INTERVENING WITH STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOUSING AND FOOD INSTABILITIES TO PROMOTE STUDENT SUCCESS

From the report series:
Addressing Financial and Basic Needs
to Increase First-Year On-Track Rates

UIC UNIVERSITY OF **ILLINOIS CHICAGO**

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INTRODUCTION

This study is part of a set of studies aimed to better understand how financial factors are associated with first-year on-track status. First-year on-track is a metric that indicates if a student is on-track to graduate from college within six years. It has four indicators with minimum thresholds that need to be met to be considered on-track: 1) 2.4 first-term college GPA; 2) C or the equivalent in the first writing course; 3) 22 credits earned in the first-year of college; and 4) no unresolved first-term financial holds. For a more in-depth explanation of the First-Year On-Track index at UIC, please refer to the first report in this series (Farruggia et al., 2022) or the first report to describe the development of the index (Farruggia, et al., 2020).

This current study attempted to isolate and address how housing and food insecurities affect first-year on-track. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the state of Illinois received CARES Act money and provided it to universities to support students through the Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) fund, facilitated by the Illinois Board of Higher Education. UIC opted to use a significant proportion of that award to provide housing and dining awards to students facing housing insecurities. This study sought to determine if providing students with GEER-funded housing and dining awards, along with participating in a pilot program to support students experiencing housing insecurities, would contribute to retention of the students. While the emphasis of this report is on first-year students, undergraduate students at all levels participated in the program and the results of their experiences are also provided.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The pilot program was developed by the Office of the Dean of Students (DOS). A total of 10 undergraduate students experiencing housing insecurities were selected to participate in the program. GEER-funded housing and dining awards were provided to students who participated in this program. Students were expected to attend a minimum of two case management sessions with DOS staff and participate in a minimum of three of seven offered workshops. Students selected workshops with the guidance of DOS staff based upon barriers or needs that were identified in an initial case management meeting. Students continued to meet with DOS staff to make meaning from the workshops that they attended and apply the content so they could successfully navigate college, become familiar with campus resources, and gain stable housing. Staff also supported students to create a plan of action to achieve housing stability for the summer and following academic year, helping them to navigate the unique needs and concerns that each student encountered.

METHODS

Ten students were selected to participate in the DOS programming. Table 1 provides demographic information on participants. Programming was open to different cohorts of students, with 4 students being first-year students. First-year student participants included students from different racial-ethnic backgrounds and were typically female. Among the first-year students, 3 students came from Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and 3 students were first-generation in college students. Similarly, the 6 undergraduate students who were in their second year and beyond included students of different-racial-ethnic backgrounds and were also typically female. Further, 4 second-year and beyond students came from Chicago Public Schools and 3 were first-generation in college students.

TABLE 1.

Housing Insecurities Programming Participant Demographic Information (n =10)

	First-Year Students	Second-Year Students and Beyond
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	25% (1)	17% (1)
Black	25% (1)	33% (2)
Latinx	25% (1)	33% (2)
White	25% (1)	0% (0)
Multi-Racial (Asian, Black, and White)	0% (0)	17% (1)
Gender		
Female	75% (3)	83% (5)
Male	25% (1)	17% (1)
CPS high school	75% (3)	67% (4)
First-generation in college	75% (3)	50% (3)

This mixed-methods project utilized institutional data, program data, and interview data and looks at data for first-year students and second-year and beyond students. Typically, results from analyses that have less than 10 participants are excluded from dissemination to ensure that individuals cannot be identified. In this study, the only people who would be able to identify the students based on their quantitative data are staff who already have access to those data; therefore, when we are presenting quantitative data, data for the two groups will be presented separately. Staff do not have access to the qualitative data, so these will not be differentiated between first-year students and second-year students and beyond in order to protect their confidentiality.

Institutional data were secured from UIC's data warehouse and included indicators of on-track, student and family background characteristics, academic performance in the first year of college, and university-related variables. For the program data, student participation in the sessions was collected. For the interviews, all students in the program were asked to participate and five students agreed to participate, representing half of the students in the program. Students were invited via e-mail to participate in an interview with a member of the research team. Upon agreement of participation, students were given the informed consent form to read and sign. These interviews were structured and lasted 30-45 minutes in length. Interview questions focused on identifying the mechanisms that promoted change and what factors led the students to having an unpaid balance that they could not cover. Students were given a $30.00 gift card to thank them for their time.

Interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, recorded and automatically transcribed utilizing Zoom's built-in feature. When interviews were completed, recordings and transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy and edits were made wherever necessary. Prior to analysis, interview transcriptions were de-identified. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), interviews were coded using Atlas.ti. Themes were deductively extracted that provided a better insight into students' struggles with accessing stable housing, food, and other resources and how these barriers impacted their educational attainment.

This project utilized institutional data, interview data, and program assessment data. The use of mixed methods allowed the research team to triangulate the research questions and gain a robust understanding of how students experience financial concerns and food and housing insecurities, and the impact of these challenges on first-year on-track.

RESULTS

The results of this study are provided in three parts. First, institutional data are examined to determine if program students were on-track at the end of the first year in college, and if they were retained to the second year and third year of college. Second, data from the program was examined to look at patterns of attendance with success indicators. Third, interview data were examined to understand what the students learned in the program that would help facilitate their on-going success in college.

INSTITUTIONAL DATA

The program was open to students at different levels of their education. The results presented in this report focus on first-year students (n = 4) and second-year students and beyond (n = 6) who participated in the program. However, on-track data only applies to first-year students as on-track is relevant to students in their first year of college. Indicators of success that are relevant to more senior students are separately presented.

FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

As a reminder, of the 10 students who participated in the program, 4 were first-year students. Each first-year student identified in a different racial-ethnic group: Asian; Black; Latinx; and White. Three of the first-year students identified as female and 1 as male. Three of the 4 students were first generation in college; likewise, 3 of the 4 students had attended a Chicago Public Schools high school.

Table 2 displays the academic success of first-year students in the program. While only half of the students were on-track, further examination demonstrated that this was due to them not earning enough credits by the end of their first year. It was promising that they were on-track for the other indicators and were retained to the second year and 75% were retained to the third year of college, reflecting that they would benefit from intervention to increase their degree progress.

TABLE 2.
Proportion of Students On-Track, On-Track by Indicator and Retained

	%
On-Track	50%
On-Track Indicators	
First-Term GPA	100%
First-Year Credits Earned	50%
English 160 Grade	100%
No Unresolved First-Term Financial Holds	100%
Retention to Fall 2021 Semester	100%
Retention to Fall 2022 Semester	75%

	M (S.D.)
First-Term GPA	2.83 (.25)
First-Year Credits Earned	23.25 (6.13)

SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS AND BEYOND

In addition, 6 students that participated in the program were in their second year and beyond. As displayed in Table 3, all 6 of these students were retained into the fall 2021 semester and all 6 were either retained to fall 2022 or had graduated. As all students from this program were success through fall 2022 (still enrolled or graduated), this highlights the importance of helping students meet their basic needs by providing them housing to ensure their ongoing success in college.

TABLE 3.

Fall 2021 Retention of Second-Year Students and Beyond

	%
Retention to Fall 2021 Semester	100%
Retention to Fall 2022 Semester	100%

PROGRAM DATA

Student engagement with DOS programming was mixed. Of the 4 first-year students, 50% participated in two workshops, and 1 first-year student participated in 6 of the 7 workshops. Participation was greater when looking at all students, with 30% of the students attending four of the six workshops. All students did participate in at least one case management session with staff from DOS. Moreover, 70% of students attended two or more case management sessions.

INTERVIEWS

Five major themes emerged from the data:

1) students experienced multiple barriers to accessing stable food and housing

2) food and housing insecurities led to diminished performance in college

3) living in campus housing allows students to focus on school work and engage in the programming

4) participating in the program brought an increased awareness of on- and off-campus resources to support students experiencing food and housing insecurities

5) students applied what they learned from the program to improve their academic and personal lives.

The first major theme was **students experienced multiple barriers to accessing stable food and housing**. While many students needed food and housing support, they identified specific barriers to accessing stable food and housing. Three subthemes were identified. The first was *students felt embarrassed of their situation, which prevented them from talking to others about their problems and accepting help*. Multiple students reflected that they have felt embarrassment about their situation, such as sleeping in the car, staying with friends, or accessing the food pantry. One student expressed feeling "shame and fear of like I'm being judged." These initial feelings of embarrassment made it more difficult for them to access the resources. Another student who had difficulties using the food pantry said:

> I was really embarrassed to even mention my story or what I was going through because I felt like at that point, because I had previously experienced that instability in high school, I felt like I had the responsibility to have it figured out already.

The second subtheme was *a lack of transportation makes it hard to access food*. Students indicated it was difficult at times to get to a grocery store and bring home groceries as they did not have a car; the grocery stores were not near their homes.

The third subtheme was *barriers compounded creating a loop of disadvantage that students could not get out of*. Students reflected that they often faced multiple challenges to stable food and housing and the challenges were often circular in nature, as reflected by one student who said:

> I'm trying to pay for an apartment, but I get paid $12.50 at the school, so I have a really low income, and I have money in collections. I'm trying to save up to pay that back so that my credit score can go up so I can get an apartment because I have medical debt, but I can't do that when I'm getting paid $12 an hour and then on top of that, I have to pay rent.

The student's circular, compounding barriers made it difficult to get out of the situation without the extra assistance of the award.

The second major theme was **food and housing insecurities led to diminshed performance in college**, which also had three sub-themes. First, students reflected that they would often have to focus on ensuring that they had food or housing, instead of focusing on their school work. Some student would change where they lived, e.g., couch surfing, or would sleep in a car, making it difficul to focus on homework or de-prioritze going to class. Second, students in the group particularly mentioned that food and housing insecurities negatively impacted their mental health, which in turn, made focusing on school difficult. One student said:

> The only thing truly that would stand in my way of being 100% confident [about finishing school] is, honestly, not even financial, it's more mental health because for me it can be up and down a lot and can be kind of crippling sometimes. I just hope that I can maintain being healthy and being able to handle like school for the next semesters. I'm about to be a senior so it'll be my last year.

Relatedly, another student noted that mental health was difficult "for everybody just this past year" due to the pandemic, reflecting how the broader context can add to the challenges that students face while trying to focus on their education.

The third subtheme reflected that *some students helped their families meet basic needs which diminished their own resources*. This, in turn, put additional strain on the students when they were already trying to manage food and housing insecurities. One student said, "I do help out my mom and sister a lot… I don't want to sound like it's like a burden on me, but it is a financial strain, because, as it is, it's difficult to provide for myself". Many students take on responsibilities to help their families which might create difficulties in focusing on school.

The third major theme, and in many ways the most important, was **living in campus housing allowed the students to disrupt the disadvantage loop and focus on school**. As previously noted, students indicated that much of their time and mental energy was spent managing their food and housing insecurities; they were often in a loop moving from one barrier to the next and not able to pull out of it. Moving into free campus housing gave them the space to disrupt the loop and focus on school and the programming to develop the skills needed to maintain stability. This theme was demonstrated by the student who said after moving into on-campus housing:

> …the really good thing about the grant was I was able to quit my job and focus fully on school and it was like really relieving for the first time because I didn't have to worry. And my first semester I got straight A's. I was like wow, I've never, never gotten straight A's because I've always had so much on my plate.

It also helped to address other challenging circumstances, such as problematic employment, as indicated by the student who said:

> I received housing relief from the Dean of Students with the GEER grant and that was really good because the job I was working at the time was not good, and like under the table, so it allowed me access to also food which allowed me to take time off of work and focus on just being a student.

The fourth major theme from the interviews was **participating in the program brought an increased awareness of resources for students experiencing food and housing insecurities**. Students shared that they were not previously aware of on- and off-campus resources for students experiencing food and housing insecurities and it was difficult to try to find resources as their attention is focused on their immediate need. Participating in the program helped to increase awareness. This lack of knowledge and related increased awareness was emphasized by the student who said:

> …when you're tackling stability and you're facing all these other hurdles, they're not aware of the resources that UIC offers and even though I'm a senior, I'm still learning more and more about the resources it has to offer. Because it is a big school, it does have a lot to offer.

Students also highlighted that the program increased students' awareness of resources off-campus. One student noted:

> …from the Wellness Center that I watched. Literally showed like different resources that's not even directly with UIC. It's called a Safe Space…it's potentially providing something I can look into if I were to need it, like in a future something, like safe housing or stability. And they also added like a lot of details and it's just it really comes down to how detailed and in depth it goes that I really appreciated it.

The fifth and final major theme was **students applied what they learned from the program to improve their academic and personal lives**. Through participating in sessions and working one-on-one with program staff, students were able to apply what they learned to their daily lives. This theme had four subthemes. The first was students developed a better understanding of college financial aid processes. Some students remarked how their knowledge and understanding of how to finance college, such as financial aid and loans for example, increased because of the programming:

> …financial aid and stuff. You would think because I had experience with these documents and how tedious it can get or complicated, but the videos really go in-depth and it really helps. It's like how you and me were having a conversation about the loans. You know they have a workshop about loans. They go in depth about it.

The same student also added:

> I learned a lot more about loans and that's how I learned that you could even exhaust loans. Like there's a limit on the amount of loans you can get throughout your college career as an undergrad. So, that's insane, honestly. I did not expect that. I don't fully agree with that, but I'm like, okay, I learned something new.

The second subtheme was *the program introduced students to a wide range of life skills and a space to ask questions*. Multiple students mentioned how the various workshops introduced them to topics they had never learned about or always wanted to learn about, but did not know where to begin:

> What I liked specifically about it was they were pretty diverse and the topics were ones that aren't really spoken a lot about, because I didn't really talk about this, this wasn't really spoken to me a lot by anyone. I wasn't really taught this in high school and it's like all this I had to learn on my own, and so what I liked about these was that it was pretty diverse.

They also appreciated how workshop coordinators and program staff were willing to answer all of their important questions regarding these topics.

The third subtheme was *students implemented what was learned to their lives*. Several students discussed how they were able to take what they learned and apply it to their own lives. One student mentioned how they were able to find their own apartment, "Well one of them taught me what to do for getting a new apartment, finding a house, and one helped with finding the apartment I'm in right now."

The fourth and final subtheme was that *support needed to be tailored to meet student needs in order to optimize success*. Students reflected on how having input in workshop topics allowed them to gain the specific skills they needed, and not just what others thought they needed. This tailoring approach recognized the complex needs of the students and gave them the support to address those needs. One student shared that their housing insecurities:

> affects obviously academia and success a lot. For some people, just being able to take care of yourself when times get really hard, also finding the right support. I feel that also is really a challenge in terms of your success because when you do have the right support, you can be a lot more successful

Having the "right" support, the support that the students identify that they need is essential to their ongoing success.

DISCUSSION

The programming was overall very successful, particularly given that this was the pilot year. Program participants were students who self-identified as housing insecure and had received one of the GEER-funded housing and dining awards; they also participated in programming to give them the resources and skills to help ensure their ongoing success. Ten students, of which 4 were first-year students, participated in the DOS programming and case management sessions. Of the first-year students, 50% were on-track with the only indicator that was off-track being the total number of first-year credits earned. Impressively, 100% of the first-year students who participated were retained into the fall 2021 semester, and 75% of them were retained into the fall 2022 semester as well. Further, 100% of the second-year students and beyond who participated in the program were retained into the fall 2021 semester, and, again, all of them were retained into the fall 2022 semester or had graduated. The housing awards and associated programming made it possible for this level of retention to be achieved.

Interview data highlighted the ways in which the program facilitated and promoted student success. This study highlighted not only the multiple barriers that students experience in accessing stable food and housing, but also the disadvantage loop that they get ensnared in trying to manage the barriers. Students were often not fully aware of the on-campus and off-campus resources to support them in addressing food and housing insecurities. Participating in the program gave them the essential housing and access to food that they needed to stabilize and disrupt the disadvantage loop that they were caught in. It allowed them to focus on school and their education in ways they had not been previously able to do. It also helped them develop the skills and gave them the resources that they need to ensure their ongoing success.

While this program was developed and delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic, its principles remain. We anticipate that students would continue to benefit from the GEER-funded housing and dining awards associated with this program. The program has continued to run past its pilot year and continues to prioritize case management as an integral component in supporting and developing relationships with students. Given the success of the program, especially regarding retention and graduation, next steps would be to assess the feasibility of expanding the program and conducting a financial analysis of the costs and benefits of the program.

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