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# **Food Insecurity on Campus**

## **Action and Intervention**

EDITED BY

**Katharine M. Broton and Clare L. Cady**

*Foreword by Sara Goldrick-Rab*

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## Amarillo College

### Loving Your Student from Enrollment to Graduation

RUSSELL LOWERY-HART, CARA CROWLEY, AND JORDAN HERRERA

*Editors' Prologue.* Addressing food insecurity on campus should not occur in a vacuum. It is important to consider the whole student and their needs. With this perspective, the goal is to ensure that students are able to cover all of their basic material needs so that they can concentrate on learning. This chapter highlights one institution, Amarillo College (AC), that has developed an integrated, wraparound approach to student basic needs security, including food security. Over time, not only has AC launched an office on campus focused on students' material needs, fully staffed by social workers, but it has also taken an approach that addresses students' academic needs. As this book is being written, AC is engaged in a randomized encouragement trial to measure the effects of their program and services on student retention and graduation rates.

*About the Authors.* Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart, president of Amarillo College, was selected into the inaugural class of the Aspen Presidential Fellowship for Community College Excellence, a rigorous, executive leadership program focused on higher education reform led by the Aspen Institute and Stanford University. His leadership on poverty and culture change was featured in the June 2018 issue of the *Atlantic*.<sup>1</sup> Russell and his Amarillo College colleagues are focused on improving student success through systemic approaches to food insecurity and other poverty barriers. He was named the National Academic Leader of the Year for 2014. He received his PhD from Ohio University, MA from Texas Tech, and BS from West Texas A&M University.

Cara Crowley currently serves as vice president for strategic initiatives at Amarillo College. Her leadership focuses on leading institution-wide initiatives targeting a systemic approach to poverty, as well as creating a data ecosystem that drives policy and process reform addressing poverty barriers hindering student success. Ms. Crowley received her MBA, MS in history, and BS in business management from West Texas A&M University.

Jordan Herrera serves as the director of social services at Amarillo College. She coordinates and manages the services in Amarillo College's Advocacy and Resource Center, which include social services, a scholarship program, a food pantry, and the campus clothing closet. Each one of the services directly serves at-risk students experiencing barriers to their education. In addition, she supervises university social work interns and serves on many community boards and committees that directly impact Amarillo College students. Jordan is a licensed master social worker. She holds an associate degree in psychology from Amarillo College and a bachelors and masters in social work from West Texas A&M University.

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Veronica found herself pregnant, and the father of her child was headed to prison.<sup>2</sup> She started hunting for jobs. She could never get an interview for the jobs that interested her. They required a degree. She did not have one. As a first-generation, Hispanic student, Veronica was scared to come on the Amarillo College campus. However, she knew she needed to provide a new life for her yet-to-be-born daughter. She parked her car at Amarillo College twice but did not even get out of the car. On the third trip, Veronica found the courage to get out of her car and make her way to the desk taking applications. The process was full of words she did not understand. She looked around, trying to find solace in the fact that many of the students in line looked like her—several with babies and kids in tow. At this vulnerable moment, Veronica needed a friend, some hope, and some help. Through systemic reforms to services, processes, professional development, and even the college culture itself, Veronica found the help she needed to start her educational journey at Amarillo College.

Students attending Amarillo College, as well as other community colleges across the country, define the future of our country and its

ability to overcome the debilitating effects of poverty in our communities and nation. Today's community college student is dramatically different from the "traditional" college student of the past. She is often the first in her family to attend college, has children or supports other family members, works multiple jobs for minimum wage, and requires financial aid not only for tuition and books but also to cover basic living expenses. As Veronica stood in line at Amarillo College, she was seeking solace from a familiar face.

As the Amarillo College president, I am ultimately responsible for ensuring that excuses do not derail my college's ability to be more creative, effective, and efficient as we serve our students and community. Realizing that many of today's college students either attend or did attend a community college is critical to understanding the challenges these students face in higher education. Today's college student looks like Veronica. Today's student *is* Veronica. And Veronica is remarkable. She demands our attention. She deserves our support. Veronica holds the future of my community's economic success. Community college students, like Veronica, hold America's economic growth in their hands.

## **Understanding the Needs of Our Students**

In 2011, the City of Amarillo came together to address our growing poverty rates and decreasing educational attainment. Together these educational, business, and community leaders established a community alliance called No Limits No Excuses, establishing a citywide goal of making pathways to postsecondary credentials and living wage employment accessible for all individuals.<sup>3</sup> At the same time as the city was conducting its data assessment, Amarillo College launched a data discussion to understand campus-wide our student course success rates and overall completion numbers.<sup>4</sup> What we learned shocked us. Our students were not completing their academic courses successfully. They were not graduating or transferring to a university. Amarillo College was failing our students and

our community. We were a contributing factor to the lack of educational attainment in our area and its bleak economic outlook.

In addition to the data discussion, Amarillo College interviewed and surveyed our students to determine what was keeping them from being academically successful. As a former faculty member, I expected that the student responses would focus on academic underpreparedness, the need for more tutoring services, and the need for more intensive advising support systems. What I was not prepared to learn was that poverty and its challenges were the reasons our students at Amarillo College were struggling with academic success.

The results of the student surveys and interviews indicated that the top 10 reasons students identified for academic struggles had nothing to do with the classroom.<sup>5</sup> Food insecurity was the single greatest barrier our students identified as impacting their classroom and academic achievement. They also identified utility payments, housing, childcare, transportation, legal services, and health care as barriers hindering their academic success. Each of these 10 barriers is entrenched in poverty and its challenges. None of the barriers were a traditional “academic” barrier. The top 10 barriers to student success identified by our students changed Amarillo College, transformed our leadership philosophy, and revolutionized my focus as a college president.

As part of our college reformation, Amarillo College adopted a No Excuses philosophy based on Damen Lopez’s No Excuses University Model, developed in 2012.<sup>6</sup> We became the first higher education partner for this network of schools committed to student success. At the heart of Amarillo College’s No Excuses philosophy is a belief that we, Amarillo College faculty/administrators/staff, will evaluate all reasons for students’ success and failure and remove institutional barriers hindering students’ academic achievements. Amarillo College refuses to use any excuse that opens the door for a student to fail. Through our commitment to the No Excuses model and its philosophy, Amarillo College experienced a

culture shift, driving us to embrace a culture of caring for students and each other—a culture of caring that loves our students from enrollment to graduation.

## **Creating a Culture of Caring**

At Amarillo College, we identify our typical student each fall term based on student demographics. We refer to her as Maria. And I want you to meet her. She is a first-generation college student, meaning that neither parent earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Why is this significant? Maria often does not understand college terminology, processes, or the financial aid system. Over 70 percent of Amarillo College students are first-generation students. Maria is female, representing 65 percent of enrolled students. She is Hispanic. In fact, 46 percent of all Amarillo College students are Hispanic. Amarillo College is a minority-majority institution, with 54 percent of our students classified as minority. Per the Wisconsin HOPE Lab survey of our students, 54 percent of all Amarillo College students are food insecure.<sup>7</sup> Maria works, on average, two part-time jobs and has at least one child. Maria, at the average age of 27, is like the overwhelming majority of our students living in the war zone of poverty. As such, Maria drives our decision-making at Amarillo College. We are designing a college experience for her. We are designing a college system that understands who our students are and what their needs are today as they navigate life barriers and academic struggles. We are designing a college system that embraces a culture of caring for Maria and all Amarillo College students.

Amarillo College employees must embrace a culture change for higher education where students drive decision-making. The foundation of our culture change is rooted in our college values. Students crafted them, and college leadership and our Board of Regents polished and finalized them. These values are devoid of traditional academic “buzzwords.” However, these values truly represent the



purpose of our college and the commitments and behaviors our students desperately need from us. The Amarillo College values clearly identify students as the core purpose of our work.

## **Amarillo College Values**

Amarillo College creates a No Excuses philosophy through actions, which display the following values:

### **1. Caring through WOW**

- Every student and colleague will say “WOW, you were so helpful, supportive, and open” after an interaction with us.
- Every student will experience WOW through engaged, learner-centered classroom experiences.

### **2. Caring through FUN**

- We will find ways to have fun with each other and celebrate each other.
- We will find ways to make our work fun and effective.
- We will find ways to provide enriching learning experiences.

### **3. Caring through INNOVATION**

- We will see ourselves as a “roadblock remover” for students and for each other.
- We will always look for ways to help others and improve our processes.
- We will develop and implement original and creative teaching strategies.

### **4. Caring through FAMILY**

- We will find ways to show we care about our students and each other.
- We will readily and effectively share information with each other.
- We will approach our interactions with each other with trust and openness.
- We will put the needs of others before our own.



- We will enhance learning by creating an atmosphere of mutual respect.
5. Caring through YES
- We will think “yes” first and find solutions rather than stating “no.”
  - We will be passionate about our jobs and helping each other.
  - We will promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills in curricula.

These values are written into every job description for all employees. The first item in every single job description is “serve students.” Meeting and knowing Maria is the foundation of new employee and faculty orientation. Poverty competencies are woven into most faculty and staff developments. Our faculty, staff, and administration are evaluated on their job effectiveness and the manner in which they exhibit these values in executing their duties. Merit pay is connected to fulfilling these values. The work has been difficult and certainly controversial. However, our students deserve no less from the college and the employees who define it.

As a result, Amarillo College has created a true culture of caring. Whether our employees station themselves at key places in the college during registration to assist students through our processes, greet students in the parking lot and walk them to their first class, or care for our students’ children during a finals week study session, Amarillo College employees care and are changing the culture of our college and community.

Creating a “Culture of Caring” requires careful systems. For Amarillo College, fall and spring general assemblies are critical. The college closes, and employees come together to gain a better understanding of our students, review our report card data, share new ideas, meet with local employers, and recognize “superheroes” who have gone above and beyond the call of duty. These meetings allow the college to provide a “Student Success Certification” for all employees.

Rebecca was able to experience the culture of caring. When her car battery needed a jump, she was comfortable asking for assistance from the first college employee she found. She often had college employees walking her to class and encouraging her stellar academic achievements.

Jamie sent a note of appreciation to the Advocacy and Resource Center after she completed her developmental education courses in the summer of 2017, expressing her love for Amarillo College and the care she received on campus. “I appreciate you helping me through the spring and summer. Thank you for the food and test vouchers. I wouldn’t have started the fall without your help.”

## **Creating a Bold Vision**

In 2015, Amarillo College launched its No Excuses 2020 strategic plan and made equity and poverty one of five overall college priorities.<sup>8</sup> We were starting to build infrastructure for addressing poverty and food insecurity barriers. However, we knew that students held the key to our own reformation. We asked a group of student “secret shoppers” and follow-up focus groups to tell us how a college should be designed to ensure their success. Students identified relationships and customer service as the single most important issue in helping our first-generation and low-income students graduate and/or transfer.

I gathered a diverse group of college leaders, faculty, and staff to look at local and national companies, as well as educational institutions, known for strong customer service. Together, we highlighted their projects and programs that provided exceptional service to their customers. I then asked our students to help us define what exceptional customer service looks like at Amarillo College as we love our students from enrollment to graduation. By examining our student data and gaining a better understanding of the life experiences of our students, we began to reimagine higher education at Amarillo College. And for us, it all started with addressing poverty barriers and systemically creating relationships.

Poverty and food insecurity used to be one of the excuses we used for student failure. We now realize that poverty is a barrier to academic success and cannot be used as an excuse for failure. As a college, we cannot be absolved of our course and college success rates simply because our students live in the war zone of poverty. Because food insecurity was the single biggest barrier to student success, our No Excuses philosophy drove us to address it. At Amarillo College, if students fail, it is because the college did not have the right person, process, or policy in place to connect and support our students. As such, we knew we had to build a systemic approach to poverty and food insecurity.

Through the work of Dr. Donna Beegle, founder and CEO of Communication Across Barriers, Amarillo College began to build a response to poverty and food insecurity.<sup>9</sup> We closed the college for an entire day and required all faculty and staff to complete Dr. Beegle's poverty leadership certification. Moreover, nearly 100 Amarillo College employees have earned an additional certification as a poverty coach. The results of these trainings have allowed the college to share a common understanding about the language of poverty and food insecurity.

The most significant thing we learned from Dr. Beegle's program was her categorization of four different types of poverty: situational, generational, working, and immigrant.<sup>10</sup> We learned that many of our processes and policies were written from a situational poverty mind-set: "If we were struggling financially, how would we react?" Yet most of our students understood life and decision-making from a generational poverty mind-set: "Life happens to me, and I do not have control of my future." We were expecting our students to proactively approach us with their needs. With a generational poverty mind-set, our students were waiting for us to reach out, connect, and lead them through our college bureaucracy.

In 2016, Amarillo College established the Billie B. Flesher Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC), which aids students as they navigate on-campus and community resources, including food in-

security, transportation, childcare, housing, and utility assistance.<sup>11</sup> The ARC intentionally guides students who have life barriers preventing their success in and out of the classroom. In addition, Amarillo College and the ARC work with over 60 local nonprofits, with federal, state, or private funds, to help our students meet basic life needs without which they could be hindered from reaching their educational goals. Amarillo College partners with local nonprofits that provide funds for transportation, housing, utilities, and childcare to our students. Without these external partnerships, the college would be unable to eradicate poverty barriers our students are experiencing while attending our institution.

By striving to understand Maria and her challenges, the college can be better prepared for students like Veronica. In a 2018 report, Maria's challenges were once again reaffirmed by the Basic Needs Survey results through the Wisconsin HOPE Lab. In fall 2017, 11 percent of Amarillo College students had experienced some form of homelessness within the previous 12 months, 59 percent were housing insecure, and 54 percent had low or very low food security.<sup>12</sup> About 72 percent of students at Amarillo College had experienced at least one of these forms of basic needs insecurity within the previous year. Nearly 8 percent had experienced all three forms of basic needs insecurity. Maria and other students throughout our college were heroic. While facing #RealCollege struggles with basic needs, they were still studying and attending classes. However, the entire Amarillo College family knew that for Maria to graduate the college would have to continue addressing the barriers she faced and address them on a larger scale.

With a bold vision of 70 percent completion by 2020, Amarillo College's No Excuses 2020 focuses on equity, expanding our cohesive system to address student poverty barriers, and reforming institutional systems to support students through relationships and strong customer services.<sup>13</sup> Students like Victor, who relied on Amarillo College and the ARC to help him navigate our higher education systems, stay in college and eventually graduate.

As a 33-year-old dad with two kids and a wife, Victor came to Amarillo College seeking a certificate in diesel mechanics, a highly desired credential in our community. To go to school and support his family, Victor had to work a full-time job. He found one that allowed him to work from 7:00 p.m. to 3:00 a.m. He would sleep a few hours and then go to school in our accelerated program from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. With kids in school and a wife with serious medical complications, Victor struggled to make ends meet. He was considering dropping out of college. His family had to skip a few meals, and it made his wife's medical issues even worse. One of his faculty members used the "social service barriers" button within the Amarillo College Early Alert System embedded within faculty gradebooks. This automatically "alerted" the ARC's social workers. They called Victor to ask how they could assist him. Victor was able to use the food pantry and even access emergency funds to fix the transmission for his truck. "You guys helped us keep everything together," he said. With a simple alert and intervention, Victor stayed in college and completed his certificate. He found a high-paying job, and his wife could then refocus on her health and her own higher education journey.

### **Addressing Food Insecurity at Amarillo College**

After completing Dr. Beegle's poverty training, faculty were relieved to learn about some of the foundational reasons for academic failure. For many, the college had misunderstood student failure and made destructive assumptions about it. The reality was that students were hungry and their hunger was misunderstood as laziness, lack of motivation, and poor academic preparation and focus.

The day after the training, college leadership met to review the training evaluation—and to pat ourselves on the back for our "courage" to require such training. The day after the training, our faculty did not meet to discuss and evaluate the training; they met to find a way to act on it. While administrators reflected, faculty gath-

ered to start Amarillo College's first food pantry. What started as a simple email soliciting donations to start a food pantry in a supply closet has grown into six pantries across all campuses, dozens of community partners, and a systemic approach to poverty and food insecurity.<sup>14</sup>

While our food pantries were initially stocked and run, voluntarily, by faculty and staff, the college knew that it needed a full systemic approach. Through faculty and staff donations, community partners, grants, and a college commitment, Amarillo College opened the ARC, which is the epicenter of Amarillo College's poverty and food insecurity system. With social workers and case managers, along with the full forces of our communities' social service agency network, students have support systems in place to address their most basic needs. As a result, students can taste academic success without the pangs of hunger to derail them.

*Thank you all very much. You all have been very kind. You all are angels sent by God. You are showing me who I can be from now on.*

—Anthony, Amarillo College student

Support for each food pantry distribution is 100 percent donation based, and no institutional funds purchase food or household items. The Amarillo College Foundation created a donor fund where individuals and businesses can make cash donations for our food pantries.<sup>15</sup> Amarillo College employees also can make payroll deductions that go directly into this account to support the food pantries on an ongoing basis. ARC personnel can access the foundation account in order to support any need not met by donations from faculty, staff, and the community.

In 2013, Amarillo College launched a partnership with our local food bank, High Plains Food Bank, to buy discounted food from their vendors.<sup>16</sup> But to meet increasing demand, Amarillo College also formed a partnership with Snack Pak 4 Kids in 2016.<sup>17</sup> This organization provides backpacks with nutritious food every Friday to children in our local school district. Snack Pak 4 Kids also has

food pantries in several high schools that provide food to students throughout the week. With this partnership, ARC staff can purchase food from Snack Pak 4 Kids via their wholesale vendor relationships. This allows Amarillo College to use foundation funds in greater capacity and purchase more food for lower prices.

Students can visit the food pantry twice per month and fill a reusable shopping bag that we give them. For students who need additional food assistance, ARC staff help students complete SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) forms, connect them with community resources that can provide additional food resources, and offer them additional food items from the Amarillo College pantry. Students may select any item in the pantry, but ARC staff assist students with selecting items that can be combined to provide hearty meals on a budget. We also have food items that can be reheated on campus if students are in need of a quick breakfast or lunch item.

One of the items most sought by our students surprised us—feminine hygiene products. These items are expensive, and no community, state, or federal agency helps clients access them. Once we knew of this need, the ARC staff sent a college-wide email asking for donations of hygiene products. Students, who were missing classes because of their lack of these items, were relieved to find this support. In fact, several faculty and community members committed to monthly donations of these items once they knew of the reoccurring need.

After getting enrolled in her first set of classes, Veronica found a student employment job on campus. Her classes were challenging. There were words she had not heard before and assignments that challenged her own confidence. She was not sure she could be a successful student. Even while working on campus and receiving a Pell Grant, Veronica struggled to feed her family. Because her college had a food pantry, Veronica knew she was in the right place. She pushed through her insecurities. She was able to feed her daughter and herself. She persisted, and her college was there to support her



every step of the way. Amarillo College embraced her in a culture of caring. Amarillo College loved her from enrollment to graduation.

Food insecurity can be devastating for students. By building a culture of caring based on a true understanding of poverty, higher education institutions can feed their students—literally and figuratively—with no excuses.

## **Impacts and Lessons Learned**

Amarillo College's commitment to addressing the life barriers that impede academic success has certainly helped our students. Our theory of change is simple: removing life barriers and building employee commitment to service and relationships will ultimately increase student course success and completion rates. We are seeing powerful evidence that our theory of change is working. Amarillo College retention rates have improved from 49 to 65 percent. Our students are more successful in gateway classes, with success rates increasing from 65 to 75 percent. Most excitingly, student completion rates have improved over the past three years from 23 to 48 percent. We have learned that when students are hungry, they cannot learn, and when they have food security, their academic performance reflects it. For students to see such dramatic gains in a short period of time, every college employee must play an important role.

Since the inception of our poverty initiative, Amarillo College has continued to grow our project annually. In the first year, Amarillo College assisted less than 1 percent of our enrolled students with social services and food insecurity needs. Today, we have grown our project to serve well over 27 percent of our enrolled students.

During the 2018–19 academic year, the ARC aided nearly 6,000 student visits with social services. When comparing to the previous academic year, Amarillo College increased student usage of the ARC by 30 percent. Specifically, the ARC assisted over 1,000 students with addressing food insecurity needs (12% of total enrollment).

Amarillo College attributes this significant growth in students served to using data analytics to identify at-risk students, connect them to social services, and address food insecurity needs before the semester begins or as early into the semester as possible. Amarillo College uses data analytics to identify students who have multiple dependents and earn less than \$19,000 annually. By identifying these students prior to the start of the term, staff in our ARC contact and work with the students to determine whether they need any financial assistance to address poverty barriers that potentially could hinder their academic performance and success in the upcoming term. By using predictive modeling to put our theory of change into action, Amarillo College has increased course success, degree attainment, and transfer success for all students.

Our data show that if students access college and community resources, they will be successful. Amarillo College and the ARC work daily to ensure that no student fears enrolling in college or fears failure. We work to ensure student success by connecting students with available resources across our campus and throughout our community. Amarillo College is committed to student success—no excuses. Amarillo College daily seeks ways to overcome the stigma surrounding poverty. We strive to assist students living in poverty with creating a new outlook on life—an outlook that removes fear and replaces it with hope, belief in oneself, and a focus on the future.

## **Conclusion: No Excuses 2025**

Given the impact of our work on behalf of Maria already, Amarillo College cannot turn back. Because our future is tied to Maria's success, we must be more intentional, systemic, and predictive in building our system to scale. With its next strategic plan, No Excuses 2025, Amarillo College plans to achieve the following five goals related to our No Excuses Poverty Initiative:

1. We must expand the reach of our predictive analytics outreach to identify students who might be at risk and connect them to resources before they even start their first class.
2. We will build a comprehensive case management system leveraging advisors, social workers, faculty, and staff to love students from recruitment to completion.
3. We will work more effectively with our community partners to tackle food insecurity for students and their families well before they become Amarillo College students by working with our local school districts and food insecurity infrastructure. We cannot wait until they enroll to solve this crisis. We know that the earlier we address the food insecurity crisis, the more likely students will matriculate into higher education and graduate.
4. We will build a robust fundraising plan specifically for poverty issues within our student body. We must leverage community resources to tackle insecurities in food and housing, transportation, childcare, and health care.
5. Finally, we will build a robust student health center that not only meets students' food insecurity needs but also integrates these services with mental and physical health needs in an intentional and comprehensive manner.

As Amarillo College continues to refine its calling to address the poverty barriers of its students, it will continue to meet its true calling, which is loving its students from enrollment to graduation. Veronica has seen that love, knows that love, and now shares that love with other Amarillo College students who are struggling to meet the challenges of life and school one day at a time.

Veronica had challenging life barriers upon entering Amarillo College. Thankfully for her, Amarillo College was prepared for her success. "I knew I had to give my kids a different life. The ARC and access to resources like a food pantry gave me hope that other people saw potential in me and were willing to give me that little push to

stay focused,” she said. Had she come a few years earlier, Veronica would have been a statistic rather than finishing as the commencement speaker for the Amarillo College graduating class of 2017. She graduated from the local university a year later with a bachelor’s degree in communication. She still visits the campus. She is mentoring new Amarillo College students while starting her first professional job. Veronica observed,

*Even at my university, my AC support system stayed with me. I got texts. I still received help with food on the occasions I couldn’t make everything come together. So many college employees came to my university graduation. At first, I thought they were just there for me and I started crying. Then I looked around and understood they came for so many of us. They loved us. You [the college president] say all the time, that AC employees must love students to success. You all truly loved me to success, not just at the college and through my university, but into the workplace.*

## Notes

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