

# Supporting Community College Completion with a Culture of Caring: *A Case Study of Amarillo College*

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## Executive Summary

This report is an in-depth case study of the No Excuses Poverty Initiative at Amarillo College (AC), a midsize community college in the Texas Panhandle. Nearly a decade ago, AC's leadership initiated a reflective and intentional series of steps to help alleviate the conditions of poverty affecting their students and promote the chances those students complete their degrees. The college has received widespread press and recognition for its work. This case study is the first intensive, evidence-based examination of that initiative, its key components, and its impact on student success.

Students at Amarillo College are predominately Latinx and come from low-income homes. More than 70% are the first in their family to attend college. As part of both a community initiative aimed at economic growth and a campus initiative designed to boost retention and completion rates, college leadership engaged in intentional reflection, professional development, and data collection as it developed a focus on poverty alleviation. This work occurred against the backdrop of community revitalization efforts emphasizing education as a key component of future economic growth. In an effort to promote college attainment on the road to financial success, the No Excuses Poverty Initiative pinpoints poverty as the most dangerous threat to degree completion and focuses on mitigating its effects.

The initiative began by educating college staff, from administrators on down, about poverty's myriad dimensions and how they can impact and disrupt students' lives. Drawing on those lessons, leaders at all levels took action, creating an on-campus social services office called the Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC), instituting an emergency fund to cover student economic crises, and establishing a network of organizations, businesses, and individuals committed to supporting students. Critically, the efforts of Amarillo College go well beyond the increasingly commonplace steps taken at community colleges around the country, such as the creation of a food pantry or stand-alone emergency grant, by supplementing those actions with case management, academic support, curriculum development, and college-wide hiring and evaluation practices. In other words, the No Excuses Poverty Initiative represents a comprehensive "culture of caring" that is woven into the fabric of the entire campus.

While quantitative analyses have yet to turn up empirical evidence of resultant changes in student outcomes, this case study reveals several implementation lessons useful for other institutions. In particular, Amarillo College stands out for undertaking an intentional cultural shift to focus on students' basic needs, committing to ongoing staff education on the challenges facing impoverished students, and striving to fully incorporate lessons learned into institutional programs and policies.

## Introduction

Community colleges are unique in their potential to generate social mobility by enrolling and graduating students from families with little economic security. They offer benefits that transcend generations, educate people with children and extended families, and provide access that rarely exists at four-year colleges and universities. But completion rates at the nation's community colleges continue to lag behind the demand for educated workers. And most community colleges struggle to advance students through their programs, allowing them to complete degrees. After more than a decade focused on promoting completion rates, just 38% of community college students reach their goal by securing a credential at a two-year institution, and fewer than one in five complete a degree at a four-year institution.<sup>1</sup>

One difficulty in moving the needle on completion rates is the fact that colleges tend to operate within a broader cultural narrative that draws a line between academic and “nonacademic” influences on students.<sup>2</sup> That false dichotomy effectively limits their efforts to address the conditions of poverty affecting students. Restricting the work of community colleges to traditional academic intervention is a mistake because the majority of community college students struggle with food and/or housing insecurity. The number of students whose basic needs are not met rivals the number of students who take developmental coursework.<sup>3</sup> Among students earning low grades in community colleges, more than half are food and/or housing insecure.<sup>4</sup> These challenges must be addressed, just as they are tackled by K-12 schools, which benefit from the National School Lunch Program, support for homeless students, subsidized housing, school nurses, and much more.

Amarillo College (AC), a midsize community college located in the Texas Panhandle, is taking an uncommon approach to promoting completion. Recognizing that securing its students' basic needs must be the *first* priority if AC is to deliver on its promise of providing a route out of poverty, the college is in the midst of an institutional transformation nested within a broader regional change. The college and the local K-12 school district have joined together in a bold commitment focused on the idea that educational institutions at all levels have “no excuse” for not addressing student poverty. As a community college committed to stimulating economic development by helping move people out of poverty, AC is instituting a culture of caring on campus that is driven by policies and programs and enforced from the highest level of leadership on down. This case study explains how and why AC enacts this culture, with the hope of informing the completion practices of community colleges around the nation.

<sup>1</sup> Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P. K., Yuan, X., Nathan, A., & Bhimdiwali, A. *Completing College: A National View of Student Completion Rates – Fall 2011 Cohort (Signature Report No. 14)*. Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (December 2017)

<sup>2</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S. *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL. (2016); Goldrick-Rab, S. “Challenges and Opportunities for Improving Community College Student Success.” *Review of Educational Research* 80(3): 437-469. (2010)

<sup>3</sup> An estimated 40% of community college students are enrolled in developmental coursework. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, *Developmental Education: Challenges and Strategies for Reform*, Washington, D.C., (2017).

<sup>4</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., Schneider, J., Hernandez, A., & Cady, C. *Still Hungry and Homeless in College*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab. (2018)

## The New Economics of College

The harsh combination of rising tuition, increasing cost of living, stagnant family income, declining state support, and a greatly diminished safety net marks the new economics of college in America.<sup>5</sup> While the average return on college remains high for those who complete credentials, a growing number of students are impoverished during college—whether or not they grew up in poverty. More than half of the nation’s community college students endure food and/or housing insecurity, with an estimated 12% to 14% experiencing homelessness.<sup>6</sup> These challenges are exacerbated by inadequate access to affordable transportation and childcare. Additionally, students can experience legal difficulties and/or mental health challenges.

The cognitive impact of such scarcity is clear and these conditions exact a steep price when it comes to learning.<sup>7</sup> For college completion rates to rise and economic development to ensue from an expanded stock of college-educated labor, students must escape the conditions of poverty long enough to graduate. Facilitating that escape requires a cultural shift that sees financial, family, and health issues as integral to academics, recognizes poverty as a societal problem rather than a personal failing, and unites college and community in partnerships to provide support.

Over the last five years, the number of programs and services directed at college students experiencing poverty has grown. Most of those efforts focus on addressing food insecurity among students, with campus pantries becoming increasingly prevalent. The College and University Food Bank Alliance, a capacity-building organization, boasted more than 600 member institutions in 2017, up from just 12 members five years earlier.<sup>8</sup> Some institutions have been more proactive, preventing food insecurity by providing food vouchers or food scholarships, or facilitating student access to public benefits such as SNAP.<sup>9</sup>

Some colleges are also tackling housing, transportation, and economic emergencies. For example, Tacoma Community College in Washington state partners with its local housing authority to provide housing vouchers for homeless or housing insecure students.<sup>10</sup> Guttman Community College in New York provides students with free Metrocards so they can get to and from school, and community college students in Los Angeles and Chicago also benefit from subsidized public transportation. Two landscape analyses found an array of emergency aid programs, including grants, loans, vouchers, and scholarships, designed to help students cover unexpected costs that might otherwise force them to stop or drop out.<sup>11</sup> Another strategy attracting attention through initiatives like the Working Families Success Network is co-

<sup>5</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S. *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL. (2016)

<sup>6</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., & Hernandez, A. *Hungry and Homeless in College: Results from a National Study of Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab. (2017); Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., Schneider, J., Hernandez, A., & Cady, C. *Still Hungry and Homeless in College*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab. (2018).

<sup>7</sup> Mullainathan, S., & Shafir, E. *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*. (2013)

<sup>8</sup> College and University Food Bank Alliance. Our Members. Retrieved from: <https://sites.temple.edu/cufba/members/>

<sup>9</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S., Broton, K., & Hernandez, D. *Addressing Basic Needs Security in Higher Education: An Introduction to Three Evaluations of Supports for Food and Housing at Community Colleges*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab. (2017)

<sup>10</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S., Broton, K., & Hernandez, D. *Addressing Basic Needs Security in Higher Education: An Introduction to Three Evaluations of Supports for Food and Housing at Community Colleges*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab. (2017)

<sup>11</sup> Dachelet, K., & Goldrick-Rab, S. *Investing in Student Completion: Overcoming Financial Barriers to Retention Through Small-Dollar Grants and Emergency Aid Programs*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab and Scholarship America. (2015); Kruger, K., Parnell, A., & Wesaw, A. *Landscape Analysis of Emergency Aid Programs*. NASPA. (2016)

locating services and pairing them with case management and other support.<sup>12</sup> Single Stop, a national anti-poverty nonprofit, has helped community colleges in nine states develop programs that integrate services and a technology-based application to help students access public benefits.<sup>13</sup>

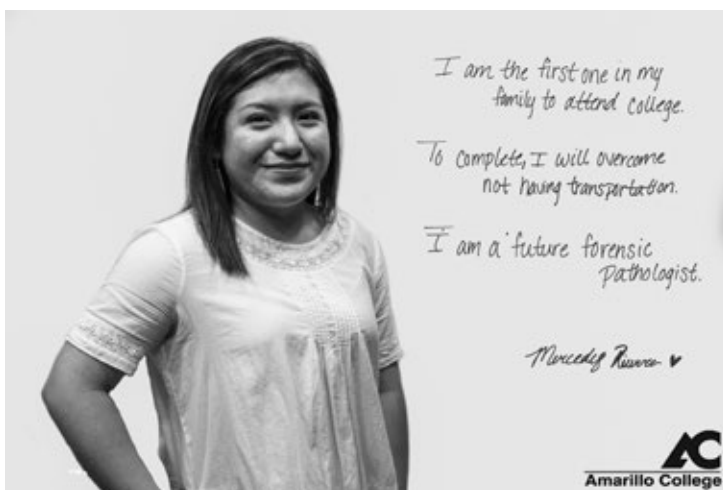
These efforts share common values and goals, recognizing that poverty is a barrier for students, and working to alleviate it. However, their efforts are limited in two key ways:

- They tend to be programmatic and focused at the student-level, rather than engaging in institutional transformation.
- They are largely reactive, addressing emergencies as they arise, rather than taking a preventative approach.

In other words, while they ask “What does it mean to ensure students have what they need to be ready to be here?” most initiatives do not necessarily include the work required to become “a student-ready college.”<sup>14</sup>

## Moving Beyond Student-level Approaches

What does a student-ready college look like, particularly one that is focused on addressing the needs of a student enduring poverty? The field needs examples to help illuminate the way and Amarillo College offers one. Beginning in 2010 with their No Excuses Poverty Initiative, AC has come to embrace what its leaders call an “institutionally supported systemic approach” to addressing poverty. The culture of caring deployed at Amarillo—and the results it appears to be achieving—are garnering attention. After joining the Achieving the Dream network in 2011, AC became a Leader College in 2014



and received the Bellwether Award in 2017. In 2018, AC President Russell Lowery-Hart testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions about the college’s approach

<sup>12</sup> Price, D. V., Roberts, B., Kraemer, S., & Chaplot, P. *Community College Approaches to Address Basic Needs and Improve Financial Stability for Low-Income Students: Lessons from the Working Students Success Network Implementation Evaluation*. Achieving the Dream. (2018)

<sup>13</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S., Broton, K., & Frank, V. *Single Stop USA’s Community College Initiative Implementation Assessment*. Kresge Foundation. (2014); Daugherty, L., Johnston, W. R., & Tsai, T. *Connecting College Students to Alternative Sources of Support: The Single Stop Community College Initiative and Postsecondary Outcomes*. Rand Corporation. (2016)

<sup>14</sup> McNair, T., Albertine, S., Asha Cooper, M., McDonald, N., & Major, T. (2016). *Becoming a Student-Ready College*. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass.

to meeting its students' needs. He has reason to be proud: While enacting a poverty-focused agenda embodied by a culture of caring, the three-year completion rate at Amarillo soared from 26% in 2012 to 45% in 2017.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, we need to understand what exactly the culture of caring at AC means and how it is enacted. This case study illuminates what it really means—and what it really takes—to do the work of addressing student poverty as an entire college.

## Learning from Amarillo

The practices involved in creating and enacting a culture of caring on campus are complex and best examined using the case study approach to research. Case studies enable assessment of college practices within real-life contexts, where boundaries between the theoretical and the practical are often difficult to discern.<sup>16</sup> In order to learn from the successes at Amarillo College, we therefore had to understand how their policies related to their community.

We took a mixed-methods approach to the work, leveraging in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document review, as well as collaboration with the college's institutional research office to examine quantitative data on student outcomes. Much of the data was collected during two three-day visits to the college in September and November 2017, when we conducted interviews, held focus groups, and made observations, in addition to talking informally with locals. In total, we spoke with 15 staff and administrators, eight faculty, 16 students, and 20 community members. We spent extensive time with the college president, his chief of staff, and the core members of the No Limits No Excuses team, both on campus and off. We attended No Limits No Excuses meetings and a large faculty-focused event, spending a total of almost 60 hours collecting data in those venues. Finally, we also were granted access to the results of a survey conducted by the Faculty Senate designed to examine how the initiative and its leaders were perceived by those on the front lines.

Our analyses are informed by experiences as scholars and practitioners. One of us (Sara Goldrick-Rab) is a classically trained sociologist and faculty member with decades of experience studying the challenges facing students like those at AC. The other (Clare Cady) is a long-time student affairs practitioner with a background in designing and implementing programs serving low-income students. Approaching the data collection and analysis together allowed us to look at each aspect of AC's work from multiple angles, while assessing those observations, and compare and contrast as we assessed what appeared to work well and where improvements were needed.

## The Amarillo Community

Amarillo College is a Hispanic-serving institution founded in 1929 and located in a city of fewer than 200,000 residents, representing almost half of the population of the Texas Panhandle. The city is predominately non-Hispanic White (60%), with much of the remaining population Latinx (29%).<sup>17</sup> Almost 8% of Amarillo's residents are non-citizens, most of whom are from Mexico.<sup>18</sup> The median household income is just less than \$50,000, and 14.5% of the population lives below the poverty line,

<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that this is only for First Time In College (FTIC) students, who are the focus in Texas, and consequently at AC as well. Dual-credit students are not included.

<sup>16</sup> Yin, R. K. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Sage: Newbury Park, CA. (1984)

<sup>17</sup> American Fact Finder. *Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin: 2010. 2010 Census Summary File*. U.S. Census Bureau. (2010) Retrieved from <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

including nearly one in five children and a disproportionate number of Latinx families.<sup>19</sup> While high school completion rates in Amarillo are similar to the national average (80%), only one in five residents older than 25 holds a bachelor’s degree (compared with one in four nationally).<sup>20</sup>

AC educates just more than 10,000 students while employing 426 full-time staff and almost 400 faculty, 195 of whom are full-time non-unionized professors (see Table 1). AC employees reside in, and many come from, a region marked by conservative politics and Christian faith and values. Almost 70% of voters supported President Trump in the last election.<sup>21</sup> More than 77% of Amarillo residents affiliate with a religion, compared with fewer than 50% nationally.<sup>22</sup> Most are Baptist (40%), with significant numbers of Catholics (13%) and other Christian faiths (8%). Many Amarillo College offices feature quotes from scripture on walls and desktops, and churches dot the landscape. During one of our visits, a Christmas tree-decorating competition was underway.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Amarillo College**

<b>Head Count</b>	<b>10,195</b>
Number of faculty	
Full-time	196
Part-time	195
Tuition and fees	
In-district	\$2,010
In-state	\$3,042
Book and supplies	\$1,656
Living expenses	
Off-campus without family	\$10,374
Off-campus with family	\$3,924
Net price	
Average	\$6,655
Students with income less than \$30,000	\$5,514
Cohort default rate (three-year)	15.30%

Source: IPEDS, Fall 2016

<sup>18</sup> Data USA. Amarillo, TX. Retrieved from <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/amarillo-tx/#demographics>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Quick Facts. *Amarillo City, Texas*. U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/amarillocitytexas/POP010210>

<sup>21</sup> Murphy, R., & Batheja, A. See Which Counties in Texas Trump and Clinton Won. *The Texas Tribune*. (November 9, 2016)

<sup>22</sup> Sperling’s Best Places. *Religion Comparison Highlights*. Retrieved from [http://www.bestplaces.net/compare-cities/amarillo\\_tx/orlando\\_fl/religion](http://www.bestplaces.net/compare-cities/amarillo_tx/orlando_fl/religion)

The region is also known for its philanthropy. The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* rates Amarillo in the top 50 metropolitan areas nationally for its generosity, with a median rate of giving among residents at 6.6%.<sup>23</sup> Local news often highlights successful fundraising efforts for charitable causes such as supporting cancer survivors or stocking the local food bank—all efforts tied to local churches. That philanthropy spills over onto campus as well, with staff reporting that once a need is identified and shared with the community, help will often follow.

The community of Amarillo, according to many we spoke with, needs a great deal of attention and care because of a slowing economy and rising poverty among some of its fastest-growing populations. Many of its specialized industries—utilities, mining, oil, quarrying, gas extraction, and construction—are struggling. The economic viability of the area is “dead,” according to one Amarillo College administrator, who went on to explain, “We’ve got to save our region. If not this will not be a place our grandchildren can live. There will not be anything here.”

Economic disparities are written on the city’s landscape. Downtown, many buildings sit empty and cracked sidewalks, filled with grass, disappear into worn dirt pathways. Around the college, however, some streets feature large homes with manicured lawns. The Gini Index, a common measure of income inequality, is 0.47 in Amarillo, close to the average for both Texas and the nation (0.48).<sup>24</sup> But efforts are underway to improve the economy. When visiting Panhandle Workforce Solutions, we were informed that the city is offering tax incentives to move businesses into the quiet downtown. There are many new construction projects, including a brewery and a nightclub, and a newly opened hotel now sits by the conference center.



Efforts to grow the economy and revitalize Amarillo’s future are more than 15 years old. In 2002 a group of community members formed Panhandle Twenty/20, an organization focused on doing work that belongs to “everyone and no one.” The effort includes various nonprofit, governmental and educational institutions such as Amarillo College, the Amarillo Independent School District, and West Texas A&M University. Over time it has honed its focus to connect community development to educational attainment.

<sup>23</sup> Chronicle of Philanthropy. *Generosity in American’s Cities: a Ranking*. Retrieved from <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/Generosity-in-All-of-Americas/156217> (2012)

<sup>24</sup> American Fact Finder. *Gini Index of Income Inequality*. U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_10\\_1YR\\_B19083&prodType=table](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_10_1YR_B19083&prodType=table) (2016)



## No Limits, No Excuses

In order to catalyze and develop more high school and college graduates, Panhandle Twenty/20 launched a community impact initiative called No Limits No Excuses (NLNE), with 26 partners committed to creating accessible pathways to postsecondary credentials that lead to living-wage employment. Amarillo College is part of NLNE and its work both informs and is informed by that initiative.

NLNE's core premise is that “when it comes to helping area students succeed there really are No Limits No Excuses” for failure.<sup>25</sup> In particular, the initiative emphasizes the importance of ensuring that financial limitations are not a barrier to collegiate success. This approach is distinct from the No Limits No Excuses charter school movement, which refuses to accept excuses for low performance from students. Rather, it aligns with Damen Lopez’s vision, as outlined in the book *No Excuses University*, which holds colleges accountable for being prepared to educate their students, rather than simply asking students to be prepared for college.<sup>26</sup> Put differently, the No Excuses philosophy dictates that a college is responsible for the whole student, by setting high expectations **and** assisting in the achievement of those expectations. This approach is also embodied in the recent book *Becoming a Student-Ready College*.<sup>27</sup>

Aligning the work of a college with the needs of its students, according to Lopez’s model, requires six “exceptional systems”: interventions, data management, assessment, standards alignment, collaboration, and a culture of universal achievement. AC began that work with a hard look at the needs of its students.

## Recognizing Maria

Unlike most community colleges around the country, AC is almost 90 years old. At one time it was a classic “junior college” serving an overwhelmingly White, male, and middle-class population. But these days, two-thirds of AC students are women and 43% are Latinx. More than 70% are the first in their family to attend college, and 38% qualify for the federal Pell Grant. Many students are married and/or have children, and most attend college part-time (see Table 2).<sup>28</sup>



<sup>25</sup> Amarillo Area Foundation. *No Limits No Excuses: Amarillo Partners for Postsecondary Success*. Retrieved from <https://www.amarilloareafoundation.org/no-limits-no-excuses>

<sup>26</sup> Lopez, D. *No Excuses University: How Six Exceptional Systems Are Revolutionizing Our Schools*. TurnAround Schools Publications. (2013)

<sup>27</sup> McNair, T., Albertine, S., Asha Cooper, M., McDonald, N., & Major, T. *Becoming a Student-Ready College*. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass. (2016)

<sup>28</sup> Testimony of Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart. President, Amarillo College, Amarillo, Texas. Prepared for the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. U.S. Senate Hearing on “Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act: Financial Aid Simplification and Transparency.” (January 18, 2018)

**Table 2. Characteristics of Amarillo College Students (Fall 2017)**

	%
Female	65
Race/ethnicity	
White	45
Hispanic/Latino	43
Black	6
Asian	3
Two or more races	2
Not reported	1
First-generation	71
Pell recipient	52
Age	
<21	44
22-24	16
25-29	16
30-34	9
35-39	6
40-49	6
50-65	2
65 and over	1
Has dependent children	26
Married	15
Full-time	36
Tested into developmental education	68

Notes: Married and children come from FAFSA; available for 70% of students. Non-dual credit students only.

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**Restricting the work of community colleges to traditional academic intervention is a mistake because the majority of community college students struggle with food and/or housing insecurity.**

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Recognizing these demographics, President Lowery-Hart refers to the typical AC student as “Maria.” During his Senate testimony in 2018 he described Maria as a “27-year-old Hispanic mother who is a first-generation student going to college part-time while working two jobs.” While she may have little in common with students who attended AC twenty or thirty years ago, Lowery-Hart emphasizes that she is smart, determined, hardworking, and church-going, and that if higher education does not serve her well, then “Maria will more likely be sitting on the sidelines needing more government assistance, when she desperately wants to earn a living wage.”

Lowery-Hart and his team strive to help everyone working at the college know Maria and the role they play in helping her succeed. He testified, “As the Amarillo College president, I am ultimately responsible for ensuring excuses do not derail our ability to more creatively, effectively, and efficiently serve our students and community.”

A 2010 Opportunity Conference hosted by Panhandle Twenty/20 offered an initial opportunity for the Amarillo community to get to know the poverty that students like Maria experience daily. The conference featured a talk by Dr. Donna Beegle, a prominent advocate for anti-poverty programs who frequently consults with state and federal government agencies. In her lectures and institutes, Beegle draws on 28 years of experience in extreme migrant labor poverty, and 20 years studying and working with communities to create a research-based model for assisting people to move out of poverty. Her visit spurred greater discussion and reflection, and at Lowery-Hart’s request she returned in 2011 to host a Poverty Institute at AC. That two-day event included lessons on defining poverty, confronting myths and stereotypes about poverty, approaches for communicating across difference, exercises to illustrate the challenges of living with a very tight budget, and other activities engaging all faculty and staff. As campus was closed for the duration of the event, attendance was strong and the impact was felt immediately.

Faculty report that following the Institute they began not only to notice Maria in their classrooms, but also to take actions to meet her needs. This was a major step in cultivating a sense of both awareness and caring. It was not as if professors had not seen signs of poverty among their students before, but they were not always confident in what they were seeing or what they could do about it. In a flurry of action following the Poverty Institute, some professors worked quickly to open a campus food pantry, while others made calls to local social service agencies to engage their support. Of course, there were some skeptics, those who wondered if poverty was “as grave an issue as [Beegle was] making it seem.” But years after that initial Poverty Institute, the effects are still evident. A 2017 survey fielded by the Faculty Senate revealed that faculty still remembered and “applauded” the college’s work to “train us in what it means to live in poverty and how to assist students in finding assistance.”

This awareness preceded some of the most sobering data collected at AC. In fall 2017, the college asked the Wisconsin HOPE Lab to conduct a basic needs security survey of all students. More than 400 students responded to the online survey, despite being offered little incentive to do so. Among respondents, 54% of students had experienced food insecurity in the previous 30 days (see Table 3). During that time period, 59% of students were housing insecure, with the majority struggling to pay for utilities. In addition, 6% of Amarillo students were homeless in the previous 30 days and 11% had experienced homelessness in the past 12 months. Clearly, poverty is present in the Amarillo community, and as an AC regent put it, saying “the p-word” out loud is a critical step in the right direction.

**Table 3. Food and Housing Security at Amarillo College**

<b>Housing Security</b>	<b>Last 30 Days</b>	<b>Last 12 Months</b>
Housing insecure (any of the below items)	46%	59%
Had a rent or mortgage increase that made it difficult to pay	11%	21%
Didn't pay full amount of rent or mortgage	16%	25%
Didn't pay full amount of utilities	28%	34%
Moved 2 or more times per year	1.6%	13%
Lived with others beyond the expected capacity of the housing	6.3%	8.7%
Moved in with other people due to financial problems	12%	19%
<b>Homeless</b>	<b>Last 30 Days</b>	<b>Last 12 Months</b>
Homeless (any of the below items)	5.9%	11%
Thrown out of home	1.4%	4.5%
Evicted from home	0.47%	2.8%
Stayed in a shelter	0.47%	1.2%
Stayed in an abandoned building, auto, or other place not intended for housing	1.9%	3.8%
Did not know where you were going to sleep, even for one night	3.3%	8.3%
<b>Food Security</b>	<b>Last 30 Days</b>	<b>Last 12 Months</b>
High security (score = 0)	33%	NA
Marginal security (score = 1-2)	13%	NA
Low security (score = 3-5)	19%	NA
Very low security (score = 6-10)	36%	NA

Source: Based on a fall 2017 survey conducted by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab. Total respondents= 415.

Notes: Food insecurity is assessed with the USDA 10-item scale. The percentages of students who indicated that they were evicted from home or stayed in a shelter are both 0.47.

## Paying for College

Financial aid is the main mechanism offered for helping students overcome a lack of income while in college, and the No Excuses Poverty Initiative takes several steps to help ensure all eligible students receive that support. Before they reach the college, many students attend high school in the Amarillo Independent School District (ISD). The NLNE partnership includes traditional efforts to ensure that students understand college as a viable option, offering “college days” in the elementary schools, organizing campus visits for older students, and incentivizing FAFSA applications. A messaging campaign urges students to “go” to college but also immediately asks “what’s your plan?” Additionally, NLNE developed an app that helps students formalize their plan for college by identifying potential career paths. The FAFSA completion rate more than doubled from 2015 to 2017 in the Amarillo ISD.

Since 1998, the ACE Scholarship, funded by the Amarillo Area Foundation, has distributed \$5.2 million in tuition and books via a last-dollar scholarship for students attending AC and West Texas A&M. There is discussion about expanding that support, and many in the community hope that it will eventually make higher education free. Some Amarillo residents we spoke with were aware of the ACE Scholarship, though most did not refer to it by name. One resident, upon learning about our research, suggested that we look into it, stating that if it was expanded his son would go to AC for free. The expansion would come as a result of a partnership between Amarillo College, Amarillo ISD, the city of Amarillo, Amarillo Economic Development, and Amarillo Area Foundation, and many of these key stakeholders are already committed to making it happen.<sup>29</sup>

But in the meantime, students at AC face a sticker price of more than \$10,000 per year, a cost that even after grants are applied remains more than \$6,000 on average (Table 1). Thus, even among students who complete the FAFSA and receive the Pell Grant, financial emergencies continue to occur. AC’s No Excuses fund, supported with at least \$50,000 per year from the college’s foundation, is a critical part of the response.

Effective emergency aid programs move quickly and efficiently to get students the support they need as rapidly as possible before they drop out. Analyses of programs around the country find that many colleges have difficulty doing this, instead struggling with protocol— establishing criteria, deciding on need, distributing resources, and collecting data to improve the program.<sup>30</sup> In comparison, AC’s No Excuses fund is administered with little fuss and appears to achieve its goal of helping students without burdening them in the process. Funded through the Amarillo College Foundation, the fund started with a \$20,000 allocation for a year, and has expanded to \$60,000, with \$30,000 granted to students in fall 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Stein, R. *Amarillo ISD Trustee Eyes Legality of Changes to ACE Scholarship*. Amarillo, TX. Amarillo Globe News. (October 24, 2017)

<sup>30</sup> Dachelet, K., & Goldrick-Rab, S. *Investing in Student Completion: Overcoming Financial Barriers to Retention Through Small-Dollar Grants and Emergency Aid Programs*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab and Scholarship America. (2015); Great Lakes. *2012-2015 Emergency Grant Closing Report and Best Practices*. Retrieved from [https://home.mygreatlakes.org/mglstatic/community/forms/EG\\_Emergency\\_Grant\\_Closing\\_Report\\_2012-15\\_0216.pdf](https://home.mygreatlakes.org/mglstatic/community/forms/EG_Emergency_Grant_Closing_Report_2012-15_0216.pdf) (2016)

In order to do this, two college employees are empowered to assess need and make determinations: Jordan Herrera, a master's level social worker who leads AC's Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC), and Tracy Dougherty, the co-executive director of the foundation. Students who are registered for at least six credit hours and have at least a 2.0 GPA may request emergency funds by coming to see the ARC team. No formal application is required; instead, Jordan determines when a student's case should be considered and shares it with Tracy via a memo, then the two women discuss it and make a decision. Interviews with them reveal that they have a common understanding of the challenges AC students face, are highly collaborative, and come to agreement quickly—indeed they often finished each other's sentences when describing the grant process. Once a decision is made, Jordan completes a request to pay form, which is signed by the foundation and sent to the AC business office for processing. The AC business office cuts checks twice a week, but in an emergency the funds can be disbursed the same day. In other cases, local businesses—including dentists, mechanics, and hotels—provide emergency services to students with payment from AC to follow, in order to move more quickly. These arrangements are facilitated by Jordan and the ARC staff, who contact businesses directly and vouch that they will be paid.

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### Saying “the p-word” out loud is a critical step in the right direction.

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Given that poverty can exact a toll in a variety of ways and at any time, and that people living in poverty are often accustomed to being mistrusted and greeted with skepticism, implementing emergency aid within a culture of caring requires the opposite tactics.<sup>31</sup> Sometimes the amount offered to a student is as little as \$75, while other times it is substantial. In no case is a student asked to fill out multiple forms to “prove” their poverty, and in every case they are given the chance to sit and speak about their challenges with a trained professional. Often Jordan's team is able to arrange payment directly on the students' behalf, saving time and potentially avoiding questions about the veracity of the requests. We met a student who received \$1,100 in support to help her family pay rent, and the student only had to provide a copy of her rental agreement before the funds were distributed to the landlord. Another student was \$418 short on tuition, and those funds were deposited to her account in a single day so that she could continue in school.

Demand for the No Excuses fund has grown over time. From September 2012 to October 2017, AC distributed more than \$136,000 in No Excuses funds to students. Faculty and staff contribute through an employee payroll deduction plan. Most of those funds helped students with academic needs (32%), housing assistance (31%), or utilities assistance (25%). However, some students also received financial support to help with transportation, childcare, or other personal expenses. Compared to the typical AC student, recipients of the No Excuses fund are disproportionately African American, female, and first in their family to attend college. They are also more likely to have received a Pell Grant.

<sup>31</sup> Mazelis, J. M. *Surviving Poverty: Creating Sustainable Ties Among the Poor*. New York, NY. NYU Press. (2017); Katz, M. B. *The Undeserving Poor*. New York, NY. Oxford University Press. (2013)

## The Advocacy and Resource Center

At Amarillo College, financial support for students is combined with other assistance, and all of the resources are centrally located in the student commons on the college's main campus. Entering the building's glass doors, visitors cannot miss the office immediately to the right of the welcome desk, home of the Advocacy and Resource Center. Since it opened in 2016, the ARC has become a place where faculty send students who they believe need help. The center is a cozy suite of offices, comfortably furnished and warmly lit, and students appear at ease there. The physical sense of support is enhanced by Jordan's well-trained, outgoing staff, who greet each visitor.

The ARC supplements the No Excuses fund, providing additional support with a social services case management program that includes access to public benefits programs, coaching, career guidance, counseling, and a food pantry and clothing closet. Under Jordan's supervision, the ARC is a field practicum site for the local university social work program, contributing to its talented staff. Its work is also buttressed by a counseling center and a legal aid clinic, both of which provide free services on campus. The personnel costs (salary and fringe) of supporting the ARC plus release time for the two faculty members managing the counseling and legal centers come to approximately \$250,000 per year.

The ARC is not only visibly conspicuous and easy to find, but it is also celebrated, particularly by President Lowery-Hart and his team. Many community colleges struggle with whether or not providing social services on campus is part of their job, worrying about mission creep. But President Lowery-Hart feels that if providing social services boosts the odds that students will complete their college degrees, then they must be provided. Reflecting that approach, Jordan explained that this is why the ARC is located "right in the middle of everything."

When students enter the ARC, they are greeted and then sign in at a computer kiosk that logs their attendance and asks some assessment questions to catalog their needs. Based on their responses, staff perform triage, bringing distressed students to the back for detailed and often emotional conversations, while directing others toward more straightforward resources like the campus pantry.



The pantry's full shelves offer a variety of nonperishable items and are kept stocked with the help of an overflow space in an adjacent building.<sup>32</sup> At Thanksgiving the floor of the extra space was covered with 500 bags filled with the fixings for dinner. "We did 100 dinners last year, so we challenged Jordan to do 500 this year," Chief of Staff Cara Crowley told us. Through a partnership with the Junior League, ARC staff met that challenge.

Near the food is a section of personal hygiene items and a clothing closet where students can get coats, shoes, or other items they might need. When a local businessman retired, he donated his suits, filling the space with work-appropriate attire. Many faculty and staff, as well as churches, also donate food or clothing.



As students utilize these resources, staff also consider other needs they might have. There are vouchers to pay for testing, computers, and calculators. The Adult Students Program, co-located in the ARC, offers assistance for child care, transportation, textbooks, and tuition. The ARC staff emphasize that they take a holistic approach, informed by their backgrounds in social work. Sometimes students get emotional support from their visits to the ARC. One staffer stated, "I've had a few students say, 'Well, my family doesn't support me coming to college.' ... Our role is to be that support system to them."

Consistent with the recommendations of national entities like the Center for Law and Social Policy and the practices of Single Stop, ARC staff also facilitate students' access to public benefits programs. While some students do not qualify for supplements like SNAP due to its associated work requirements, others meet the criteria and simply need help completing the application. That assistance may be cost-effective. As President Lowery-Hart points out, Texas taxpayers already fund federal programs; drawing down those dollars to support AC students makes sense because if the funding is not used, it will simply go to people living outside the state. The Wisconsin HOPE Lab's survey of basic needs insecurity, conducted in fall 2017, found that among AC's food-insecure students, 36% receive Medicaid, 32% receive SNAP, and 14.5% receive WIC. In addition, nearly one in four students reported receiving assistance with housing and/or utilities. During our visits, Jordan spoke often of her dealings with the local water and gas utilities, made easier via her personal connections and longstanding presence in the community.

<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that while the ARC's pantry is well-stocked and maintained, it does not, as many other pantries in the country do, offer fresh or frozen foods.



But the ARC is unable to meet every need. Transportation is one of the deficiencies in current services. While there is a bus system in Amarillo, it has a limited service area and does not run at key times, including evenings, when many students need it. A recent survey found that 15% of students either lacked transportation or their transportation was unreliable. A pilot program offered more bus coverage at times when students needed it and provided bus passes for the semester at a discounted rate of \$200. But after an extensive marketing campaign failed to attract many students, the college realized that the discounted price was still too high.

As we approached students around campus and asked about their strategies for making ends meet at Amarillo College, we noted a great deal of awareness of the ARC's existence. Even when they did not know the program's name or had never accessed its services, they knew the ARC was available. One student noted she had learned about the ARC from a class announcement made during her first course, as this is a primary marketing strategy of the program. Faculty and staff often refer to the ARC simply by its staff, fondly referencing "Jordan and her crew."

The outreach seems to be working. During fall 2016 the ARC served almost 450 students (5.4% of enrolled students), and in spring 2017 it served about 420 students (5.7% of enrolled students). Since then usage has expanded substantially with the ARC serving 1,062 students (13.2% of enrolled students) as of October 31, 2017, just two months into in the fall 2017 term. This increase appears to be related to the use of AC's homegrown predictive analytics system for targeting outreach to students (more on this below).

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**Given that poverty can exact a toll in a variety of ways and at any time, and that people living in poverty are often accustomed to being mistrusted and greeted with skepticism, implementing emergency aid within a culture of caring requires the opposite tactics.**

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And the ARC continues to do more, trying to ensure that all professors and students are aware of its services. This is especially important because there are some apparent disparities in who uses the ARC. While the student body is 65% female, nearly 80% of students who use the ARC are female-identified. That could be due to higher rates of poverty among women (which is certainly the case in the broader community), but it may also be related to the all-female staff or a culture of machismo. It can be difficult to marry a culture of caring with a culture of pride. One male student stated, "If you can't provide for your family, culturally that's supposed to be embarrassing." Indeed, a professor said that while she regularly refers students to the ARC for help, she also keeps food in her office because some students are "too prideful" to get services there.

As demand expands, the challenges for the ARC will inevitably grow as well. Already, its three-person staff is finding itself overworked and without sufficient space. Longer hours of operation and more staff are needed to assist students quicker. There is also a growing awareness that staff, and even some faculty, could benefit from help at the ARC.

## No Excuses Across Campus

The No Excuses approach to serving students goes beyond the ARC and office of the president and is integrated into all aspects of student life at AC. Many who work on campus speak of how they ensure that there is no excuse for students not to be successful. It was the faculty who took the first steps to fill students' basic needs by starting the food pantry, but the attention to serving the whole student does not stop at the classroom door. Faculty connect with students through an online platform, answering questions in real time and even checking in with students if they miss class. Some faculty have even picked up a student whose car broke down or celebrated graduation with a student in the hospital who could not attend the ceremony. The latter student reported, "I even had no excuse not to be at graduation." Many faculty also ensure students know about the ARC services by including class announcements at the start of the semester or providing a referral when they learn that a student has the need. No Excuses also shows up for students having academic challenges, with mandatory tutoring provided to students who are struggling. Students must attend in order to take their next test, meaning they have no excuse not to study.

Outside of the classroom, life is also informed by No Excuses. Academic advisors take the time to address students' needs beyond what courses they have to take. One talked about how critical it was to have personal conversations with students, noting that if an issue is going to affect a student's performance, they should know about it and address it. Student Life offers the Coaches and Champions Mentoring Program to support first-generation, low-income, and academically at-risk students. Staff describe the No Excuses approach as just part of what they do and are often unable to differentiate between their No Excuses-related work and the daily functions of their jobs. This makes sense, as everyone who works at AC, faculty and staff alike, have a commitment to No Excuses included in their job descriptions.

## Connecting with the Community

Not long after the first Poverty Institute, the college was contacted by a local agency that serves families and individuals experiencing poverty. They were fielding phone calls from faculty and staff on campus regarding what appeared to be seven homeless students. After searching for shelter and support for these students, the agency realized that in fact the calls were coming from seven different contacts but all about a single student. This experience, President Lowery-Hart noted, helped the college realize that intentional partnerships and strong communication would be imperative to the success of any program or initiative addressing poverty. Without these relationships there would be either a duplication of services or a waste of resources—both detrimental to their cause.

One critical function of the ARC is the role it plays in connecting the college with as many as 50 external agencies, individuals and organizations, including prominent partners such as Panhandle Community Services, Family Support Services, Texas Workforce Solutions, and Cal Farley's. Each of these agencies are among the partners in the No Limits, No Excuses initiative in Amarillo.<sup>33</sup> These

<sup>33</sup> While the NLNE website states there are 26 partners, those we spoke to with NLNE told us that the number is now 30.

relationships are close and the connections utilized regularly. For example, an executive director shared that she had Jordan's cell phone number and they often texted to sort out services for students. These communications may involve problem-solving or even lead to warm referrals so that students can quickly utilize the resources at a particular agency. Jordan reported that while initially she sent students into the community for services, as partnerships have strengthened the agencies are now flagging students in their own offices and ensuring they know about the ARC as well. Panhandle Community Services places a priority on students for certain programs including those targeting persons experiencing homelessness, and Texas Workforce Solutions pays for a staff member who works in the career center on AC's campus. Several of the organizations we spoke to also noted that AC's referral channels have upped their service numbers, which has allowed them to access additional grant and government funds.

The college and the ARC also benefit from relationships with individuals and businesses in the community to leverage resources and services. Administrators estimate that the college saves \$300,000 per year in personnel costs by leveraging partnerships with external agencies. President Lowery-Hart takes many meetings with local leaders and entrepreneurs to build such relationships. Several local optometrists offer free or low-cost eye exams. One member of the Board of Regents is a local dentist who takes referrals for students who cannot get help at the local clinic. The relationships between the ARC and these individuals are so powerful and important to the success of students that AC refers to these partners as "college success coaches."

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**"I even had no excuse not to be at graduation."**

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Many businesses work with the ARC to get student bills covered through the No Excuses Fund. Jordan explained that the ARC staff have contacted mechanics, hotels, and even the power company to request they accept a direct payment from AC to cover a student's bill. These requests have always been met. Landlords and rental agencies have also been contacted and paid in this manner. Jordan notes, "I just take the time and say [to the student], can I have your landlord's phone number? Can I just call them?" With the student's permission, she contacts the landlord and negotiates a time frame within which the AC business office will issue a check to pay the rent.

Still, the relationship between AC and its community can be further improved. For example, local partners express a desire to better understand the services already offered by AC so that they can make better referrals for students. They also seek more feedback from AC, so that they can assess whether their current referrals are working. Both AC and its partners point to a need to streamline intake processes and reduce redundancies. This has been an ongoing challenge for the community, which had previously tried working with a third-party organization that offered an online platform to screen people for benefits and services.

## Leading the Charge

Resources are tight at AC, just as they are at community colleges across Texas and around the nation. President Lowery-Hart took office in the wake of a \$4 million budget cut from the state. This reduction in support led to a sizable retirement buyout and layoffs, as well as the restructuring of leadership, faculty, and staff. While economically painful, those shifts also created opportunities. Indeed, while some referred to the overhaul as “a big mess,” others spoke of it as a transformation point. President Lowery-Hart describes that period as “very painful” but necessary, allowing him to “flatten out” the leadership team and create a more streamlined administration focused on implementing the No Excuses approach while at the same time instilling a culture of caring



Still the two actions often cut at cross purposes. Over time, he led shifts in key roles including the vice president of academic affairs, the vice president of student affairs, and the director of institutional research. Chief of Staff Crowley played a key role in implementing those changes, as did local NLNE leaders, including Anette Carlisle, Panhandle Twenty/20 president and an AC regent. She and other members of the Board of Regents act as emissaries for the No Excuses work, leveraging different people and perspectives for different contexts. When we spoke with Regent Carlisle she explained that it often makes sense to explain the NLNE and the No Excuses Poverty Initiative from a business perspective. She outlined how addressing poverty is an issue of local economic development, tying the success of local businesses to the success of the community as a whole.

While the No Excuses initiative is a team effort, President Lowery-Hart is its charismatic and empathetic leader. He understands this duty and wears it as a mantle of responsibility. Growing up in the Texas Panhandle, he recalls “standing in line for government cheese and milk and butter.” At the same time, he emphasizes that his family was never “poor,” as they always had enough to eat, even offering food from the family garden to those in greater need. From a young age, he viewed education as a “safety net,” finding the classroom “a place where I found community and safety.” He understood college was critical to his success, and that understanding is foundational to his ongoing commitment to the education of others. He is quick also to acknowledge that as a White male, he has been afforded advantages that others, including “Maria,” are not. He seeks to leverage his privilege for the betterment of others while also striving to learn more about the experiences of others. For example, he participated in a three-day homelessness simulation in a nearby town to better understand what it means to live in extreme poverty. It was a transformative experience for him, one he described as “immediately dehumanizing,” as he tried to obtain food and shelter in a world that would not look him in the eye.

President Lowery-Hart’s approach to leadership is “all about relationships,” and he devotes significant time to that effort. He meets with students each week. He also brings together faculty, staff, and administration for No Excuses meetings. He sits with members of the business community, trying to forge relationships and pathways that will result in jobs for students. He convenes NLNE partners to bring the AC perspective to the table and connect their work with other community initiatives. Beyond campus he leverages relationships to find success for the college. He was a fellow with the Aspen Institute’s Community College Excellence program, where he formed a strong bond with people around the country who continue to provide moral support—and an active group chat on his iPhone. He

negotiated a coach as part of his contract with AC at the start of his presidency, allowing for additional support and a relationship that would make him successful. He is engaged online, utilizing Twitter and other social media to make connections. He maintains strong connections in the Amarillo community. At one point in a meeting we were attending he excused himself early because he had to “go judge barbecue” at a local event.

The response to President Lowery-Hart’s many efforts to connect and reach out are largely positive. Many of the people we interviewed simply referred to him by first name, conveying the connective and informal nature of his leadership and relationships. One faculty member drew a comparison between Lowery-Hart and the previous president by stating, “the last one was like my dad, and [Lowery-Hart] is like my friend.” But some professors worry that his approach detracts from AC’s academic mission and the overall “quality” of the institution. One noted, “Amarillo College has shifted from actually teaching students and giving them a good education to ‘saving the community,’ which apparently means getting students through the program, whether they actually learn the subject or not.”

Another faculty member posited that resources allocated to No Excuses negatively impacts the professoriate, writing on a survey that the college was “killing faculty positions to pay for the president’s ‘poor children’ schemes.” While it is true that the number of faculty positions were reduced in 2016, most were subsequently reinstated. Moreover, classified staff positions were also reduced, and administrative positions were cut to an even larger extent.

## A Culture of Evidence

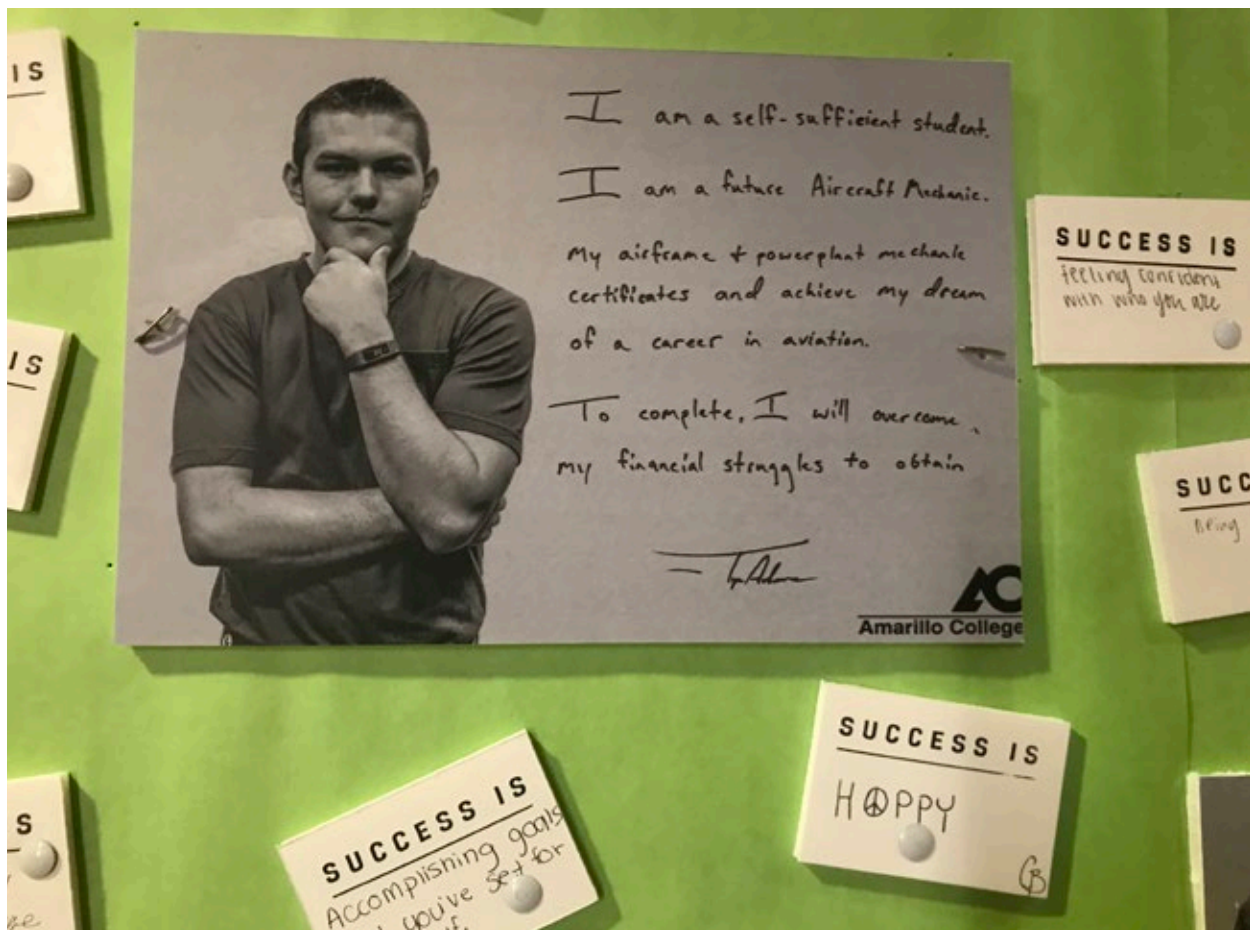
For more than a decade, efforts have been under way to develop a culture of data and evidence at the nation’s community colleges. The primary focus has been on expanding the traditional role of institutional researchers so that they can play a broader role in creating success among the college’s students.

This effort is in full swing at Amarillo College. The last search for a new institutional researcher was chaired by the head of the college’s math department, Collin Witherspoon. Collin began working at Amarillo as a math instructor in 2005 and became chair in 2014. As the search progressed, the committee found that it was unable to identify a suitable candidate. Eventually, administrators turned to Collin and asked him to step in. He agreed, leaving his role as a professor to become the executive director of analytics and institutional research in 2016.

According to the Community College Research Center, a college with a culture of evidence uses data to understand the problems that students experience, turns to data when developing strategies for addressing those challenges, and then commits to evaluating the effectiveness of those strategies.<sup>34</sup> Under Collin’s leadership, all of these attributes of a culture of evidence are implemented at Amarillo. His ability to do this is reinforced by his attendance at the president’s cabinet meetings, which allows him access to the highest-level discussions.

Bringing evidence into discussions about initiatives like No Excuses can be challenging. Practitioners striving to implement a time-consuming effort seek to understand its impact and want to know if their hard work pays off in support of the students. As a mathematician and a respected longstanding

<sup>34</sup> Morest, V. S., & Jenkins, D. *Institutional Research and the Culture of Evidence at Community Colleges*. Achieving the Dream. (2007)



member of the Amarillo community, however, Collin is able to transmit both good and bad news to AC leaders and keep the conversation focused on what the evidence shows. Interviews with his colleagues suggest that while Collin has been the bearer of bad news (“that supposedly positive trend might just be a fluke”) he is also open to questions and criticism. In doing so, he increases the respectability of data and evidence and leads others to better understand how they can learn from it.

Consider another AC initiative focused on helping more students complete their courses, shortening the term from 16 weeks to eight. As it was implemented, many faculty (and some administrators) expressed concern that such an abbreviated term would put some students at a disadvantage. “What about older students who have trouble keeping up with the fast pace?” they worried. Some also doubted whether shorter courses could work well for STEM fields. Collin turned those questions into hypotheses, disaggregating the course performance data by age and sharing the results. In some cases, he found that the skeptics were right—the few Amarillo students who are substantially older than the median age did not do as well in the shortened courses. But in many other cases, the data did not support the concerns. Those data-driven conversations help Amarillo focus on its students, checking stereotypes and assumptions with evidence.

Like an increasing number of colleges around the country, Amarillo utilizes a homegrown predictive analytics model and an early alert system to help support students at risk. This supplements the No Excuses work in several ways. Faculty and advisors use a tool on the student management system to alert the ARC staff if students need assistance. When students use the ARC or a related support service, they scan their student ID, allowing the college to track that participation and utilize the information in its predictive analytics system. The Institutional Research office then helps the ARC staff target proactive outreach to students with multiple dependents who earn less than \$19,000 per year, or other students who appear at-risk using the profiles created using predictive analytics. This outreach, which was implemented in fall 2017, appears to be driving a substantial increase of students seeking services from the ARC.

When it comes to the No Excuses Poverty Initiative, data are being collected but a full-blown evaluation is not yet possible. The program is very young and until recently served only a few hundred students per year. The descriptive data on retention rates, averaged over a three-year period, are as follows:

- Fall to spring retention: 67.5% for all AC students vs. 73.0% for students receiving services from either the ARC or the No Excuses Fund
- Fall to fall retention: 46.8% for all AC students vs. 48.0% for students receiving services from either the ARC or the No Excuses Fund

It is not possible to conclude from these numbers, however, that the program is having the desired impact. Every student who sought services was accommodated, and those students likely differed in important ways from those who did not seek support. Thus, simple comparisons between students who visited the ARC and those who did not cannot reveal the program's true impact.

We worked with Collin to conduct a propensity score analysis, endeavoring to isolate program impact by leveraging administrative data to create comparison groups against which we could assess the outcomes of students receiving ARC services. But some of the most important characteristics of students coming to the ARC cannot be observed in administrative records—for example, their level of food or housing security. Thus, even when we utilized FAFSA data for a subsample of students, the estimates were compromised by missing data that likely correlate with both the ARC utilization and the propensity to remain enrolled in college. It was therefore unsurprising that those quasi-experimental analyses revealed no evidence of program impact.

Instead, Amarillo is now moving toward a more rigorous evaluation—a randomized controlled trial that can more precisely estimate the impact of the ARC using strategic encouragement deployed to urge students to seek out the ARC. This is important, as the college's financial commitment to the work is purported to have a sizable return on investment—\$34 in tuition, fees, and state funding for every dollar expended. Our team will partner with Amarillo in the coming year to examine such outcomes.

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Those data-driven conversations help Amarillo focus on its students, checking stereotypes and assumptions with evidence.

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## Recommendations

There is strong evidence that the work being done at AC is improving the lives of students as well as those of faculty, staff, and the Amarillo community. Through years of intentional and informed decision-making, AC has shifted from a college that enrolled some students who endured poverty to a college that explicitly recognizes the barriers that poverty presents and seeks to mitigate them. But the institution continues to evolve and become more impactful. Our research suggests that the following actions may help.

### Defining the theory of change

What is it about saying that a college has “no excuses” that drives a commitment to addressing poverty? How does that attitude and approach inform the subsequent steps required to improve student outcomes? What would it look like to effectively mitigate poverty in the college setting? These are all questions that AC is still trying to answer. It is important to do so in order to ensure that the required changes to practice and institutional policy, and perhaps resources as well, are in place to support completion. Commitment and passionate leadership are necessary but insufficient attributes of a successful institutional change strategy. As the No Excuse Poverty Initiative evolves, its leaders will need to more clearly delineate the major milestones to mark its progress.

### Scaling outreach

The use of analytics to identify students who could benefit from No Excuses services is a positive development. However, the benefits are currently limited because the model relies on financial information from the FAFSA, which is missing for many students and inaccurate for others. In order to take a more proactive and equitable approach to identifying students who could benefit from support, the college might also use census data. Following the approach developed by the Community College Research Center, students’ addresses could be matched with census block groups and then classified according to the average financial security characteristics of those block groups.<sup>35</sup> Volunteers could be enlisted to support ARC staff in reaching out to students and informing them of available support on a regular basis.

### Addressing long-term sustainability

The work of the No Excuses Poverty Initiative is extensive and requires significant time to implement across campus. The total cost per student and the impact on completion have not yet been estimated, and thus it is not known whether these efforts result in a return on investment that makes the initiative at minimum revenue neutral, ensuring its sustainability. AC has done a good job leveraging federal and private grants to build out programs and services, which has fueled the growth and success of the program. But over time questions of cost, impact, and scale must be rigorously examined in order to ensure long-term sustainability.

35 Jenkins, D., D., Leinbach, T., Crosta, P. M., Prince, D., & Whittaker, D. *CCRC Research Tools No. 1: Using Census Data to Classify Community College Students by Socioeconomic Status and Community Characteristics*. Retrieved from <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/research-tools-1.html> (2006)



## Lessons and Strategies

For several years, President Lowery-Hart and his team at Amarillo College have been telling anyone who would listen that they take the challenges facing today's college students seriously. They view overcoming life's challenges as integral to academic success in college and are doing whatever they can to help. Our research indicates that their initiatives are a strong example of how a college can intentionally and systematically engage in programming and culture change to serve and support student success—even if those students have few financial resources. Amarillo College now faces some significant challenges, in particular as it aims to scale this work in a climate of significant budget constraints. But it has reason to persist. The evidence accumulated thus far on Amarillo's model does not support causal claims of success, and there is more work to be done, both in terms of implementation and evaluation. Nevertheless, it is appropriate for community colleges around the nation to consider learning from AC's efforts. In particular, we emphasize three lessons:

### **Successful programs require culture change**

The ARC is central to AC's work but is not a standalone program. Rather, it is part of a broader initiative that draws connections between what students are experiencing and the corresponding reforms to AC's systems and services. The No Excuses Poverty Initiative is integrated into the work of every employee, rather than being isolated in a single area of campus or left to the responsibility of one team. The strategic use of storytelling, community meetings, data, and personal outreach to implement a culture of caring is constantly leveraged by President Lowery-Hart and his team to bring efforts to support students across campus.

### **College communities need data-driven education about poverty**

Culture change must be grounded in an informed understanding of the problem. One of the most critical components to the success of No Excuses is the commitment to ensuring that faculty, staff, and administration have an intimate understanding of how poverty affects people and their educational experiences. The training provided by Dr. Donna Beegle is evidence-based and free of stereotypes. Educators at AC understand that poverty does not make a person deficient or "different" but rather constrains their ability to succeed. It can and should be alleviated.

### **Leaders are everywhere**

While President Lowery-Hart is a clear instigator of the No Excuses Poverty Initiative on his campus, he is not the only leader. Faculty members, staff, community activists, and board members play key roles in shaping and reshaping what the initiative looks like and how it affects students. By giving them that responsibility, writing it into their job descriptions, and infusing a sense throughout campus that everyone has the potential to change students' lives, President Lowery-Hart has strengthened and amplified the power of this work. In many ways, this is an efficient and effective approach to a difficult task.

## Acknowledgements

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## Information on the Authors

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