



Higher Education Partnerships for Ending Unaccompanied Youth Homelessness

*Clark County School District and University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Hope Scholars Program*

Overview

Students experiencing homelessness during high school face unique challenges to accessing and successfully transitioning to institutes of higher learning. Educational institutions can respond with partnerships and strategies to help students succeed. Across the country, local education agencies and institutes of higher learning are building capacity to ensure every student experiencing homelessness is identified and has a full and equitable opportunity to pursue and achieve their post-secondary goals.

Nevada's Clark County School District (CCSD) is the fifth largest school district in the country, serving approximately 320,000 students across 356 schools in Pre-K through 12th grade. CCSD serves both urban and rural areas across 7,200 square miles: 46% of students are Hispanic, 26% are Caucasian, 13% are African-American, and less than 1% are Native American. The school district identified almost 14,600 students as experiencing homelessness at some point during the 2015-2016 school year, including approximately 3,350 high school students.

Clark County is also one of more than 40 communities, including three states, that have been confirmed by the federal government as having ended Veteran homelessness. This gives the community a unique opportunity to capitalize on the momentum and success created around those efforts in order to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness, including students who are transitioning from high school to institutes of higher learning.

Prior to 2015, there were no coordinated efforts within Clark County to address the needs of unaccompanied students identified as experiencing homelessness and preparing to transition from high school to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). In response to requests the UNLV Housing office was receiving on behalf of students, the university began planning for the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program, linking it to the Clark County School District's McKinney Vento Program (Title I HOPE Program) and partnering with the Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth (NPHY).

Launched in 2016, the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program leverages the resources and expertise of the McKinney-Vento Program and is designed to assist CCSD graduating seniors experiencing homelessness secure housing, academic, and financial support while attending UNLV. The Title I HOPE Program has been central to the development and implementation of the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program and serves as the referral source for the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program, providing a direct access point from the school district. The Title I Program identifies students who will potentially meet UNLV admissions requirements, engages students across the school district to assess interest in higher education, and assists them with their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms, verification, and scholarship opportunities.

Target Population

The UNLV HOPE Scholars Program focuses on CCSD graduating seniors who are identified as unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness by the CCSD McKinney-Vento Program. Seniors must have been accepted by and are planning to attend UNLV, as well as submitted a FAFSA form. Participation is voluntary. Youth who choose

to enroll in the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program commit to moving into UNLV student housing and living on-campus year round, participating in a summer math ‘bridge’ program, enrolling full-time in school, maintaining a 2.75 cumulative GPA, and meeting with identified supports, including an academic success coach and the UNLV Single Point of Contact (SPOC).

Key Partners

The Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth (NPHY) is a strong community-based partner, providing access to an array of services to support the success of HOPE Scholars. Services include counseling, assistance with obtaining identification, family reunification supports, and connections to employment and other resources for youth experiencing homelessness. Students are able to access services on and off campus, increasing participation and building community capacity to serve youth experiencing homelessness.

Key Strategies

The UNLV HOPE Scholars Program focuses on a number of strategies:

- Leveraging the existing expertise of the partners who are implementing the program at both the local school district level and the university level;
- Proactively identifying and supporting eligible students who are seniors and juniors; and
- Streamlining access to a range of resources and supports associated with housing, education, and overall well-being.

Key Lessons Learned

- **Leadership and buy-in of the program goal is key:** Someone at the higher education level must champion the program and articulate the purpose with senior administration officials. The purpose of the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program is to recognize the impact it has on a student’s academic success, as well as the long-term outcomes for youth who are experiencing homelessness.
- **Partnerships matter:** Take time to build relationships. A true partnership between the university and the school district has meant understanding the expertise each brings to the table and leveraging strengths to successfully implement the program. For example, the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program relies heavily on the school district to support the identification and transition of students during their senior year through a meeting and site visit to UNLV.
- **Centralize efforts through a Single Point of Contact (SPOC):** Having a SPOC reduces confusion for both students and community partners. Students have support navigating what can be a complicated process to access needed support while community partners have a central point of contact for receiving referrals and providing information regarding existing resources.
- **Direct contact with the students is more efficient and effective:** At the onset of the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program, school counselors acted as the primary liaisons, but this proved to be a less efficient way of engaging students and connecting them to the program. The UNLV HOPE Scholars Program now communicates directly with students through the SPOC as they are identified by the school district’s Title I HOPE Program, which facilitates early and ongoing engagement prior to and during UNLV attendance.
- **Implement academic supports before and during the school year:** While all of the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program participants demonstrated academic success in high school, the first year of university proved to be challenging and the program learned that implementation of supports prior to the start of the fall semester was critical. This has resulted in a summer ‘bridge’ program to ensure the students are ready to take on the rigors of university courses, especially in math.

- **Plan for program sustainability early on:** With private and university funding identified for the first two years of the program, UNLV is working to secure additional resources to ensure the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program is sustained long term. While many foundations invest in education and related supports for younger students through high school, and there are some school-based resources to support the transition to higher education, it has been a challenge to identify additional foundations and other funding for the critical role the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program itself plays.

Outcomes

While it's too early to report on longer-term housing and education outcomes for students, the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program is tracking each cohort throughout their UNLV enrollment in a four-year program.

Looking Ahead

Building Capacity

Identifying opportunities to promote and expand the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program has been a key strategy moving into the second year. Fundraising has included the development of materials featuring students themselves who were interested in promoting the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program and drawing attention to issues facing youth experiencing homelessness. Peer outreach and engagement has been an important outcome of UNLV HOPE Scholars Program participation as the participants themselves have helped to connect fellow students experiencing homelessness with available resources and supports on and off campus.

CCSD continues to proactively engage high school seniors who are on track to graduate and are identified as experiencing homelessness. The targeted focus on unaccompanied youth who lack parental support has helped to address a gap that many seniors were facing when it came to the challenge of financial aid as well as trying to access resources to support post-secondary studies. The school district has also expanded outreach for the program to include high school juniors, so that students who might be eligible for the UNLV HOPE Scholars Program can be identified earlier, and be provided with information about the kinds of resources that exist to support them post-graduation.

Learn More

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