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## BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: Social Work Case Management

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On any given day, millions of college students face basic needs insecurity. Not having enough food to eat or a safe place to sleep can be profoundly distressing, as can the prior “multiple and intersectional” toxic circumstances that lead to this scarcity.<sup>1</sup> Housing insecurity creates a loss of predictability and control over one’s daily life, causing a loss of faith in others and experiences of isolation. Adaptions to scarcity may also harm students. For example, some students seek out free food or free housing using online dating sites, which contributes to sexual exploitation.<sup>2</sup>

Trauma is a significant mental health phenomenon that should not be confused with the stress of a failed exam, or a break-up with a significant other.<sup>3</sup> Rather, trauma is “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”<sup>4</sup> The effects of trauma include difficulty coping with ordinary daily stressors, developing trusting relationships with others, handling cognitive functioning such as memory, attention, and thinking, and controlling emotions and behavior.<sup>5</sup> Trauma also undermines a student’s sense of self and safety.<sup>6</sup>

Trauma-informed care, including case management, is a crucial support for students enduring basic needs insecurity. This brief explores the role that social work guidelines could play in student affairs case management with regard to addressing students’ basic needs.

### Background

Case management engages clients “in the collaborative process of identifying, planning, accessing, advocating for, coordinating, monitoring, and evaluating resources, supports, and services.”<sup>7</sup> It is a process that originated in the social work profession, dating from the late 19th century, as a response to poverty and other systemic social problems. Initially, the goal was to reduce inequality through social change, achieved by matching individuals with needed services.<sup>8</sup> Starting at the turn of the 20th century, case management shifted and began to focus on clinical “treatment” services and was influenced by psychotherapeutic theories and practices. However, two things later occurred that allowed case management to resume its original intent and brought it to where it stands now. First, in the late 1950s through the early 1970s,

psychiatric hospitals deinstitutionalized severely mentally ill individuals to the community, who then needed coordination of complex and often fragmented services.<sup>9</sup> Second, the social and political upheaval of the 1960s “renewed the social work profession’s emphasis on social action, planning, and policy” on behalf of the disenfranchised.<sup>10</sup>

Case management began to appear in higher education following the shooting tragedies at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University (in 2007-2008). Colleges and universities sought systematic ways to deal with campus safety, identify students in emotional distress and crisis, and help them get the appropriate services on campus, or sometimes, in the surrounding community.<sup>11</sup> The Higher Education Case Managers Association (HECMA) has more than 800 members from 266 schools in 43 states. In 2019, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education released [specific standards](#) for case management in higher education, designed to promote the development and success of students.

Both clinical and non-clinical case management are used in higher education. The former is primarily located within counseling and psychological services, and case managers usually have professional mental health training. While they do not provide direct counseling services, their focus is on students’ psychological well-being. They identify, coordinate, and provide referrals to community mental health providers, substance abuse providers, in-patient hospital psychiatric units, and crisis intervention units. Clinical case managers are bound by strict confidentiality laws which limit their communication with other campus departments.<sup>12</sup> Although students who are experiencing basic needs insecurity may avail themselves of this type of case management, typically these professionals do not deal with such issues.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, non-clinical case managers work with students on all other types of school-related struggles. They focus on assessment, student advocacy, student empowerment, and follow-up and resolution. Their work involves identifying students who pose a behavioral threat to themselves or others; helping students navigate the college/university; and connecting students to needed services that are intended to maximize their academic success. Some of these services are located in the community, but a great many are located in existing departments on campus. Case managers’ tasks vary according to where they are situated within the school’s institutional structure. For example, they may be located in the Dean of Students office, student affairs offices, the office of student conduct, the office of disability services, academic services, residential life, or in association with a school’s CARE or Behavioral Intervention Team.<sup>14</sup>

The number of case managers at a college or university varies. According to a 2017 survey of HECMA members, the average ratio is more than 7,000 students to one case manager.<sup>15</sup> However, very few community colleges have case managers. That survey found that just 3.8% of participants were employed by a community college.

The scope of a case manager’s work depends, in part, on the size and type of institution, the number of case managers, and the student population (homogeneity, typical age/developmental stage, typical financial resources, geographic location). Over half of survey respondents said that they helped students with meeting basic needs, and their responsibilities focused on providing or coordinating resources.

## Case Management at the University of Arizona

At the University of Arizona, case managers perform the follow services:

- One-on-one consultations with students seeking assistance regarding challenges that may impede their ability to remain successful
- Assistance with academic processes such as Explanation of Absence, Complete Withdrawal, Medical Withdrawal, and Retroactive Medical Withdrawal
- Education of the campus community regarding policies, procedures, and support services available to students
- Connecting students to appropriate campus and community resources
- Providing students with institutional knowledge concerning policies and procedures in order to strive to create a common baseline understanding of the University among all students
- Collaboration with campus colleagues to assist students in navigating campus bureaucracy

## Social Work Case Management on Campus

Social work case management is a key aspect of the [work](#) done by Amarillo College in their Advocacy and Resource Center and appears to contribute to their culture of caring. In addition, a study conducted at Tarrant County College found that comprehensive, intensive, and ongoing social work case management had a positive effect on persistence and degree completion.<sup>16</sup> Single Stop often employs social workers in its services operating on community college campuses.

There are many reasons why a social work case management approach that broadens the scope and purpose of student affairs case management may be useful to the modern college or university. The approach involves working at the micro-level with individuals, at the mezzo level with institutions, and at the macro level with public advocacy. In other words, the social work case manager addresses basic needs insecurity as both a personal trouble to be addressed in the moment, and a systemic problem requiring structural change.

Social work brings a holistic perspective to case management, focusing on understanding the student in their environment, and using a strengths-based approach. This is also the model used in trauma-informed care. Using this approach, a case manager can explore the sorts of challenges that may prevent students from using existing campus resources, uncovering areas for improvement, and helping administrators avoid creating new programs. The case manager takes seriously many issues that the Hope Center's research reveals are main barriers:

- A student's sense of how basic needs insecurity came about, and their belief that they created the current problem (they often believe that they provoked their poverty)
- The role that their family plays in their decisions and finances
- Lack of access to campus resources, including challenges with timing and transportation
- Their social network
- Negative perceptions of help-seeking and of public benefits programs
- Institutional and legislative policies and programs (or lack thereof)

Social work case management employs a strengths-based approach that values people, irrespective of their behaviors or circumstances, for their successes, rather than blaming them for their problems. The emphasis is on resilience, hope, empowerment, and self-determination.<sup>17</sup> Using a strengths-based approach includes the following focal points:

- **Goal-oriented:** Students create their own goals based on the possibilities they see for themselves.
- **Systematic assessment of strengths:** Assessment by the case manager (in conjunction with the student) of the student's current circumstances is ongoing and constantly searches for things that will help students achieve their goals. While the focus is on the present, past successes and resources are considered vital information in order to promote self-esteem and optimism in a very discouraging situation.
- **Strengths go beyond personal characteristics:** Strengths include personal and professional relationships; opportunities; naturally occurring resources such as a faith community, a library, a job, or extracurricular activities; and community resources such as a food bank, a housing program, or government benefits.
- **Focus on hope:** The case manager intentionally forms a strong alliance with a student that is based on increasing optimism and a positive self-perception. This provides sustenance to the student when they are trying to achieve challenging goals.
- **Providing choices:** Students are informed of all of the options available to them, and are given the opportunity to make their own decisions.
- **Collaboration:** The case manager and student form a partnership, and case management is something that is done with a student, not for or to a student. The premise behind this is that the student brings experience, knowledge, and resources to the case management process.

Students dealing with food and/or housing insecurity often experience a lot of shame and embarrassment, which may even preclude them from reaching out for, or accepting, assistance. They may also face the any of the following obstacles:

- Shame and stigma
- Fragmentation or duplication of services
- Lack of knowledge of available resources
- Difficulty navigating and negotiating with multiple on-campus offices
- Trauma from having to repeatedly explain their situation to different people and/or perform their poverty in order to get help
- Lack of knowledge among school personnel of the extent of basic needs insecurity, as well as available resources
- Discrimination
- Cultural norms against sharing problems beyond the family or close community

Having a case manager who focuses on their strengths, accomplishments, and abilities can diminish students' feelings of self-doubt and hopelessness and increase their sense of control. These positive feelings may even give them the courage to advocate for change. This comes about by working on students' challenges at the micro, mezzo, and macro level.

**Micro.** At the micro level, case managers engage and collaborate with individuals to help them with emotional, behavioral, or concrete distress. For example, case managers are equipped to:

1. Provide proactive outreach by identifying vulnerable students
2. Meet with an individual student and conduct a strengths-based, trauma-informed assessment of their current situation
3. Co-create a plan with goals, measurable objectives, and a timeline
4. Refer and connect them to services and supports, within both the school and community
5. Contact programs, agencies, or departments in the school on behalf of the student
6. Advocate with other departments or agencies
7. Coordinate services to prevent gaps or duplication
8. Serve as a single point of contact
9. Monitor progress
10. Provide ongoing emotional support and encouragement

**Mezzo.** At the mezzo level, practitioners work with institutions or communities to promote change on behalf of, or with, a group of people needing assistance. The conceptualization of community can take many forms. For example, case managers are equipped to:

1. Identify where services exist on campus, and advocate for departments to collaborate and avoid duplication of services
2. Identify community and government programs, and develop networks
3. Utilize, customize, or create apps for identifying free food on campus
4. Work with programs like Single Stop, whether locally or virtually, that provide one-stop screening and applications for public benefits including nutrition assistance and health insurance; tax assistance; financial counseling; legal services; and immigration consultations.

**Macro.** At the macro level, case managers work in the public sphere on large scale advocacy endeavors, as well as analyses of policies and programs at all levels of government. Work in this sphere is predicated on social work's assertion that "just societies provide members with the essentials they need to flourish, such as food, comfort, safety, opportunities to grow, freedom, respect, and dignity."<sup>18</sup> The case manager should thus take as active a role as possible in publicly addressing systemic oppression, and fighting for change. They may:

- Develop and distribute fact sheets
- Testify at public hearings
- Conduct research on policy proposals and outcomes
- Write articles and op-eds in news outlets
- Create active social media campaigns
- Attend rallies and demonstrations
- Collaborate with think tanks, government agencies, legal advocates, or higher education associations regarding prevalence and responses to basic needs insecurity.

## Case Management at San Jose-Evergreen Community College

At San Jose-Evergreen Community College, case managers perform the following services:

- Assess the psychological needs of students and develop an appropriate plan of action
- Provide direct crisis management
- Assist college faculty and staff with non-crisis student-related issues
- Develop and establish relationships with community agencies and resources for the benefit of students
- Coordinate with student services programs on campus to ensure effective programs are in place that address identified student needs
- Develop intervention and support strategies to manage potentially harmful or disruptive behavior, including the Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT)
- Provide mental health and wellness education training to students, staff, and faculty
- Research national trends and implement safety and support programs for students

### Getting Started

Creating a culture of caring is critical to the success of all students, but especially those who face substantial life barriers to academic success. The following recommendations are intended to help you bring a social work case management perspective to campus.

1. Establish the need for trauma-informed, social work case management guidelines to be implemented when working with students who have basic needs insecurity.
2. Learn about trauma-informed care, so you can incorporate it into your case management, and to educate other campus staff and faculty. There are many resources online, and [SAMHSA](#) is an excellent place to start. You will find links for clinicians/staff, organizations, patients/consumers/families, and policy makers and leadership. These are also excellent resources: [SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach](#) and [SAMHSA's Trauma-Informed Approach: Key Assumptions and Principles](#)
3. Advocate within for time and funds to develop and deliver case management services, specifically targeting students experiencing basic needs insecurity.
4. Create a clear description of the role and responsibilities of case management, incorporating social work, and trauma-informed principles. This should include an explicit focus on meeting students' basic needs. A clear job description will help avoid "mission creep" and help others understand and respect professional boundaries.
5. HECMA recommends that when creating a new role or amending an existing job description, pay careful consideration of your job title, so that it is clear to internal and external stakeholders.<sup>19</sup>

6. Incorporate best practices for meeting students' basic needs in existing or developing case management manuals. Include campus and off-campus resources for referrals and services.
7. Create and provide professional development, targeting faculty and staff, regarding the signs of basic needs insecurity. Incorporate principles of trauma-informed practice.
8. Schedule meetings with staff and key internal stakeholders for collaboration and funding purposes. Other departments may have funds in their budgets to support case management activities.
9. Create direct marketing/outreach materials for students, incorporating social work and trauma-informed principles. These materials can be distributed via social media, email, flyers, tabling, and in classrooms.
10. Commit to one of the macro practice activities listed above. Engage colleagues and students as well. This will help build a coalition of support and create momentum. It will also empower students to regain control and dignity in their lives.

## Authors

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Sara Goldrick-Rab is Founder of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice and Professor of Higher Education Policy & Sociology at Temple University. She is the recipient of the William T. Grant Foundation's Faculty Scholars Award and the American Educational Research Association's Early Career Award, and in 2016 POLITICO named her one of the top 50 people shaping American politics. Her latest book, "Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream" (University of Chicago, 2016), won the 2018 Grawemeyer Award, and was featured on The Daily Show with Trevor Noah. The Chronicle of Higher Education calls her "a defender of impoverished students and a scholar of their struggles," she is ranked sixth in the nation among education scholars according to Education Week, and in April 2018 the Carnegie Corporation awarded her the Carnegie Fellowship.

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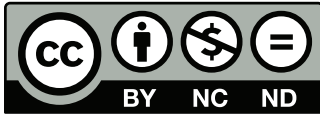
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