



**MAKING IT WORK:
HOMELESS STUDENTS BALANCING
SCHOOL, EMPLOYMENT, AND SURVIVAL**



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Executive Summary
3	Introduction
7	Methodology
15	Reccomendations and Next Steps

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview:

Homelessness among college students is an often overlooked but significant barrier to academic success. This summary highlights findings from a study on the experiences of students in Depaul USA's Dax program, which supports homeless students through housing and comprehensive case management.

Homelessness is unseen but prevalent:

8% of undergraduates and 4.6% of graduate students reported experiencing homelessness, equating to about 1.4 million and 166,000 students respectively. Only 20% of low-income students graduate within 6 years.

Dax Program Model:

Services Provided: Housing, case management for goal and financial planning, and monthly community activities.

Impact:

- 90%+ retention or graduation rate among participants.
- - Reduced financial stress and enhanced academic focus.
 - Decreased social anxiety and increased sense of belonging

Key Findings and student insights:

- 83% of students experiencing homelessness were employed
- 2-year college students report higher rates of caretaking than 4-year students, increasing the strain on their time
- 24% of low-income students in survey had valuable internship experience, at rates comparable to the wider college student population
- Students cite need to balance employment and academic obligations and to build professional networks
- Financial struggles persist although students live in subsidized housing. Students report needing assistance with clothing and transportation to secure and retain employment.
- Participants report that soft skills were strengthened as a result of program participation, increasing their career preparedness

Recommendations:

- Strengthen alumni networks and facilitate career service access.
- Partner with employers to assist students with accessing experiential work to be competitive for post-graduation employment.
- Continue comprehensive support to foster career readiness.
- Connect social activities to life skills education including networking and communication.
- Pilot alumni mentorship program.
- Promote financial education.





Research has demonstrated a clear link between homelessness and lowered academic performance and negative behavior for youth in K-12 education. The effects of homelessness in post-secondary education have been less examined. However, logic would suggest that the stress of homelessness will negatively impact mental health and academic performance. Additionally, homelessness will create new barriers to meeting basic needs including retaining employment. This study provides information about homeless college students and their experience with employment from their own perspectives, including the barriers they face and the support that can help them stay in school and successfully graduate. As the United States faces stagnant social mobility and soaring college costs, the need to increase degree attainment amongst low-income students becomes more critical. The personal benefits of graduation for each student also have ripple effects through their families by increasing social and financial capital in their networks. Employment during college prepares students for successful careers upon graduation as more employers prioritize experiential knowledge.

The barriers faced by disadvantaged and low-income students must be addressed so that they can both meet their basic needs in the short term and transition to successful careers upon graduation.

This research relied on a mixed-methods analysis of college students enrolled in a housing and social service program operated by Depaul USA. The Dax program, opened in 2015, provides shared housing with holistic case management in sites across 4 cities (Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia) with students housed in groups from 6 to 24 individuals. Participants report benefits from peer and adult social support and an increased ability to network which may improve their ability to secure employment both while in college and post-graduation. By providing below-market-rate housing, the program improved the financial well-being, mental health and academic success of participants. Specifically, there was a reduced need for paid employment and reduced stress from struggling to meet basic needs. Results also demonstrate that students need financial literacy and money management skills in addition to holistic case management. Participants also remained enrolled in school and made progress towards a degree. Historically, over 90% of program participants have remained in school or achieved graduation, which is far higher than the larger population of low-income students at 20%. The program offers a model of care that is successful and empowers youth to carve their own path forward.

INTRODUCTION

History of the Dax Program

Since the 1990s, rates of college attendance in the United States have greatly increased as more young people pursue post-secondary education to increase their lifetime earning potential. Despite the increase in enrollment, only 51% of students in 4-year institutions graduate within 6 years¹ and fewer than half of students who attend 2-year schools attain their degrees, transfer to a 4-year school or are still enrolled 6 years later². Academic challenges, work and family responsibilities, social isolation and the cost of tuition can all impede students on their path to degree attainment. For low-income students and students without family resources, homelessness and housing insecurity are risks that can derail their opportunity to graduate. Only 20% of low-income students complete a bachelor's degree within 6 years³. Students who drop out of college without a degree are left with debt but without the private and social benefits of a certificate or diploma. DePaul USA aims to increase equitable opportunity by helping low-income students through housing and comprehensive case management via the Dax program.

In 2015, the Dax program began as a home host program serving 3 homeless and housing insecure college students attending DePaul University in Chicago. Staff quickly realized that students felt uncomfortable as the "guests" of a family and pivoted to providing participants with housing similar to their non-homeless peers: shared housing and dorm-style housing. As of 2024, the Dax program provides 80 units of housing in 4 cities across the US: Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia. Students are referred to the program by on-campus advisors including mental health counselors, the Dean of Student's office and campus ministry. Students find out about the

program through word-of-mouth and when they are referred by on campus support staff. Students are accepted on a rolling basis and a waiting list is not maintained. Students who are not enrolled in the program are referred to other community agencies.

In 2020, the program has also expanded from serving students attending 4-year colleges to students attending community colleges and vocational schools. All housing units are furnished, and the housing fee is set far below 50% of the local market rate (ranging from \$100 to \$350 depending on the accommodation). House Managers or Residential Aides provide supervision at the sites and Case Managers meet with students once to twice per month to assist with financial planning, goal planning and referrals to community resources. Socialization activities ranging from house meetings to educational workshops to recreational outings are a regular part of programming and occur at least monthly. Participants can reside in the program for up to 2 years or until 3 months post-graduation. Program goals are focused on college retention and discharge to permanent housing.

HAVING THE HOUSE HAS HELPED ME A LOT, ESPECIALLY EVEN BEING ABLE TO DO WELL IN MY CLASSES BECAUSE NOW I'M NOT STRESSED, "WHERE AM I LIVING, WHERE AM I EATING?" I JUST HAVE TO FOCUS ON SCHOOL AND MY WORK.

– FEMALE PARTICIPANT AND 4-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENT

1 U.S. Department of Education. (2011). Six-Year Attainment, Persistence, Transfer, Retention, and Withdrawal Rates of Students Who Began Postsecondary Education in 2003–04 (No. NCES 2011-152). <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011152.pdf>

2 Reclaiming the American Dream: Community and the Nation's Future. (2012). American Association of Community Colleges. <https://www.aacc21stcenturycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/21stCenturyReport.pdf>

3 Engle, Jennifer; Tinto, Vincent. (2008). Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students. Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED504448>



C.J. is a 26-year-old veteran. He served in the Marines and once he left the service, he was unable to find a job that allowed him to afford housing in Los Angeles. He lived in multiple shelters and enrolled in Trade Tech's 2-year barber program. However, living in shelter made it difficult for him to sleep at night and to fully focus on his studies. After a few months, he was referred to the Dax program. C.J. currently volunteers weekly at a homeless service program cutting hair to give back and to improve his skills. C.J. hopes to graduate and open his own barbershop one day.

Who is Experiencing Homelessness?

In popular media, college students are regarded as a privileged and healthy part of the population with poverty constrained to “beer runs” on Fridays. The problem of college student homelessness is largely invisible but widely prevalent. In August 2023, the federal government released data on students experiencing food insecurity and homelessness as part of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS). In the first national dataset to include information on hunger and homelessness, the NPSAS:20 data include responses from 80,800 undergraduate students and 19,700 graduate students attending 2,200 postsecondary institutions. The 2019-2020 data showed that many students are experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness: 8% of undergraduate students and 4.6% of graduate students report experiencing homelessness in the previous 30 days. With 18,580,000 college students, this translates to 1.4 million undergraduates and 166,000 graduate students experiencing homelessness in any given year. Students who identified as Black, Native American or gender non-conforming were more likely to report experiencing homelessness than other groups. While homelessness may be temporary for many students, for others the experience of repeated housing insecurity and homelessness will lead to the abandonment of postsecondary education.

In 2020, the Dax program began accepting students attending 2-year colleges. In addition to a lack of on-campus housing options, the key differences between 2-year and 4-year college partners were the greater emphasis on basic needs at 2-year programs. These institutions had food pantries, and a longer history of staff dedicated to assisting students with obtaining financial resources including food stamps and health insurance. Two-year college students were also more likely to be long-term residents of their cities. Most were planning to transfer to a 4-year college upon graduation and were more likely to be experiencing homelessness due to family dysfunction and recent loss of employment.

Academic success is deeply impacted when students struggle to remain in school while experiencing housing insecurity. Broadly, the causes of college student homelessness can be attributed to 6 factors:

- 1. The rising cost of college.** The average cost of tuition and fees at a four-year public college has increased by 212% since 2003. At a four-year private college, the cost has increased by 189%. These increases have far outpaced inflation, making it more difficult for students and families to afford college and rising costs of living.
- 2. More low-income students are enrolling.** There is an expansion of college enrollment,

with low-income students accounting for much of the growth.

- 3. The lack of affordable housing.** At 4-year colleges, on-campus housing has not kept up with increased enrollment and can be prohibitively expensive. Community colleges have not historically provided housing.
- 4. Lack of support services.** Many colleges and universities do not have adequate support services for homeless students. Youth referred to the adult homeless service system are unlikely to access emergency shelter due to safety fears.
- 5. Economic Issues.** Loss of parental financial support and lack of reliable employment contribute to student economic issues.
- 6. Social Issues.** Familial dysfunction and family separation may be due to many factors including youth aging out of foster care, LGBTQIA youth and domestic violence.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines literal homelessness as living in a place not meant for human habitation (street, car, abandoned house, etc.) or in a shelter or transitional housing program. The HUD definition also creates other categories of homelessness including Imminent Risk, Fleeing Domestic Violence and Homeless under Other Federal Statutes. The Department of Education broadens the definition of homeless youth to include young people living “doubled up,” in substandard housing and abandoned or forced out of their homes by their parents or guardians. Unaccompanied youth is defined by HUD and the Department of Education as people under the age of 25 who are experiencing homelessness as individuals. The Dax program adopts these definitions in determining eligibility for program participation.

The Dax program serves a highly diverse and vulnerable population. Nearly all students are first generation, and many have intersecting marginalized identities. In the period from July 2023 to June 2024, the Dax program served 93 participants. Nearly all were BIPOC: 65% Black, 18% Latino, 11% white, 4% Asian and 2% Native Hawaiian or API. Sixty one percent of participants were female, 31% male and 8% non-binary. The majority of participants resided

in the Chicago programs (48%), followed by Philadelphia (34%) with smaller numbers in New York (13%) and Los Angeles (4%). In 2023-2024, 46% of Dax participants attended 4-year college, 49% 2-year college and 5% graduate school. The Dax program also opened its first program for non-traditional students aged 26-30 attending community college in Chicago in January 2024.

What services are available?

The career services departments at colleges and universities have undergone a major shift in the last twenty years. While their time was once focused on connecting with local employers, posting local jobs, and assisting students with resume writing and interview preparation, their role has expanded significantly. The introduction of digital technology has revolutionized career development, ranging from personality assessments and job aptitude to application submissions, screening activities, and virtual interviews. Students are increasingly mobile, and alumni stretch across the globe. Students want to cull through job postings from across the world and are competing with talent from just as far. The most recent addition of artificial intelligence (AI) has changed the landscape again. While career services staff still post jobs directly from employers on internal college platforms like “Handshake” and invite employers to campus for job fairs, students report using Google or AI assisted searches more frequently.

Similarly, with so many first-generation students now attending universities, career services staff find themselves with new responsibilities like filling gaps in student experiences or family backgrounds by offering financial literacy programs, basic writing skills support, and coaching soft skills such as what to wear to an interview or how to write a thank you note afterwards.

Another notable shift is the way that work is evolving, becoming more skill focused and fluid. This demands new models for assisting young adults who are entering the workforce. “Instead of merely selling job-search techniques, we must serve as catalysts for personal and professional growth,” writes Hasan Akamal, the executive director of Career and Professional

Development at University of California San Diego.⁴ He asserts that mental health and well-being, as well as emotional intelligence, are essential elements for professional success.

Dax students report that they know support to navigate these emerging realities are available at their respective institutions. However, some report lacking the time or organizational capacity to access services such as in-person workshops or visiting the office. The concept of making an appointment for specific services, rather than simply dropping in, seemed overwhelming. For those who do avail themselves of the resources, the outcome has been positive.

My college didn't help me get any type of employment. But I didn't know about Career Services or anything like that. I didn't go to Career Services for school yet. But I actually want to try and visit and see what they're about.

- Female participant and 4-year college student

The Role of Employment

Relevant employment or applied experiences like internships have taken on new importance for college graduates in the job market. “There was a time when employers were waiting to snap up college graduates for entry-level jobs and then mold them into corporate men (and much later—women). That model has been gone for more than a generation. In its place is a much more open marketplace where virtually all the workers who employers hire—by some measures 95 percent—are experienced.” – Peter Cappelli, PhD “College and the Job Market Today.” “How College Contributes to Workforce Success,” a 2021 study for the Association of American Colleges and Universities, found that internships/apprenticeships and work study or other employment during college ranked

I would definitely say I access career services. Handshake is a really big one. That's the student portal where they post all the jobs.

- Female participant and graduate student

We have an Accounting 250 class, and they help you with navigating your career in accounting. So, there's a specific type of resume you should be using. There're different types of interview questions that you're going to be asked, things like that. So after my first career meeting that I had, and I worked on my resume to get an on-campus job, that class was much more helpful for me in navigating for my career in accounting, because they gave us a template of what I should use, what it should look like, and it was really helpful.

- Female participant and 4-year college student

#1 and #3 on the list of qualities that make employers “much more likely” to consider hiring a job candidate.

The priority placed on experience is couched in a labor market that was also more competitive for recent college graduates in 2024. While unemployment remains low for the general population, fewer employers are hiring, and in the past year, unemployment and underemployment rose among recent graduates⁵. In addition, employers are increasingly using skills-based hiring practices including competency-based job descriptions, interview rubrics, and assessment tools⁶.

Part-time employment has been a core component of Depaul USA's Dax Program since its inception, with an emphasis on increasing

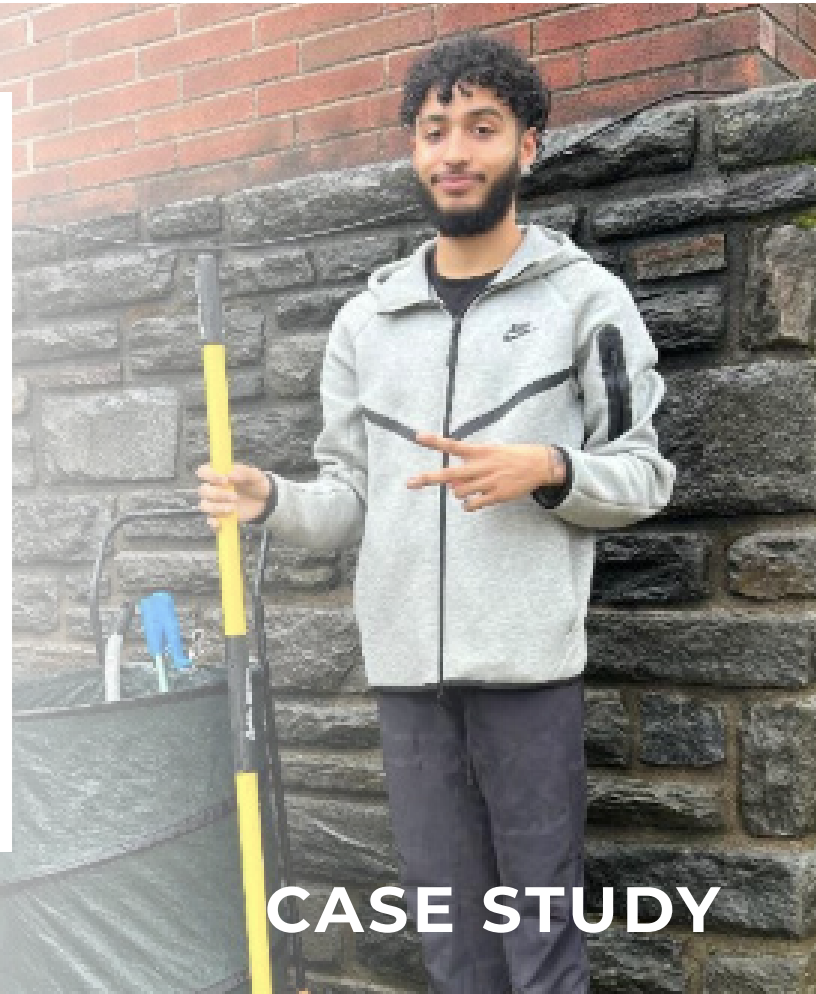
4 Akmal, H. (2023, December 1). Designing the Future of Career Services. <https://www.nacweb.org/career-development/trends-and-predictions/designing-the-future-of-career-services>

5 Smith, T. J. (2024, September 5). The Hot Labor Market Has Melted Away. Just Ask New College Grads. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/05/business/economy/jobs-college-graduates-unemployment.html>

6 Job Outlook 2025: Hiring Up After Year of Decline. (2024). National Association of Colleges and Employers. <https://www.nacweb.org/research/reports/job-outlook/2025>

income and building financial stability as well as gaining valuable work experience. As the job market for college graduates places ever more emphasis on skills and experience, understanding the types of jobs and work experience Dax students are attaining, barriers to attaining or maintaining employment and internships, ways in which the Dax Program supports employment, and what additional resources are needed will help the Dax Program better prepare students to transition from college and prepare for their careers.

LaSalle University sophomore, Alex, was looking for a job this spring that was hands-on and local. Our team had recently discussed student employment opportunities with a city council staffer who recommended a new program called Glitter. This anti-violence initiative funded by the state prioritizes clean streets in our community to encourage positive, pro-social behavior. Staff reached out to Glitter, and they invited Alex to apply. He was offered a job and spent the last six months picking up trash and sweeping selected blocks in the neighborhood. “I enjoy meeting older neighbors,” Alex says, “And on really hot days they sometimes give me water.” He can set his own hours around his class schedule and appreciates the self-directed nature of the position.



CASE STUDY

METHODOLOGY

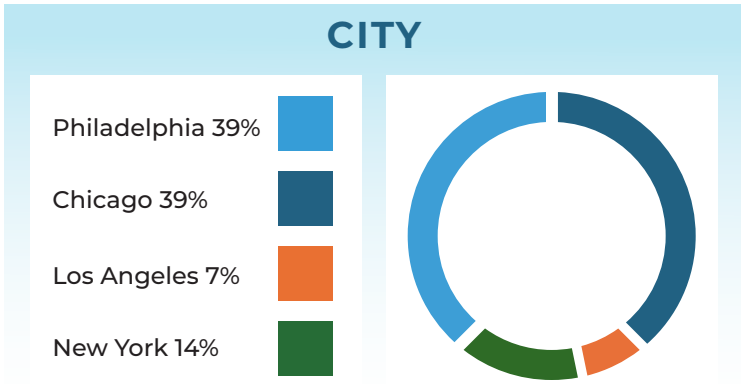
This report is based on research and analysis by Depaul USA staff participating in the Pew Charitable Trust’s Evaluation and Capacity Building Initiative. From August to October 2024, over two phases, staff collected quantitative and qualitative data from college students in the Dax program about their experience in the program and their perceptions of their skills and barriers to employment. In phase one, staff at the 4 Dax programs offered a 15-question online survey to participants (clients) including current participants and alumni of the programs. A total of 29 participants (45%) responded to the survey. As an incentive, four \$50 Amazon gift cards were offered as a raffle prize to survey respondents. Following the survey period, in phase two, staff at Depaul USA conducted

in-person and teleconference one-on-one interviews with 11 current and former Dax students representing all four program cities. Interviews were 30 to 60 minutes in length and participants were offered \$20 as compensation for their time. Two focus groups were also completed with staff in Career Services at partner universities to explore how college students post-pandemic were preparing for careers after graduation and to understand best practices in the field.

Depaul USA staff transcribed and coded the individual interviews and completed a mixed methods analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. Information from the interviews was used to further contextualize the results from the survey. Once results were coded and a

preliminary analysis developed, research staff returned to share the data with other Dax staff members for further meaning making and contextualization.

The findings are informed by the following quantitative data:



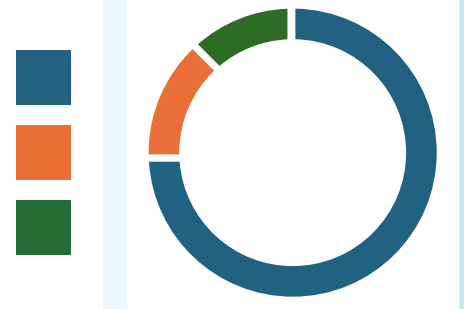
Fifty-four percent of survey respondents attended a 4-year college, 40% a two-year college and 7% were in graduate school. The average age of students was 22 with a range from 19-28. Compared to the population served by the Dax program in the preceding year, female respondents are overrepresented. Seventy five percent of respondents were female (compared to 61% of Dax participants and 57.9% of all postsecondary students)⁷. The

GENDER

Female 75%

Male 14%

Other 12%

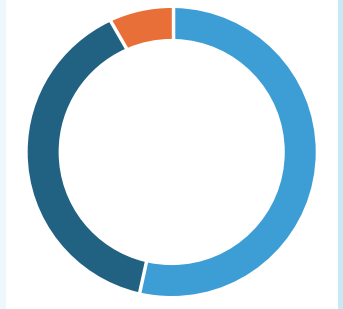


TYPE OF COLLEGE

4-Year College/
Univeristy 53%

Graduate School 7%

Community College
(associate's degree)
40%



distribution between programs is proportional and the length of tenure in the program includes a mix of participants who have arrived recently as well as participants who have been in the program for greater than 12 months.

Homeless Youth and Employment

“I’m going to have to quit the jobs because that’s too much on my plate and I love doing it but it’s too much and I’m really feeling burned out.”

- Female participant and 4-year college student

Students were persistent in their employment with an average of one employer per year and 83% of survey respondents were currently employed. Sixty-three percent had the same employer as when they entered the program. Experience in the workforce included part-time work (72%), volunteer work (52%), federal work study (38%) and full-time work (31%). With the majority of work in precarious part-time

employment, participants experience insecurity with job permanency and consistency in hours.

Additionally, 21% reported contract work such as Uber or Amazon. Staff report that some participants favor this type of work because it offers them independence although the pay rate may be lower or less consistent. Participants are also unlikely to develop pro-social skills at these types of employment and will not gain professional references for future job applications.

Forty percent of 2-year college students report caretaking for family members compared to 0% of the 4-year college students, highlighting the multiple responsibilities that community college students often face in addition to their academics.

⁷ Women in Higher Education. (2024). Postsecondary National Policy Institute. https://pnpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/WomeninHigherEd_FactSheet_Feb24.pdf

Surprisingly, for a disadvantaged population, 24% had internship experience which may be attributed to pressure on companies to offer paid internships to advance equity. This is because students who are struggling to meet basic needs are often unable to take advantage of unpaid internships although the experience will advance their long-term career goals. Seventy one percent of students who had internship experience were 4-year students or graduate students. All had been enrolled in the Dax program for at least 4 months and 86% for more than 7 months. Affordable housing coupled with case management/mentorship may be the reason that participants were able to take advantage of internships. The correlation between high rates of internship experience and length of program tenure demonstrates that the program advances equity for low-income and disadvantaged students. In addition to positively affecting school retention and graduation, the program can better position students for successful careers after graduation.

When I was in college, I just wasn't able to find a job that was willing to accommodate my schedule.

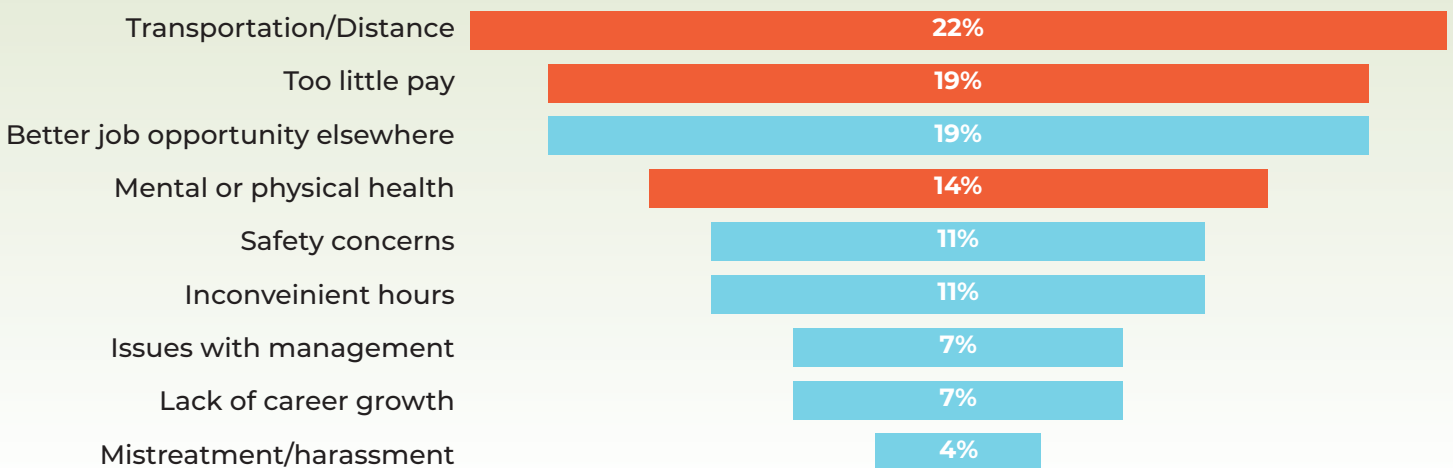
- Male participant and 2-year college student

Although the majority of participants were persistent in maintaining employment, others struggled to retain employment or moved from

job to job. Participants in the survey identified multiple barriers to obtaining and retaining employment. For 22% of employment positions ended, the reason was due to difficulty with transportation. All Dax programs are located in cities of major metropolitan regions. The cities of Philadelphia, New York and Chicago have extensive transportation systems within city limits with less complete networks in the suburban regions. Conversely, hourly pay rates for service jobs are higher in the Philadelphia suburbs, attracting students who seek to maximize their income. In New York, the program is located in the Bronx and Queens boroughs while higher paying jobs are located an hour away in Manhattan. However, long commute times have negative effects on health and well-being⁸ and unreliable transportation can hinder job security and affect academic success.

After asking students about resource needs, it is also apparent that some students could not afford public transportation to travel to work. Nineteen percent of employment ended because students did not earn enough money. Additionally, mental or physical illness were the reasons cited for 14% of job terminations. For students with the support of case management, these reasons for ending employment reveal that under-resourced students are vulnerable with few financial resources and tenuous access to preventative care. Program staff have noted that some

REASONS FOR LEAVING EMPLOYMENT



⁸ Libin Han, Chong Peng, Zhenyu Xu. (2022). The Effect of Commuting Time on Quality of Life: Evidence from China. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*, 1(573). <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9819363/>

participants struggle with long-term planning due to cognitive bias, limited perspective and lack of experience and that they prioritize short-term rewards. Mentors and other trusted adults can provide participants with guidance to access proactive care and to create financial plans so they can avoid job loss due to these reasons.

Students were asked to identify the additional resources they would need to secure employment that would meet their career and economic needs. These included subsistence employment during college and employment post-graduation. Participants overwhelmingly noted the need to build a professional network (68%), and to update cover letters/resumes (57%) and references (43%). As nearly all Dax participants are first-generation college students, they are unlikely to have family or social connections with employers thus reflecting their interest in networking and references.

A surprising percentage of students also identified improving their communication skills (39%) as a need. Staff at universities noted in their focus groups that current college students have difficulty making “small talk” and that there is an increased prevalence of social anxiety. They attributed this to both the Covid shutdowns during a formative period in these students’ lives and the increasing prevalence of asynchronous communication as students relied on text messages and email to interact.

Dax participants also noted that they needed financial assistance to obtain employment, including 36% who identified interview-appropriate clothing and 29% who needed transportation assistance. Although participants pay minimal housing fees and most are employed, they continue to need financial assistance to meet their goals due to low incomes and the need to develop financial literacy and money management skills. Participants are encouraged to create savings accounts to weather financial emergencies however their participation is only loosely monitored by program staff.

I’ve had transportation issues in the past because I was in school full-time, and I had a part-time job. I couldn’t work as many hours as I wanted, which meant less money to have transportation to get to work. So that was a barrier I had often. And also, some of the jobs that I had were far away, so distance was also a barrier.

- Female participant and 4-year college student

Additionally, university staff noted that employers are seeking graduates with relevant experience in their fields. They noted that students are under a tremendous amount of pressure and that many first-generation students focus more on academic success than in gaining relevant experience that will prepare them for the job market post-graduation. The high percentage of participants who have only part-time or gig work experience highlights the importance of assisting first generation students to prioritize employment that will also meet their long-term career goals.

In the United States, it is estimated that 400,000 undocumented immigrants are enrolled in higher education⁹ and these students are especially vulnerable when their financial support systems fail. In qualitative interviews, the roles of documentation and immigration were also raised by several participants. They noted that immigration status created challenges for them in securing steady income and in participating fully in the economy and increasing their vulnerability to dropping out of school.

I do think about [my immigration status] often. And the future dilemma is always there. I’m not necessarily building what a “normal” path would look like. Get a nine to five, get this job, save, get a raise, savings, investing. That’s not happening for me. So, I’m always just trying to get there as much as possible on my end.

- Female participant and 4-year college student

9 Undocumented Students in U.S. Higher Education. (2024). Presidents’ Alliance. on Higher Education and Immigration. <https://www.presidentsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Undocumented-Students-in-Higher-Education.pdf>

The Dax Program Model of Care for Employment

The Dax program model utilizes a participant-centered case management strategy. While there are common expectations across the program, each student comes with their own unique challenges and opportunities. Staff help craft a personalized service plan for each participant that uses an appreciative inquiry and abundance mindset. They first seek to affirm the student's dignity and agency, then move into tactics and strategies.

Case managers ask questions such as: What brings you joy? What are your strengths? How has your experience shaped you? What are your academic, personal, and professional goals? What do you need to achieve those? What barriers might be getting in the way? How can we assist you? Who can we connect you with?

In the context of employment, the student's response to those questions might reveal their need for assistance to navigate social anxiety, limited English language proficiency, depression, or physical mobility issues. Other students may have lost jobs due to personality conflicts and need coaching in regulating their emotions or problem solving with supervisors or co-workers. Case management around these soft skills has proven central to participants obtaining and retaining employment.

The Dax model of care also emphasizes participation and community building. Residents shared that the communal living context of the Dax program has enhanced and enriched their socialization, thus equipping them to navigate diverse settings, such as the modern workplace. They spoke of experiencing social isolation, perhaps a holdover from the pandemic or related to trauma, and the nature of the program drawing them out into group activities.

And I think living with like all of these, like the girls in the house here, like you learn to get along with so many different personalities...it was great to be in Dax to introduce you to how to handle things on your own.

- Female participant and graduate student

I isolated myself and I didn't talk to people for the longest time, but they had these community activities where we would have no choice but to participate. And so, they would make you literally talk to people and those people end up becoming really good friends.

- Female participant and four-year college student

Transition from College and Preparing for Careers

Students shared that they gained valuable skills to help them transition from college and prepare for careers in several ways:

Soft Skills and Independent Living Skills In interviews, students commonly shared that the Dax Program helped them to develop skills and qualities to be more independent and more successful in getting and keeping a job. Examples included responsibility, accountability, self-advocacy, maturity, communication skills, and budgeting and financial management.

I did learn that advocating for yourself was the most important thing.

-Female participant and 4-year college student

I was in and out of jobs and I wasn't really being responsible. A lot of people came to me, and they saw this and they sat down with me to help me figure out a game plan.

-Female participant and 4-year college student

...The Dax program helped me ...with a lot with saving and making sure I have a backup plan.

-Female participant and 4-year college student



THEY'RE REALLY GOOD ABOUT CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH THE PEOPLE THEY NEED. AND HELPING THEM GET THE RESOURCES THEY NEED TO GET TO WHERE THEY NEED TO GET TO.

-FEMALE PARTICIPANT AND 4-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENT

I'VE SPOKEN TO A LOT OF DEPAUL USA STAFF, ALSO THE HOUSE MANAGERS FROM OTHER HOUSES THAT I'VE SPOKEN TO, AS WELL AS PARTICIPANTS IN OTHER PLACES, I STILL DO STAY IN TOUCH WITH CERTAIN PEOPLE THAT HAVE LEFT THE PROGRAM.

-FEMALE PARTICIPANT AND 4-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENT

IF I SAY TO (STAFF MEMBER), "HEY, I'M LOOKING FOR A JOB SPECIFICALLY IN THIS." "OKAY, WE CAN GO FROM HERE." I KNOW PEOPLE, (STAFF MEMBER) KNOWS PEOPLE, MY ROOMMATE KNOWS PEOPLE...

-FEMALE PARTICIPANT AND 4-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENT

Internships

About one-quarter of Dax students surveyed reported having internship experience. This number is only slightly lower than the percent of students in the 2023 National Survey of College Internships study who reported participating in an internship. The national study however also found that 55% of respondents had an interest in participating in an internship but were unable to secure one due to barriers including heavy course loads, work or family commitments, and lack of pay or transportation, which are also common barriers for Dax students. The relatively high number of Dax students who had internship experience, providing them with critical experiential work, may be due to an emphasis on employers offering paid internships.

Networking

Most students shared that their university or career services emphasized the importance of networking. Many, especially first-generation students, do not have family networks to turn to. In interviews, students suggested that Dax Program staff and peers were helpful in connecting them to employment opportunities:

Dax students also shared that they would value additional networking or career advice/support, including through alumni engagement:

One of the ideas I had was involving alumni where you would match students with their specific majors to an alumni and they would maybe meet in person, meet over zoom for maybe a half an hour, preparing questions, actual real prepared questions, like “You work here, how did you get here? What does it take to get here? If I were to go and apply to your establishment right now, what would make me appealing to your hiring manager? What would make them say yes?”

-Female participant and graduate student

Mental health benefits In interviews, participants also identified reduced stress and decreased social anxiety as a result of participation in the Dax program. Participants report decreased stress because they were less concerned about meeting their basic needs. As a result, they were able to focus on their academics and to pursue extracurricular activities on campus that would strengthen their networks and experiential knowledge. Participants also cited the importance of having adult mentors to provide guidance and advice. A few participants noted that they felt alienated and stigmatized by their experience of homelessness and that the other participants in the program were in a unique position to normalize their struggles.

Responses may also indicate that students have a desire to “network” but may lack understanding of the mechanics of “networking.” University staff noted that students have fewer opportunities to assemble in groups since Covid-19 and were less likely to interact with students from other class years. This diminishment in interactivity means that first-year students and sophomores are less likely to learn from and be mentored by seniors and to learn how to navigate university departments or career development opportunities.



I think it would be helpful to know what the [post-graduation] process is... as a full-time person, what do I do? Because this part doesn't exist anymore. Where should I focus so that I am successful in my career, not just in school, I mean, not just in the workplace, but generally speaking, to be to be successful in life, holistically, not just work, but everything else, having that.

-Female participant and 4-year college student

They help with my confidence a lot because I'm, I'm very, as you can see, I'm a little shy, and I can kind of get, you know, stuck all my words and my sentences, but they helped me to open up to actually be able to go out and do things, like get up, go for an interview, apply for jobs.

-Female participant and 4-year college student



DAX HAS BEEN GIVING ME WHAT I NEED SO THAT I CAN FOCUS ON MY EDUCATION IN SCHOOL.

-MALE PARTICIPANT AND 2-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENT

YES, IT'S ABSOLUTELY HAVING THAT COMMUNITY. IT'S VERY HELPFUL. EVEN HAVING SOMEONE TO REALLY TALK TO THAT WOULD UNDERSTAND SOME PART OF WHERE YOU'RE COMING FROM, IT'S VERY HELPFUL.

-FEMALE PARTICIPANT AND 4-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENT

CASE STUDY

Jasmine, 19, has faced housing instability since her junior year of high school.

"I stayed at friends' houses, sometimes with their parents' permission, sometimes secretly. Every night I had a place to sleep felt like a miracle—until I started to worry about the next day."

Determined to attend college, Jasmine moved 800 miles to NYC with friends, relying on her savings from her 2 jobs and their support. Her plan was soon shattered after a violent incident with her roommate's partner left her bruised, scared, and without a safety net.

Jasmine was referred to the Dax program by her school and found the stability she desperately needed. The program immediately

relocated her to a Dax house, supported her in reporting the assault to law enforcement, and ensured her safety from further threats. She also received pro bono legal assistance, which helped her secure the financial aid she deserved as an independent, unaccompanied youth. With Dax's encouragement, Jasmine also began counseling to process her experiences.

Today, Jasmine is thriving. She maintains a 3.5 GPA, is employed, and actively participates in school clubs, Dax community events, and weekly house meetings.

"I put posters on my ceiling. It's my space, and I love looking up at something that's truly mine." Through the Dax program, Jasmine has found safety, stability, and the opportunity to pursue her dreams.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

College students face costs beyond tuition and fees. These include housing, food, transportation and clothing and, for low-income, first-generation students there may be little financial support available from their families. The Dax program provides a comprehensive, high touch intervention to assist college students experiencing homelessness to reach graduation. Through the provision of basic needs including housing and food assistance, the program reduces the financial strain on students. Dax participants report that they feel supported by adult staff members and less socially isolated in shared housing. Group activities are also beneficial for helping students to gain social skills which are transferable to the workplace. Program staff avoid reduplication of services and work synergistically with campus staff to support students including career, mental health and physical health services.

Emphasize social integration

In addition to financial support in the form of housing subsidies and targeted financial assistance, the program's goals of college retention can only be met via a multi-pronged approach. College retention relies on a student's "sense of belonging" or social integration. Supports that promote social integration including workshops, meetings and connections to campus resources mitigate risk factors that can impede a student's success. Each program site strives to increase social integration within the community sharing a home. Program staff also refer participants back to campus resources to strengthen ties between the student and their college.

Connect all students with Career Services

Program staff assist participants with employment readiness including developing resumes and preparing for job

interviews for subsistence employment while enrolled in college. To date, the program has relied on Career Services at each student's respective college to assist them with career development post-graduation. In interviews with participants, some had not yet completed referrals to these elective services. Program staff can assist students in accessing these services through warm handoffs, hosting Career Services staff for online workshops and incentivizing attendance.

Increase access to experiential work

Low-income participants in the Dax program were able to access internships at the same rate as the larger population of college students. By providing subsidized housing and basic needs assistance, low-income students could take advantage of valuable experiential work to better prepare themselves for post-college careers and the program increased equitable outcomes for young people. To increase the percentage of students taking advantage of internships, the program should seek out business partners to provide internships for Dax participants.

Pilot alumni mentorship program Students and Career Services staff also noted that the Dax program is well positioned to provide young mentors to students in the form of program alumni. These young people would be more relatable to participants than typical mentors who are over age 40. The connection between socialization activities amongst participants and soft skills transferable to the workplace should also be made more explicit as many students indicated that they lacked confidence in their communication and networking skills. By supplementing individual career development in case management with a structured alumni program and life skills education, the program can help participants gain confidence in their ability to navigate the workplace post-graduation. Staff will explore these ideas further in a pilot project.



Promote financial education

The Dax program promotes employment with limited hours (10-15 hours) for participants to increase independence and self-sufficiency. However, several Dax participants work over 30 hours per week or work several jobs to afford tuition and living expenses. Research has suggested that increased off-campus work hours can interfere with college persistence. Balancing a young person's need for independence with academic responsibilities is a focus of the case management process. Helping young people develop financial skills and resources so that they can work fewer hours but meet their basic needs will also be critical to helping students retain college enrollment. Program staff will explore credit counseling and help students better understand their financial aid package to help students reduce their work burden.

Participants in the Dax evaluation repeatedly shared their hopes for their future. Students believe that they can succeed and that they have the tools and resources to help them make clear and sensible decisions about their careers and academics. One of the most effective strategies that the program employs is the empowerment of youth and the belief that they can, and will, succeed.

