

Appendix H-6. Collaborating With Higher Education

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When The College Cost Reduction and Access Act passed in 2007, my liaisons began asking questions and saying things like, “What is a FAFSA? What do we do? Who do we contact in higher education and what do we say?” At the same time, I got a call from Misti Ruthven who works with College Invest, a division of the Colorado Department of Higher Education. Misti called because she was getting questions from higher education financial aid officers who wanted to know what this new “McKinney-Vento” requirement was about following the first Application and Verification Guide (AVG). It was something like, “You have your chocolate in my peanut butter; you have your peanut butter in my chocolate.” We had something special when we put our skills together. I invited Misti to talk at subgrant meetings and Misti invited me to her higher education meetings so we could give each group an introduction to the other’s work.

We started discussing how we could expand upon the partnership to bring these stakeholders together statewide and create a systemic way of helping to support successful transitions into higher education for unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY). We decided to invite McKinney-Vento homeless liaisons, representatives from higher education (in financial aid, admissions and student services), K-12 counselors, scholarship providers and homeless service providers to join the CO Taskforce on Higher Education for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth. During our first meeting with the group, one of the greatest challenges was helping the higher education folks get comfortable with being verifiers and understanding that they could do it. They were OK with using the other verifiers for independent student status listed in the legislation (homeless liaisons, shelter providers, and HUD or RHYA staff) but preparing them to make the determination when none of these people were involved with the student took a lot of work. We had to address jargon differences and provide sensitivity training to make sure the verification would be handled respectfully with youth. They needed to understand how really vulnerable some of these young people are. We realized we needed at least one person on each higher education campus who understood McKinney-Vento and would be willing to do the outreach for UHY. Now we have a single point of contact at every college and university in Colorado, which we have informally nicknamed our SPOCs (for Single Points of Contact) and more formally refer to as our

McKinney-Vento Higher Education Liaisons. SPOCs could be in admissions, student services, or financial aid. They not only take care of verification, but they help with the whole transition into college, as well as offer support throughout the college experience. It's amazing! We have teams of folks at the colleges and universities that have taken this work and run with it. They put together welcome baskets that have coupons for haircuts and movie tickets, along with basic necessities. SPOCs not only connect students with financial aid and admissions, but they also connect our students with housing services, tutoring, and FAFSA assistance for the next year.

Another challenge had to do with scheduling. Financial aid typically has days they meet with students, and students have to schedule an appointment on those days. If one of our students came by without an appointment or on the wrong day, they would be turned away. We have been able to help staff in these offices understand how difficult it could be for some of our youth to return and now they make an extra effort to try and assist the day the student comes to the office.

We developed a standardized process and form using the NAEHCY template which we modified a bit. It is used by liaisons, financial aid administrators, service providers and is recognized by all our SPOCs. Under FERPA, our liaisons are allowed to communicate with higher education; however, since service providers are bound by HIPAA, we added a signature line for youth to approve the communication between the provider and the college. Interestingly, the form actually became a barrier for a while. The financial aid folks were telling students they had to get the form completed, which actually put more work on the student. We added financial aid as a verifier on the form to reinforce the fact that they did not need anyone else to verify.

I don't know how we found the time; we just found it. I do have more gray hairs! We did 80 presentations/trainings across the state in 18 months. It does align with our work as state coordinators – it's about successful transition for our students and helping to further build the asset of education. While the collaboration may not save time, it certainly makes our work far more effective. Misti and I have received great participation. We both have strong relationships with our folks and saying "You really need to come!" has been enough to get involvement. I could not have done this work without my higher education partner. Public K-12 education and higher education have different cultures and ways of doing things, and this can, at times, cause tension,

and the jargon differences can lead to miscommunication. Misti and I helped each other understand when the differences surfaced and this allowed us to bridge and address those different cultures. Getting the liaisons and high school counselors to talk with each is another part of the collaboration. Now we highly recommend that our liaisons complete the form automatically whenever they identify an UHY. They keep a copy, give one to the student, and fax one to the high school counselor who is more likely to be in communication with colleges. It really has filled communication gaps and sped up time for successful FAFSA verifications.

The collaboration has created many new and exciting initiatives. Our SPOCs have given us feedback that has led to incorporating “tips from higher education” in our trainings. For example, they recommend that K-12 liaisons or counselors help youth set up email accounts and make sure the students always have their name written the same way on all forms. Sometimes our students have street names which may not match their vital documents; this has posed a big barrier to approving the FAFSA in the past. Access to vital documents was another barrier for our youth. Now we have a partnership with College Invest so there is a free web space where our youth can scan and store their documents, making it a lot easier to have what is needed in a convenient place.

We are starting annual trainings for our SPOCs and will be asking them what we can do to make the process better. For example, they have asked for a tip sheet to help them with asking the right questions in an interview to use for verification.

Was it worth it? Absolutely! It seems daunting looking back – we were flying the airplane while building it. Now we have food banks on campuses, dorms that are open on breaks so our students have a place to stay, welcome baskets, and a sincere message to our youth that, “We’re glad you’re here!” Peers are talking to each other and spreading the word about this work. Now there is at least one person on each campus. Early on, I got a call at 3:45p.m. about a college student who was going to be evicted from her residence hall at 5:00 p.m. because her financial aid was delayed due to lack of parent signature. Everyone knew that going to a shelter would not be good for her. I told the liaison to contact the SPOC at her university. Once they connected, they were able to postpone the eviction and work out a process so the student could sign the FAFSA for herself. Events like this make it all worthwhile. Two years ago, I had a college student transferring

from a Colorado college to Texas A&M. She was having a hard time getting the new school to work with her (the law was just starting to be implemented). I was able to share the AVG with school and explain the process, and I copied our Texas state coordinator, Barbara James, to keep her in the loop. The school took the information and ran with it. The student was SO appreciative, and I did very little – she was the self-advocate. That was one of my best days on the job!

This collaboration was one of the best things that has happened! Having a passionate partner in higher education is a vital component. The extra time all of us put in made it work. One Colorado school district has had a greater percentage of their UHY graduating and go on to college than the overall district's percentage – and their overall rate is strong! Liaisons and SPOCs can really be champions for UHY in a tangible realistic way and show that college can be a reality. They can be the “caring, supportive adults” that our students talk about who make all the difference in opening up doors and helping to navigate systems that can be daunting for all of us.