

Bill to Help Homeless College Students

Washington State has passed a bill to direct more aid to homeless college students in Washington State (Senate Bill 5800). Olympic College, located in Bremerton, Washington, has been a leader in addressing the problem of student homelessness according to Senator Emily Randall.

Olympic College conducted a survey of students in 2016 and received 3,283 responses from a student body that today totals about 12,000. Among respondents, 145 students said they were homeless. Most of the homeless students, around 80 percent, said they were couch surfing. Others were living in cars or shelters. Nine percent reported they were attending college while living in a tent. The survey showed 33 percent of all students who responded struggle with food insecurity. Students reported that being hungry interferes with their ability to study. "That's huge," Olympic College's President Cavalluzzi said. "It's really hard to be successful in anything if you're hungry."

Through a pilot program of the state bill, data will be collected on homeless students and pilot institutions will provide help such as access to short-term housing, laundry and shower facilities, reduced-price meals or access to food banks, access to technology and case management. Pilot colleges may also establish plans to surplus property for affordable housing, as the House version of the bill suggests. Olympic College — with campuses in Bremerton, Poulsbo and Shelton — already provides similar assistance to homeless students including a free food pantry on campus stocked by students and staff. Professors often have baskets of snacks available in their classrooms and offices, President Cavalluzzi said.

President Cavalluzzi said Olympic College's homeless initiatives are in line with the college's push for equity. The college is analyzing data to understand barriers that prevent students from completing their degrees through a national program called Achieving the Dream.

"Right now, we have a laser focus on equity and inclusion," President Cavalluzzi said. "We're looking at data like never before."

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