

A Promising Tool For Helping Vulnerable Workers? An Exploration of the Use of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to Help Low-Wage Workers on College Campuses

Andrew B. Hahn

Abstract

Employee assistance programs, or EAPs, are an employee benefit designed to help workers meet their work and family needs. However, questions have been raised about the design, utilization, and scale of services that EAPs make possible for low-wage workers. This article explores whether on college campuses an EAP benefit can simultaneously meet the needs of faculty and professional staff as well as hourly workers in parking and security, janitorial and facility, and dining services. Findings derived from interviews and a literature review reveal many promising practices worthy of replication by colleges and universities; however, this investigation also revealed the limits of EAPs' usefulness for "working poor" service workers in higher education.

Introduction

This article explores employee assistance programs from the perspective of low-wage workers and then describes both the promise of and the barriers to more creative uses of employee assistance programs (EAPs) for these workers. It explores whether employee assistance programs for a heterogeneous workforce composed of service workers and faculty works well for all the workers.

On college campuses today, the share of minorities in the laborer class is five times the proportion in management. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2002) reported that at colleges and universities, the share of laborers from ethnic or minority backgrounds is 60 percent. This includes Blacks (44%), Hispanics (12%), Asian Americans (3%), and American Indians (0.5%). In contrast, the share of minorities is 12 percent in the officials and managers class. In another category, service workers, the EEOC reports an overall minority level of 34 percent, with the proportion of Black service workers at 16 percent and Hispanics at 15 percent.

What do we know of these workers? Many of the minority workers are immigrants and recent arrivals to the United States. Others are members of groups who have traditionally faced economic hardship in American society. One common source of assistance for these campus workers is the availability of “employee assistance programs,” or EAPs, as part of a broad employee benefit package on campus.

In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sunny Merik writes,

The way that colleges and universities treat their employees demonstrates—both to students and to society at large—their priorities and values far more accurately than official pronouncements, mission statements and recruitment brochures. . . . When academic leaders extol the virtues of social justice, they rarely have in mind the cooks and groundskeepers at their own institutions. (BI)

The present article examines a relatively unstudied feature of life in workplaces today, employee assistance programs (EAPs). The article explores benefits that in principle should be able to help workers, high-status and otherwise, deal with stresses—and challenges to productivity—related to family issues, work, financial problems, child care, the difficulties of caring for an elderly parent, coping with a disabled child, and more.¹

The methodology used was the height of simplicity. I reviewed the literature on low-wage workers in the higher education sector, and I spoke in personal interviews to EAP vendors who sell their services to workplaces. I also interviewed “internal EAP” managers (those in college-operated EAPs rather than an outside firm) as well as general benefit managers. Additionally, I spoke to worker advocates, a few workers, and human resource trade groups, all from the Boston area. Given the competitive nature of the EAP field—private for-profit EAP firms compete for the business of colleges—and given that universities and colleges when describing their EAPs and/or workforce issues on campus seek privacy, none of the local colleges and universities or the EAP representatives interviewed are identified.

The article is organized around several key “learnings” that flowed out of the exploratory scan. But before presenting this overview of lessons, I present some background material on the topic and discuss briefly why I think this kind of inquiry is especially important for a sector that often espouses progressive values.

Universities and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)

Universities and colleges have enjoyed the use of employee assistance programs (EAPs) to help meet the needs of their faculty and staff for well over three decades. Linda Stoer-Scaggs (1999) notes that EAPs in higher education began to develop in the mid-1970s through federal funding from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA).

The services provided by EAPs on campus are largely indistinguishable from the EAP services in other employment sectors: assessment, intervention, counseling, and referral to services aimed at a variety of issues, including stress management, emotional issues, depression, anxiety and panic attacks, grief or loss, relationship problems, family problems, chemical dependency, eating disorders, domestic violence, career frustration, child care needs, elder care resources, legal issues, financial concerns, nutritional questions, gambling, and work-life balance.

In other words, EAPs help workers balance work and family challenges, and they do this through services, follow-up, and case management. Campuses have the same rationale for EAPs as other workplaces: helping employees with personal or workplace problems that may affect job performance and productivity.

According to Stoer-Scaggs (1999), the growth in EAPs has been a bit slower on campuses than in other settings. She attributes the slower growth pattern to the greater tolerance found in higher education for problem employees on the faculty and for the traditions of autonomy and nonhierarchical organization in colleges. She speculates that faculty and professional staff often attempt to address for themselves—or ignore—problems in workers, rather than utilize formal services connected to an EAP and housed in human resources departments. Of course, EAPs are not only for professional faculty and senior staff. Line staff are also participants in EAPs, but the differences between the two groups in work settings and culture have direct effects on the utilization of available EAPs among the hourly service workers and faculty alike.

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Consider, for example, that deterioration in work site performance is less evident in a faculty member who can obscure these problems longer than a janitor who must be accountable on a daily basis for particular goals. A supervisor for the hourly worker is thus more likely to suggest the availability of needed services than the supervisor of a faculty member. The supervisors of faculty know less about those whom they supervise and, accordingly, “presenting problems” are less of a trigger for referrals to an EAP. It follows that if the EAP design on campus is tilted toward faculty, the EAPs will likely be weighted toward self-referrals and peer referrals, which, as noted, may not work as well for hourly employees. This presents a creative challenge for benefit planners in college settings, namely, designing EAPs so they work for all categories of workers.

A comment by a respondent in my interviews further demonstrates the challenge of designing EAPs for all workers. The respondent notes that whereas faculty members would be likely to call an 800 number or even trigger an assessment over the Internet under the auspices of their EAP, a recent immigrant might be intimidated by, or uninformed about, these approaches. Designing an EAP for a heterogenous workforce remains an important challenge connected to the promotion and utilization of EAPs.

I now turn to some of the key lessons from the scan of the field and the Boston area interviews.

Great Interest in Using EAPs to Meet the Needs of All Workers

College-run “internal” employee benefit programs on campuses, as well as “external” EAP firms who contract to do this work with colleges, as well as the colleges and universities themselves, appear genuinely interested in deepening their work targeted toward low-income service workers. Meeting with these individuals yielded many requests for resources and best-practices models. As I interviewed people, they saw me as a resource and wanted more extensive assistance reaching out to low-income college workers. There were honest admissions that hourly wage earners who show up on time, do their work, and don’t complain are largely invisible to the administration. Nearly all the people interviewed felt that the key to progress in this area is to avoid an adversarial tone and instead work with senior human resources staff on college campuses to sensitize them to the issues and to arm them with new and creative ways to use EAPs, especially for low-income workers.

Better Dissemination of Creative Uses of EAPs to Assist Low-Wage Workers

The literature review and personal interviews yielded information on both the services needed by hourly workers—or especially attuned to their needs—and information on what some campuses are actually doing using the employee benefit structure.

Exhibit 1 is a summary of an ideal comprehensive EAP for recent immigrants, low-wage workers, and others. This exhibit displays what such an EAP service should include to meet worker needs. I developed this exhibit after reviewing the literature and interviewing Boston respondents on pressing problems faced by low-income workers that impact their work productivity and challenge family life.

Exhibit 2 shows some “best practices” suitable for replication. These were drawn from the literature, especially reports from a clearinghouse project conducted by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE). NERCHE’s

Exhibit 1. EAP Services Beneficial to Low-Income Workers

- Referrals to adult education, ESL, and job training
- Referrals to government programs such as public assistance or social services
- Referrals to sources of tax support and applying for the Earned Income Tax Credit Program (EITC) of the IRS
- Referrals on energy relief and winterization programs
- Referrals to housing assistance
- Referrals to criminal justice assistance and bonding insurance if in an offender status
- Work/family counseling services customized for different cultures
- Financial planning information and support to combat gambling
- Case management services that don’t rely on e-mail and understand the high geographic mobility of workers even within a local region
- Referrals to dependent care that have been screened for cultural relevance
- Transportation assistance

Exhibit 2. Exemplary Approaches with Current or Potential Ties to EAPs

- Harvard University offers a Bridges to Learning and Literacy Program. This initiative offers ESL, GED prep, and computer training to hourly workers. Another initiative is the Boston Health Care and Research Training Institute, which brings together eight major Boston region health care employers focused on building the skills of campus employees and upgrading them to work in the university-connected health care industry.
- The University of Hawaii runs the Blue Collar Supervisory Leadership Development program.
- Middlebury College offers an employee-mentoring project that crosses class and job classification lines.
- Massachusetts College of Art introduces new students to service workers during orientation.
- Emerson College English Exchange is organized around weekly dialogue sessions with workers and students on language, class, and social issues.
- Penn State University sponsors a Quality Worklife office, monitoring strategies and weekly staff assemblies.
- Santa Clara University brings together all sectors of the university community to focus on raising the prospects of the working poor on campus.
- Carnegie Mellon University revises its mission statement through a thoughtful and highly inclusive process and makes sure that the official mission statement addresses the richness of all people who work there.
- Brandeis University ESL initiative involves students as teachers of GED and ESL classes for campus workers. Classes are free and after work hours.
- Boston University and Middlesex Community College both have EAPs that are open to all benefited and non-benefited employees, as well as family members.
- Regis University (Colorado) has a Center for Service Learning that oversees a program for subcontracted custodians. ESL is taught by student volunteers who use the experience for credit in service-learning requirements.

Source: Burack and Mullane 2004

“reversing the telescope” project is premised on the idea that colleges and universities should not only tilt their telescopes toward the surrounding community; they should also look inward at their own employment practices (*Burack and Mullane 2004*).

Viewing both exhibits in tandem results in a simple conclusion: EAPs have a powerful potential role to play, but much work must still be done to adopt creative approaches and replicate exemplary practices demonstrated in other places.

Barriers to Using EAPs to Assist Low-Income Workers

If as exhibits 1 and 2 show there is much that EAPs could do and models do exist, what are some of the barriers? The interviews revealed the promise but also the many pitfalls that stand in the way of using EAPs to better meet the needs of low-wage workers.

Expanding EAPs to better serve low-income service workers who work alongside professional employees is anything but a straightforward task. In fact, the changing workforce and demographics on campus pose challenges for every service offered by EAPs: mental health counseling, financial planning, legal assistance, Web access to family support resources, and so forth. Each of these benefits becomes especially challenging when dealing with recent arrivals to the United States as well as people with low literacy levels and other barriers. I present some examples of these challenges in the next sections.

The challenge and opportunity of diversity: Robert Grossmark in “Cultural Diversity and Employee Assistance Programs” (1999) notes that, “Whether it is the consideration of the appropriate referral for psychotherapy for a person of color, the structuring of a management training workshop, critical incident debriefing, or assisting in a return to work plan, the issue of diversity is a constant presence for the EAP professional” (71). Countless examples could be cited for the role of culture, class, ethnicity, gender, and race on accessing, using, and benefiting from a range of EAP services. One example, again from Grossmark, is indicative of the critical role these factors play. He gives a simple example when discussing the design of a stress management workshop provided by an EAP in another industry for its employees.

It is essential to recognize who the employees are culturally. Just as stressors addressed with a group of managers would be different from the stressors addressed with a group of telephone response customer service representatives, the stressors of a White, single mother, customer service representative are distinct from those of a married Latina mother who is a department supervisor. (83)

One EAP owner working with colleges and universities agreed completely about the challenges posed by diversified college workforces. This informant said:

The bottom rung of workers is not being served well by EAPs. A nursing home came to us about Creole speaking employees from Haiti. Our EAP features on-line access to resources but of course, these populations didn't have access to the web. When I sought information from them in face-to-face meetings, they mistrusted our inquiries and inevitably saw a connection to their immigration status. Frankly, we don't know what they need: legal help, housing, tax assistance? This is true throughout our higher education clients and indeed throughout the industry.

Another EAP owner told the story of three women working on a team: one from Korea, a second from Cambodia, and a third from Vietnam. There was a great deal of strife and unhappiness on the team. It was revealed to the EAP counselor that two of the women ate with their fingers and then passed playing cards during lunch to the third woman, cards stained with their food. The woman who objected to this didn't understand her fellow workers' customs and was repulsed by the foods the other women ate. It all worked out after an intervention, but the EAP counselor reflected, "What do we know about these women and their cultures? We don't have the knowledge!"

Confidentiality of information and deeper promotion of EAPs:

On campuses the state of information collection regarding worker issues in general and EAP themes in particular (e.g., assessment of needs, evaluation of EAP utilization, and customer satisfaction with EAPs) is quite primitive. Colleges conduct relatively few studies of their workers' needs and uses of available services. As a result low or no expectations are set for utilization of work/family benefits especially targeted at low-wage workers.

Benefit managers on campus should have certain targets or employee groups in mind when reviewing whatever EAP utilization statistics are provided by their EAP on a monthly basis. The target in one university was 5 percent utilization of the EAP. Since the actual rate was far lower than this, the benefit manager expressed concern and the need to review utilization with the EAP provider. On the other hand, that same university could not adequately identify utilization by worker classification in the reports or even clusters of occupations on campus. It was not known if low wage workers were using the system and if so, for what.

In fairness, there are legitimate confidentiality considerations in tracking EAP services utilization, but ethical workarounds are available. Colleges are of course aware that informed consent for collecting information for groups of people—information that is not reported on an individual basis—is a tried and true strategy. Moreover, the EAP companies themselves, where EAPs are contracted, can be instructed to do more data collection, as a kind of buffer from the college. They can also be urged to provide more promotion of EAPs on campus, especially to low-wage workers. These promotion efforts must be targeted, culturally sensitive, and accompanied by incentive structures to get people to learn more about available services.

In summary, colleges and universities need to work with their EAP providers to focus on information systems, employee benefit planning from need assessments to utilization statistics, and aggressive outreach. The EAP company itself should be the driver with respect to information collection, but high expectations from the client university should set the tone. With anonymous responses and questions on job classification, as well as informed consent, some of the barriers to better data systems can be addressed, which can in turn lead to more aggressive use of available benefits for and among low-wage workers.

Future innovation in EAPs depends in large part on money:

The EAP industry fights to make a profit through the services it offers in a highly competitive environment. The costs of experimentation—which could lead to enhancements and exciting new benefits for low-income workers—are likely too large for the average EAP firm working under a traditional contract. One EAP respondent whom I interviewed is exploring an enriched EAP that seems highly responsive to the problems of low-wage workers in his various client sites. First, this particular EAP representative

is exploring working with his college clients to have a rainy day fund for emergency assistance. The fund could be used for paying an electric bill, fixing a broken headlight, paying for a day of day care—"little things" that get in the way of work and a healthy family life. The EAP provider appreciates the need for carefully thought-out guidelines and the challenge of limitless requests made to the "rainy day fund" but is nonetheless committed to offering this kind of financial assistance through university contracts.

Another feature of this proposed EAP for low-income workers is a strong debt and financial management component. Often mismanagement of personal finances is as much of a problem as lack of resources. The concept of credit and debt, for example, is a new one for many workers. This is easily addressed in EAPs.

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While this kind of innovation in EAP design is critical and rare, the unfolding of similar innovations will likely be held back by the economics of EAPs. Simply put, EAPs have become a commodity. EAP firms compete vigorously to win contracts by cutting the per worker costs used to structure a contract.

EAPs charge their clients by employee head count, and those figures have dropped to an average of \$1 to \$4 per employee per month based on level of service and other factors. In other cases, payroll companies or health providers basically throw EAPs into the mix of services for free in order to win contracts where the real money is, for example, health and disability insurance or payroll administration. To the extent that they wish to refocus EAPs toward low-wage workers, college and university benefit planners must become aware of the economics of EAPs and the need to fund these services more adequately.

EAPs face grave financial pressures. These pressures clearly suggest that innovations in the future, such as the preceding example, will be limited. Brokers are another barrier to innovation: brokers serve as the middleman between employers in need of an EAP (e.g., colleges) and EAP providers. My respondents explained that brokers are interested in the capitated costs and little else. Although targeting them for orientation and sensitivity to

the needs of low-income workers might help, it is unlikely to produce dramatic results. They promote a low-cost industry where experimentation is difficult.

Fragmentation of approaches to assisting low-income workers:

EAPs are rarely seen by campus administrators as one component in a larger comprehensive attempt to lift up the prospects of all low-wage service workers. Many excellent single strategies used by colleges and universities are spread across the university with little campuswide communication and integration. ESL classes for workers may be offered in one part of the university while the EAP remains unaware of this program. College scholarships for workers' children may reside in another part of the campus, but this fact may not be promoted by the EAP. This is not an insurmountable problem; the solution begins with recognition of the problem, communication about programs, and careful planning toward attainable goals.

Conclusion

One growing challenge facing the higher education sector is how universities and colleges treat their low-wage workforces, who in turn contribute to the quality of life on campuses, productivity, and more. In this context, employee assistance programs or EAPs are an important but often unexamined tool that universities and colleges could use to assist these workers.

This article has described the EAP field and recommended numerous opportunities for reform of EAPs to make them work better for those at the bottom of the work pay scale. I have also reported on some of the challenges that will likely be confronted by college benefit administrators, such as funding, cultural diversity, and better management of information.

Universities typically espouse progressive social values. In this context, EAPs are an excellent vehicle for addressing unmet needs of the most vulnerable members of the university community. EAPs, however, will require numerous reforms before representing an effective solution to the problems encountered by low-income hourly campus workers. Administrators and advocates alike need to understand the opportunities for reform as well as some of the contextual issues that are likely to represent implementation pitfalls.

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Endnote

1. Some low-wage workers on campus may not be employees of the college or university. Instead these workers are leased from an outside employment firm that enjoys a contract from the college or university to supply workers to help with janitorial, dining, parking, or security services. My interviews in the Boston area revealed that these contract workers typically have access to employee assistance programs (EAPs) from the colleges. The colleges do not enforce formal screening processes for eligibility to their EAP services. The low-wage workers may also use an EAP offered through their own employer.

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About the Author

Andrew B. Hahn is a professor in the Brandeis University, Heller Graduate School for Social Policy and Management in Waltham, Massachusetts. He conducts policy analysis, evaluation, training, and demonstration projects for government agencies, corporations, and major foundations on employment, education, youth, and community development strategies.