



CO-PRODUCTION, DIGITAL EXCLUSION, AND THE STRUCTURAL FRAGILITY OF TANF FUNDED EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF A UNIVERSITY–AGENCY PARTNERSHIP (2005–2025)

Yolandra Plummer
Business Management
University of the District of Columbia
yolandra.plummer@udc.edu

Abstract

This article examines a two-decade partnership between a public urban university and a municipal human services agency designed to support Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients through education, workforce development, and wraparound services. Using a qualitative case study approach, the analysis situates the program within welfare state scholarship, highlighting how institutional coproduction (Osborne et al., 2016) and anchor institution theory (Manning et al., 2017) shaped program design and implementation. The article also draws on digital citizenship frameworks (Ribble, 2015) and research on digital exclusion among TANF recipients (Plummer, 2023) to interpret the program's pandemic era pivot to contact tracing. Findings reveal that the program functioned as a hybrid welfare education intervention that mitigated structural barriers through culturally responsive supports yet remained vulnerable to the volatility of TANF funding. The program's closure in 2025 underscores the precarity of mission-driven partnerships embedded within a block grant system characterized by political fluctuation and chronic underinvestment. The case contributes to social welfare scholarship by illustrating both the potential and the fragility of university and agency collaborations in the contemporary U.S. safety net.

Introduction

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program remains one of the most contested components of the U.S. social safety net. Its work first orientation, time limits, and decentralized funding structure have produced uneven access to

education and training across states. Within this landscape, a longstanding partnership between a public urban university and a municipal human services agency represents a rare effort to integrate higher education into TANF service delivery. From 2005 to 2025, the program provided academic pathways, case management, and wraparound services

to approximately 10,000 TANF recipients, functioning as a hybrid welfare education intervention. This article analyzes the program through three theoretical lenses: institutional coproduction (Osborne et al., 2016), anchor institution theory (Manning et al., 2017), and digital citizenship (Ribble, 2015). These frameworks illuminate how the partnering institutions jointly produced services, how the university's identity as a minority serving institution shaped participant engagement, and how digital exclusion constrained TANF recipients' access to economic and civic participation. By situating the program within broader welfare state debates, the article demonstrates how the program's strengths and vulnerabilities reflect structural features of TANF itself.

Background: TANF, Education, and Structural Constraints

TANF's statutory design has long limited recipients' access to postsecondary education. Work participation rate (WPR) requirements restrict the extent to which education can count toward mandated hours, and block grant funding creates chronic instability. These constraints disproportionately affect low-income Black women, who comprise a significant share of TANF recipients in urban jurisdictions, but whose overall numbers remain disproportionately less than their Caucasian counterparts.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) is how state human service agencies partner with community and technical college systems to support TANF parents. The article highlighted detailed

examples of Kentucky's Ready to work (RTW) program. RTW has a long-standing partnership between the human services agency, the community, and a learning institution that coordinates the facilitation of tutoring, case management, advocacy, outreach, and work-study opportunities (Pavetti 2023).

Within this policy environment, the university–agency partnership emerged as an institutional workaround. The university provided academic pathways and cultural legitimacy, while the agency supplied funding, eligibility determination, and regulatory authority. This arrangement allowed TANF recipients to pursue education without incurring sanctions—an outcome rarely achieved within traditional TANF service models.

The Urban Institute and MDRC released a joint publication as part of the TANF amicably Research Synthesis Brief Series. The policy brief draws on rigorous studies that show the participation and completion of postsecondary education among TANF and other low-income populations. The brief emphasizes that some community-college based programs (and other qualified learning institutions) have succeeded in boosting participation, and that various agencies and institutions can work while promoting higher education among low-income parents (ACF/OPRE 2025)

Case Context: Origins of the Partnership

The program originated in the late 1990s as the university sought to fulfill its public mission, and the agency sought to

expand educational access for TANF recipients (District of Columbia Department of Human Services, n.d.). The university's status as a public, urban, minority serving institution positioned it uniquely for this collaboration.

The partnership exemplified institutional coproduction: the university contributed pedagogical expertise and cultural trust, while the agency provided funding and administrative infrastructure (Osborne et al., 2016). This alignment enabled a level of service integration that neither entity could have achieved independently.

Program Design and Implementation

The program offered a multicomponent service model that included:

Educational pathways: GED, high school completion, vocational certifications, and degree programs.

Financial support: Tuition assistance and licensing fee support.

Case management: Advising educational pathways and TANF compliance.

Supportive services: Childcare, transportation, and counseling.

These components address structural barriers that typically prevent TANF recipients from pursuing education. Program documentation describes case managers conducting intake and orientation to advise participants on educational and employment pathways.

The program's design reflects a welfare to education model that contrasts

sharply with TANF's dominant work first paradigm.

Temple University presented a report as part of a national landscape analysis of postsecondary eligibility restrictions in TANF and related programs. It reviews how state TANF program structure rules around student participation, work requirements, and degree pursuit, and provides an extensive state-by-state comparison of policies affecting students in higher education. It includes citations to Welton (2023) and Welton & Rios (2023), two peer-reviewed policy analyses specifically examining how proposed federal TANF rulemaking would affect state higher education access and completion.

Pandemic Pivot: Contact Tracing and Digital Citizenship

The COVID19 pandemic created both crisis and opportunity. In 2020, the program launched a Contact Tracer training to train 50 TANF participants. The initiative served dual purposes: supporting the city's public health response and embedding digital literacy within a meaningful employment pathway.

Program documentation notes that the initiative transformed a public health emergency into a digital literacy intervention. This aligns with Plummer's (2023) findings that digital exclusion functions as a multidimensional barrier for TANF recipients. The initiative operationalized digital citizenship (Ribble, 2015) by integrating digital navigation, data entry, and communication skills into workforce development.

Yet the initiative also revealed structural limitations: digital literacy training cannot compensate for lack of broadband access, device ownership, or stable housing—conditions shaped by broader welfare state inadequacies.

Findings: Outcomes and Structural Vulnerabilities

The minority serving institution created a tailored digital literacy program for TANF recipients. This was in direct response to high-need industries, such as healthcare and technology. The partnership helped TANF recipients gain credentials, such as Contact Tracer and Community Health Worker. The union also enabled TANF recipients to work with University Case Managers and Success Coaches. These navigators provided referrals to educational, health, housing, and community support. The partnership provided specialized skills training to District residents. This helped to strengthen the local economy and create career pathways for TANF recipients.

The program's closure in 2025, however, underscores the fragility of TANF funded educational interventions. Despite its effectiveness, the program lacked a dedicated revenue stream independent of TANF allocations, leaving it vulnerable to political and budgetary fluctuations (District of Columbia Department of Human Services, n.d.). The loss of institutional memory and community trust represents a significant social cost.

This vulnerability reflects structural features of TANF itself: block grant funding,

political volatility, and the absence of long-term investment in education and training. The TANF program was introduced to benefit all recipients. The improvements made through this equity program were intended to level the playing field for those who have been historically disadvantaged (Plata-Nino, 2025).

Discussion

1. Co-Production as a Welfare State Strategy

The partnership demonstrates how coproduction can mitigate bureaucratic fragmentation and expand access to education for TANF recipients (Osborne et al., 2016). Yet co-production remains vulnerable to the same funding volatility that constrains TANF more broadly.

2. Minority Serving Institutions as Welfare Actors

The university's identity as a minority serving institution generated cultural trust that facilitated participant engagement (Pew Research Center, 2024). This suggests that such institutions may play underrecognized roles in the welfare state, particularly for Black women navigating TANF.

3. Digital Citizenship as a Welfare Imperative

The Contact Tracer initiative illustrates how digital literacy is now central to economic participation (Ribble, 2015). Welfare policy must therefore address digital exclusion as a structural barrier, not an individual deficit.

The Administration for Children and Families and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reiterated a federal guidance policy that provides a detailed scholarly-style review of evidence and legal authority. It emphasizes that there has been ongoing interest in career pathways enabling TANF recipients to participate in specialized vocational education and training through community colleges, and stresses that these efforts take on a variety of structures dependent on local labor market needs. It also highlights the TANF/WIOA Resource Hub, which includes more than a dozen papers describing collaborations between TANF and WIOA agencies (January 17, 2025).

Conclusion

The program illustrates both the promise and precarity of integrating higher education into TANF service delivery. Its two-decade success demonstrates the potential of coproduced welfare education interventions, particularly when anchored in culturally responsive institutions. The partnerships promoted equity by focusing on underserved communities, helping TANF recipients address basic needs while pursuing long-term financial stability.

Yet its closure reveals the structural fragility of programs dependent on unstable TANF funding. This funding is subject to changing federal priorities. Recent executive orders targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices have contributed to the fragility of TANF funding for minority students (UPCEA, 2025).

This underscores the need for welfare state reforms that stabilize funding, institutionalize partnerships, and recognize the centrality of digital access and higher education in promoting long-term economic mobility.

The overall results show how Welfare Reform's signature "work-first" approach affects the pursuit of educational goals. Two main themes were revealed: "Authority/Resistance" and "The Culture of Despair" in welfare. Relationships among identity, oppression, and recipients' ability to advocate to acquire information and resources to achieve educational goals are uncovered, revealing how recipients' critical analysis of their situations and structural flaws endemic to welfare helps create unique pathways toward their objectives.

Welfare reform's work requirements constrain recipients' activities and present significant barriers to enrolling and persisting in higher education, yet many welfare recipients assert that post-secondary education is their best, if not only, option for improving their life chances and those of their families.

The culture of welfare can change to be more inclusive, promising hope rather than engendering despair, by shifting focus from culturally bound rules around work toward support for recipients' self-determination and inclusion.

References

- Osborne, S. P., Radnor, Z., & Strokosch, K. (2016). Co-Production and the Co-Creation of Value in Public

- Services: A suitable case for treatment? *Public Management Review*, 18(5), 639–653.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2015.1111927>
- Manning, K. (2017). Institutional Theory. In *Organization Theory in Higher Education* (pp. 113–131).
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315618357-6>
- Ribble, M. (2015). *Digital Citizenship in Schools: Nine Elements All Students Should Know* (3rd ed.). Washington DC: International Society for Technology in Education.
- Plummer, Yolandra A. (March 2023), "Multidimensions of digital literacy among the TANF Populations," *Journal of Economics and Political Economy* (JEPE).
- Temporary Cash Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). (n.d.). Dhs.
<https://dhs.dc.gov/service/temporary-cash-assistance-needy-families-tanf>.
- Pavetti, L., PhD, & Azito Thompson, G., PhD. (2023). College Support Programs Tailored to TANF Parents Can Expand Employment Opportunities, Increase Earnings, and Promote Equity. In <https://www.cbpp.org/research/income-security/college-support-programs-tailored-to-tanf-parents-can-expand-employment>. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) research synthesis. (n.d.). The Administration for Children and Families.
<https://acf.gov/opre/project/tanf-and-ccdf-research-synthesis-2009-2012>.
- The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program & higher education. (n.d.). The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs.
<https://hope.temple.edu/state-state-choices-national-landscape-analysis-postsecondary-eligibility-restrictions-opportunities-snap-ccdf-tanf/temporary-assistance-needy-families-tanf-program-higher-education>.
- Plato-Nino, Gina. (2025, Jan. 24). President Trump's DEI Rollback: A Setback for Racial and Social Equity in Food Security - Food Research & Action Center. Food Research & Action Center. <https://frac.org/blog/president-trumps-dei-rollback-a-setback-for-racial-and-social-equity-in-food-security>.
- Deane, C. (2025, May 28). Americans' deepening mistrust of institutions. The Pew Charitable Trusts.
<https://www.pew.org/en/trend/archive/fall-2024/americans-deepening-mistrust-of-institutions>
- UPCEA. (2025, August 29). Justice Department threatens college funding over DEI policies; Administration

requests detailed admissions data |
Policy Matters (August 2025).

UPCEA.<https://upcea.edu/justice-department-threatens-college-funding-over-dei-policies-administration-requests-detailed-admissions-data-policy-matters-august-2025/>