Discussion Guide: Mutual Aid on College Campuses During COVID-19

No one could have expected 2020 to include a pandemic. We also could not have predicted how many groups would be disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Many individuals face increased risk of experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, and unemployment due to the pandemic. One such group is college students, but mutual aid efforts that appeared across campuses have made it their goal to support every student’s needs to the best of their abilities.

Before the Discussion:

Take some time to learn about mutual aid and its role during the COVID-19 pandemic. You can read about it here: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/y3mkjv/what-is-mutual-aid-and-how-can-it-help-with-coronavirus As you read the article, be sure to ask yourself:

1. What is the purpose of mutual aid?
2. What are the differences between mutual aid and charity?
3. What was the role of the pandemic in highlighting why mutual aid was necessary for communities?
4. In its design, are there any obstacles present keeping groups from receiving mutual aid?

Once you read the article, read this interview between a student organizer at the University of Chicago, Adrianna Barnett, and Lauren Young: https://www.teenvogue.com/story/university-of-chicago-student-coronavirus-mutual-aid-effort-campus To fully recognize how students came together to create mutual aid programs at their colleges, take a look at this list: https://www.swipehunger.org/community-care/ The list does not include every college’s mutual aid programs, however. When you finish reading these articles, ask yourself:

1. According to the interview, what factors present were necessary for student leaders to organize and create a mutual aid emergency fund at the University of Chicago?
2. What were the contributions of students to the emergency fund?
3. Compare and contrast the emergency funds of colleges with each other. What things are the same and what things are different? What does this reveal about the needs of college students?
4. Why are emergency funds for college students significant?

Take some time to read Chapter 6, Ahead of the Storm, of Palaces For The People. Pay close attention to pages 182-189. As you read the chapter ask yourself:

1. What were the contributions of churches to members during the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in Houston?
2. How were the actions of churches an example of mutual aid?
3. Do churches act as a single social infrastructure? Or does its ability to enact mutual aid show that it is distinct as a social infrastructure?
4. What is the role of social infrastructures in collecting items for the benefit of community members?
Discussion Questions

Eric Klinenberg defines social infrastructures as “the physical places and organizations that shape the way that people interact” (Klinenberg, 5). When we think of social infrastructures, we typically think of libraries and community parks; however, social infrastructures can be present in our lives through various forms. One such form that has made a huge impact throughout communities in the United States as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are mutual aid funds.

Mutual aid funds have been present before the COVID-19 pandemic, but their influence has grown as a result of a huge spike in people needing aid. One such group, college students, have experienced an increased need of aid due to unexpected circumstances regarding housing and food security among other things. The need of mutual aid/emergency funds demonstrates a lack of a social safety net for much of our population, but especially for vulnerable groups like college students. As a result, it is necessary to discuss these issues.

1. What do you think about mutual aid funds/emergency funds?
2. What does the increased need for mutual aid reveal about flaws within our social safety nets?
3. What criteria would you use to assess the effectiveness of mutual aid in guaranteeing that vulnerable group’s need are met?
   a. How would you assure that no group is excluded?
4. What are the things college students need the most?
   a. Are these items “too much” to ask for?
5. Why are mutual aid funds necessary for college students?
   a. Should universities take more accountability to ensure that their student’s needs are being met? If so, how?
6. After reading about mutual aid efforts in other campuses, how do you feel about student efforts on campus at UR regarding COVID-19 relief?
7. How would you assess the relief UR has provided for its students?
   a. Do you believe UR was transparent in its efforts to provide relief?
8. Do you agree with the statement “no one should be left behind”?
   a. How do mutual aid efforts contribute to this idea?
9. Do you agree with mutual aid efforts? If not, why?
10. How would you design mutual aid efforts at UR? Who would you want to include and how would you assess “need”?