

Basic Needs, Poverty, and Impact on Academic Success

Students unable to meet their basic human needs for food and housing suffer academic consequences. Student experiencing food insecurity report more trouble concentrating, more mental health challenges, and significantly lower grade point averages than food-secure students.^{i ii iii} Students with insecure housing have lower college completion rates, lower retention rates, and lower credit achievement than students with secure housing.^{iv v} Students who experience food insecurity report grades of C or below at much higher rates than their food secure peers.^{vi} ***Support for basic needs is an essential strategy for raising academic success on college campuses.***

Public institutions of higher education in California have been at the forefront of a movement to assess basic needs insecurity among students. California made the investment to collect basic needs data so that campus leaders and policymakers could employ well-researched and data-driven strategies to increase academic success. The result was the largest data collection effort in the history of California's community colleges. In collaboration with the California State Legislature and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), the Wisconsin Hope Center disseminated basic needs surveys to 57 California Community Colleges. More than 40,000 students responded. ***We now have data on the scope and scale of basic need deficiencies among CCC students and have an exceptional opportunity to make changes that bolster academic achievement.***

Food Insecurity Limited or uncertain access to nutritionally adequate, safe, and acceptable foods that can be obtained in socially acceptable ways.¹

Housing Insecurity¹ Limited or uncertain *availability* of stable, safe, adequate, and affordable housing and neighborhoods; limited or uncertain *access* to stable, safe, adequate, and affordable housing and neighborhoods; or the *inability to acquire* stable, safe, adequate, and affordable housing and neighborhoods in socially acceptable ways.¹

Equity

Across all populations, food and housing security are associated with college completion, persistence, and credit achievement. But food and housing security are not evenly distributed across all populations. Students from historically underserved or unserved groups report higher rates of food and housing insecurity. ***Basic needs supports are also critical for achieving equity in college success.*** In the California Community College system, Black and Native American students have rates of food insecurity of more than 60%, putting these students as much as 20% ahead of students who identify as White.^{vii} Food insecurity among gay and lesbian students is 56%, a full ten percentage points higher than their heterosexual peers. Housing insecurity is also disproportionately represented among at-risk student groups. Students of color, LGBTQ students, and student veterans are all at increased risk for housing insecurity.^{viii} For California Community Colleges to fulfill their mandate to provide accessible, equitable education of all California residents, there must be expanded support for students who struggle to meet their basic needs.

Scale and Scope

Rates of basic need insecurity vary across the California Community College system. The highest rates of basic needs insecurity are found in the Northern Coastal, Northern Inland, and Greater Sacramento regions. Across all California Community Colleges, **seven of 10 students reported that they experienced housing insecurity, food insecurity, or homelessness in the last year.**^{ix} Forty percent of respondents were *both* food and housing insecure during the previous year. Basic needs insecurity was more common among older students and among students who are parents. It was more prevalent among students who are African-American, LGBTQ, former foster youth, former military, and formerly incarcerated.

The astonishing scale and scope of basic needs insecurity among California Community College students is not caused by lack of student employment. Students who experience basic needs insecurity work, on average, more hours than students who do not report insecurity.^x

- **Food Insecurity.** When students were asked to report on food insecurity in the past 30 days, the results are even more alarming: 50% of California Community College students experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days, with 30% of students reporting food security at “very low” levels.^{xi} These rates persist despite the fact that 84% of California Community College students who report food insecurity are either employed or actively looking for work.^{xii}
- **Housing Insecurity.** Sixty percent of California Community College students experienced housing insecurity in the previous year, and 19% reported period of homelessness.^{xiii} That nearly one-in-five number of homeless students captures only those who self-identified as homeless rather than those who are doubled up with families; couch surfing with friends; or living in substandard structures not meant to be inhabited as homes. It is almost certainly an undercount. It is also an average; for example, a Peralta Community College District survey of students found that 84% of students—nearly 42,000 individuals—experienced either housing insecurity or homelessness in the past year.^{xiv}

Very Low Food Insecurity Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.¹

Causes and Consequences

A 2017 report by the Community College Equity Assessment Lab analyzed findings from the Community College Success Measure survey completed by nearly 4,000 California Community College students. Their data show that needs-insecure students are more likely to hold college achievement goals than needs-secure students, while at the same time they are less likely to achieve them. **Students who are basic needs-insecure are less academically successful than their needs-secure peers and they are concentrated in remedial education at rates as high as 70%.**^{xv} Food-insecure students, particularly, are more likely to report that they intend to drop out. They report substantially lower rates of academic confidence, and are less likely to perceive college as being worthwhile; to feel a sense of control in academic pursuits; and to be focused in school.^{xvi} Students who cannot meet their basic needs are less likely to buy textbooks; more likely to miss, drop, or fail classes; and more likely to withdraw from college entirely.^{xvii}^{xviii}

At the same time, basic needs-insecure students are more likely to have a goal of achieving a certification and more engaged with their faculty inside and outside of class. Students with basic needs challenges are motivated to move out of poverty, and perceive a California Community College education as an effective strategy to do this. They are accessing campus resources at higher rates than needs-secure peers, including advising, tutoring, the library, and the career center.^{xix} But these students are not being well-served by the system. They report difficulty accessing campus services; feel that the services they can access are poorly equipped to help them overcome barriers; and feel a lower sense of belonging from the faculty.

Recommendations and Reforms

The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office recently released its "Vision for Success." These seven core commitments are intended to drive the actions of tens of thousands of people both inside and outside the California Community College system. The Vision highlights the longstanding mission of the California Community College system: to provide full and open access to higher education for all. Without addressing the basic needs of students, this mission is thwarted; without addressing the consequences of basic needs insecurity, too many students—especially students from vulnerable populations—are unable to reap the benefits of a system designed to provide college access to all Californians.

If we apply the commitments enumerated in the Vision for Success to the challenges for students with basic needs insecurity, we can build a plan of action to realize the essential mission of the California Community Colleges.

California Community Colleges' Vision for Success

1. Focus relentlessly on students' end goals
2. Always design and decide with the student in mind
3. Pair high expectations with high support
4. Foster the use of data, inquiry, and evidence
5. Take ownership of goals and performance
6. Enable action and thoughtful innovation
7. Lead the work of partnering across systems

1. **Focus relentlessly on students' end goals:** Basic needs-insecure students want to achieve certification in higher numbers than their needs-secure peers. Support these students with grants and loans, and develop services for housing and food support that are accessible and without stigma.
2. **Always design and decide with the student in mind:** Colleges have a responsibility to their students to provide access to services that are aligned with the needs of their students. Currently, basic needs insecure students are accessing campus services in high numbers, but they are not meeting their needs.
3. **Pair high expectations with high support:** Basic needs-insecure students are concentrated in remedial classes, which is often a direct consequence of their food and housing insecurity. With

access to basic needs supports, these students can advance through their education more quickly and with more success.

4. **Foster the use of data, inquiry, and evidence:** California Community Colleges have invested in data collection efforts that demonstrate the critical effects of basic needs insecurity on academic success. The system now has a responsibility to use these data to reform programs, practices, and strategies to better serve these students.
5. **Take ownership of goals and performance:** The California Community College system has long promoted the goal of access to higher education for all students. This commitment can only be operationalized by providing culturally appropriate, trauma-informed services and supports to students with basic needs insecurity.
6. **Enable action and thoughtful innovation.** The data are in place to demonstrate what is needed to improve academic outcomes for under-resourced students. With commitment and innovation, colleges can move the needle towards academic success. Program reforms may begin as small-scale, and if they are tracked often and thoroughly analyzed, successes can be replicated across the system.
7. **Lead the work of partnering across systems:** Supporting students who lack the ability to meet their basic needs cries out for collaboration. Colleges must partner with local and state housing organizations and food programs. They must work with governments to facilitate access to aid, including local, state, and federal programs that serve their student populations. Collaborations with social services, foster youth agencies, veteran-serving departments, and housing and food programs can increase student security and boost academic success.

Avoidable Emergencies Housing insecurity among California Community College students is most often caused by rent increases or a temporary inability to pay the full amount of rent or utility bills. These housing crises are avoidable if students receive small emergency loans to stabilize their living situations, but California Community Colleges are the system of higher education in California least likely to offer such loans.¹

California Community Colleges Health & Wellness

www.cccstudentmentalhealth.org

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