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Addressing the Basic Needs of California Community College Students

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This month the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice released results from the first-ever survey of basic needs insecurity among students attending California's 114 community colleges.

Half of the California Community College students surveyed experienced food insecurity in the last 30 days, 60% were housing insecure in the last year, and 19% were homeless in the last year. These numbers are higher than estimates for other public higher education sectors in California and higher than most national numbers as well. They should be a call to action.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office points out that investments in financial aid are undermined when students do not have enough to eat. Basic needs insecurity is more common among students with lower rates of degree completion, and is a significant factor in lagging college attainment rates at community colleges.

In California, rates of basic needs insecurity vary by region and by institution. More students are struggling in the Northern Coastal, Northern Inland, and Greater Sacramento regions of California. Rates of basic needs insecurity are

far lower, albeit still substantial, at community colleges in the South Central region of the state, which includes Santa Barbara. At particular risk are historically marginalized students, including African Americans, those identifying as LGBTQ, and those considered independent for financial aid purposes. Students who have served in the military, lived in foster homes, or been incarcerated are also at greater risk of basic needs insecurity.

The data clearly show that working and receiving financial aid is not enough to ensure that students have enough money for food and housing. Even with a job and a Pell Grant, students struggle with unaffordable housing costs and rising food prices. Limited support is available, particularly in the form of public benefits, yet many students do not take advantage of that help. Barely one in five food-insecure students at California Community Colleges receive CalFresh. Forty percent of homeless students report receiving no government assistance.

When students are able to attend community colleges and complete their degrees, it promotes economic self-sufficiency. We offer the following recommendations to help them do that.

Reform and Grow the Cal Grant Program

California Community Colleges charge the lowest tuition in the country, and offer a systemwide financial aid program that waives tuition for low- and middle-income students who apply. This arrangement allows any additional financial aid that students receive to be applied to non-tuition expenses, including food and housing costs. However, the state's Cal Grant program does relatively little to help California Community College students meet their basic needs. Policymakers are rightfully interested in reforms to the program, but any new investments must offer far greater support of not only community college students but those struggling with basic needs throughout the state.

Support Students in Accessing Available Financial Aid

Both the Hope Center and TICAS have encountered community colleges that encourage their students to decline available grant aid offered to them, whether it be federal Pell Grants or state Cal Grants. Their rationale is that those grants should be saved for later, so that students have maximum aid available if they transfer to a university with costlier tuition. Some of the California Community Colleges do not even participate in the federal student loan program, believing that students should not borrow money until they attend a four-year college or university. While these practices may be well-intentioned, they leave students short of necessary funds when they need them at community college, contributing to basic needs insecurity. It is counterintuitive to withhold available resources until students have successfully transferred, when insufficient resources are preventing students from ever getting to that point. Taking basic needs insecurity and college completion seriously means helping students take advantage of available financial aid from the start.

Support Students in Accessing Available Food Benefits

The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known in California as CalFresh, can provide students with monthly resources to purchase food. California has expanded students' eligibility for CalFresh in recent years, but more needs to be done to educate and enroll eligible students. For instance, students with documented eligibility for federal work-study can receive CalFresh benefits, but many students are unaware of this fact and colleges do not always optimize the distribution of work-study dollars to maximize CalFresh support.

Support California Community Colleges in Developing Lunch Programs

For decades, the National School Lunch Program has addressed hunger among schoolchildren by providing subsidized meals in elementary and secondary schools, in recognition that hungry students struggle to learn. The same is true for community college students, yet no similar program exists to support their needs. While some individual colleges across the country have attempted to implement lunch programs, California Community Colleges are well positioned to tackle such a program more systematically. With increased staffing capacity, the Chancellor's office could develop infrastructure and partnerships for interested colleges and districts. Existing community college funding streams, including Governor Gavin Newsom's proposed budget increase for California College Promise (AB 19), could support this effort.

Explore Options for Meeting Student Housing Needs

Throughout much of the state, California housing costs have grown sharply in recent decades. Beyond supporting students with additional financial aid, there may not be a one-size-fits-all solution. In regions where university enrollment has declined, partnerships with public universities could enable local community college students to take advantage of unused spaces in residence halls. In other regions, host home programs designed to match college students with spare rooms in the area could support housing insecure community college students. More analysis and creative thinking are imperative.