Center for Equitable Higher Education
Studying and promoting economic, food, and housing justice

Transforming and Institutionalizing Basic Needs Supports in California Higher Education

Recommendations for the California Higher Education Basic Needs Community

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Postsecondary credentials are necessary to access living wage jobs, but for millions of Californians these credentials remain out of reach due to inadequate support for basic needs including housing and food.

California is making new investments in student basic needs. These funds are a historic opportunity to advance state goals for student success and racial equity, but only if resources are invested wisely.

This document is designed to provide California higher education leaders with research-based approaches to invest new funding to meet student basic needs.

About the new investments. On June 28, 2021, Governor Newsom signed into law Assembly Bill 128, the California Budget Act of 2021, which includes desperately needed investments in student basic needs. The new budget includes $105 million in new, ongoing investments in student mental health across all three systems of public higher education and student basic needs support at the California State University (CSU) campuses and California Community Colleges (CCC).[1] The CCC dollars, as an example, will benefit the student basic needs centers and the hiring of student basic needs coordinators on each CCC campus. The community college system will also receive $100 million in one-time funding to address food and housing insecurity and all three systems of higher

[1] $60M/year in mental health: ($15M for UC, $15M for CSU and $30M for CCC) and $45M/year in general basic needs ($15M for CSU and $30M for CCC). More information on CCC specific investments available here.

education have access to a combined amount of over $1 billion in state and federal funding for emergency financial aid."[2]

Under state funding guidelines, colleges and universities are responsible for developing expenditure plans to meet their unique student needs. This is a great opportunity to localize student support strategies based on student needs in a sustainable way, but it also introduces the risk of campuses implementing approaches that are duplicative of existing campus or community services and/or poorly aligned with research-based best practices.

This document outlines ways that campus-based leaders can ensure their investments have the greatest likelihood of leading to meaningful improvements in the lives of students and contributing to student success outcomes.

8 ways to make new investments count

Now is the time to go big and think in transformative ways about ending basic needs insecurity for college students and institutionalizing long-term supports. Existing programs and support on campuses are working, but ongoing funding for basic needs means we have the opportunity to make a down payment on ending college hunger, homelessness and housing instability altogether. Here are 8 ways to ensure new investments on your campus are designed for impact.

1. **Expand and optimize campus resource hubs.** All UC and CSU campuses already have at least one Single Point of Contact (SPOC) responsible for addressing student basic needs security and the state recently required that all CCC campuses establish basic needs centers. On-going funding enables program leaders to expand existing or create new hubs to include case management teams that can provide individualized support to students on an ongoing basis. When adding staff capacity, hubs should consider hiring social workers who can supervise social work students from campus programs. For example, hiring a social worker with a graduate degree to oversee a paid internship program would help provide more case managers to meet the growing need for services, while providing an experiential learning experience for interns. Additionally, add staff representation from key campus offices (i.e. financial aid, counseling centers, or health centers) to ensure fluid access to support and provide real time, informed responses to students in one space. Coupling financial aid expertise in particular can help ensure that students have support if and when questions arise at the intersection of basic needs funding, financial aid and satisfactory academic progress requirements. Leaders should also use new money to ensure that hubs provide students with a "single stop" location that can increase access to services, make use of the best available technology (e.g., social media, dedicated apps) to streamline communication with students and across college faculty and staff.
2. **Develop and fund "housing navigators" and provide access to housing resources.** Building safe, affordable, and accessible housing is the ideal solution. Until that housing exists,

[2] More details are available in the *California State Budget 2021-22* accessible here.

colleges should develop/expand partnerships with local housing agencies and nonprofits to ensure that students have subsidies and support needed to secure and maintain stable housing. Because many housing markets in California have a low-supply of affordable housing, financial assistance for housing must be combined with support from a housing navigator: a point of contact that can develop relationships with property owners, maintain records of available housing, connect students with housing opportunities and broker connections to legal assistance in situations where it is needed. College-Focused Rapid Rehousing, which includes partnership with community-based housing agencies, is one promising practice in supporting long-term housing stability.

3. **Ensure recruitment reaches students most likely to benefit from support.** It is abundantly clear from findings of the CSU Study of Student Basic Needs and similar studies from the University of California and the California Community Colleges that students who are of color, first-generation, low-income, undocumented, have child dependents, or have histories in foster care are most likely to experience basic needs insecurity. Students at the intersection of one or more of these identities show even higher rates of need and these students are often least likely to seek help on their own. Passive approaches to reaching these students are not enough. Campuses must work with their institutional research colleges to develop individualized, proactive engagement with these students, simplifying and automating support wherever possible. As campuses implement such efforts, leaders must remember that their language matters. Strength-based framing as an "award for commitment to education," rather than more deficit oriented framing like "need for low-income students," can destigmatize these efforts, build rapport, and engage students with the full cadre of available services.
4. **Strengthen relationships with community-based partners and other colleges.** Campus leaders can use new money to ensure that staff have capacity to develop relationships with community and tribal partners (e.g., county representatives, local housing authorities, mental health providers, community action agencies, K-12 districts). Colleges that are able to develop proactive, meaningful and consistent collaborations with community partners will have a better idea of where support is needed, avoid duplication of services that already exist in the community and be able to expand the capacity of existing services and broaden the scope of resources available to students. Additionally, college leaders can accelerate their progress by working in a collaborative way with other colleges in their regions and across the state — maintaining continuity of services for transfer students, borrowing program models/tools and sharing lessons learned during implementation.
5. **Train faculty and staff in trauma-informed practices.** Many students do not choose to participate in campus services or co-curricular activities, making faculty the only people who are certain to interact with students. Campus leaders should prioritize professional development for all faculty and staff so that they are prepared to identify and respond to students who may be experiencing basic needs insecurity. Leaders can build from established campus professional development (PD) processes (e.g., staff/faculty onboarding) and use PD as a space to raise awareness around existing resources. Specific strategies might include embedding information in course syllabi that can point students to

basic needs services, preparing faculty to identify red flags for basic needs insecurity, and ensuring faculty are well-versed in making referrals for basic needs services.[3]

6. **Evaluate existing programs and interventions.** With the abundant new activity around campus basic needs work, it is imperative that leaders establish structures that can help them learn from and continuously improve their approaches. Indeed, the enabling legislation requires that UC and CSU campuses submit annual reports to the Department of Finance describing, "how funds reduced food insecurity and homelessness among students, increased student mental health, and, if feasible, how funds impacted student outcomes such as persistence or completion."[4] Campuses can do this by investing in faculty time to ensure that all basic needs programs and services are evaluated in meaningful ways. These findings should be disseminated broadly across campus and pooled with findings from other campuses to help drive decisions about program refinement, implementation and expansion. Findings can also be incorporated into annual campus planning processes to make sure that basic needs supports are being improved over time.
7. **Implement creative and de-stigmatizing awareness campaigns.** Colleges must commit to developing a campus culture of proactive support to meet the needs of students experiencing significant material hardship. To do this, they can partner with Equal Opportunity Program (EOP)/Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) staff, mentorship programs, centers for teaching and learning, campus clubs and other "nodes" to improve awareness and access to support, and destigmatize basic needs insecurity. Explore recommendations made by NASPA, NASFAA, and MDRC that highlight the importance of improved communications and outreach and ensuring that equity is a guiding principle in this important work.
8. **Fully leverage all available public benefits.** Recent advocacy efforts led by students, faculty and others have led to a sizable expansion in CalFresh enrollment amongst California college and university students, which helps reduce food insecurity. State legislation has revised eligibility criteria in a way that now helps more students than ever qualify for CalFresh. While there is still much work to be done to continue expanding CalFresh to all students who could benefit, campuses can learn from and replicate this approach of advocating to ease student access to public benefits. Colleges and universities can work to ensure that students have easy access to other public benefits that can help cover costs related to housing (Section 8), utilities (LIHEAP), childcare (Subsidized Child Care) and other financial needs (CalWORKS).

[3] See sampling of additional resources compiled here.
[4] California Assembly Bill 128 - Budget Act of 2021. [LINK]

8 things to avoid

1. **Small-scale thinking**. COVID has created unprecedented hardship — especially in low-income communities and communities of color. Campuses changed strategies to stretch our capacity to support students. We have the opportunity to continue to be transformative. Students need big, transformative support. Given the opportunity of large state investment, now is not the time for wholly relying on small steps.
2. **Short-term thinking.** Students need comprehensive, sustainable, institutionalized systems of support — not episodic aid. It is imperative that campus leaders balance student short term needs with the expectation to build infrastructure that will ensure the sustainability of programs/services to support future students.
3. **Recreating ineffective systems.** We do not need to recreate a charity system in higher education that replicates inequities embedded in historical approaches to addressing poverty. Some of those systems are broken and we need to do better.
4. **Loan requirements.** We should not saddle students with additional, unnecessary debt as a requirement for seeking fiscal support. Students in the greatest need cannot provide personal cash-based investments before they can access help. Campus leaders should avoid policies that require students to take out maximum loans before they can access services. High need students are loan averse and highly unlikely to accept support that is conditioned on meeting specific requirements.
5. **Race neutral approaches.** Race neutral approaches tend to reinforce a status quo that perpetuates racist outcomes. Campuses should avoid programs that lack a racial equity lens.
6. **Unnecessary red tape.** Complicated/burdensome applications to gain access to services are a common frustration for students who could benefit from streamlining processes.
7. **Narrow eligibility requirements.** Campuses often create unnecessary barriers to access by setting narrow rules around things like academic standing, GPA requirements and/or minimum enrollment requirements that dictate who can access supports. While it is important to focus efforts on students who have the greatest need, other eligibility requirements should be removed.
8. **All sympathy, no action.** Don't send your students from office to office getting sympathy from faculty and staff, but not providing them with actual solutions.

About the Centers for Equity in Higher Education

The mission of the Center for Equitable Higher Education (CEHE) is to advance equitable post-secondary education through research and evaluation for economic, food and housing justice at all levels. Acknowledging that the burden of basic needs insecurity is not equally distributed across all student populations in race, socio-economic status, and other social indicators, CEHE investigates equity gaps through research and evaluation to ensure that students are met with evidence-based programs, services, and policies that meet students' basic needs for financial stability, and physical and emotional health while pursuing higher education.

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