

‘Starving student’ takes on new meaning

Cohort 3 alumna publishes ground-breaking study on food insecure and housing displaced CSU students.

College students are known for eating a pack of Top Ramen as a meal or flocking events that provide free food, but an alumna’s study has found the idea of a “starving student” may be more serious for CSU students.

The study, conducted by Dr. Rashida Crutchfield of Cohort 3, was commissioned by California State University Chancellor Timothy White and investigated the needs of displaced and food insecure students in the CSU. Dr. Crutchfield found that preliminary student survey results from one school had a population of about 12 percent of students who were displaced and 21 percent who were food insecure.

According to the USDA, the definition of a food insecure person is someone who is consistently worried about being able to get enough food to survive. Displaced students are described in the study as students experiencing housing instability. These students may be living in their cars or “couch-surfing” at the homes of friends or family.

“It’s an issue about basic needs,” Dr. Crutchfield said. “That if we’re really looking at making sure that students succeed and are retained to graduation, their basic needs have to be met. It’s about a holistic approach to student success.”

There has never been a study like this, Dr. Crutchfield said. Her dissertation focused on the experiences of students



Logo provided by Dr. Crutchfield.



The LBSU Nutrition Program holds a canned food drive to donate non-perishables to the Emergency Intervention Program at Long Beach State University on April 6 in front of the library // Valerie Osier

who were experiencing homelessness. When she was working on her dissertation as a student, she found practically no literature on the topic of displaced or food-insecure students.

“I think there’s a presumption that students who are in college would never be homeless,” Dr. Crutchfield said. “I think that people have presumptions about who is in their classrooms. It’s an emerging awareness, people weren’t really aware that this was even an issue.”

According to the study: “Students who experienced food and/or housing instability reported managing incredible stress, and addressed the issue that stress could be extremely distracting in class while trying to manage the demands of college and personal life.”

While all students’ situations vary widely, in situations of displacement, the feeling of instability is usually constant, and makes it even more challenging to concentrate on exams or homework, Dr. Crutchfield said.

The study used multiple research methods that utilized open-ended interviews, surveys and document analysis, including an online survey and focus groups with staff, faculty and administrators.

Dr. Crutchfield also conducted an additional online survey, focus groups and interviews with LBSU students.

“This is data that no one’s ever had before, so it provides data-driven recommendations,” Dr. Crutchfield said. “I think just the fact that we’re doing this study has expanded people’s interests and motivations to support students. And now we’re having active conversations about these issues.”

According to the report, 11 CSU campuses had programs for food insecure students and one campus had a program that served displaced students. LBSU has the Emergency Intervention Program run by Student Affairs that can provide for students through the Student Emergency Grant, the Meals Assistance Program and the Short-Term Housing Assistance Program. But, Dr. Crutchfield said that further evaluation and support of these programs is needed.

“Again, this is an emerging awareness,” Dr. Crutchfield said. “...But in general, because we’re just learning about the experiences of these students who experience homelessness or food insecurity, we’re just beginning to understand how to support them.”

According to the study, staff and faculty at different contact points with students (ie: financial aid office or counseling

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services) were often “gateways where students might disclose their barriers to food and housing and seek support.”

“Our instructors are often aware [of this issue], because our students in the CSU experience a lot of different things,” Dr. Crutchfield said. “It’s important for us as faculty to be aware that: if my student is falling asleep or is edgy, it might be because they didn’t sleep, or they haven’t eaten today and it’s not necessarily because they’re disinterested or partying too hard, it might be something far more serious than they could imagine.

“Students don’t have to go to seek student affairs or student services to get help, but they do see us, they do see

faculty, so if we can be alert to some of those things, then students are more likely to access the supports that are available for them.”

The study has been funded for an additional two years for a second phase of study and in 2018-19, they will be running and evaluating model programs. There will be a conference in June at the Chancellor’s Office in Long Beach to “Best Meet the Needs of Housing Displaced and Food Insecure Students.”

Chancellor White recently went to Washington, D.C. to do legislative advocacy and one of his objectives was to push and support policy that would support students who are experiencing these problems.

Student Spotlight: Isabel Nuñez

Soon-to-be graduate shares insight from 3 year Doctoral experience

During her first summer in the Educational Leadership Doctoral program, she was nearly ready to quit. Like many students, Isabel Nuñez wrestled with self-doubt and wanting to give up. But she didn’t and now she’s almost done with her doctorate.

“That first summer we took a methodology class and it was a five hour class so just sitting in class for that long was very difficult,” Isabel said. “And then we had a leadership class, and I was just in that class thinking: what the heck am I doing here? I didn’t get any of it, I was completely clueless.

“That was the worst part: doubting my intellect. And even Dr. Scott and Dr. Haviland, our pro-sem instructors, would say, ‘don’t worry, if you didn’t have what it takes, you wouldn’t have been accepted.’ They kept saying that over and over, but it was still hard because you are your hardest critic.”

Isabel says that if it wasn’t for her family being so supportive and proud that she was in the program, she might have actually quit. Now she’s glad she didn’t. Having once looked at an education study article with confusion, she can now read, understand and synthesize the information as well as anyone with a doctorate, she says.

“It’s not from one day to the next, it’s a gradual process, but in the end you really have learned something,” she said.

Starting school again after finishing her Master’s 10 years ago was a big adjustment for Isabel. She describes



herself as a “late-bloomer,” having not finished her Bachelor’s in Psychology until her early 30’s. She went for her Master’s right after and was then hired as a school counselor almost immediately after finishing her Master’s.

Isabel had always wanted a doctorate as a personal goal, but after getting her job she pushed that dream aside, already feeling content with her life then. But, Isabel was inspired when her coworker Veronica Perez, who was in a similar stage of life, was looking into doctoral programs. They both applied to the EDLD program at Long Beach State and both were accepted. They are now each other’s biggest support in the program.

“We carpool together, which really helps,” Isabel said. “And she inspires me to keep going, and vice versa. It really helps having somebody to lean on, someone who knows what you’re going through. Because you know, I try

to explain to my husband and to my family that: I’m stressing out, I’ve gotta finish chapter 4, I’ve gotta finish chapter 5. And they hear me, they understand, but they don’t really know what I’m going through.”

In their car rides home to Orange County, Isabel says she and Veronica “debrief” on what they learned in class that day. She recommends to all new cohorts to “really get that buddy system going.”

As a counselor at Santa Ana High School, she loves her job and wants to be able to continue working with students even after she earns her doctorate.

“The higher up you go, the less interaction you have with the students, so I don’t know what I’ll do after I graduate,” Isabel said. “In that respect, I don’t have any goals at this point, other than to finish and be called Dr. Nuñez.”