Student Resilience

in the Face of Challenges at California's Community Colleges

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Table of Contents

The California Homeless Youth Project

The California Homeless Youth Project (CHYP) is a multi-year research and policy initiative of the California Research Bureau and the California State Library. The CHYP highlights issues and solutions for youth ages 12 to 24 who are living "on the edge" of homelessness or are currently homeless in California. In particular, the CHYP engages these youth directly in research and policy discussions, giving voice to their experiences and recommendations as well as those of researchers, practitioners, and policy experts. The CHYP is supported by funding from The California Wellness Foundation and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation.

Authors: Victoria Cabrera, Heather Jaffe, & Nancy LePage
All authors contributed equally to this work.

Editor: Pixie Pearl

INTRODUCTION

The California Community College (CCC) system is facing an unprecedented food and housing crisis. An estimated 60 percent of its 2.1 million students have experienced   in the past year, and about 50 percent have experienced   within the last month, according to the Hope Center for College, Community and Justice at Temple University.[1] College students facing food and housing insecurity navigate these challenges in many ways. A recent California State University (CSU) study found that the students experiencing the greatest food and housing challenges were also the most likely to access on- and off-campus services.[2] Yet, accessing resources is just one of a variety of strategies that students employ.

To better understand the intersecting challenges that community college students face, the needs and   strategies of these students, and what state policymakers, campus leaders, and other stakeholders can do to support their academic success, the California Homeless Youth Project at the California State Library interviewed 20 students between 18 and 30 years old who were currently enrolled at a community college or had graduated or transferred from one within the past two years, and had received any kind of housing-related service while attending a community college. The following findings and recommendations are based on the knowledge, experiences, and insights that these students graciously shared.

These interviews (see *Research Methodology & Limitations*, , for details) reveal that the impact of facing   insecurity spill over into all aspects of students' lives, and that more than a stable source of food and housing is required to help these students succeed. Echoing this finding, focus groups with 58 University of California (UC) students found that the students defined "basic needs" as all of "the resources sufficient to be the best version of themselves," including having access to transportation, good mental health, and greater financial aid.[3] Based on the experiences of the 20 students we interviewed, we recommend expanding the definition of "basic needs in higher education" to include all of the necessities for a college student to maintain their well-being while achieving academic success.

Supporting students to meet their basic needs, broadly defined, is both an equity and inclusion issue. All students in California must be fully equipped and empowered to accomplish their higher education goals. When people, policies, and practices align to support all students to acquire meaningful college credentials, we can end cycles of poverty, prepare our young people for a shifting economy, and enable them to embrace their fullest potential.

> *We recommend expanding the definition of "basic needs in higher education" to include all of the necessities for a college student to maintain their well-being while achieving academic success.*

Recommendations

- Provide more affordable housing opportunities for students who are low-income and who are experiencing housing insecurity.

- Expand resources on California Community College campuses both by providing additional funds and by using existing resources more creatively.

- Enhance awareness of existing campus resources in a way that reduces stigma.

- Make financial support more accessible and more robust to help offset the non-tuition costs of attending college.

- Foster a trauma-informed campus culture among faculty, staff, and student workers.

- Foster supportive relationships on campus that allow students to receive guidance, advice, and a sense of belonging.

- Actively support students in recognizing and appreciating their capabilities, strengths, and resilience.

FINDINGS

FINDING 1
Students Face Numerous Challenges

FINDING 2
The Challenges that Students Face Intersect

FINDING 3
Accessing Resources is a Challenge

FINDING 4
Social Support Helps Students Succeed

FINDING 5
Student Success is Rooted in Resilience

Students Face Numerous Challenges

Background

In higher education, addressing the issue of basic needs insecurity among college students tends to focus on two key challenges: housing and food.[4] Although housing insecurity has no formal definition in the United States, this term is used to describe a wide range of housing challenges, such as the inability to pay rent, having to move often, and living in poor housing conditions (e.g. overcrowded or dilapidated housing).[5] Homelessness is an extreme form of housing insecurity, and it is defined by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act as the lack of a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence".[6] Examples of homelessness include living in motels, cars, abandoned buildings, transitional housing, camping grounds, and emergency shelters.[7] College students who have experience with housing insecurity also tend to experience food insecurity.[8] Food insecurity in the United States is federally defined as "the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways".[9] Students who are "food insecure" have diets that are less desirable, lower quality, and lacking variety, and may also experience hunger due to eating less each meal or skipping meals entirely.[10]

Many of California's public college students struggle with basic needs insecurity, especially community college students. One study found that 1 in 10 CSU undergraduates experienced homelessness at least once in the past yea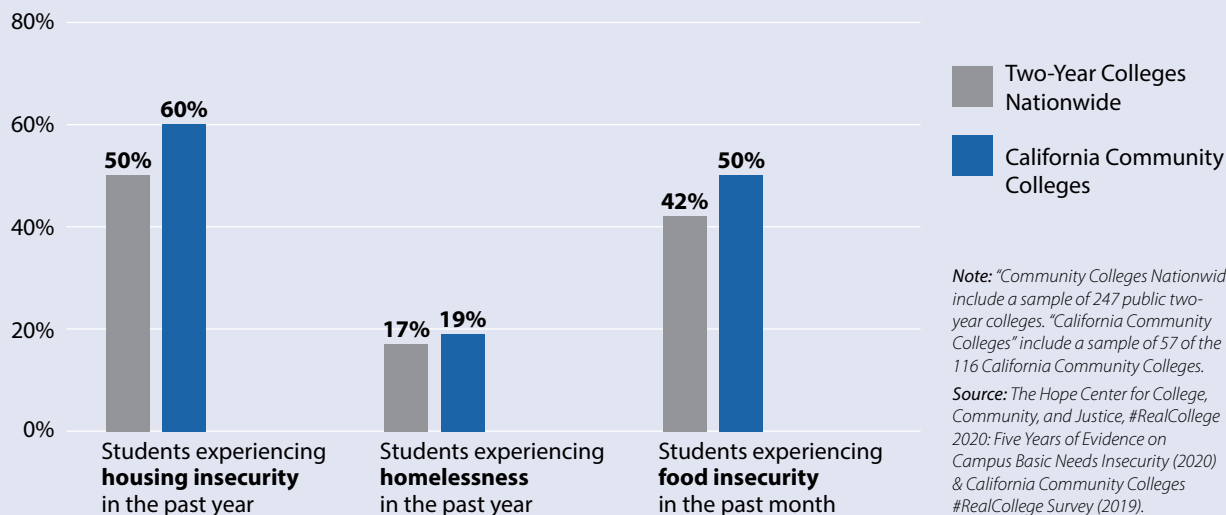r.[11] That number is doubled at the CCCs, where 1 in 5 students experienced homelessness at least once in the past year.[12] Even more college students at California's public colleges and universities experience housing insecurity and food insecurity.[13] The aforementioned CSU study found that 43 percent of transfer students were dealing with food insecurity, with many transfer students coming from community colleges.[14] A study conducted by the CCC system, in partnership with the The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, found that 50 percent of California's community college students experienced food insecurity in the past thirty days, and 60 percent experienced housing insecurity in the past year.[15]

The prevalence of basic needs insecurity among students in California's public higher education systems is a major concern considering food and housing insecurity negatively impact students' academic success and mental health.[16] In California's public colleges and universities, students experiencing food and housing challenges are more likely to have lower grades and grade point averages (GPA) compared to students whose basic needs are met.[17] One study found that community college students

> "It's really hard to manage going to school in general and then dealing with being homeless at the same time. 'Cause, at least for me, I didn't have any motivation to go to school anymore. Like, it was just hard 'cause I was couch surfing or, like, I had to stay with a family member that lived in a different city, you know. So it's just a lot of challenges…"
>
> –Julie, 24, Los Angeles County

FIGURE 1: *California Community College students experience higher rates of food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness compared to community college students nationwide.*

Legend:
- Two-Year Colleges Nationwide
- California Community Colleges

Students experiencing **housing insecurity** in the past year: 50% / 60%
Students experiencing **homelessness** in the past year: 17% / 19%
Students experiencing **food insecurity** in the past month: 42% / 50%

Note: "Community Colleges Nationwide" include a sample of 247 public two-year colleges. "California Community Colleges" include a sample of 57 of the 116 California Community Colleges.

Source: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, #RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity (2020) & California Community Colleges #RealCollege Survey (2019).

who reported experiencing food insecurity also reported having lower GPAs compared to students who had no issues accessing food.[18] Preliminary research also points to strong, statistically significant relationships between housing insecurity among college students and their persistence, graduation, and credit attainment as well as their ability to attend and perform in class.[19] A study conducted on a sample of CCC students in Northern California further highlights how housing instability can negatively impact students' higher education experiences.[20] The housing challenges that these students faced lengthened the timeframe for completing college, with many dropping out and returning multiple times.[21] Both nationwide and in California specifically, food and housing insecurity have been extensively studied; however, these are just two of many challenges that college students face concerning accessing basic necessities.

Findings

The 20 California Community College students we spoke with described a number of different challenges that they faced while attending community college. While the main challenges of housing access, food access, and limited finances were prevalent among all the students in our study, additional challenges also came up along the way for some. Many mentioned experiencing challenges with relationships, transportation, and psychological health. For example, some students

spoke about relationship issues with their families that made it hard for them to attend class; others mentioned their relationships with professors being troubled due to their inability to get to classes on time due to transportation. Each of these challenges impacted their ability to succeed in college. Students talked about how having to work through the many challenges they faced made it difficult for them to focus on school. According to Colin,"… but that was really hard because I was living in my car and trying to find work, and also trying to stay in classes part-time because I wanted to continue making progress towards a degree… But then I had to drop out from that semester because, ultimately, I had to pay rent, and so it was kind of a game of I had to choose: classes or full-time work." Some students talked about dropping classes, while others described how the challenges they faced caused them to quit college altogether during especially difficult periods of their lives.

Each of the different challenges created unique problems for the students we interviewed. One student mentioned how the inability to access nutritious food made it impossible to cook healthy meals. Others

mentioned having no choice but to use unreliable public transportation to get to school, which meant they either had to leave very early or risk showing up late to class. Financial challenges made it hard for students to get to campus as well as afford textbooks or a computer for completing coursework. Overall, financial, food, and housing challenges were the most prevalent amongst the students interviewed, but with each student the challenge presented itself differently. Because of this, multiple types of resources for students are necessary in order to fully and effectively support their academic success.

The Challenges that Students Face Intersect

Background

The students we interviewed for this study never had just one challenge; instead, each dealt with multiple, overlapping challenges while trying to make their way through community college. A recent California Community College study noted how common the co-occurrence of homelessness and food insecurity is for community college students. Of the CCC students who said they had experienced homelessness in the past year, 77 percent stated they also dealt with food insecurity in the past month.[22] The results from this study were reiterated in a nationwide study, with 32 percent of respondents from two-year institutions having experienced both food and housing insecurity in the past year.[23] The CCC study highlighted that, when students are faced with these types of challenges, it is often hard for them to focus on school. Food and housing insecurity directly impacted the GPAs of the CCC students, with those affected by both types of challenges having the lowest GPAs.[24] Beyond academics, the mental health of

college students can also be negatively affected; as students continuously worry about where they will sleep, about how they will get food, and about their grades, their mental health suffers.[25]
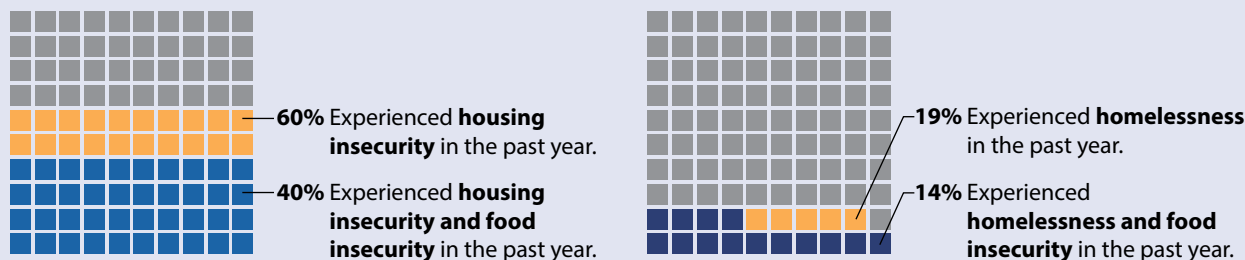
In a California State University study, students in focus groups and interviews described how food and housing challenges negatively influenced many areas of their lives, including greater academic struggles, longer work hours, and diminished physical and mental health.[26] This intersection of challenges led to what the researchers termed "inactive days," or days where the challenges kept students from doing their usual activities.[27] The inability to do things like school, work, self-care, and recreational activities highlights the reach that food and housing challenges can have. While already struggling with housing and food, these struggles led to further issues, making it hard for the students to be successful in multiple areas of their lives.

> *"But yeah, I would have to travel to study and that kind of sucks. The hour and thirty minutes that you're on a bus going to and from a certain place, that takes away from how long you can study for. Not only that, but then you add that you might get hungry. Then you have to break up your study time even more looking for food—and then not only looking for food, but looking for food that's low cost. And so it can get really stressful really fast."*
>
> *–Taylor, 24, Los Angeles County*

Much of the current literature on basic needs insecurity in college notes that food and housing challenges do not occur in isolation; rather, college students who are experiencing food and housing challenges are likely to have experienced, or be simultaneously experiencing, other types of challenges as well.[28] For example, housing insecurity (including homelessness) in higher education has been linked to persistent traumas in students' lives, such as family trauma/instability, foster care transition, mental health issues, and abuse.[29] Oftentimes, academic pursuits are pushed aside as students focus on other, more urgent life factors, like where they will live, what they will eat, how they will earn income, and how they will attend to the needs of their families.[30] Another CSU study found that students who reported being just food insecure, or both food insecure and homeless, had much higher demands on their time—spent on things like labor and family obligations, in addition to their coursework—compared to students who were food and housing secure.[31] This aligns with prior research about how students must balance numerous conflicting priorities in addition to their academics.[32]

FIGURE 2: *The majority of the California Community College students who experience housing insecurity and homelessness also experience food insecurity.*

60% Experienced **housing insecurity** in the past year.

40% Experienced **housing insecurity and food insecurity** in the past year.

19% Experienced **homelessness** in the past year.

14% Experienced **homelessness and food insecurity** in the past year.

Source: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, California Community Colleges #RealCollege Survey (2019).
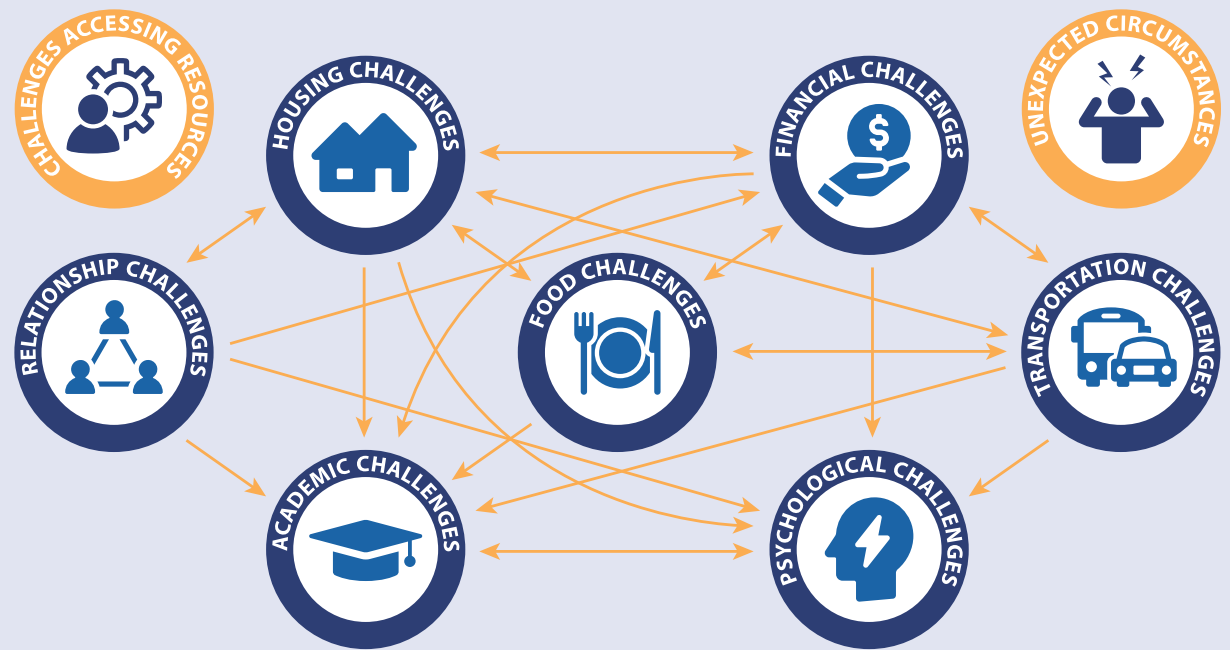
Findings

When the students of the study were asked about the different challenges they faced while enrolled in community college, there was never only one challenge. Each student faced multiple challenges, and oftentimes the challenges would intersect and compound with one another (see Figure 3)(See *Examples of Compounding Challenges*,). For example, when students struggle financially, they are also going to have a hard time affording the bus or repairs to their car or bike—making it difficult to travel between class, work, and home. They are also going to find it that much harder to buy the necessary supplies to be successful in their coursework. In addition to financial challenges affecting academics, there is also the issue of accessing affordable and healthy food. One student told us, "… the food experience was very challenging because I had to focus a portion of my income to rent," while another said, "… there were times where I would spend money on other things. And then I kind of [would] just buy the cheap food like Cup of Noodles."

The challenges the students faced in one area would often carry over into another, making it

FIGURE 3: *According to the students we interviewed, the challenges they faced oftentimes led to other additional challenges—especially academic ones.*

even harder for them to focus on things like school. It seemed the financial and housing challenges each student faced trickled into every aspect of their academic life. For example, one student said, "I've had to drop classes here and there over the semesters as my life sort of adjusts and I move into a different place or wherever." In addition, many students noted the struggles they had getting to campus. Some could not afford a bus pass until the campus provided one for them; instead, they asked around for rides every day. Others who could afford a bus pass discussed the bus schedule not aligning with their school schedules, work schedules, and transitional housing curfews—resulting in them either arriving late to class or many hours early. Students described it being hard to concentrate on their classes and having to drop classes throughout the academic term because they needed to focus on meeting their basic needs, such as finding a place to stay. The combination of these challenges led many of the students in our study to struggle with their mental health, and those issues were exacerbated by the challenge of finding helpful, supportive resources.

"I feel like the instability of housing and the cost of tuition back then really hindered me, 'cause I feel like I could have finished community college two years ago already, but I just kept having to move or taking random classes to stay in status while not really moving forward, you know what I mean? I'm taking classes, but at the same time, it's not really helping me to get my degree."

–Blue, from Santa Clara County

"Throughout my community college experience, it was pretty rough. I didn't foresee any of these complications right out of high school. I didn't expect independent living to be so hard: being responsible for my own food, for part of my rent, having to work a job on the side while studying, the isolation that you could feel from it."

–Bart, 22, Los Angeles County

FINDING 3
Accessing Resources is a Challenge

Background

Institutional resources, or resources that are provided by government agencies, nonprofits, and higher education institutions, present a variety of challenges to college students experiencing basic needs insecurity. These challenges include a lack of needed resources, a lack of awareness of existing resources, difficulties accessing resources, restrictive eligibility requirements, unhelpful resources, and even negative experiences while receiving resources and services.

Although California's community college students experience higher rates of homelessness and food insecurity than undergraduates at the CSUs and UCs, the CCCs have significantly fewer basic needs resources.[33] For example, less than one third of the 50 CCCs examined in one study were found to have

programs that specifically target students experiencing housing insecurity—compared to two thirds of California's public universities.[34] Similarly, only 11 of the 114 California Community Colleges have a form of student housing on or in close proximity to their campuses, which house a very small fraction of the total CCC student body.[35] In contrast, all of the CSUs and UCs offer student housing, which provides housing to about 14 percent and 35 percent of their total student bodies, respectively.[36] Differences in the amount of basic needs resources at California's public higher education institutions are reflective of their financial realities; compared to the CCCs, California's public universities have more core funds per full-time equivalent (FTE) student as well as more robust and numerous revenue-generating enterprises.[37]

In addition, findings from several system-wide studies suggest that resources available to California's public undergraduate students may be underutilized.[38] A CCC study found that only 56 percent of California community college students who experienced basic needs insecurity were receiving any form of public assistance, pointing to opportunities to increase resource utilization.[39] Underutilization can be connected back to many different types of barriers, including a lack of knowledge about resources and difficulties accessing resources. According to CSU student respondents in one study, the primary reason why students did not use available resources was because they had never heard of them.[40] Even when they have heard of them, students also experience difficulties accessing available resources. For example, another

CSU study found that the likelihood of students accessing resources depended on whether the hours of operations of services aligned with their work and school schedules; meanwhile, other students simply did not know how to go about accessing the resources.[41] Even when students know about resources and the resources are accessible, eligibility requirements may present a further challenge. For example, emergency grants and short-term loans through some of California's community colleges are only available to specific student groups, and oftentimes participating in foster youth programs requires official documentation verifying a student's experiences in the foster care system.[42] Furthermore, student perceptions can be just as much of a barrier to utilizing needed resources. For example, many students who participated in the latter CSU study did not believe that they were "needy enough" or that they qualified for resources and services.[43] Stigmatization around experiencing challenges and receiving aid is another reason why students may not access the supports that are available to them.[44]

"So, I feel like my first time attempt, there was no resources available or no programs that were in place for me as a former foster youth because it was so hard to get the ward of the court document. I don't know, like, what happened, but they didn't believe that I was in the system… I didn't have the support that I needed."

–Naranja, 27, Los Angeles County

"And, when I told [the school counselor therapist] exactly what was going on, like, raw—and I didn't even hide anything—he had this face that I'll never forget to this day—that he just looked at me like he wasn't expecting to hear that. I think he expected me to hear [sic] that I was stressed because I got, like, a C … So, I had a bad experience and I never really went back to any kind of therapies. I just kind of dropped out of school…"

–Elizabeth, 26, Los Angeles County

Findings

When asked about the different types of challenges they faced while in college, the students we interviewed never mentioned a lack of resources as being a problem. However, when we asked how the experience of going to community college could be improved, many students said that they could use more resources. For example, the students we spoke with suggested having a space on campus for students to nap or stay overnight, having more housing assistance programs, having additional food resources on campus, and offering low-cost housing or dorms near their college. Students also described their difficulties finding needed resources and then accessing those resources. For example, Amanda, referring to campus-based resources that were difficult to find, said, "Like, if they wanna help out, they should make it truly possible for anyone to get help, not kind of keep it as a secret." Barriers to accessing resources also included not being eligible, difficulties proving eligibility, and losing eligibility.

Even when students knew about the resources available and could access them, they also described instances where the quality of the resources was poor. For example, Katy described homeless shelters as "really rough and heartbreaking and scary." Sometimes students had to wait long periods of time to receive promised aid—in some cases so long that they experienced additional challenges because of the delays. In addition, the aid provided to the students was at times insufficient given the challenges that they faced, and at times the aid provided was simply not helpful at all. Referring to a negative experience with a resource, one student said, "So I didn't like the services and the program that was a part of CAYFES [Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Educational Support]. I'm not going to lie. They did not do a good job at stuff. They didn't do a good job at trying to help me find those resources… they just told me to call 2-1-1." Lastly, the students we interviewed described having negative and sometimes even harmful interactions with service providers. Challenging resources made responding to and navigating other types of challenges all the more difficult.

"So the foster students, they get a lot more benefits than the homeless do… they have like a support system and stuff. They give out like bags full of food and like stuff… And they get more, like, vouchers, like, different vouchers than we do—like, better ones. And they get like, they get, like, Uber passes and stuff."

–Samantha (age and county unknown)

"What I would do while being in [Transitional Housing Nonprofit]—it's 15 minutes away but a 1.5-hour walk. But, I would just walk to and from [the nonprofit and class]. They did help a bit with TAP cards, but it's only a certain amount per semester."

–Aaliyah, 27, Los Angeles County

FINDING 4
Social Support Helps Students Succeed

Background

The presence of   is critically important for homeless college students during their transition into adulthood.[45] One study found that supportive campus relationships helped connect college students experiencing basic needs insecurity with campus programs which, in turn, helped them address their needs.[46] Similarly, a CSU study found that many students identified faculty and staff in student affairs as their source of information about resources on campus.[47] Beyond discovering needed services, having supportive relationships is associated with better mental and physical health.[48] The presence of positive relationships has also been identified by well-being researchers as an important element that enables psychological well-being.[49] Social support and the presence of role models are important social protective factors that contribute to resilience in adulthood.[50] Key sources of social support for homeless young adults in general are family and community organizations.[51] It has also been found that college students who have experi-

ence in the foster care system greatly benefit from positive social support, especially from nonfamilial relationships.[52]

California's higher education institutions currently provide varying levels of on-campus social support to help students experiencing housing insecurity. For example, all of California's public colleges and universities are required by state law to have at least one advisor on every campus who is responsible for supporting students experiencing homelessness.[53] These staff members act as single points of contact, connecting students to programs and services that address their specific needs and experiences.[54] Based on a point-in-time study that examined resources at all of the UCs and CSUs, and a sample of 50 CCCs, 100 percent, 87 percent, and 78 percent of these public higher education systems, respectively, have at least one employee on campus whose explicit job is to provide support to students experiencing homelessness.[55] Furthermore, this study
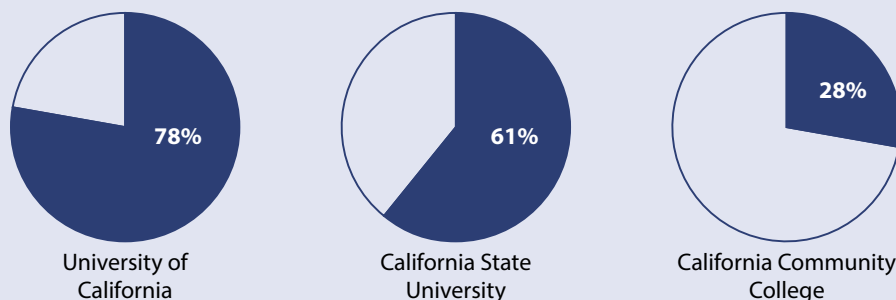
found that 78 percent of the UCs, 61 percent of the CSUs, and 28 percent of the 50 CCCs offer programs specifically for students experiencing housing insecurity—programs which provide coordinated basic needs services and, in some cases, additional financial aid, additional academic services, and even a sense of community with staff and peers.[56]

Findings

For many of the students we interviewed, social support was critical for navigating challenges and fostering resilience. Relationships provided these college students with some of the tangible resources they needed as well as intangible resources, like information about campus services. Students' relationships with friends, family, counselors, professors, and case managers resulted in direct help, such as housing, school supplies, financial support, advice, or just a listening ear. Many students mentioned living with friends or parents of friends when they had nowhere else to go. Several students received advice on navigating the college system, while others were given a place to temporarily store their things in between living situations. Students also described turning to case managers and campus counselors for advice, emotional support, and help with accessing resources. In addition, their peers

FIGURE 4: *California's higher education institutions currently provide varying levels of programs specifically designed to support students experiencing housing insecurity.*

78% University of California

61% California State University

28% California Community College

Percent of schools offering programs specifically for housing insecure and homeless students.

Note: Estimations are based on a sample of 50 California Community Colleges, as of March 2019.

Source: California Homeless Youth Project, Measuring Our Success: Campus Supports for College Students Experiencing Food and Housing Insecurity (2019).

provided academic support, such as studying together and recommending excellent professors. These relationships aided students as they navigated numerous challenging situations.

Relationships were also a key factor for connecting students to the on-campus resources they needed. Among the students interviewed, referrals were the common way of getting connected to on-campus resources, such as short- and long-term housing, supportive programs, food pantries, and places to get clothes for job interviews. The types of relationships that students had with the people providing referrals ranged from close friends or classmates to counselors and case managers. Empowered by the information from these referrals, students were then able to seek out needed resources—taking actions to stabilize their lives. When they were able to do so, the students we interviewed also acted as resources for their peers, becoming the very social supports that they had depended on. Ways that students helped others included being transparent about their own challenging circumstances, offering money when they learned another student was hungry, and providing referrals to programs on campus. According to Julie, "… I feel like, if I share my experience, that what I'm going through—it'll help somebody else. Like, 'OK. She's going through this. I can ask her for help.'" A few students even volunteered or ended up working for the programs that had helped them during difficult times.

"I actually found out about it from one of my friends in my soccer class that I took in the fall semester. She was like, 'You should join this program. It's pretty good, and it's for students, and they give you a lot of opportunities… And I went, and I joined it. Now it's like—I didn't realize that there's that kind of resources out there for students. If I would have known, I would have joined it sooner."

–Joanne, 21, Los Angeles County

"We like to lift each other up socially 'cause we have a lot of people in the group who struggle with depression, me being one of them, and anxiety and whatnot. So we always try to make sure that we're mentally and emotionally available for each other… So I'm better able to deal with my problems. And if I can't deal with it, I know that I have someone there who can help deal with it, so I don't get as overwhelmed."

–Kendra, San Bernardino County

Student Success is Rooted in Resilience

Background

College students who have experienced basic needs insecurity demonstrate resilience by being able to bounce back from the trauma and challenges that accompany their situation. Resilience is "the ability to adapt successfully to adversity, stressful life events, significant threat, or trauma".[57] A number of psychological factors have been identified that contribute to both resilience and psychological well-being. A large body of research over the last several decades has identified protective psychological factors that contribute to resilience in adulthood. These factors include: emotion regulation capacity, optimism, positive emotions, habitual cognitive reappraisal, active coping, and meaning and purpose—with many of these factors interlinked.[58] One study that looked specifically at perceptions of resilience and coping among homeless young adults found four primary themes that highlight perceptions of resiliency and coping: individual strengths, positive life perspective, external social supports, and individual coping strategies.[59] In addition, environmental mastery, autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, and purpose in life have been identified as important factors that enable psychological well-being.[60]

Psychological well-being is important for college students. Recognizing this, California's public colleges and universities offer a variety of mental health services on campus, but mental health services are not consistent across the three public higher education systems. For example, all of the California State University campuses provide

mental health clinics with services, such as mental health outreach, short-term counseling, services for students that are suicidal or violent, and referrals.[61] However, according to a website analysis conducted by the California Health Report, only 95 of the 114 California Community Colleges have mental health clinics, and available services vary among these campuses.[62] Again, differences in the availability and robustness of mental health resources at California's public higher education institutions are reflective of their financial realities. Going beyond the need for more robust mental health services, a student mental health task force assembled by UC Davis recommended creating a campus culture of student mental health that engages all campus community members through training and programs.[63]

One study found that 20 percent of California's public college and university students used mental health services, and half of them used off-campus resources, such as private mental health service providers, wellness centers, community clinics, and hotlines.[64] However, these off-campus resources cannot be expected to fully meet the mental health needs of college students throughout the state because of a lack of local resources in rural areas and overburdened local resources in urban areas. Furthermore, hotlines can directly provide preliminary counseling, but they are not considered a long-term solution for college students with mental health needs.[65] Psychological well-being can foster student resilience, but mental health services at California's community colleges that promote psychological well-being are in short supply.

Resilience: *"the ability to adapt successfully to adversity, stressful life events, significant threat, or trauma."*

Findings

Many of the students we interviewed developed their own ways to help themselves navigate challenges, and these different ways demonstrated their resilience. Students used a wide variety of self-management, self-care, and psychological strategies to manage their school, work, and personal lives as well as address the many challenges they faced. For example, they described scheduling school and work responsibilities and keeping track of tasks by writing them down. Students talked about how they stayed active through exercise, took time to enjoy activities outside of school and work, set aside time to rest, and sought out medical care when needed. Some students also sought out therapy or counseling to learn how to better deal with stress, feeling overwhelmed, or mental health challenges like anxiety or depression. Others described expecting the worst but hoping for the best; practicing gratitude; practicing self-acceptance; staying motivated by focusing on their dreams for a better life; encouraging self-talk; reading or listening to motivational materials; trusting oneself; trying their best; focusing on their learning; and understanding that learning is a process.

Students took specific actions to change their situation, physical environment, or social environment in order to help themselves deal with challenges. Several students chose to change their living situation to have more stable housing, reduce their commute to campus, or better focus on their academics. For example, one student quit their job and gave up their apartment in order to have fewer expenses, work less hours, and therefore have more time to dedicate to coursework. Students also talked about how they did their best to intentionally control their physical surroundings in ways that supported their educational needs, such as by studying at a library to be more productive (compared to being in their homes or cars) or at a park to have a quiet, safe space that allowed them to focus. Concerning social environments, one student surrounded herself with supportive people instead of negative people. Other students talked about establishing boundaries with their families by removing themselves from negative family situations. Furthermore, students talked about balancing their priorities in the face of limited finances, limited time, and numerous responsibilities outside of school. One student spoke about negotiating with her boss for hours that allowed her to both work full-time and study.

In the stories the students shared with us, they described the many ways that they were resilient despite encountering obstacles. For example, John Doe described persevering through his transportation challenges. "Car was [sic] obviously a bit too expensive… [the] LA bus system is not always the best. Sometimes it would be faster to bike, so sometimes I would have to bike on average 100 miles a day from work, school, back to work, back to school, back to work, home." Colin described his shift in attitude which allowed him to persevere despite being pulled in the opposite directions of work and

"…And I saw how much I had done, and since then I have realized that there are certain things that I can block out that will keep my stress levels down and keep me focused on something else… I have had to teach myself how to compartmentalize and just—So, school's in this compartment, home, children, and just put things in random spaces in their own little boxes in my head."

–Chrys, Humboldt County

school: "I've kind of accepted it as a reality that I will never get a 4.0 because work comes first. But, the way I look at it on the flip side is, 'but I'm still making progress… I'm still moving forward…'". However, only a few students talked about their awareness of these positive traits. Denise, describing her perseverance strategy, said, "I always tell myself, 'There is a way.' Even when sometimes you deal with people on the phone and you call them and they're just like, 'Oh there's nothing we can do.' You hang up, you call back, maybe there, you'll get someone else who can help you. But, you'll never know unless you try."

"Well, actually, one of the reasons why I chose this school was because it's one of the few junior colleges with living, with dorms on campus, and that was kind of unusual. And I thought, 'Well, the way to just get through this, and put my nose to the grindstone, and get this degree—being on campus is the best way.' And it's actually pretty affordable for California."

–Sterling, Humboldt County

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the conclusion of every interview, we asked students to reflect on their college experiences and then share what changes they would like to see that would improve the experience of pursuing a college degree. The following recommendations draw from key solutions that the students put forth, as well as solutions put forth by us, the researchers, in light of all that they shared with us (See *Comprehensive Student Recommendations*, , for a complete list of student recommendations). The recommendations proposed below focus on creating new resources and expanding existing ones, increasing access to resources, promoting a campus culture that is more supportive of struggling students, helping students foster positive relationships, and acknowledging students' tenacious resilience.

Provide more affordable housing opportunities for students who are low-income and who are experiencing housing insecurity.

Students' experiences shed light on the different forms of housing insecurity in higher education as well as its far-reaching consequences. Students described moving often, temporarily sleeping on the couches (and even the floors) of friends and relatives, staying in hotels, living in their cars, and being treated poorly by landlords. Financial challenges and housing challenges directly contributed to numerous other difficulties in their lives, including their access to food, access to transportation, psychological health, academic success, and relationships. However, when students sought out housing support—and then were given access to campus dorms, provided with subsidies for apartments, or admitted into transitional housing programs—they thrived both personally and academically. Describing the experience of having a safe, stable place to live after receiving housing aid, one student said, "It's helped a lot. I'm able to breathe…" and another said, "It has been such a relief. I've never been more at peace." Many students also described how the housing services they received included case management and other types of support beyond housing, and this made a positive difference in their lives. Based on these students' experiences and on the robust body of existing literature, access to stable housing is foundational for success in higher education.

Several of the students we spoke with recommended increasing the provision of free and affordable housing opportunities for low-income students. This would require both long-term commitments and collaborative actions on numerous levels. Leaders and lawmakers in state government are responsible for allocating sufficient, consistent funds towards the creation of additional community college student housing. The CCC Chancellor's Office could provide technical support and promote the convening of campus administrators to determine best practices in student housing development, expansion, and management. On the ground, campuses are responsible for strategically making student housing happen. Campuses can partner with community-based housing nonprofits and with nonprofit housing development corporations to support these efforts. Landlords of nearby apartments are also potential partners, should the student housing end up being outsourced.

"…Once you're able to create your own environment, then you could focus, then you could actually show what you can do academically."

–Katy, 24, Los Angeles County

"Based on homelessness, I would say more help [like] a program that students could potentially maybe apply for that would allow them to have enough assistance to either be able to rent a studio off campus."

–Chrys, Humboldt County

"This is a really tall order… but figuring out housing for students who are housing unstable. Like having a building that has a government mandated lower rent for students or something. That would be amazing."

–Taylor, 24, Los Angeles County

Expand resources on California Community College campuses both by providing additional funds and by using existing resources more creatively.

Campus resources played a powerful role in helping the students we interviewed navigate difficult circumstances. One of the ways that nearly all of the students responded to challenges was by receiving direct aid in one form or another from their campuses. However, students also shared that, at times, these resources did not provide enough help. For example, one student talked about how she struggled to afford the $35 student fees each semester which would have given her access to a bus pass. Another said he was promised a certain amount of emergency grant aid that would fully cover the unexpected expenses he faced, but then he received much less than the promised amount. According to many of the students we interviewed, community college campuses need to offer more robust supportive services.

"The thing I really like about [CCC] is that there's a lot of resources for the students to make college easier for them and not so stressful. I've got a lot of help, and the different programs that they have for students has, like, really helped me out a lot."

–Joanne, 21, Los Angeles County

"I feel like more resources for people who are having a little bit more trouble with adapting to the environment and understanding certain things… And I wish there were more resources and outlets for kids who need a little extra help."

–Jaime, San Bernardino County

"I don't know if it's realistic, but just to have more programs that are like [Transitional Housing Nonprofit] and to have even a space on the campus where students can take a nap for 30 minutes or an hour… Even having access to a kitchen that the students can use, too. Making public transportation free for students…"

–Aaliyah, 27, Los Angeles County

A paradox exists: California's public universities have a greater financial capacity to invest in institutional resources for their students compared to the public community colleges, yet the highest need students are overwhelmingly enrolled in the CCC system.[66] Therefore, fully supporting low-income community college students requires an active and ongoing financial commitment by our state's leaders and lawmakers—with on-the-ground implementation guided by the wisdom of campus administrators, staff, and even the students themselves. An example of this is the recent allocation of $9 million in ongoing funds for CCCs through the AB 74 Budget Act of 2019 to "support rapid rehousing efforts that assist homeless and housing insecure college students."[67] This is a start, yet campuses are still far from helping all students meet their basic needs, broadly defined.

In addition to expanding campus resources through greater funding, California's community colleges can more creatively leverage what they already have. For example, one study found that as of March 2019, none of the sample of 50 CCCs redistributed edible, prepared food (that was approaching its expiration date) at campus eateries and grab-and-go convenience shops (that would have otherwise been thrown away) to students experiencing food insecurity.[68] Concerning emergency housing services, campuses can form partnerships with transitional housing nonprofits, setting aside beds and catering housing services specifically to the needs of college students. With additional efforts, but not much greater direct costs, opportunities like these should be or should continue to be explored.

Enhance awareness of existing resources in a way that reduces stigma.

Creating additional resources is only useful when students know about and can access them. However, many of the students we spoke with described how finding on- and off-campus resources was, at times, very challenging. In fact, two students said that they felt as though people intentionally tried to keep the resources hidden from them. Given how difficult it oftentimes was for students to learn about resources on their own, it is not surprising that they often learned about resources through referrals—referrals which came after they began to experience challenges and disclosed their struggles to someone to seek help. While the referral process is important, it is also reactive. If students knew about the resources sooner, before or at the very onset of their challenges, they might have been able to reduce the duration and intensity of those challenges. Students should also be able to find resources without the requirement of sharing their struggles with other people.

According to several of the students we spoke with, supportive resources both on- and off-campus need to be made more known. Local nonprofits and community college campuses need to enhance student awareness of existing services and programs in a way that both safeguards privacy and reduces stigma. There are many ways to make resources more visible. Students suggested using posters, putting flyers on campus bulletin boards, and sharing information during new student orientations. In addition, faculty can include information about campus resources in course syllabi (also ensuring that faculty know where to direct students who choose to disclose their challenges). Finding the balance between students' privacy yet making resources visible requires intentional consideration, including assessing available options and consulting the students themselves. One student mentioned the importance of discreetly providing services to students experiencing challenges: "…they probably should have had an office… designated to, like, at-risk students or something. Maybe it not be [publicly out in the] open…" Making resources more known must be done without requiring students to publicly reveal the challenges that they are facing.

In the process of making resources more known, an opportunity exists to reduce stigma associated with basic needs insecurity and stigma associated with the resources in place to support students. This can be achieved both through word usage and the design of supportive services. Word usage should not require the students to identify with negative labels in order to seek out and receive aid. Thus, "homeless liaisons" should be called "housing counselors," and "CalFresh" should be called a "financial aid program." In addition, services can be provided in a way that supports students while honoring their dignity. For example, if possible, campus food pantries should allow students to select the food items they prefer, giving them choice over their dietary needs and preferences. Both the wording used and how resources are designed and implemented play a powerful role in reducing stigma—ultimately making resources more accessible to the students they aim to serve.

"I feel like they make it so difficult to find those resources… I had to talk to my counselor and tell her what was going on at home for her to tell me about [Housing Nonprofit]. There was no poster saying, like, 'Hey, are you homeless?' or 'Hey, are you going through stuff? Call here.' And you know, like, it's not advertised out there… Like, what if I didn't ask? What if I just went through stuff and just, you know?"
–Elizabeth, 26, Los Angeles County

"I would definitely say raising more awareness for the different resources students can get. Because I didn't know anything about those things until one of my friends told me."
–Joanne, 21, Los Angeles County

Make financial supports more accessible and more robust to help offset the non-tuition costs of attending college.

Many of the students we interviewed recommended providing more financial supports and discounts to offset the costs of going to college. The cost of living in California continues to rise, yet financial aid and entry-level wages fail to keep up.[69] Together, these conditions have created, and will continue to create, the perfect storm of challenges for economically disadvantaged community college students. Difficulties accessing transportation, nutritious food, safe and stable housing, and textbooks are all fundamentally financial challenges. According to the students we spoke with, financial challenges also directly resulted in various relationship and psychological challenges. Providing resources, and making those resources known and accessible, helps students navigate these challenges. However, providing additional financial support helps to address the underlying issue that in many cases caused those challenges—the tension between working to earn income to survive in the present or studying to earn meaningful college credentials to thrive in the future.

> *"I'll say financial is the biggest problem or burden because you get financial aid, but you still have to have living expenses and you still—or you'd be homeless, and that's not fun either. So, you have to work, and then working, like, full-time just to make minimum wage, and then that only covers a certain amount of your living expenses. So, it puts a lot of stress on you when it comes to actually sitting down and focusing and going to college."*
>
> *–Denise, 26, Los Angeles County*

> *"The cost is prohibitive to so many people, and I think that until that gets addressed, I think that we're gonna have an unprepared adult population who doesn't really have the ability to go to college. Because unless you have parents who have money or put money away, it's really impossible to go to work and also pay for school. Just, like, the math is just—it just doesn't add up."*
>
> *–Sterling, Humboldt County*

California is a generous state towards many low-income college students. Between the combination of the California College Promise Grant, institution-specific grants, Cal Grants, and federal Pell Grants, at least half of the students across California's three public higher education systems pay no tuition.[70] The California College Promise Grant waives enrollment fees (i.e. tuition) for over one million CCC students each year.[71] Through Cal Grants B and C, CCC students also receive $1,094 and $1,656, respectively, per year towards living expenses.[72] However, eligibility requirements exclude many students from receiving these various forms of financial aid. For example, students can only continue to receive the California College Promise Grant if they stay enrolled full-time during the fall and spring semesters.[73] The vast majority of the Cal Grants awarded have GPA cutoffs and require students to enroll in college within a year of graduating high school.[74] Consequently, eligibility requirements exclude certain students, such as CCC students who had to enroll part-time so that they could also work and CCC students who have been out of high school or college for more than one year.

Even when students have tuition fully covered by grants, there is the issue of living expenses. According to an article published in early 2019 by the California Community College News Center:

The actual cost of attending a community college for a student living independently is more than $20,000 annually when you consider housing, transportation, textbooks and personal items. As financial aid programs are structured today, a California community college student receiving the maximum amount of aid possible would still face a deficit of more than $6,000. Very few community college students qualify for financial aid to cover non-tuition costs and low-income students with unmet financial need have limited choices: work more hours, take fewer courses, accumulate what can become crushing debt, or drop out of school.[75]

Our state's leaders and lawmakers must choose to prioritize expanding the accessibility and the robustness of existing financial supports in order to free CCC students to invest in their futures while having all of their basic needs fully met.

Foster a trauma-informed campus culture among faculty, staff, and student workers.

Homelessness, housing instability, and food insecurity are all instances of trauma. Trauma refers to any negative life event that occurs in a position of relative helplessness. Any trauma occurring prior to the age of twenty-five (when the brain is fully developed) is considered an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), ultimately affecting the construction of the brain, learning, behavior, and relationships.[76] A lack of awareness and supportive resources can accidentally result in additional instances of trauma, both within the environment of higher education and of the local service providers that students are referred to. System- and institution-wide projections of "noble poverty," or the idea that financial, housing, and food insecurity are all normalized rites of passage while attending college, can be detrimental to the identification of struggling students and to supporting these students in accessing needed supports. Campus advisors and off-campus service providers who lack an awareness of effects of basic needs insecurity and lack knowledge about needed resources may unknowingly cause harm when interacting with students, driving them away from supportive programs and services. For example, one student we interviewed said, "Before I joined the [EOPS] program, I went to regular counselors, and they just weren't helpful. I had shared many times about my housing insecurity and being hungry—really sensitive stuff—and it made it worse for me in a way." Furthermore, rigid course scheduling and limited academic accommodations can negatively impact the ability of students experiencing basic needs insecurity to enroll, maintain enrollment, and or pass their courses.

By providing trauma-informed training and integrating the core values of trauma-informed care into the campus mission and culture, California Community Colleges can establish a space for students, faculty, and staff to feel aware, safe, understood, and supported.[77] By emphasizing physical and emotional safety, trustworthiness, choice and control, collaboration, and empowerment, educational institutions can project the initiative of community care and further the success of the campus as a whole.[78] Additionally, ensuring that information and resources are visible, known, and readily available to the campus community can intentionally promote an accepting environment by destigmatizing the housing, food, financial, and mental health challenges that come with navigating through both trauma and higher education.

> *"I think the assumptions that are sometimes made by faculty, that are made by other students—I know at [CCC], there was also kind of a culture that almost you're not working hard enough if you're living in your car, and that always kinda rubbed me the wrong way."*
>
> *–Colin, 21, Riverside County*

Foster supportive relationships on campus that allow students to receive guidance, advice, and a sense of belonging.

For many of the students we interviewed, supportive relationships were critical for navigating challenges and fostering resilience. Relationships with family, friends, classmates, roommates, faculty, campus staff, and nonprofit staff provided students with some of the tangible resources they needed. These relationships also provided intangible resources, like encouragement, that supported them during difficult times. Existing literature, both on college students specifically and on social supports more broadly, fully supports the positive impacts of supportive relationships.

Yet, some of the students we spoke with also described feelings of loneliness and isolation. A few students talked about barely having enough time to take care of themselves after doing their best to tend to work, academic, and personal life responsibilities while simultaneously navigating housing challenges. When asked about the challenges she faced, one student described how homelessness made it difficult for her to make friends on campus, explaining,"… it's like I don't want people to know me because I'm homeless. I want them to know me for me." Loneliness also stemmed from broken relationships with family members (which in many

cases launched the students into a period of housing insecurity), being geographically far from loved ones, and transitional housing rules that did not allow visitors or pets. For example, one student said, "So, I actually went to college against my family's wishes. So, I was alone throughout all my college experience. I'm doing the payments by myself; I'm living by myself. I didn't count with [sic] any family support…".

California's community colleges can foster supportive relationships in many ways, including through campus programs and peer mentorship. Programs targeting students who have experienced housing insecurity can connect young people who are currently facing, and who have previously faced, similar challenges. As an alternative to creating new programs, existing programs can be expanded; for example, programs targeting foster youth can be made available to students experiencing housing insecurity as well. In either case, these programs provide opportunities to build community with peers and staff by coordinating social gatherings. Another approach is promoting peer-to-peer mentorship, allowing more seasoned students to show new students how to navigate the campus and how to succeed in higher education, with the possibility of mentors and mentees forming friendships. In addition, having faculty and staff who understand the trauma and challenges that many CCC students face can also support the formation of supportive relationships between them and the students they serve.

"…if they do have one, rely on their support system and be transparent about their situation… But, if they don't, then they definitely need to absolutely find one immediately… Because if you are alone in your own situations, it's very easy to give up. It's very easy to not see the light at the end of the tunnel and just see your circumstances being the end of the world."
                                        –Bart, 22, Los Angeles County

"I think having access to those upperclassmen as informal mentors was a huge help to me because it helped me anticipate the hurdles I had to jump over… I think that maybe a more explicit program should be created that allows students to get those mentors that are in either the same major or the same field or come from a similar background."
                                        –Taylor, 24, Los Angeles County

In addition to receiving assistance from other people and organizations, students' choices, habits, mindsets, and actions helped them navigate the numerous, varying challenges that they faced as they pursued their higher education goals. Although the experiences that the students shared with us clearly demonstrated their strengths and resilience, only a few spoke about how they recognized these positive aspects of themselves. College students would benefit from more fully seeing their own internal capabilities and power which they can wield—and have already wielded—in the face of adversity. Deficit-based perspectives must also be uprooted and replaced with strength-based perspectives in the minds of campus faculty and staff, a process which is supported by having a trauma-informed campus culture. This would further support students in perceiving their own strengths.

There are a variety of ways that California's community colleges can support students in recognizing and appreciating their inner strength. For example, campuses can honor students' academic progress and accomplishments, despite the challenges they had to overcome, by spotlighting their stories and honoring them with awards (after obtaining the students' expressed permission for these forms of public recognition). Student-led workshops on campus could allow students to teach each other life skills, self-help strategies, and resilience strategies. Lastly, California's community colleges must be better financially supported to provide comprehensive mental health services, such as counseling and therapy, for students.

CONCLUSION

By drawing on the stories of 20 California Community College students, this study builds on an existing foundation of research in order to gain greater insights into the many challenges that students experiencing housing insecurity face as well as how they navigate these challenges. The interviews reveal that these students strived to overcome numerous and complex difficulties in pursuit of their academic goals. Yet, due to supportive resources on their campuses and beyond, social support, and their own resilience, students experiencing housing insecurity demonstrate remarkable tenacity—a tenacity that must be recognized, fostered, and celebrated.

The recommendations of this report reiterate that the multifaceted problem of unmet basic needs in higher education which extend far beyond food and housing and require equally multifaceted solutions. These solutions must be guided by further research that sheds light on the provision and lack of technical assistance, program-level evaluation, system-level evaluation, and accountability for policy implementation.

All of California's college students must be fully empowered to accomplish their higher education goals. To achieve this, every aspect of our state's public higher education system—including lawmakers, campus system leaders, campus leaders, program staff, faculty, and community organizations—must take singular and collective actions to further support students' success. Only then will the California Community College system be both equitable and inclusive, enabling this next generation of young people to embrace their fullest potential.

Comprehensive Student Recommendations

At the conclusion of every interview, students were asked to reflect on their college experiences and then share what changes they would like to see that would improve the experience of pursuing a college degree. The following is a comprehensive list that summarizes their responses:

Prepare Incoming Students

- When promoting colleges and universities to high school students, also use the opportunity to raise awareness of the resources that are available at each campus.
- Prepare incoming students for what to expect and what they need to do in order to successfully navigate college.

Foster a Supportive Campus Culture & Environment

- Provide and foster supportive relationships on campus that allow students to receive guidance, advice, and a sense of belonging.
- Foster a more understanding campus culture towards college students who are adjusting from previously attending high school or working full time.
- Train professors to be aware and more inclusive of students experiencing basic needs insecurity so that they can better support these students in their learning.
- Provide greater program flexibility to support non-traditional students, such as more online classes and more classes offered outside of normal work hours.

Improve Access to Resources

- Promote resources and programs in a variety of different ways on campus to make sure that students are aware of them.
- Allow students who previously experienced, who are currently experiencing, or who are at risk of experiencing homelessness to participate in the foster youth programs on their campuses.
- Make resources beyond the campus more available to students on campus.

Provide More On-Campus Resources

- Provide more free or affordable housing opportunities for students who are low-income or experiencing housing insecurity.
- Have a space on campus where students experiencing homelessness can stay and sleep for a few hours or for the full night.
- Have an on-campus resource person specifically for students experiencing basic needs insecurity.
- Provide emergency funds, such as emergency grants and short-term loans, to students who experience unexpected financial setbacks.
- Provide more financial support and discounts to offset the costs of college.
- Provide mental health services to students experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness.
- Provide tutoring services and encourage students to use them.
- Provide free public transportation to students experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness.

Student Advice to Their Peers

At the conclusion of every interview, students were asked to reflect on their college experiences and then share what advice they would give to others who are experiencing similar challenges. The following is a collection of select responses:

"…you can't control what has already happened, but you can control your outcome. And to just remember their goals, and to try their best to work around their current circumstances to accommodate and reach those goals." –Bart

"…put yourself into a positive space if you feel like you're in a negative one." –Taylor

"It's hard to go through it. I would definitely recommend some kind of therapy and getting help in taking care of the mind… And try not to feel embarrassed. Try to get over that because it's just the situation." –Aaliyah

"…build like a good relationship, I guess, with a counselor or with like a friend or like a professor or something, because that really goes a long way." –Julie

"…stick to [it] even though at times it can be extremely stressful when it comes to having to pay bills and stuff like that…looking at the overall picture has helped me a lot… So giving it your best and looking at the bigger picture will definitely help out. Stay focused." –John

"As long as you keep fighting and you don't give up, you will get through it." –Denise

"…definitely do tutoring and talk to the professor as much as you can to see what you can do to, you know, get a good grade. Oh, and definitely go see your counselors. See what you need to do and what you need for your counselors." –Joanne

"Don't be afraid to ask for help. There are a lot of people willing to give it if you open your mouth." –Quinn

"…do the best that they possibly can and really invest in their education because there are two things. One, at the end of the day, no one can take your education away from you… And the second thing is that your education is something that's gonna be helping you for the rest of your life." –Katy

"And if you're going out of your way to find help, along that way that you're meeting people, know who they are, get their number… And if they don't see potential, make them, convince them that you want the help, that you're looking for the help." –Amanda

"And so that, I guess, would be my advice, just to really take advantage of every opportunity and know that there are often opportunities out there, you just have to seek them out." –Colin

"On one hand, I'll say, 'Just stick with it. Don't give up.' But on the other hand, I'll say, 'Even if you have to give up, just come back [to college].' Because all of my different experiences has finally led me into the career that I want… I wouldn't be pursuing it if I hadn't taken time off college to know what I want." –Jill

"That's my biggest word of advice is save your money and do not let people get in the way of your goal. Because you can't let people kick you while you're down dude. If you let people kick you while you're down, you're never going to get back up… So I'm like—you just have to keep going." –Samantha

Examples of Compounding Challenges

When the 20 students of this study were asked about the different challenges they faced while attending community college, there was never only one challenge. Each student faced multiple challenges, and oftentimes the challenges would intersect and compound with one another. The charts below highlight how the students we interviewed for this study experienced compounding challenges. They provide examples of how one challenge can contribute to another and vice versa.

Housing Challenges → Financial Challenges	Financial Challenges → Housing Challenges
"I had a couple jobs, but experiencing homelessness I wasn't able to keep the jobs. Nothing in my life was stable." –Aaliyah	Talking about the cause of her housing instability: "I actually got laid off from my job, and I had about two months' worth of savings… And then, I realized that my savings was running out pretty severely." –Katy
"…but that was really hard because I was living in my car and trying to find work, and also trying to stay in classes part-time because I wanted to continue making progress towards a degree. But it was just really hard to do when I was living in my car." –Colin	"There came to a point where work situation was harder for me and then my roommate ended up moving out, so I couldn't really afford to live by myself anymore." –John Doe
"So um I've been homeless ever since and it's been a struggle trying to get my finances together—like figuring out how to get money and like resources." –Samantha	"I suppose it was kind of a difficult start because in order to start college, I had to move out of the apartment that I had because I realized I couldn't afford it because I couldn't work full time." –Taylor
	"However, the problem is, because I'm a full-time student, it's hard to find a job that balances my class schedule, and then also gives me enough hours to provide for myself." –Denise
	"And then while [sic] so then I had to leave both of my jobs. And so housing is a problem because I was going to school full-time… So the reason I stopped going the first time was because I was homeless. So I needed—I couldn't be homeless. I was living in my car. And I had to, I had to, I had to, uh, to—I had to work. Yeah, I had to work." –Naranja

Referring to living in her car: "It was affecting the relationship at bit, just how things were. I had expressed it to my ex." –Aaliyah

"I guess sometimes trying to make friends… Yeah, because, you know, usually I get the question, 'Oh, you know, where do you live?' You know, I tell them '[Local City]' and they're like 'Oh, cool, that's nice. You know, whatever.' And they start asking, like, 'Where are your parents from?' And I'm like, 'Uh, I don't know that part actually.' And then, you know, you have to kind of explain some, which I don't mind. But at the same time, it's like I don't want people to know me because I'm homeless. I want them to know me for me." –Julie

"Yeah, I was just living there. And then like something had happened where like, oh, the daughter wanted to, like, move out. And so the mom blamed me. She ended up like saying like 'You have to leave' or whatever because she thought that I was being a bad influence on her daughter." –Naranja

"Yeah, I was just living there. And then like something had happened where like, oh, the daughter wanted to, like, move out. And so the mom blamed me. She ended up like saying like 'You have to leave' or whatever because she thought that I was being a bad influence on her daughter. And so then like, obviously, I became homeless and then my friend let me stay in her place. So I probably stayed there for a good while." –Naranja

"I felt betrayed because I had lived with this family for so long. And then all of a sudden they said… 'there is not enough room for you. You're gonna have to find your own way to sustain yourself.' And I was not prepared for any of that… So I just felt like I was being swept to the wayside." –Bart

"Yeah, the minute I was 18, my mother kicked me out of the house, so I'd been homeless since then for half a year." –Quinn

"I moved back in with my siblings and my mom, which wasn't the best idea. After moving in I realized that it wasn't really a healthy situation. Which led to housing instability for about a year afterward—on and off for about a year afterward for my first year at [Local CCC]." –Taylor

24

"I had PTSD and the anxiety just makes it worse. I had trouble taking tests. My mind was just somewhere else… I would get down on myself for not retaining the information all in one sitting. Before I would feel like I was not getting it, and then I got mad at myself for not getting it…" –Aaliyah

"I don't want to, like, do poorly on tests or homework because I'm too worked up about my personal life. My therapist helped me practice separating the two of them and doing different things. Like going for a walk when I'm getting stressed out—just going outside, breathe for a second, and then come back and try to do my homework." –Joanne

"Yeah, I'm not sure how much more streamlined they could make it. I'm not an expert in that regard, but I also have ADD and I have other sort of kind of learning things, so that's—I think it's more of a challenge when you're neurodivergent." –Sterling

"Because of things going on in my personal life, I kind of didn't want to wait to kind of heal from some things that were going on. I just dived right in. And I was just going and going. And I guess. I thought that I can, I could separate my personal life from my school life. I thought that whatever was happening at home or whatever was happening with me wouldn't affect my performance, wouldn't affect school. But I was greatly mistaken. Like it totally wrecked everything because when I wasn't okay… So I—little by little, I started kind of dragging schoolwork." –Elizabeth

"The only problem is that I have this habit of if I get like stressed out by classes, I forget to eat. And that's become an issue… So sometimes it got stressful because I would have a lot of homework. I mean, the chemistry sequence at [Local CCC] is incredibly unforgiving. So if I wasn't able to study for a day, it was really stressful for me." –Taylor

"It was my first time taking organic chemistry. And I ended up getting a B by the skin of my teeth. And I was so disappointed in myself as a person. I was like, 'Wow, how dare you eat dinner? How dare you sleep? You got a B.'" –Katy

"In my case, I always put a lot of pressure on myself to get straight As and I was like, 'If I don't get a straight A. If I don't get an A in a class, I failed.' That was me, the first two years of college. And that was extremely, extremely stressful, trying to get As in engineering classes while having to work and running for the university." –John Doe

"And at the same time, like I don't really talk to my case manager because it's not really a relationship there. And when we do talk, I'm just reminded, 'You know, if you don't pass this semester, we're not going to be able to help you anymore.' So that kind of doesn't help. So I think it'd be better if they're a little more lenient with their academics at least and on the students because it's a lot to deal with, being homeless alone, and it's even harder to deal with, you know, being homeless and trying to go to school and trying to figure out your life, you know?" –Julie

25

Financial Challenges → Transportation Challenges

"…but it was also a struggle for me to understand how much I'd have to work hard to be able to pay for certain stuff and be able to make it to school 'cause I wasn't local. So transportation was also kind of a big problem for me…" –Amanda

"And for school they do have a bus card, but you have to pay your like student fees at the beginning of each semester in order to get it. And that $35. And at least for myself, I struggle to get that bus card. I had to ask people for money." –Julie

"I didn't pay off parking tickets because I couldn't pay it off… So my car got impounded and it was impounded for two months during the fall semester, and I basically had to Uber to work, to school." –Bart

"Maybe, a couple of months ago, I had an issue with tickets that I had, and they were holding my license, which was stopping me from getting employment." –Denise

Transportation Challenges → Financial Challenges

"And while being in community college here, one of the biggest challenge was transportation. Car was obviously a bit too expensive in terms of insurance and gas, and parking lots at the university. So I would—I'd go—I try to do the buses, but LA bus system is not always the best, sometimes it would be faster to bike. So sometimes I would have to bike on average 100 miles a day from work, school, back to work, back to school, back to work, home. So it was a lot of biking." –John Doe

"Finding a job is hard too cuz I mean, I don't have a car. So my transportation that I rely on is a bus. And then, you know, I have to look at the bus schedules and you know, how long it takes me to get there." –Julie

Research Methodology & Limitations

Methodology

The findings in this report are based on data collected from interviews with 20 current and former California Community College (CCC) students. To meet the recruitment criteria, all of the students were between 18 and 30 years old; were currently enrolled in a CCC or had graduated or transferred from a CCC within the past two years; and had received any kind of housing-related service, broadly defined, during their time attending community college.

Remote, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews took place between April 1 and August 15, 2020. Students were compensated with $20 e-gift cards to their choice of Walmart, Amazon, or Target for their time. Interviews lasted between 13 and 62 minutes, with an average duration of about 40 minutes. Student interviews provided insight into how they experienced and responded to food insecurity, housing insecurity, and other challenges while pursuing their higher education goals. The impacts of their responses to these challenges, especially the impacts on their well-being and academics, were also discussed. After the interviews, students were invited to complete a brief online demographics form which collected information about age, marital status, gender identity, race/ethnicity, and which county the students lived in while both attending community college and experiencing housing challenges—giving us an understanding of who our sample interviewees were.

Each interview was transcribed and analyzed (through coding) by two of the four researchers using a conventional content approach. The analysis process included looking for a priori themes as well as identifying new, emergent themes for the two overarching categories of "the challenges that students faced" and "how students responded to the challenges." Quotes that demonstrated each theme were organized and compiled into a single document, called a "code-book." Doing this allowed us to find sub-themes within each theme; for example, for the theme of "Psychological Challenges" we found numerous quotes specifically around the sub-theme of "PTSD and trauma." We also identified the relationships between the different challenges, according to the experiences that the students shared with us.

Partner organizations across California supported the recruitment process. These organizations included transitional housing nonprofits, host home programs, and emergency housing programs within California's public colleges and universities. Outreach for recruitment to participate in this study included emails, printed flyers, announcements in newsletters, and verbal invitations. We estimate that about 200 eligible community college students learned about our research study.

A total of 20 students ultimately completed interviews. Of these, 16 interviewees filled out the online demographics form. Based on the demographics information they provided, our interviewees came from diverse backgrounds. Ten students identified as women, three identified as men, one identified as a transgender man, one identified as non-binary, and one identified as gender fluid. The interviewees also had diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds: American Indian, Mexican, White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Chicano. Twelve interviewees hailed from Los Angeles County, two from Riverside County, one from Humboldt County, and one from San Bernardino. Notably, age was intentionally controlled to be between 18 and 30 years old through the recruitment process. Consequently, the students we interviewed were between the ages of 19 and 27 years old, with the mean age being 23 years old.

Limitations

Conducting interviews to explore the challenges that college students face and how they navigate those challenges results in rich, descriptive data. The resulting qualitative data shed light on complex processes and on individual's experiences, laying the foundation for deeper understandings about the phenomena of basic needs in higher education. However, the qualitative research approach we utilized for this study is not suited for testing theories nor for determining causation. Furthermore, our non-random, purposeful approach to recruitment—which resulted in 20 community college students sharing their challenging college experiences and resilience strategies with us—should not at all be considered representative of the over 2.1 million CCC students across California.[79] In other words, the experiences and insights gleaned from our small sample of student interviewees are not intended to be generalized to the broader student population.

We interviewed only 20 students due to a compilation of circumstances both within and beyond our control and due to the limitations of this research study. The experiences and perspectives that the students shared with us are stark examples of the complexities that students experiencing housing insecurity—particularly in California's community colleges—must navigate in order to pursue their higher education goals. However, with such a small sample size, these interviews barely scratch the surface. Additional interviews might have revealed new themes and sub-themes concerning the types of challenges that students face and how they navigate these challenges. Alternatively, additional interviews might not have revealed anything new, instead providing evidence that the stories already heard cover a good portion of the range of students' experiences (i.e. "reaching data saturation"). Until more interviews focusing on the challenges faced and the resilience strategies employed by young adults in community college are conducted, in California or beyond, it is unknown if key themes were missed in this study or if the current sample sufficiently represents the broad range students' college experiences.

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900 N Street, Suite 300, Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 653-8722
cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov