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Basic Needs? Yes, Please!: A Report on the University of California Basic Needs Services

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BASIC NEEDS? YES, PLEASE!:
A REPORT ON THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
BASIC NEEDS SERVICES

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Professor Pellaton

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For students at the University of California (UC), tuition is facing a steady increase, wherein indirect costs like books, transportation, food, and housing can account for around 60% of the overall cost of attendance. Today, the Pell Grant's maximum grant only accounts for almost one third of the overall cost of attending a public four-year institution.¹ While students may succeed at having their tuition partially covered, necessities like food and housing are not being strongly supported by financial aid leaving low-income or financially independent students behind in success or in debt.

In response to this climbing problem, the UC created basic need services (BNS) in 2014 to help alleviate student financial burdens by providing access to or accommodations for basic necessities ranging from food, housing, financial security, transportation, and legal services. In this research, I aim to understand how BNS are affecting the rates of food insecurity at all nine of the UC campuses, and whether the amount of services provided affects these rates. To answer this question, I identify and compare what BNS are made available to students across each campus and whether the amount of services affects food insecurity rates after BNS implementation.

I found that the UC campus with the most BSN and food insecurity services did not have the lowest average of food insecurity, while campuses with the lowest amount of BNS and food insecurity services had the higher average rates of food insecurity. I found that the rates of food insecurity relied heavily on the survey data collection done by the University of California, and I conclude with a discussion on what this means for the University of California and access to basic necessities for the institution's students.

¹ National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, "The Case for Doubling the Pell Grant". NAICU, <https://www.naicu.edu/policy-advocacy/doublepell/making-the-case/>.

Context and Significance

The University of California is in a unique position to serve populations of first generation, low-income, and immigrant students who originally did not have access to institutions of higher learning as qualified as the UC. As these populations increase it means that more students who are first to work toward a degree in their families, or who are working class or are self supporting can mean that the cost of tuition, food, housing tend to become a hurdle to student success. These hurdles cause students to exert more energy into surviving, that is by skipping meals or couch surfing in order to save money and continue their education.² The UC system as an institution of higher learning has a moral obligation to address the grievances of its students, whose academic success is dependent on basic needs, and study the magnitude of students' overall living situations. In 2017, the Food and Housing Security Study (FHSS) reported that almost half of the UC undergraduate population experienced some variation of food insecurity.³ Food insecurity defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.⁴ In 2018, the UC Office of the President (UCOP) Global Food Initiative (GFI) funded a study across all UC campuses in order to understand and end food and housing insecurity for its students and to further address this problem across the state and nation.⁵ One of the complexities with understanding food insecurity,

² Gaetano, Chris, "Report Finds College Students Skipping Meals to Afford Tuition". *New York State Society of Certified Public Accountants*, 8 December 2021, <https://www.nysscpa.org/article-content/report-finds-college-students-skipping-meals-to-afford-tuition-120821#sthash.n6gUlqiY.dpbs>

³ University of California, "Redefining Student Basic Needs for Higher Education: A Study to Understand and Map University of California Student Basic Needs". *University of California Global Food Initiative*, July 2020, pg. 10. https://basicneeds.ucsd.edu/_files/uc-bn-report-compressed.pdf

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Food Insecurity in the U.S.: Measurement". *USDA Economic Research Service*, 25 October 2023, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/measurement>.

⁵ University of California, "Redefining Student Basic Needs for Higher Education: A Study to Understand and Map University of California Student Basic Needs". *University of California Global Food Initiative*, July 2020, pg.16. https://basicneeds.ucsd.edu/_files/uc-bn-report-compressed.pdf

is figuring out how to categorize and quantify experiences of homelessness or hunger. The FHSS partially approached a broader definition of insecurity and aimed to explain the nuances through focus group questions and student-generated definitions of basic needs, homelessness, and food insecurity. The University of California has implemented a food insecurity goal of 24% for undergraduate students, the current food insecurity rate of graduates across all UC campuses who responded to the survey is at 43%. Though it is a rather ambitious goal of the UC, I see this policy as of now a failure. I argue this because the UC relies on the numbers collected by the UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) to reflect the population of students who are food insecure, but because it is a voluntary survey which is done on a biennial level, it leads me to believe these numbers aren't actually reflective of the UC population and create a false sense of limiting food insecurity for all UC students.

It is an ambitious goal of the UC to create a system of basic needs to help support students, though there is a precedent for this. In 2022, the California Code, Education Code (EDC) § 66023.5 required that each California community college 1) establish a Basic Needs Coordinator to be a point of contact for students 2) establish a Basic Needs Center on campus with a site explaining each resource and where it is located 3) help students enroll in CalFresh, food programs, and tax credits when applicable 4) use a portion of funds available for basic needs support and provide students directly to address urgent needs 5) collect disaggregated data on each service when applicable.⁶ Comparing this to the 2016 L.A. Community College District study, 63% of students experienced food insecurity and a 2017 Community College 24 state

⁶ “Section 66023.5 - Basic Needs Coordinator and Basic Needs Center, Cal. Ed. Code § 66023.5.” *Casetext.com*, 2024.
<https://casetext.com/statute/california-codes/california-education-code/title-3-postsecondary-education/division-5-general-provisions/part-40-donahoe-higher-education-act/article-2-general-provisions/article-3-general-provisions/section-660235-basic-needs-coordinator-and-basic-needs-center>

study, found 67% of students experienced food insecurity.⁷ With this research suggesting more than half of students in 24 states in the U.S. and in L.A. alone faced bouts of food insecurity, it would only cause for such policies to be enacted. The same policy would be assumed for state and public universities in California, but at this time there is no policy requiring implementation and reporting like EDC § 66023.5. In my discussion section I will explain the benefits of outlining California policy for public institutions.

Just as food insecurity is extremely nuanced and personal to each student's experiences, the policies enacted must reflect those multifaceted problems. The question is, would a policy like EDC § 66023.5 work for the UC if the institution has basic need services and data collection in place? Each campus also deals with its own rates of food insecurity and access to basic needs services. For example, across the four years (2016-2022) of the UCUES, UC Merced had 8,562 students take the survey, with reports finding that over those five years an average of 58% of students experienced a variation of food insecurity meanwhile over those same years UC Berkeley had roughly four times as many students participate and received a food insecurity rate of 40%. This Points to questions about the future of identifying food insecurity, for example do all students need to answer the questionnaire? Why is it only made to be voluntary and do these numbers accurately reflect the real amount of students struggling with food security? These are questions I aim to explore later in discussion.

Literature review

Plenty research has been done on the topic of food and housing insecurity in the U.S. and across university student populations. Understanding why tuition has gone up over the last decade can point to reasons why students face issues of insecurity. *The Center on Budget and*

⁷University of California, "Redefining Student Basic Needs for Higher Education: A Study to Understand and Map University of California Student Basic Needs". *University of California Global Food Initiative*, July 2020, pg.8 . https://basicneeds.ucsd.edu/_files/uc-bn-report-compressed.pdf

Policy Priorities issued a report (2017) on how state cuts in university funding since the recession have spiked tuition in almost all 50 states, including California where tuition has gone up 60% in light of state funding cuts⁸. The report finds that state funding has remained below pre-recession levels, with California increasing only 2.2% at the time of this report. Higher rates of tuition and slashes to academic services and student opportunity in turn make public universities less accessible for a large population of students who are low-income, first generation, or rely on state and/or federal funding. One important highlight of this research is that tuition costs have outpaced income gains as of 2017, this is a clear indication that many working students or students from families that are not affluent can struggle to obtain basic needs, thus basic need services could reduce this stress.

Food insecurity is something that is faced not only in college, not only nationally but also internationally. For the purposes of this research I will be identifying food insecurity at the university level in California, but for the sake of this paper I will however mention food insecurity at private institutions. Food insecurity and BNS are found throughout all community colleges and public universities, yet not as much in private institutions where students can face similar or higher rates of insecurity. The *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* has a research article on hunger in private institutions⁹. The report finds that private institutions are enrolling more students that come from marginalized backgrounds and differ from completely independent to dependent in terms of their financial status. A student-led organization trying to bring awareness to the issue of food insecurity allowed students to self report their status, they found that 48% of students from multiple different midwestern private institutions were

⁸ Mitchell, Michael et al., "A Lost Decade in Higher Education Funding". *The Center on Budget and Policy Priority*, CBPP. 23, August 2017, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/a-lost-decade-in-higher-education-funding>

⁹Keefe, Susi et al., "Campus Food Insecurity: Bringing Private Institutions into Conversations on Basic Needs". *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, vol. 16 Issue 1. 2021. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19320248.2020.1838984>

experiencing food insecurity. This number only increased to 70% when the researchers added another study done by Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, and Kinsley and student-led campus conversations. This research identified, like the research from the UC, that some students just cannot afford to pay for tuition alongside other necessities like food, housing and transportation, and that it is an issue that is faced across all higher education institutions.

Now that the financial situation across the country has affected tuition rates and that food insecurity is experienced across all higher education institutions, it is equally important to understand the potential foundation of food insecurity for college students in California. The Global Food Initiative in 2015 compiled a report on student food insecurity at the UC campuses. This report highlights key statistics in order to understand how food insecurity affects students. For example, food insecurity was a new hardship for most students as 60% of those identified did not experience food insecurity as a child¹⁰. The report also found that most food insecure students tend to have lower grades and suspended studies even with financial assistance than students who did not experience food insecurity. In all, this report implies there is a relationship between food security and academic success but also a relationship between tuition increase and food insecurity.

Universities have adapted to solving these problems by creating new programs which are designed to be more efficient and expansive in order to help students. In the *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness* comes an article exploring a program designed out of a Southern California university to address basic needs, called Campus Alignment with Student Advocacy (CASA). The article points out the benefits of the program, like case managers, off and on

¹⁰ Global Food Initiative, "Student Food Insecurity: A 2015 Study from the University of California". *University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources Nutrition Policy Institute*. 2015. <https://npi.ucanr.edu/files/248812.pdf>

campus services, and application assistance for SNAP¹¹. Yet the findings indicated that some students still experienced barriers using CASA, critical access of food and housing, while others experienced supportive interactions. What was clear from this report was that a barrier students faced was knowing what qualified them for basic need services. Students didn't know if they needed to be totally homeless or hungry or if they could be low-income or first-generation. Which again presents issues of students unaware of what constitutes them beneficiaries of institutional support. This research indicates that there is a gap in knowledge surrounding basic needs services and understanding requirements for those services.

Students who are suffering from higher rates of tuition, gaps in requirement knowledge, and new experiences of food insecurity, also find ways to combat it themselves. The *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* in 2023 studied food and housing insecurity among college students and the determinants, consequences, and resilience among the population¹². Based on interview data studying the lives of college students, the research did well to explain the nuances of being food insecure and the consequences of this issue. The researchers found that students have had to create their own ways of supporting themselves, covering the gaps where the university or state cannot support them. For example, some students tended to split grocery costs and share food, some students would split single meals to last a couple days. This study showed that these barriers to retention ultimately had negative outcomes on students, but regardless the students in the study showed resilient measures to stay in school. While these are examples of student resilience, there should not be reasons for students having to find ways to accommodate

¹¹Crutchfield, Rashida et al., "Getting Help: An Exploration of Student Experiences with a Campus Program Addressing Basic Needs Insecurity". *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, Vol. 29, Issue 1: Food and Housing Insecurity in Higher Education in the United States. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2020.1677010>

¹²Haskett, Mary E. et al, "College Student Food and Housing Insecurity: Students' Perceived Determinants, Consequences, and Resilience". *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, October, 2023, 1-19. <http://doi:10.1080/19320248.2023.2277832>.

themselves, especially when those services could be provided by their home institutions and are linked to supporting student academic success.

This previous research creates a conversation around understanding the needs of students and the role of the institution within the lives of their students. If the UC is actually becoming more accessible to previously marginalized students, then why do the numbers suggest these very students face food insecurity? In light of these gaps, this research aims to identify the services at each of the UC campuses and whether these services have affected the rates of food insecurity among students based on the survey done by the UC.

Theory and Hypothesis

For this research I hypothesize that the amount of basic need services offered at an individual campus will decrease the amount of food insecurity, because access to more support services encourages higher chances of stability. For this research I will analyze the amount of services provided by each of the nine UC campuses. I will also examine the number of food specific services offered within their basic needs services for each of the nine campuses. Based on that first finding I will then examine and compare the average rates of food insecurity to understand if the rates are lower at a UC which offers more services and vice versa, between the recorded years of 2016-2023.

Research Design & Methods

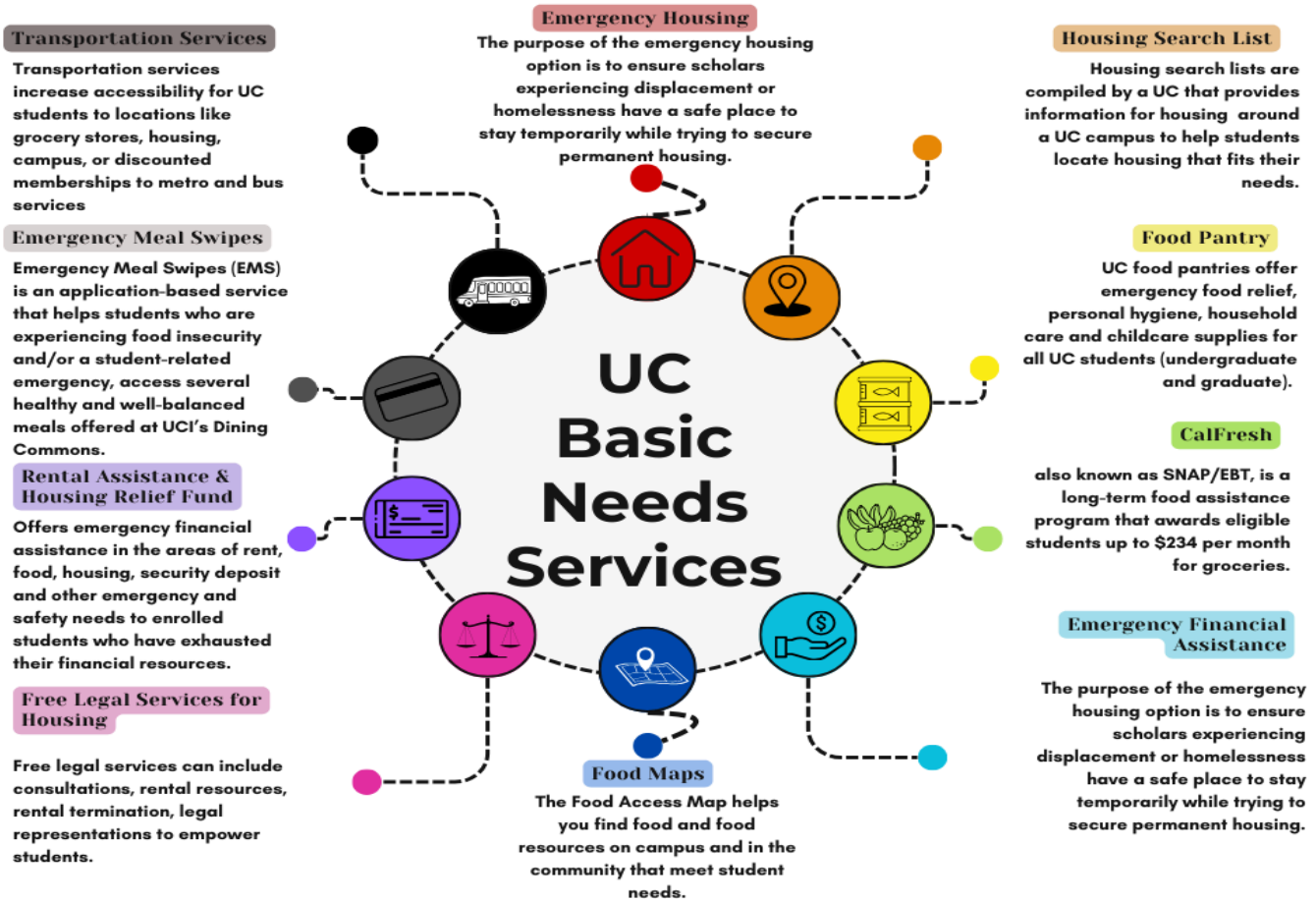
My independent variables are the basic need services offered and the amount of services at each individual campus. To measure this I went to each campus's BNS website and made a list compiling what they offered. I created a criteria based on the California Education Code, § 66023.5. If a campus had these services it was either marked yes or no (Y/N). I then created a chart to examine which UC campuses had the most and the least amount of services.

My dependent variable is food insecurity. I analyzed the information reported by the University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) where food and housing insecurity was measured. These findings are based on students voluntarily answering the questionnaire, at this time the UCUES is not mandatory for all students.¹³ The data collected by the UC measuring food insecurity was measured beginning in 2016 and then every other year into the present. For this research the data is collected from 2016-2022 for food insecurity for a total of five years.

Results

To make basic needs services more accessible, I created an infographic to explain what each of the services do for students. I collected all of this information from various UC BNS websites. All of the services listed below are most of the services offered at the majority of all campuses. The idea of this infographic was to show the breadth in assistance, creating a physical image of exactly what parts of academic success are students struggling with. For example, transportation for commuter students, locating nutritious food, renting litigation, and locating affordable housing.

¹³ The UCUES is a voluntary biennial survey done at all of the UC campuses. For this reason the data on food insecurity may not accurately reflect the true rates of food insecurity among students. For example, over the span of 5 years, UCB had over 17,000 students respond while UCM had a little over 8,000.



(Figure 1). The colors of the infographic correlate to the colors of the donut chart listed below.

The shaded colors represent “Yes” the UC campus offers this service, while the tinted or lighter shade represents “No” the campus does not offer this service. As it appears UC Davis offers the most basic need services out of all the UC campuses. The UC campuses tied with the least amount of services are UC Merced and UC Berkeley. For example, UC Berkeley does not offer food maps, free legal services for housing, rental assistance, meal swipes or transportation services.

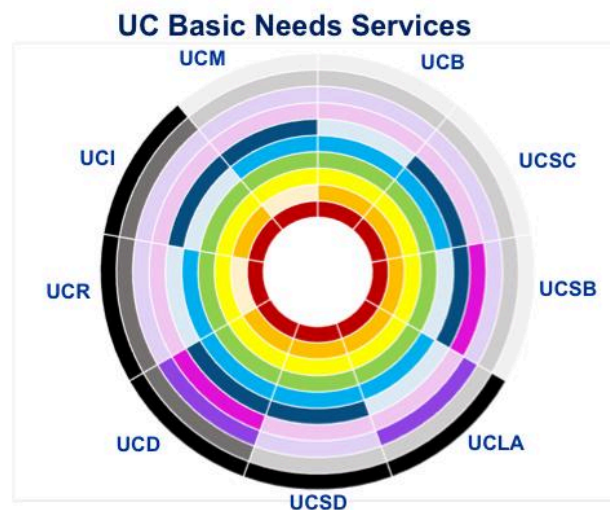


Figure 2. Basic Needs Services Report

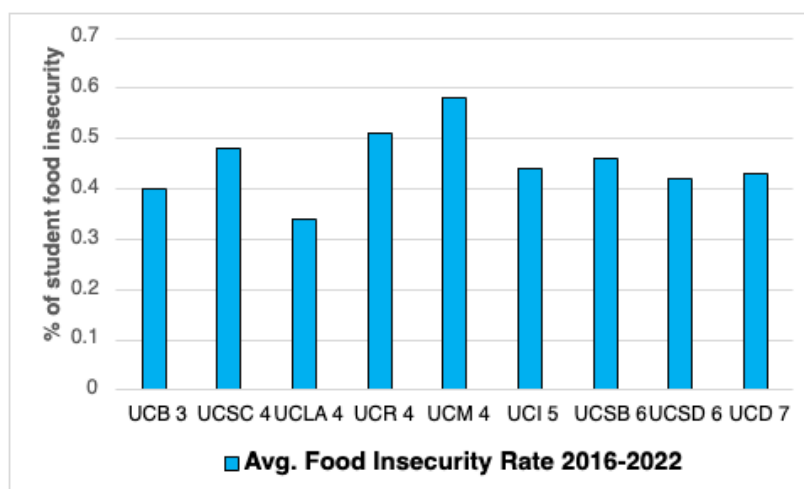
Chart Legend



(Figure 3). Specifically looking at food security related basic need services the same donut-style chart is used. The shaded portions are representative of the amount of services, not what services are offered. It appears that UC Davis again, has the most food services available within their basic needs services. The university with the least amount of services again was UC Berkeley.



I then compared the data I collected on the BSN to the food insecurity rates at each of the UC campuses. The data source below provides data on the average food insecurity rate for each campus over the five years (2016-2022).



The numbers next to each of the schools correlates to the amount of food services they have, three being the lowest and seven being the highest (i.e. UCB 3). As the data shows, UC Merced has the highest average food insecurity rate at 57% and UCLA has the lowest with 34%. My hypothesis was proven wrong, UC Davis with the most BNS and food insecurity services had the fourth lowest average rate with 43%.

Discussion and Research Implications

My original research question was to identify and compare what basic needs services are made available to students across each of the nine campuses and whether the amount of services affects food insecurity rates after basic needs implementation. My hypothesis was that the campus with the most services will in effect have the lowest rate of food insecurity. My hypothesis was proven wrong, UC Davis had the most services but did not have the lowest average over the years of 2016-2022. Why I believe this hypothesis was proven wrong can rely heavily on the UC Undergraduate Experience Survey raw data. UCUES is where I collected my raw data on food insecurity, and this survey is not only produced on a biennial level, but it is also voluntary. For example, over the span of five years UC Berkeley had roughly 18,000 students answer while UC Merced had roughly 8,000. Currently the UCUES has no quota for the amount of students who need to take the survey. This can mean that the data collected does not accurately reflect the true levels of food insecurity at each campus. This will only affect the average I found within this research study. Another reason is when the services were implemented. From my research I could not find the exact years in which these services were

created, this can affect the usage of services and the overall rate of insecurity among the campuses.

What is surprising is what some of the campuses offer over others in respect to their location. Take for example UC Los Angeles, on their basic needs websites they did not offer food maps, legal services for housing, a housing relief fund or transportation (Figure 2). Based on the geography, Los Angeles faces one of the highest rents and lack of affordable housing in the U.S.¹⁴ Surely because of this reason the school would offer rental assistance for off-campus or commuter students, but it was not advertised on the website like for example, UC Davis, in a city with a much smaller population. Or UC Berkeley, the university does not offer the 6/10 that I found through research, some of which being transportation or housing relief. Similarly Berkeley mirrors L.A. which has a housing crisis, yet it is one of the most well connected cities through public transportation but does not offer any services. This points to a possible lack in understanding student needs as it pertains to location but also echoes a larger city service that needs to become more accessible.

Based on these findings I am led to believe that much more research needs to be done assessing the services, their qualities, success, and usage. It is possible that some services are more needed than others based on a reflection of the population, but this can only come from the UCUES being stronger, more available, and required at all of the UC campuses. For example I would propose that EDC § 66023.5 is strengthened to add UC, CSU, and private institutions across California.

I would also urge that basic need services are more advertised to students. For example, students should be notified about basic need service hubs during orientation and over university

¹⁴ Cruz, Melaina Cecilia, “Affordable, Sustainable Solutions for Los Angeles’ Housing Crisis”. *American Builders Quarterly*. 3, June 2024.
<https://americanbuildersquarterly.com/2024/affordable-sustainable-solutions-for-los-angeles-housing-crisis/>.

breaks and holidays. As exemplified in the previous research, students have trouble being able to identify themselves as food insecure and understanding what their next steps are. Having a point of contact like outlined in EDC § 66023.5 would make the success of these programs much stronger.

Research Limitations & Research Extensions

For this research I did come across a couple limitations that ultimately would have made the outcomes much stronger. The first being as I mentioned, using a data source that was voluntary. I mentioned previously the biggest issue with that is because it is not mandatory for all students, the insecurity rates may not accurately reflect the true number of students who suffer from food insecurity. If possible the research could have been run using a specific sample size from each school or if the survey had been mandatory, I could have seen a more significant outcome. Another limitation as previously mentioned is not having information on when certain basic need services were implemented at each of the campuses. If it were possible the test could have been run based on when each food service had been implemented and if, since that year, the rates of insecurity had decreased. Other limitations included the privacy of students taking the survey, it could have been beneficial for the research to understand the background (i.e. financial, living situation) of each student answering questions about their food insecurity status.

To extend the scope of this research, researching each campuses finances toward basic needs, and if based on the amount of money the campus has, will it affect the student resources available. I would also recommend researching and comparing the differences and effectiveness of basic needs services at California institutions like the CSU, CCC, and private universities. I also suggest that the UCUES could produce stronger findings by asking students to provide

background information on for example, living situation, employment, and financial aid, in order to understand potential multifaceted problems students face that contribute to food insecurity.

Lastly, the research could become stronger by comparing geography and location of the campuses in comparison to food accessibility for students, drawing on the USDA's definition of food insecurity, in order to understand the relationship between location and nutritious-affordable-food scarcity. Which is what I would've liked to control for, the urbanity and rurality in addition to the transportation and access to nutritious foods (i.e. grocery stores) can affect the food insecurity rate at differing campuses.

Conclusion

Research on basic need services aids in the fight to acknowledge the impact rising tuition and smaller financial aid packets have on the success of university students. My research conducted on the UC system was to show the progress of what the university is actively doing to ensure that all students are well equipped outside of their lives as students. Though my findings were not positive, the research suggests other improvements the university can implement in order to support students' ability to obtain basic necessities. The research finds that food insecurity and basic need services hinge on the undergraduate experience survey being accessible every year and to all students at each of the nine UC campuses. I stress that without more accurate numbers representing food insecure students, the services provided now are not as strong in support as they could be. My research also finds that state and federal funding alongside university tuition keeps climbing and makes university less affordable for the students the university wishes to uplift; low-income, marginalized, first-gen, and immigrant students. My research also echoes the problems California faces as a state, that is food insecurity and lack of

access to nutritious food, housing and food affordability, less access to social safety nets for California’s students and future residents. I hope that this research drives more research to be done in the direction of serving all students in California and across the nation to make university more accessible and to ensure that basic necessities like food, transportation, housing, and technology become free to all those attending college.

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