

Innovations in Holistic Student Support ***Education Speakers Series Summary Report***

Food and housing insecurity affect many students across Tennessee and the nation. Students facing food and/or housing insecurity encounter extreme challenges in pursuing and completing postsecondary credentials. Such credentials present the most promising pathway to break cycles of poverty, given the workforce demands that now require some education or training beyond high school. Comprehensively addressing food and housing insecurity can increase students' likelihood of successfully completing a program of study and securing living-wage work.

On March 7, 2019, Complete Tennessee convened leaders from universities, community colleges, higher education systems, state agencies, and community-based organizations to consider comprehensive strategies to address Tennessee students' basic needs.

To learn how the nation's largest higher education systems (by enrollment) address these challenges, Complete Tennessee invited **Ruben Canedo** to present on the basic needs initiatives underway at the University of California, Berkeley. As Director of Strategic Equity Initiatives, Canedo chairs UC Berkeley's Basic Needs Committee and co-chairs the university system's Basic Needs Committee, an effort across all ten UC campuses that includes coordinated activity with the California State University and California Community Colleges systems. His work focuses on access, education, outreach, programs, and policies that go beyond providing an emergency food pantry on every campus.

The Challenge in Tennessee

Data from Tennessee show demand for a comprehensive basic needs agenda:

- **Tennessee has the 12th highest state ranking for household poverty** in America; more than one in four children age 18 or younger live in poverty.¹
- More than **13 percent of Tennessee households are classified as "food insecure"**, which the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines as "a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life."²
- Hunger affects both rural and urban communities, but rural communities make up nearly 90 percent of counties with the highest rates of child hunger across the country.³
- **More than 8,000 Tennesseans are experiencing homelessness**, and thousands more live in cars, motels, and temporary facilities.⁴
- Nashville has seen the second-highest spike in the U.S. since 2009 in the rate of unsheltered homelessness (69.1 percent) and the third-highest from 2015 to 2016 (43.3 percent).⁵



Learning from Another State: California’s Basic Needs Initiative

In California, 14 percent of all households and 19 percent of households with children report experiencing food insecurity. To assess the prevalence of food insecurity across the University of California system, in 2015 the system’s president allocated \$75,000 to each of the ten member campuses to support food access and security initiatives. Also, that year a systemwide survey on food insecurity collected data from nearly 9,000 undergraduate and graduate students.

California’s Challenges

Survey questions asked students how often over the prior 12 months they had to skip or reduce the size of meals or lacked money to purchase food. Findings from the survey included:

- 19 percent of student respondents indicated they had “very low” food security;
- an additional 23 percent of survey respondents were characterized as having “low” food security;
- food insecure students were more likely than food secure students to receive federal nutrition assistance and need-based financial assistance such as Pell grants and to have experienced food insecurity as a child; and
- 57 percent of food insecure students were new to food insecurity, suggesting that students who are on their own for the first time may require financial literacy training and additional information about economic and food access resources.

California’s Solutions

Based on results from the survey, the UC system’s Food Access and Security Subcommittee developed an action plan designed to address food security across the university system. The resulting UC Food Access and Security Plan included five components:

- On-campus student services and programming
- Off-campus partnerships and engagement
- Campus coordination
- Systemwide coordination
- Research and data collection

This Food Access and Security Plan recognizes that institutional leaders, working in collaboration with students, can often identify ways to strengthen relationships and smooth processes to address students’ basic needs more systematically. Where on-campus resources may not be available to meet students’ needs, community-based organizations and faith-based groups can serve as partners. Efforts

Basic Needs: Defining Terms*

FOOD INSECURITY refers to the limited or uncertain availability of safe and nutritionally adequate foods; or limited or uncertain ability to obtain such food in a socially acceptable manner. In its most extreme form, known as hunger, individuals can experience physiological conditions such as uneasiness and pain.

HOMELESSNESS means that an individual does not have a stable, reliable, or permanent place to live, often residing in a shelter, automobile, motel, a public facility, or an abandoned building or outside.

HOUSING INSECURITY refers to a broader set of challenges that could include the inability to pay rent or utilities, need to move frequently, or residing in a place where personal safety or health is compromised.

FINANCIAL INSECURITY refers to students’ lack of 1) preparation to navigate on- and off-campus finances, 2) funds for their on- and off-campus needs, and/or 3) support during crisis/emergency situations.

*Definitions from M.F. Balcazar Tellez, R. Kim, & R. Canedo (2019). *Serving Students, Transforming Systems*. <http://basicneeds.berkeley.edu/>.

spanning on- and off-campus partners should remain under regular evaluation, as student experience data should inform continuous improvement in practices and policies.

As presenter Ruben Canedo noted during the event, UC Berkeley has implemented a comprehensive approach to students' basic needs.

Pre-college **College Access Symposia** engage district and school leaders, counselors, teachers, and college access advisors to broaden awareness and deepen understanding of challenges faced by many basic needs-insecure students. A **basic needs screening tool** for students assesses areas of greatest need and connects newly-enrolled students to the best resources for their needs.

Emergency housing grants are available to students facing loss of housing because of unforeseen circumstances—including changes of financial situations or the safety of a home environment. These grants can support students for up to four weeks. **Winter Break housing** is also available for students who may not have housing when their residence halls close between semesters.

Because some students may not qualify for CalFresh (the state's food stamp program) but still struggle with the high cost of living in California, a food assistance program equips students with **debit cards**—after screening by the Financial Aid and Scholarships Office—that are accepted by dining halls, on-campus restaurants, and local food merchants as a form of payment.

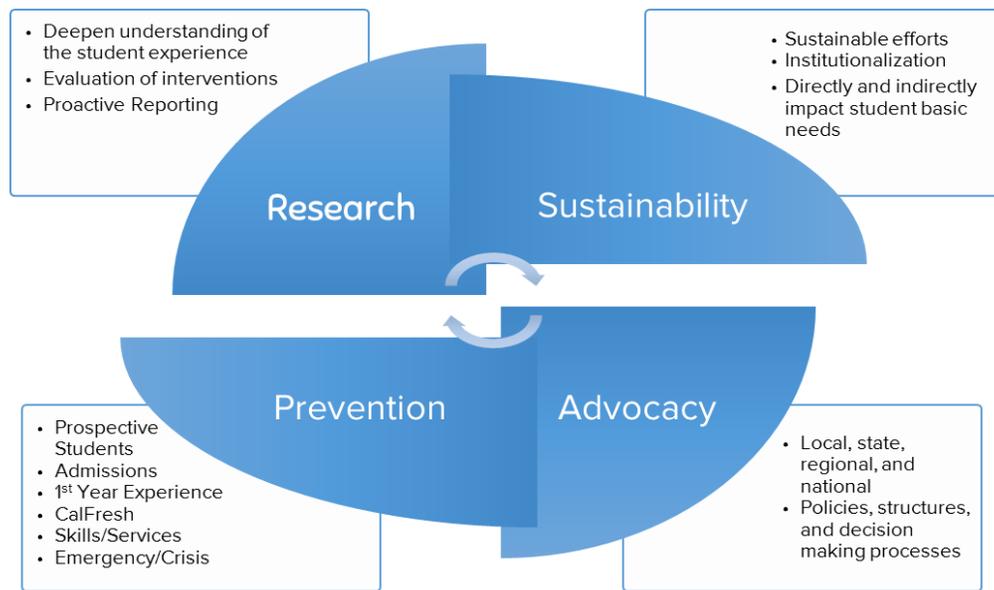
Basic Needs Security at UC Berkeley addresses food insecurity through a set of programs, including those below.

- **Food Pantry:** Meets immediate needs of students and staff struggling with reliable access to food on campus.
- **Food Collection:** Three initiatives go beyond and support the food pantry's efforts.
 1. Farms & Gardens – Urban gardens initiative providing food to support campus food security.
 2. Student Kitchen Coalition – Student-run, volunteer-operated food recovery kitchen and retail café. A portion of meals produced are made available for free through the campus Food Pantry.
 3. Food Recovery Coalition – Gathers leftover food or food that would otherwise go to waste through partnerships with campus dining, local farmers market, and campus event services.
- **Meal Point Food Donation:** Option for students to donate unused campus meal plan points to purchase items at the end of a semester to help stock on-campus food pantry.
- **Food Security and Wellness Course:** Course that provides students with instruction on nutrition and nutritional meal preparation. The course also includes instruction on basic cooking skills.
- **University Health Services Nutritional Services:** Provides essential resources to increase students' knowledge of food and nutrition. Services include cooking demonstrations, body image workshops, and drop-in nutritional education sessions.

These programs maximize both on- and off-campus partnerships, empowers students with knowledge and entrepreneurship opportunities, and de-stigmatizes food and housing insecurity as potential barriers to educational success.

Canedo shared the University of California system’s Basic Needs Model, which incorporates four domains of activity: Research, Sustainability, Advocacy, and Prevention. Data from student surveys and use of campus services serve as the foundation for all efforts.

University of California System Basic Needs Model



Confronting Student Basic Needs Challenges in Tennessee

In response to Canedo’s presentation, participants heard perspectives from two regional leaders in addressing the basic needs of students—one from a community-based nonprofit organization and another from an area community college.

Kent Miller, chief program officer for the Nashville-based **Martha O’Bryan Center**, discussed how the faith-based organization collaborates with more than two dozen nonprofit, government agency, and higher education institution partners. These partnerships enable Martha O’Bryan Center to facilitate access to a range of support programs for young people through the K-12 system, into postsecondary, and toward early career opportunities. Martha O’Bryan’s Postsecondary Success Initiative provides a network of support for first-generation and low-income college students from several of Nashville’s most economically-disadvantaged areas. **Residents of the center’s surrounding neighborhood earn an average household income of less than \$8,000 a year.**

Tiffany Zwart, coordinator of student support in **Volunteer State Community College’s** Office of Student Engagement and Support, discussed a student-led initiative to address food insecurity across Vol State’s four campuses. The Feed is a volunteer-staffed food pantry that provides canned food items, ready to

heat/eat meals, ingredients to make snacks, and personal hygiene items. This program provides a foundation for further work to address students' basic needs. Zwart shared that **many students confronting food and housing insecurity also face deeper issues such as addiction and domestic violence** that can lead to unstable home environments. Addressing students' needs in holistic ways requires taking these scenarios into account as well.

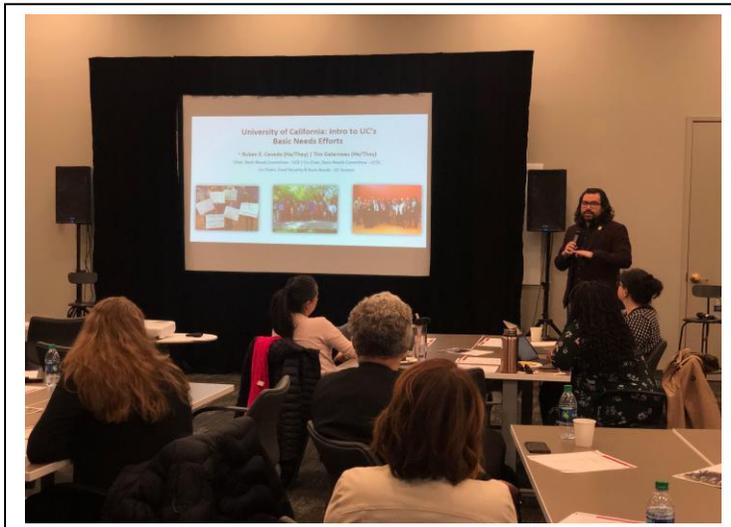
Developing More Comprehensive Student Support Systems

In breakout group discussions following Canedo's presentation, participants identified actions they could take—whether on campuses, in state agencies, or through work in nonprofit and community-based organizations—to improve supports for student basic needs.

Participants agreed on the need for **better data** on students' challenges with housing, food security, and other basic needs. Those data, in turn, can inform better campus practices. For example, rather than ask, "Are you homeless," survey instruments can ask students more precise questions such as, "Do you have a consistent place to stay?" or "Do you have your own home, or frequently stay with friends (such as on a couch) or family?"

In addition, campus personnel expressed the need for **shared definitions** of housing and food insecurity that would serve as the basis for on-campus programs and other resources.

Staff and faculty professional development should also raise awareness and broaden understanding of students' basic needs challenges. That increased knowledge can help people on campus better identify signs of students who may be affected by housing or food insecurity. **Reconnect Navigators** and **Academic Counselors** should also receive professional development to recognize students who may have unmet basic needs and direct students to available support services.



Participants recognized **student involvement and leadership** are key to any basic needs effort. Therefore, students must have influence to inform how institutions approach basic needs initiatives. Student involvement can also diminish stigma that may discourage some students from using available resources.

Institutional leaders recognized the opportunity to **map both on-campus and community-based resources**, and to build relationships oriented around addressing student basic needs.

Finally, participants recognized the need for financial sustainability of programs intended to support student success. Grant funding from **philanthropic partners** can help launch programs, but **advocacy partners** should take on basic needs in a more comprehensive way to help ensure **adequate budget line items** are dedicated for the long-term.

According to program participants, **policy leaders** have an opportunity to consider ways to direct funding through the state's outcomes-based funding formula to advance equity for low-income students confronting basic needs challenges in their academic careers.

Continuing the Conversation

Higher education professionals help students struggling with food and housing insecurity and other personal challenges every day. As the discussion during *Innovations in Holistic Student Support* made clear, however, more can be done to elevate awareness of students' basic needs and the gaps in practices, policies, and support systems that can make it especially difficult for students to realize their educational goals. This event sparked important conversations that should continue on campuses, within state agencies, and among community-based organization leaders.

Complete Tennessee will continue to provide resources and spaces to empower higher education professionals, students, and other key partners to improve systems of support. As Tennessee continues to strive toward an ambitious postsecondary completion goal, increasing equity requires focused attention on needs that may go unsaid but should not go unmet.

Additional Resources

- California State University. (2018). *Study of Student Basic Needs*. Basic Needs Initiative. Online at <https://www2.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/basic-needs-initiative/Documents/phasell-report-with-Appendix.pdf>.
- Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., Schneider, J., Hernandez, A., & Cady, C. (2018). *Still Hungry and Homeless in College*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab. Online at <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Wisconsin-HOPE-Lab-Still-Hungry-and-Homeless.pdf>.
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- Martinez, S. A., Maynard, K., & Ritchie, L. D. (2016). *Student Food Access and Security Study*. University of California, Global Food Initiative. Online at <https://www.ucop.edu/global-food-initiative/best-practices/food-access-security/student-food-access-and-security-study.pdf>.
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Complete Tennessee is a nonprofit 501(c)3 education advocacy organization focused on increasing postsecondary access and completion in Tennessee.

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.frac.org/wp-content/uploads/sos-tn.pdf>.

² <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>.

³ <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/rural-hunger-facts>.

⁴ https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-report/?gclid=CjwKCAiAgrfhBRA3EiwAnfF4tsA2tpC_Xbf2nurBjIWwojpl13iGafJZblaYLcUmGXcqtbdRP7xe1BoCV9gQAvD_BwE.

⁵ <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2016/12/14/homelessness-nashville-spikes-10-percent/95419066/>.