Office of the President

TO MEMBERS OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON BASIC NEEDS:

<u>**DISCUSSION ITEM**</u>

For Meeting of January 21, 2020

UPDATE ON EXPLORING HOUSING INSECURITY AMONG UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA STUDENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This item presents the second phase of findings from UCSF Professor Suzanna Martinez's study, *Defining Student Basic Needs in Higher Education: An Explanatory Study on Housing and Food Insecurity among University of California Students*. This qualitative study, of which the first phase of findings was presented at the July 16, 2019 Special Committee on Basic Needs meeting, aimed to document the experience of housing insecurity among UC students and to pilot a housing insecurity survey instrument (resulting in four topical modules) with students.

The results of Phase 1 of the study are under review by Institutional Research and Academic Planning (IRAP) to explore how the items from the four modules can be used to strengthen future UC surveys. The results of Phase 2—including the eight identified themes, definitions of basic needs and housing insecurity, and student recommendations—will be shared and discussed with campus basic needs staff to inform their work moving forward.

BACKGROUND

While some researchers have begun quantifying the extent of the problem, survey tools for assessing student housing insecurity and homelessness have not been validated. Validated and standardized survey instruments are necessary to provide governments and universities with reliable and accurate data on student housing insecurity. Unlike the assessment of food insecurity, for which there are standardized sets of questions used in the U.S., there is not a standardized way to assess housing insecurity in the general population, let alone in student populations. To tackle this issue, the President's Global Food Initiative (GFI) funded research with two objectives:

1. To explore the issue of housing insecurity and homelessness among UC students; and
2. To develop validated survey questions for future use by using cognitive interviews to identify and analyze sources of response error in existing housing insecurity survey items among UC students.

METHODOLOGY

Trained facilitators led 90-minute focus groups at each campus. A total of 58 undergraduate and graduate students were recruited from basic needs resource centers from five UC campuses (UC Irvine, UC Santa Cruz, UC San Francisco, UC Berkeley, and UC Merced).

In Phase 1, students completed a housing insecurity survey adapted from existing tools, and cognitive interviews were conducted to assess their comprehension of the survey questions. The survey tool was then updated based on student feedback and recommendations. In Phase 2, in-depth qualitative focus groups were conducted with the students to understand the impact of housing insecurity on their health, social life, and academic performance. Students were asked what programs they would like to see in the future to help students meet their basic needs.

RESULTS

Phase 1

Cognitive interviews revealed discrepancies in existing questions that have been previously used to assess housing insecurity, as well as a lack of clarity in the wording and time frames used in the questions. Students provided feedback on the questionnaire to make it clearer, more comprehensive and better reflective of student experiences. They recommended including more categories within living situations (e.g., graduate residential/family housing and housing cooperatives were added), particularly for graduate students and those who were married or had a family. Students suggested adding an additional time frame, "any time while attending a UC school," to the question on locations where students had slept in the last six and 12 months. Students brought attention to the stigma regarding the term *homeless* or *homelessness* and recommended that questions on homelessness status and timing be reworded. The questionnaire was adapted to ask instead about "lacking a safe, regular, and adequate nighttime place to stay and sleep" and to ask about "risk of losing a safe, regular, and adequate place to stay and sleep while waiting on a UC housing waitlist." Lastly, students recommended including questions on trade-offs and consequences of not being able to afford the full cost of rent. Examples from their experiences include: foregoing transportation, avoiding medical expenses or services, or encountering late fees.

The final Housing Insecurity Questionnaire, informed by the Phase 1 results, includes four modules (Attachment 1).

1. Students' current and past living situations (17 items)
2. Housing insecurity and challenges students encountered around housing (21 items)
3. Overcrowding issues (six items)
4. Food insecurity timing and issues regarding basic needs security (21 items)

Phase 2

During focus group discussions, participants discussed their own definition of *student basic*

needs and their experiences related to housing and food insecurity as a University student. Eight themes emerged from the discussion.

Theme 1: Students' definition of basic needs is more than minimal food and shelter.

- Most students described basic needs as the resources sufficient to be the best version of themselves. They identified mental health as an important basic need, which students often referred to as having a sense of stability or peace of mind.
- Within the context of housing security, students also spoke about having a place that was "safe enough to sleep" and to sleep uninterrupted.
- While acknowledging that is it also the student's responsibility, most students were in agreement that the University is responsible for meeting their basic needs. However, some students felt shame or felt that they were to blame when they were unable to meet their own basic needs.

Theme 2: Students encounter multifaceted issues regarding housing insecurity.

- Students discussed housing insecurity as stressful and mentally exhausting due to constant worry about affording rent and cost increases, frequent searches and moves, or having to live long distances from campus in order to find more affordable housing.
- Some students discussed the consequences of living in small spaces or in crowded housing, which created challenges for both studying and sleeping. More severe consequences of overcrowded housing included living in common rooms (e.g., living room as a bedroom) and unsanitary conditions.
- Crowding was not limited to off-campus housing. Students discussed University housing shortages and over-enrollment. This led to overcrowded dorm rooms with 3–4 people living in a single room.
- Another issue related to on-campus housing included lack of kitchen access. Although residence halls were equipped with a small kitchen, students considered the kitchen inaccessible as it was shared with hundreds of other students and was poorly equipped for cooking.
- Many students coped with the lack of on-campus housing or lack of affordable housing near campus by moving further from campus to find more affordable housing. The trade-off included long commutes that cost time, money, exhaustion, and stress, limiting time to focus on studying and often leaving students too tired to complete assignments.

Theme 3: Housing is a priority over food, which leads to food insecurity.

- Students prioritized housing over food, and given expensive rent, students had little money left for food.
- Students affirmed that free food was another way of meeting their dietary needs, though they acknowledged that free food was not always the healthiest.
- Students have developed intricate strategies to save money on food, like splitting costs with friends, scheduling University food programs or events offering free food into their

calendars, and even skipping meals to make food last longer.

- Students also described coping with a constant tradeoff between eating and other priorities like seeking medical services and physical health.
- Loneliness and isolation were consequences of not having enough food to eat or having to make meals at home, and therefore students missed opportunities to socialize with friends and fully experience campus life.

Theme 4: Transportation barriers interfere with meeting students' basic needs.

- Students from each represented campus expressed the need for more affordable and more consistent transportation.
- Overcrowded or delayed public transit interfered with students' participation in academics.
- Limited transportation options thereby amplified food insecurity. For instance, students spoke of the need for affordable grocery stores close to campus instead of the more expensive food on campus.

Theme 5: Nontraditional students and graduate students face unique challenges.

- First-generation students: Some first-generation students discussed the obligation of financially supporting their family back home. They felt they have little guidance on how to budget their financial aid or navigate the University system.
- Student parents and older students: Student parents struggled to provide for their family while being a student. On some campuses, older students struggled to fit into a housing system that seemed designed for a younger population.
- International and out-of-state students: Owners of off-campus housing have required students to provide a social security number and/or a credit history to apply for housing, both of which international students do not have.
- Graduate students: Housing leases often do not align with graduate student stipend pay schedules. Graduate students fellowships and other forms of funding, such as a graduate student instructor or researcher jobs, did not cover their basic needs, and students explained that they did not receive funding in the summer.

Theme 6: Limited financial aid is a barrier to meeting students' basic needs.

- Many students, both undergraduate and graduate students, stated that their financial aid package did not cover their expenses.
- Some students described having several jobs to supplement financial aid or working extra hours, particularly when financial aid ran out toward the end of the term, which coincided with exams.
- Students expressed the need for additional funding to cover the true cost of attendance and for skills for living on a very tight budget.
- Some students felt that University staff were insensitive to their financial struggle and described the staff and faculty as being out of touch with the experience of low-income

students.
- One source of tension between students and financial aid administrators came from students being asked why they were not taking out loans or maximizing their loans. For some students, taking out loans was not something that they considered financially responsible.
- In general, students had limited education on and understanding of how to navigate and maximize campus financial resources, including but not limited to financial aid.

Theme 7: Fees further add to basic needs insecurity.

- Many students discussed an assortment of fees (i.e., credit card payments, off-campus housing waitlist fees, late rent fees, parking and shuttle fees, etc.) that challenged their financial security.
- Students who already have medical insurance explained that they struggled to find the information to waive their UC health insurance, a fee that is beyond the capacity of many students.
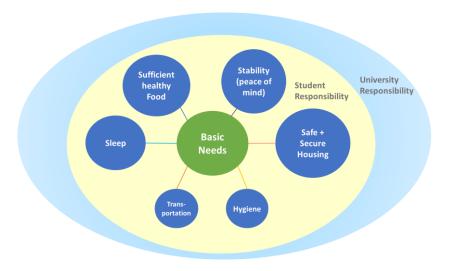
Theme 8: University basic needs services are essential, and there is a need to strengthen and expand the accessibility of existing ones.

- Many students agreed that campus basic needs programs were essential, specifically the campus food pantry and other free food programs.
- Students discussed the food pantry as being in high demand and that the location and hours were not always convenient. They suggested keeping the pantry open for longer hours or on a daily basis to increase accessibility and asked for improved dissemination of basic needs information.
- In general, students expressed the need for more preparation—even when in high school—for the true costs of attending college and how best to navigate those costs.

A new definition of basic needs in higher education

A more comprehensive definition of student basic needs was developed based on the research findings. While previous definitions focused only on housing and food security, the study found that students define basic needs in a more comprehensive and holistic manner. Figure 1 illustrates the concepts that emerged when students who struggled financially were asked to define student basic needs. The biggest change is the addition of stability, which students defined as having a peace of mind that comes with not having to worry about affording housing and getting enough food.

Figure 1: Definition of college students' basic needs based on student focus group discussions. (Note: the circle size corresponds to the density with which the concept was coded.)

Defining housing security in higher education

According to students, housing security means having safe and stable housing, with a place to shower and sleep, and personal space to study, all while free of housing-related stress (See Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Definition of post-secondary student housing security based on student focus group discussions

Student-informed recommendations for addressing basic needs in higher education

Additional University support is essential for students to be successful. Based on student discussions, the study identified the following recommendations on how the University can ameliorate students' basic needs:

- Reconsider wording in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) measure of homelessness, as students may not consider themselves to be "homeless." Using the McKinney Vento Act definition and wording may be more valid, reliable, and culturally sensitive.
- Provide more affordable campus housing.
- Set standards for the number of students in dorm rooms. Overcrowding is counterproductive to student success. Other researchers have shown that 50 square feet per person in the household is the minimum for healthy child growth and development, whereas others suggest at least 165 square feet per person for U.S. household.[1,2,3]
- Work with city transportation or campus transportation to get students subsidized transportation and to increase the number of buses/shuttles operating routes to/from campus.
- Offer training or workshops with financial aid administrators to better support students with financial planning to consider all costs—not just tuition, but housing, food, and transportation.
- For all researchers, administrators and staff, increase sensitivity training and awareness regarding the diversity of all students and their backgrounds, both traditional and nontraditional, as a means to increasing sensitivity and responsiveness to their needs.
- Conduct workshops with students to improve financial aid loan literacy so that students maximize loans and not credit cards.
- Develop basic needs strategies to educate and better prepare students with the skills to navigate the reality of college affordability.
- Improve accessibility of existing basic needs resources, strengthen them, and expand their capacity to serve more students in need. Simple efforts could include extending food pantry hours to reduce conflicts with student schedules so that more students are able to have access.
- **Future research should examine issues regarding student employment, such as how many hours students should work without jeopardizing academic performance.**

CONCLUSION

College students, undergraduate through doctoral, face intersecting economic (i.e., personal and family/guardian finances) and social barriers to completing their degree(s). These barriers include going without food or essential medical services, working in addition to being a full-time

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[1] Bradley and Caldwell, 1984; https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1984-14860-001
[2] U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development,
https://www.huduser.gov/publications/pdf/measuring_overcrowding_in_hsg.pdf
[3] American Housing Survey, 2005; https://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/h150-05.pdf

student, coping with long commutes to campus, and not participating in social or extracurricular activities.[4,5]All of these barriers vary according to the socioeconomic circumstances of the student and the resources available at their institution to support them.

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Key to Acronyms

IRAP	Institutional Research and Academic Planning
GFI	Global Food Initiative
HUD	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Attachment 1: Housing Insecurity Questionnaire

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[4] Broton, et al. 2016; https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00091383.2016.1121081
[5] Meza, et al. 2018; https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30553586