A Plate At The Table

Student Stories and Recommendations Regarding Hunger and Basic Needs Insecurity

The UC Student Association is the official voice of over 240,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students from all ten UC campuses. It is our mission to advocate on behalf of current and future students for the accessibility, affordability, and quality of the UC system. Learn more about our work at www.ucsa.org.
A Plate At The Table

The UC Student Association considers food security, affordable housing, and readily available, culturally competent mental health services all to be basic needs of students pursuing a degree at the University of California. By thinking intersectionally about these issues, students are bringing forward their stories, ideas, and solutions to improve their quality of life while also improving education outcomes for low income students and students of color.

At the University of California, just 45% of Black students are graduating in four years; that number rises to 73% in six years. For Latino students, 46% will graduate within four years, and 75% will complete after six years. From this data we can infer that 1 in 4 Black or Latino students is leaving the UC system without a degree.

A recent study by the University of California Global Food Initiative found that 19% of student respondents had very low food security, while another 23% were considered to have low food security, as defined by the USDA. Further, the study showed that the prevalence of undergraduate students systemwide who faced a reduced quality of diet or reduced food intake was 49%. The report concedes that food insecurity has the "potential to widen disparities in students academic achievement, overall health, and future success." The UC Global Food Initiative survey did not examine the relationship between student food insecurity and time to graduate or failure to graduate. It also fails to capture those students who have already left the UC system because of a lack of basic needs.

At UCSA, we know that improving student success across all identities is both a social and economic imperative. We are working to ensure that students are received into a system that respects their needs and allows them to progress with dignity and health. We understand that college completion is vital to upward mobility for students from low income backgrounds, and that our state will need more advanced degree holders to meet the workforce demands of the 21st century. Thus, we are calling on the UC to make significant investments to quickly improve basic needs provision for all students.

In this publication, A Place at the Table, you will find the stories of nine UC students who are facing basic needs insecurity everyday. Their stories speak to the intersectional nature of these issues and show that there is no silver bullet for the challenges we face. Issues of student poverty and hunger are not intractable, but they do require strategic solutions and real investment in student food, housing, and mental health programs.

The UC must continue to take responsibility for the assessment and provision of the basic needs of students.

Methodology

UCSA sent out a call for student participants in this project via email and social media in May 2016. The students who responded to this call happened to be female identified students, which may speak to higher levels of stigma and shame among male identified students experiencing hunger and homelessness. Volunteers were asked to participate in an interview conducted by a member of UCSA Staff. The majority of the interviews were conducted on the phone; some were conducted in person. Students were asked a series of questions about their background, and were asked to describe their experiences with hunger, homelessness, and mental health. Staff then transcribed the interviews and turned them into narratives, which were submitted to each student for their approval. Upon approval from each student, UCSA honored their time and participation with a $100 honorarium.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to our student participants for their time and honesty while sharing these brave stories. We hope that this publication shows each of you that you are not alone in your struggle. Special thanks to the student leaders who have been working diligently to improve basic needs provisions on their campus. This includes student members of the Global Food Initiative work group, former Student Regent Sadia Saifuddin, and every student engaged in these important conversations at the local level. We would also like to acknowledge the work of Ruben Canedo and Tim Galarneau of the Global Food Initiative, whose leadership and guidance is truly moving the basic needs conversation forward.

This report was prepared by UC Student Association staff member Toni Gomez, Director of Strategic Initiatives.

1 CCO Black Report
2 CCO Latino Report
3 Global Food Initiative Student Food Access and Security Study 2016
Alejandra, UC Santa Barbara

Alejandra is a first generation college student from a working class, low-income family. At her Hayward, CA high school, Alejandra benefited from the Puente program, which prepared and encouraged her to apply to college. “Most students at my high school didn’t apply to college, but the bridge program encouraged me to apply to a UC.”

Although they encouraged her to attend university, Alejandra’s parents were not equipped to help her with the bureaucratic hurdles ahead. “My parents didn’t help me at all with the application process. They didn’t know how. My dad speaks very limited English and my mom only speaks Spanish so I had to figure it all out on my own. No one in my family knew what to do, and applying for financial aid was especially hard. I tried to fill out the FAFSA on my own but I wasn’t sure if I was doing it right.” Despite these challenges, Alejandra was accepted to her dream campus, UC Santa Barbara.

In her first year at UCSB, Alejandra lived in student housing on campus. At the end of that year, she and three friends secured an apartment in Isla Vista for the school year ahead. Alejandra spent the summer working 40-50+ hours a week and saved up enough money to purchase a car. In early August, the terms of her apartment lease suddenly changed. The landlord was demanding a higher deposit and a co-signer, which she and her roommates agreed to provide. Three days later, the property owner gave away their housing to someone willing to pay an even higher deposit.

Alejandra diligently searched for rooms and apartments, spending hours on Craigslist trying to find something she could afford. Her search came up short. While there were a few rooms available, none of them were affordable. In her search process she made new friends; 4 girls that were also searching for housing on the night before classes started. She found a friend’s couch to sleep on in a one bedroom apartment that was already housing three people; far above the maximum occupants allowed on the lease. “My friends and I started asking the university questions; why is it that the night before school, I am packing up my belongings, not my backpack? Why is there no housing available for me as a student that I can afford? I moved three times in that Fall quarter.”

“It affected my grades and my mental health greatly. I was houseless, and it was difficult to hide this from my parents, but I would pretend to be fine with them. I was always scared that I was bothering someone or that I would get kicked out because the apartment was too full.”

“Students need better workshops and resources on how to sign a lease, how to make sure that you are protected as a tenant, and what bills to expect. I think it’s important for the university to address these needs because they are losing a lot of brilliant students who are facing these struggles and don’t know if they will be able to go home at the end of the day or have enough food to eat.

“I would buy the minimum amount of food, and I would use the food bank constantly. I would leave the house early, at 6 in the morning, and come back at midnight or 1 am so that I wouldn’t bother anyone. I just wanted to have somewhere to sleep.” Eventually she sought out mental health services through CAPS, but the wait time was very long. “It was hard to talk about this issue with anyone, particularly when administrators were telling me ‘there is no housing crisis’ but I knew there was serious housing scarcity.”

“My financial aid package is not enough for me as a student. I am working and helping my family with expenses back home, and I am also a student leader. This requires a lot of time, and often I don’t have time to cook, and I don’t have enough money to buy food. I have taken out a huge amount of student loans. When I was looking for housing I took out a large loan hoping to find something that I could place a large deposit on and get into, but I couldn’t find anything for less than $900 a month, and I couldn’t afford that in the long run.”

Despite all this, Alejandra does not consider food or housing her biggest struggles as a UC student. “While I am experiencing all of these struggles as a student, I am also a survivor of sexual assault. During the time I was houseless, I was also in the middle of an investigation to see if UC Santa Barbara would find my perpetrator responsible. I told administrators that I was houseless and in the middle of this investigation, but they just shrugged it off. The stress of this resulted in the lowest grades of my academic career.”

Alejandra tried to access resources for housing and legal services on her campus, but did not receive enough support. Instead, she got involved with the Isla Vista Tenants Union. “This is where she carries on her activism for better housing solutions for students. When asked if she has considered dropping out of the University, Alejandra said ‘Yes. Definitely yes. I thought about dropping out or transferring. I thought maybe this isn’t the place for me, maybe I am doing something wrong. Maybe I didn’t apply for that lease correctly or something. There were many times when I wanted to leave but I knew I couldn’t because there was nothing for me back to at home.’

“Students are in lecture halls worrying about their next meal instead of what is going to be on the test.”

Recommendations:

Alejandra needed better access to information that could help her understand her rights as a tenant. Students should be made aware of their tenant rights as part of UC orientation so that they can advocate effectively for themselves. UC should also place more pressure on landlords to treat student tenants fairly by warning students against housing which has proven problematic in the past.

Alejandra also needed access to secure housing that didn’t violate someone else’s lease. The UC should consider creative solutions for providing students with temporary on-campus housing.

“There were so many people staying in one place that their food wouldn’t fit in the fridge... but none of that food was for me.”
Amber, UC Berkeley

Amber is a senior and a student parent at UC Berkeley where she is studying Social Welfare. A first generation college student, Amber found the process of applying to the UC to be very difficult. While her family was supportive of her pursuit of higher education, they didn't have the experience to help her with her application. Her high school counselors didn't offer much in the way of support. In spite of all of this, Amber applied to UC Berkeley and was accepted. She immediately applied for family housing, but was placed on the waitlist. She sat in this limbo until a space opened up for her in July. Without having received her financial aid package, Amber struggled to come up with the money to secure family housing. She overcame this obstacle through hard work and perseverance, and she and her child moved into the Family Village off campus.

Under the impression that she was living in campus housing, Amber based her budget on her initial financial aid award offer. However, upon arriving in Berkeley she discovered that she would actually receive about $10,000 less because she was technically living off campus. "They provide $700 a month for rent, but these units are $1500-2200 a month. It became a struggle to pay rent each month. Due to the decrease of her financial aid, Amber was forced to work more, adding to her stress as a student parent.

While she describes the services available to student parents on campus as "ok," Amber hopes that the campus will pay more attention to this population and provide more staff support, specifically around housing and rental options.

"Students living in the dorms are having their needs met, while we have to figure it out on our own. We are not given the same access to resources that other students are."

Amber currently serves 10 hours a week at an internship at Cal's food donation program for student parents. She also works 20 hours a week, on top of being a parent and going to school full-time. These commitments have taken their toll on Amber's mental health. "I already am living with anxiety, I am constantly worried and nervous that I won’t be able to pay rent. It makes me sick."

Amber has come close to dropping out of school because of the cost of living and owing back rent. "At one point I had to come up with $2400 to pay my rent, and so I have considered moving back in with my parents, taking a semester off to make money, or both."

"Being a student, a parent, and an employee is incredibly hard. I hope that the university will consider better supporting students like me so that we can thrive at the UC."

Recommendations:

Amber needed better information about the conditions of her financial aid package and the options available to her as a student parent. UC campuses should provide clear information about the costs and consequences of different housing options.
Julia, UC Riverside

Julia is a Freshman Public Policy major at UC Riverside and a first generation university student from a low-income family. The second youngest of six kids, they do not have contact with all of her siblings. Julia didn't have much support while applying to college. Their parents didn't offer them much relevant guidance and they struggled to access their financial records in order to secure financial aid. When they came to UC Riverside, Julia decided to reside in the dorms. They has since had to take out student loans to afford their on-campus housing and food.

Throughout their time at UC, Julia has had many opportunities to grow and build her skills, but they still struggle with the basic needs of everyday life. Affording the UC has been incredibly difficult. "I am frustrated by how expensive the UC is and how hard it is to just keep working towards my degree". While they do not know how much aid they will be receiving in the next year, Julia is confident that they will have to take on more debt in the coming year, in order to afford their living expenses.

"The biggest struggle for me personally has been the lack of mental health services. My financial situation is extremely stressful. It takes about four weeks to get an appointment with a counselor; that can be more than half of a quarter term. It's stressful because you are trying to deal with all these big scary things, and my school can't even help with my mental state as I face all these issues."

"I have sat in class googling where I can find a homeless shelter."

This isn't how I should be spending my time as a student. Better mental health services would help decrease the level of stress and anxiety that I am feeling.

"We are making huge contributions to research and innovation. We are the economic drivers of tomorrow. But they (the UC Regents and Administration) don't see us as human; as people with basic needs that aren't being met.

If they want us to succeed, they have to start with addressing those basic things and ensure that our experience is a positive one."

Recommendations:

Julia's story tells us that having resources available on campus and students actually being able to access those resources are two different things. UC food pantries should consider if their hours best meet the needs of students within the confines of their limited resources.

Julia wants to access mental health resources so that she can cope with the stressors in her life. UC must invest in quality mental health services that can meet students needs in a timely manner.
Katelyn, UC Merced

Katelyn’s decision to come to the UC was a last minute one. With support from her high school AVID program, she applied to UC Merced. Now in her fourth year, she is studying Human Biology and has been elected as the next President of UC Merced’s Associated Students. Katelyn receives the CAL Vet Tuition waiver; she doesn’t receive need-based financial aid. Though she was offered loans as part of her financial aid package, Katelyn chose not to take them out. “I don’t want to take the loans because I don’t know very much about them, and you always hear horror stories about people with student loans who are in debt for years and years after they graduate.”

For her first year, Katelyn lived in the dorms on campus. She had a meal plan and enjoyed easy access to food in the dining hall. In her second year, she chose to move off campus, and meal planning has become more difficult. “I wish I could purchase a small meal plan so I could have access to food on campus during the day. Buying each meal is really expensive, but I don’t have a lot of time to cook and prepare food.”

Although Merced has very affordable housing, the support that Katelyn receives from her family can vary from month to month.

“At one point at the beginning of the summer, I had $10 in my bank account and no food in my house. For a week I survived on noodles with butter.”

It’s hard to budget when my family is going through unpredictable times, and I don’t know how much they will be able to send me each month. It can be embarrassing to ask my friends to use their meal plan for me at the dining hall.”

Katelyn highlighted that enrollment growth is compounding basic needs issues on her campus. Since 2014, administrators have offered housing to more students than they can provide beds for. Double occupancy rooms are being converted to triples, and there is a limited supply of off campus housing available to students when they arrive in the fall. “Last year we had at least one student who was living in storage units at the beginning of the semester because they couldn’t secure housing. With all the new students coming to campus this problem will only get worse.”

Katelyn admits she isn’t totally aware of all the services students can access, but the services she knows about are limited to serve on campus students or graduate students. UC Merced doesn’t provide information or resources for renting or accessing food in the Merced community. “We have a food pantry on campus where you can get two weeks worth of food once a month. But it’s hard to know if I will really need that food, or if I should leave it for someone else.”

Even as a high achieving student leader, Katelyn has considered leaving UC Merced. “My biggest struggle has been making it so far away from my family ... I have thought about dropping out, and moving back home to be close to my family again. That would take some of the pressure off of me, and the financial burden would be less for my family. It would be so nice to not have to worry about so many expenses while also going to school.”

Recommendations:

Katelyn needed help to better understand her financial aid package and the long term consequences of taking out student loans. While loans are by no means a solution to the basic needs crisis, a small summer loan could have helped her forgo the experience of hunger.

Each UC campus should explore alternative meal plans for off-campus students in order to maximise access to readily available foods on campus.
Lara, UC Berkeley

Lara is a 3rd year student at UC Berkeley, where she is studying American Studies with an emphasis on integrative medicine and mental health. Lara came to the UC from San Diego, where she attended High Tech High, and was able to access resources that encouraged her to apply to great universities. While her family didn’t have the capacity to support her college search, she received the push she needed from her counselor at HTH. Lara is a second-generation immigrant from an Iranian family. She describes her family dynamic as “broken… we come from different worlds.” In her first year at Cal, Lara knew that she would be living in the dorms. After that, things got more difficult. She tried to find an off campus apartment, and quickly realized how expensive Berkeley is to live in. She couldn’t find anything in her price range. “Not all students can live in student housing, but there isn’t enough housing out there for all of us who don’t fit into those spaces. Students are cramming 10 students into one space in order to afford rent. That’s not quality housing, that’s not a living situation that I want.”

From May to August 2014 Lara was homeless. She stayed with friends and slept in her car at that time. “It really stressed me out, and I had a panic attack at one point, the ambulance had to come pick me up.” Once she found an apartment, she ended up in a difficult situation, eventually paying $1300 a month to retain her housing. After a few months, Lara could no longer afford to pay her rent. When she went looking for help on campus, she found that no one was equipped to offer her the help she needed financially and emotionally.

“This lady was telling me to take a math class. I told her I was on the verge of homelessness and she told me to take a math class.”

The intense stress of her situation eventually send Lara to the hospital - she was there for three days. “I feel like people live in this bubble, they couldn’t understand my struggle both mentally and financially.” Lara eventually took a year off in order to gain balance in her life. She moved home to La Jolla, and has since come back to Cal. She still faces housing struggles, facing a tight rental market that doesn’t offer much that is within her reach.

Lara faces food insecurity every day. “It’s hard to walk around campus and see all these people with all this food, and I can’t afford it. It hurts.” She wants to eat healthier, and knows that healthy food can make a huge difference on her mental health, but it is very expensive. Her financial aid package barely covers her tuition and books, and finding extra funds for healthy foods is difficult. “To not be able to sustain myself, and provide myself with food, it gives me a lot of anxiety. It makes it hard to get up and face the day.”

Lara is currently working two jobs and going to school full time. She hopes that UC Berkeley will do something significant for students facing food insecurity.

“So far, it’s the students that are helping each other out and holding each other up. The university needs to do more.”

“I wish there were a space where students could come together and prepare meals and share resources. I want to be mentored and guided to resources and have a place I can go where I feel like someone cares about me, that I am not alone.”

Recommendations:

Lara needed crisis intervention services, but was not able to find them on her own. The UC must develop “no wrong door” procedures to refer students in crisis to the basic needs resources they require. All staff, faculty, and administrators should be equipped to refer students to the most appropriate resources for their needs.
Lenka, UC Riverside

Lenka is an international student from the Czech Republic, studying Digital Composition and Ethnomusicology at UC Riverside. Lenka applied to UCLA and UC Riverside and was accepted to a PhD program at UCR. At age 34, she is financially independent from her parents. If she were back in the Czech Republic, she would have a very stable life. Lenka feels frustrated by her experience and quality of life at UCR, "If I were ten years younger, this would be ok, but at this point in my life it is not".

When she first came to UCR, Lenka didn’t know where she would live. She stayed in a room she found on AirBNB for two weeks while searching for housing and attending classes. UCR offered her university housing, but she found that it was overpriced for the area and seemed better suited for younger students. She found housing with an abusive landlord who dictated many aspects of her life, to the point that her landlord demanded that she move out in the week before her finals. The landlord refused mediation, and so she was forced to search for new housing. Lenka would move two more times before finding a safe, affordable, and stable housing situation in Riverside.

Lenka was surprised by the heavy load of work that PhD students are expected to take on as a first year student. "I had 400 pages of reading in the first week. I tried to double major, so I had a lot of units to take care of and study for. I had no free time at all, no weekends, not even one day for a very long period of time. There was no time to go buy food, bring it home, cook, and eat. There was no time to take care of this. There is no place around to buy affordable food, so I have to drive to get groceries, drive back, cook, and eat. This would take 3 hours. That is 70 pages of reading that I could have done in that same time. If I had 15 minutes to eat between classes I felt lucky, but even then I didn’t have enough time to prepare food. If I was in classes all day, I would have to prepare all three meals for the day.

*If I didn’t have time to prepare, I would starve. I would get headaches, and have nausea, and I would even vomit from hunger a few times.*

So I wouldn’t eat, I would starve. During the year, I was buying all my groceries at the 99 cent store and being laughed by other people because of the poor quality of food I was eating. I did not feel comfortable with it either, but I had no other choice with my budget."

Lenka doesn’t receive a stipend as an international graduate student. She has heard about the food pantry on her campus, but is not interested in canned or instant foods that are distributed there. This struggle with food security has been a huge source of stress for Lenka. Recently, she has been considering if staying at UCR is worth it to her.

She knows that it is a good decision for her career, but is not sure if she can withstand the conditions under which she is living. "I wish that I could only concentrate on my studies and my projects. But the food insecurity and housing problems are pushing me back from the university and my studies."

When asked how she would address these problems and what resources should be available, Lenka explained, "We need better options for prepared food on our campus. There are so few options, they are not healthy, and they are also costly. This is so hard to explain to my family. They tell me ‘Just go buy some food!’ but it is not that simple. They cannot imagine how these things work here."

This struggle with food security has left Lenka isolated from her peers. "It feels to me that this is my problem, and I should be able to deal with it. But on the other hand, I have never experienced such a problem earlier in my studies, and I have been at university since I was 18. Basically, I have never had such a struggle until this year at UCR. Coming from Europe, it feels to me that these issues are not public issues that I should be sharing with my classmates in the States. They give me the impression that everyone is living in their own personal bubble and everything that is happening in your life, that is your problem and you need to deal with it. Back in Europe, we were more like a community in our classes. We would share the best things and the worst things in our lives, and try to help each other and share information. That makes you feel like others are in the same situation together. But here, I feel very lonesome. This is my first time telling anyone about the full picture of my struggles these things. I feel that I am not supposed to bring these dark sides of my life to class. Maybe other people are experiencing these things, but they feel they are not supposed to talk about it. We are all hiding our troubles. That makes me feel very lonesome, with all these issues and no one to talk to."

“It is important to address this so that we can all focus on our studies. To do that, I need to feel safe about the place I live in and that I will have enough food to keep working and not be hungry.”

"I want to focus on my goal and finish my education.”

Recommendations:

Lenka faced many struggles because of the lack of affordable graduate student housing. UC campuses should lower rents to create more affordable graduate housing options or work directly with local apartment complexes to place graduate students in safe and dignified housing.

Lenka also struggled to find healthy, affordable food on campus. UC campuses should require that all on-campus vendors offer a healthy and affordable meal option as part of their menu. UC Riverside specifically should consider partnering with local vendors to bring healthy
In her second year, while living in Isla Vista, Natalie was evicted from her housing because she could not afford to pay her rent. “I got a lot of support from the legal assistance office. They helped me understand my rights as a tenant. Without their help I would have faced homelessness sooner.”

Without any affordable housing options, Natalie was forced to drop out of UCSB before the start of Winter quarter of her second year. She took several jobs working more than 45+ hours a week to save up and re-enter housing. During this time, friends provided her as much as they could, but Natalie still felt like a burden. “I was sleeping on a couch at one friend’s house, showering at another place, and cooking at another place. It was really draining. Without a place to store food, I began to rely on non-perishable foods like popcorn and power bars.”

At the end of her second year of school, Natalie now carries $19,651 in student loan debt. Increased nonresident tuition continues to grow her loan burden. She expects to have at least $40,000 in debt by the time she completes her education at UC Santa Barbara.

Natalie needed honest information about the cost of living in the area around her campus. Cost of living guides for each campus should be developed and include the real cost of rent, food, and other necessities. Students should have clear communication from campuses about the standard of living that they will be expected to adopt, such as sharing a room with up to four people in order to live off-campus.

Natalie’s story also demonstrates the negative impact of the UC’s reliance on out-of-state students and the higher tuition they pay. This exploitive practice is tarnishing Natalie’s dream of a UC education.
Saoirse, UC Berkeley

Saoirse came to Cal with a 12 piece cookware set. Growing up with a permanently disabled mother gave her the motivation to learn to cook at an early age. Eventually she would like to be a chef. Even equipped with these vital skills and tools, she has struggled with hunger and homelessness throughout her time at UC Berkeley.

Although she had a meal plan with points as a Freshman, this was insufficient to meet her nutritional needs, “I did the math and the points would only cover about 50% of my meals. The only kitchen available to me was on the other side of the Clark Kerr campus; I was in building 3 and the kitchen is in building 12. So I would pack up my cooking stuff and go over there to prepare a meal or two. Even if I could prepare a good amount of food, there was nowhere to store it in my dorm.”

In her first year, Saoirse moved 15 times in 15 months. When the dorms closed for Winter break in her first year, she didn’t have a place to go. She slept outside in her sleeping bag for a few nights, until the rain made it impossible to stay outdoors. During breaks, she has stayed with family members, friends, in AirBNBs, and in motels to meet her housing needs because the dorms are not open to her. Her housing instability led to poor grades, which affected her financial aid package, which in turn caused more stress and greater difficulties with food and housing.

This year, Saoirse lives with three of her friends in a 1 bedroom apartment for a total cost of $2200 plus utilities. Two students sleep in the bedroom and two in the livingroom. The cramped quarters have made studying and sleep difficult for Saoirse. “When we talk about student housing, we should really consider the quality of housing.

“Sure, I can afford my rent right now, but it comes at a cost because I am sharing space with so many people and that affects my grades and my health in many ways.”

When asked what one resource should be available for hungry and homeless students, Saoirse names Winter break housing as a critical intervention that many students need. “I started looking into where I could stay over winter break, and the university eventually provided me with a list of rental agencies. That is also how I learned about AirBNB. But I can’t imagine what it is like for international students, who can’t afford a ticket home and have no place to stay here.”

“It is important to address issues of hunger and homelessness.”

“Safe and dignified food and housing is a human right.”

“But it is also in the best interest of the University to ensure that its students are safe and successful.”

Recommendations:

In order to make her financial aid package stretch far enough to meet her basic needs, Saoirse needed a place to prepare food. UC campuses should improve student access to shared communal kitchen spaces and food storage outside of traditional dorm structures.

Saoirse experienced homelessness because the dorms on her campus closed between semesters. Many students do not have a house to go home to during these extended closures. UC campuses should consider providing safe on-campus housing to students during breaks as needed.
“Often by the end of the month, we have used up all of the EBT funds, so we eat whatever leftovers we have, what’s in the freezer, or ramen, which my son loves, but it isn’t healthy.”

All of the pressures brought on by school, work, and motherhood had a negative impact on Zhane’s health. Last spring she had to take a medical withdrawal in order to bring balance. She has returned to campus with help from her family, her friends, and her partner. Zhane doesn’t feel that her struggles as a parent are seen in the broader picture of UC Berkeley. “I feel that because student parents make up a small percentage, administrators don’t see our experience as legitimate. There may only be 90 families at UC Berkeley, but that means there are 90 students who are working extremely hard to do right by their kids and are facing hunger.”

“The UC just doesn’t see non-traditional students, student parents, those with disabilities, previously incarcerated students. These are students who honestly don’t have the time to advocate for themselves. I wish more people knew about what we are going through so that someone would have our back.”

“I am trying to buy healthy foods for me and my son to eat, and that is expensive, especially in the Bay Area.”

Recommendations:

Zhane’ needed better administrative advocates. Student parents and other non-traditional students need more support than traditional students to ensure that they persist through their college career and complete a degree. UC campuses should coordinate wrap-around services for this vulnerable group of students, including help applying for CalFresh, MediCal, and other public benefits.
Summary of Recommendations

Affordable Housing + Tenants Rights

- UC students need better access to information that helps them understand their state and local rights as a tenant. Students should be made aware of their tenant rights as part of UC orientation so that they can advocate effectively for themselves. UC should also place more pressure on landlords to treat student tenants fairly by warning students against housing which has proven problematic in the past.
- There is a severe lack of systemwide affordable student housing. At UC San Diego, the monthly rental rate for a two-bedroom on-campus apartment averages $1,780 per month ($890 per student) for undergraduates. At UC Santa Cruz, the average on-campus double-occupancy rate is $985 per month. UC campuses should lower rents to create more affordable housing options or work directly with local apartment complexes to place students in safe and dignified housing.
- Students deserve honest information upon acceptance about the cost of living in the area around their chosen campus. Cost of living guides for each campus should be developed and include the real cost of rent, food, and other necessities. Students should have clear communication from campuses about the standard of living that they will be expected to adopt, such as sharing a room with up to four people, in order to live off-campus.

Financial Aid Clarity + Counseling

- UC students require better information about the conditions of their financial aid packages and the options available to them to maximize their aid. UC campuses should provide clear information about the costs and consequences of different housing options.
- UC students also need better information about the costs, benefits, and consequences of taking out student loans. Loans are by no means a solution to the basic needs crisis; rather, the UC should consider tuition rollbacks and lowering the cost of campus housing and food. For the time being, student loans can help to fill the financial gaps for students who are food and housing insecure, but not a long-term solution.

Support and Expand What Works: On-campus Food Access

- UCSA is happy to see two more years of funding for the activities of food pantries on campus. Pantries should develop longer hours and more robust offerings for the campus community.
- Each UC campus should explore alternative meal plans for off-campus students in order to maximize access to readily available foods on campus. Ideally, financial aid would cover the cost of a meal plan for every student who has an Expected Family Contribution of 0.
- UC campuses should require that all on-campus vendors offer a healthy and affordable meal option as part of their menu. UC Riverside and UC Merced specifically should consider partnering with local vendors to bring healthy food options onto campus.
- UC campuses should consider how students can access and share communal kitchen spaces and food storage outside of traditional dorm structures.

Improve Mental Health Resources

- Access to culturally competent and readily available mental health resources is vital for students coping with poverty and basic needs insecurity. Many of the students we interviewed reported experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety due to a lack of access to safe housing and adequate food. Students need better access to counseling which can help them to manage their experience at the university. Mental health access at the UC should be fully funded, such that counseling services become preventative rather than crisis-responsive for students.

Develop Policies + Procedures that Support Students in Crisis

- UC must develop “no wrong door” procedures in which all staff, faculty, and administrators are fully equipped to refer students to the most appropriate resources for their needs. The UC has in place a system for responding to sexual assault and sexual violence. UCSA recommends developing parallel resources for students facing a basic needs crisis.
- Students experience homelessness because most on campus housing is closed between semesters. The UC must acknowledge and respond to the fact that some students do not have a house to go home to during these extended closures. This is a critical juncture for low-income first and second year students; one where students, and particularly students of color are vulnerable to homelessness and hunger. UC campuses should consider providing safe on-campus housing to students during breaks as needed.
- Student parents and other non-traditional students need better administrative advocates as well as traditional student support to ensure that they persist through their college career and complete a degree. UC campuses should coordinate wrap around services for this important group of students, including help with applying for CalFresh, MediCal, and other public benefits.

1 July 2016 Regents Agenda Item GB1
2 July 2016 Regents Agenda Item GB2