Basic Needs Report and Recommendations

Scope of Project

In Winter Quarter, 2022, Kari Mansager, Director of Wellbeing & Health Equity, partnered with Drs. Amber Williams and Jay Bettergarcia from Psychology & Child Development to explore barriers in Cal Poly SLO students' access to basic needs resources, particularly for Pell-eligible students, students with dependents, former foster youth, and undocumented students.

There were two primary goals for this project:

1. Examine barriers to equitable access to basic needs resources for students with dependents, former foster youth, undocumented students, and Pell-eligible students.
2. Develop recommendations for the Basic Needs Taskforce at Cal Poly to improve access for these populations.

To achieve these goals, the team 1) Worked with Student Affairs assessment to conduct a deep demographic dive by race/ethnicity on who is accessing food pantry, Cal Fresh services, Cal Poly Cares grant, and meal vouchers; 2) Conducted semi-structured interviews with staff and faculty who work closely with marginalized and underserved students; and 3) Held focus groups with marginalized students from these communities

Rational & Literature Review

Students with dependents, undocumented students, former foster youth, and low-income Pell-eligible students face various systemic and institutional barriers to succeeding in higher education. Although some barriers may be similar across these groups, each student population also faces challenges that are unique to their experiences and needs. The following provides an overview of some of the structural and institutional barriers that these student groups may face.

Students with Dependents

Research suggests that although students with dependents are highly motivated to succeed for themselves and their families (Dotterer et al., 2021; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Kiernan et al., 2015; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018), they also face numerous barriers in college and university settings. Students with dependents may struggle to balance time between their roles as parent and their role as a student, financial burdens at home and managing the costs of attending a university, a lack of social support, and having internalized stigma, shame, or judgment about being a student parent (Ajayi et al., 2022; Dotterer et al., 2021; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Students with dependents also tend to face structural barriers within university systems, including a lack of spaces that welcome children, not having classes offered at times that coincide with their schedules, a lack of affordable housing for students with families, a shortfall of affordable and reliable childcare, and a lack of financial resources (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). Research also shows that students may have difficulty accessing support services, especially when they are only hearing about these services by word of mouth (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

Undocumented Students

Undocumented students make up roughly 2% of the undergraduate student population and can face various structural and institutional barriers that can inhibit their ability to fully attend to their education and negatively impact their mental health (Gonzales et al., 2013; Presidents' Alliance, 2021). These stressors can include job insecurity, uncertainty about immigration laws, and experiences of discrimination (Gonzales et al., 2013). Undocumented students are not eligible for many government-supported grants, scholarships, or funding opportunities, and their need for these resources can be exacerbated by intersectional oppression, including minoritized race and low socioeconomic status (Cervantes et al., 2015). Though undocumented students face numerous structural barriers and need access to support services, they also become quite resilient in efforts to combat the exclusionary climate of many university campuses (Kwon et al., 2020).

Former Foster Youth

Students who have identities of being a ward of the court, emancipated, former foster youth, or independent often have challenges in how they navigate the university system and access basic needs. When youth leave foster care, there are limited resources available to them (Kruszka et al., 2012). Youth experience heightened anxiety and awareness of planning for basic needs and often must ensure those needs are met independently (Clemens et al., 2017). Stigmatization, incongruence between government and university systems, and lack of trauma-informed care can all contribute to barriers foster youth face when trying to access basic needs resources (Morton, 2018; Clemens et al.,2017; Hines et al., 2005; Davis, 2006; Kruszka et al., 2012). For those who enroll in higher education, college can be seen as a way of ensuring stability in terms of food, clothing, and shelter, but reliable housing, living expenses, access to technology, and navigating the complexities of academia continue to be barriers to completing their degree (Hines et al., 2005; Davis, 2006; Kruszka et al., 2012).

The literature emphasizes the importance of support centers' educational programming that caters to at-risk former foster youth college students, as their needs may go "beyond the logistics of filling out applications, coordinating financial aid, and other bureaucratic requirements of attending college" (Salazar, 2012; Davis, 2006)). "It is important to ensure that those who provide services to students from foster care fulfill the unique needs of this population", and support services on college campuses should hold space for these centralized roles to be fulfilled (Davis, 2006).

Quantitative Data

Cal Fresh

- In Fall 2021, **Asian and Hispanic/Latino students were disproportionately more likely to use Cal Fresh services** compared to their percentage of the general Cal Poly student population (see percentages with under/overrepresentation below).
- White students were disproportionately less likely to use Cal Fresh services.
- American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, and Multiracial students' use of Cal Fresh services was proportionate to their general population at Cal Poly.

Cal Poly Cares Grants

- In Fall 2021, **Asian and Hispanic/Latino students were disproportionately more likely to obtain a Cal Poly Cares Grant** compared to their representation in the general Cal Poly student population (see percentages with under/overrepresentation below).
- White students were disproportionately less likely to have obtained a Cal Poly Cares Grant.
- American Indian/Alaska Native and Multiracial students received the Cal Poly Cares Grants roughly proportionally to their representation in Cal Poly's general population.
- Black students were slightly disproportionately more likely to have obtained a Cal Poly Cares Grant, but this should be interpreted with caution, given the low number of Black students at Cal Poly and the resulting difficulty of drawing firm conclusions.

Meal Vouchers

- In Fall 2021, **Asian and Hispanic/Latino students were disproportionately more likely to use meal vouchers** compared to their representation in the general Cal Poly student population (see percentages with under/overrepresentation below).
- White students were disproportionately less likely to have used meal vouchers.
- American Indian/Alaska Native, Multiracial, and Black students used meal vouchers roughly proportionally to their representation in Cal Poly's general population.
- Data for Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students were collected; however, this population represented 0% of meal voucher recipients and represents .23% of Cal Poly's student body.

Food Pantry

- In Fall 2021**, Asian and Hispanic/Latino students were disproportionately more likely to visit the food pantry** compared to their representation in the Cal Poly population (see percentages with under/overrepresentation below).
- White students were disproportionately less likely to have visited the food pantry.
- American Indian/Alaska Native, Multiracial, and Black students visited the food pantry roughly proportionally to their representation in Cal Poly's general population.
- Data for Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students was collected; however, this population represented 0% of food pantry visitors and represents .23% of Cal Poly's student body.

Table 1. The percentages of recipients of basic needs services by ethnicity compared to percentage in campus student population for 2021.

Ethnicity	Campus Population	Cal Fresh	CPC Grant	Meal Vouchers	Food Pantry
American Indian/Alaska Native	.12%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Black/African American	.72%	1%	3%	1%	1%
Multiracial	7.5%	7%	9%	4%	8%
Asian	13%	28%	13%	19%	28%
Hispanic/Latino	19%	39%	46%	65%	29%
White	53%	24%	25%	10%	33%

Note. Green indicates overrepresentation; blue indicates underrepresentation; no color = proportional representation

Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups

The team conducted 4 semi-structured interviews with a total of 11 staff and faculty who serve the communities we were focused on, and 4 student focus groups with undocumented students, students with dependents, former foster youth, and Pell-grant eligible students. A total of 23 students participated.

Demographics

Age: Half of the students were between the ages of 18-25 years old (50%; *n* = 12), fewer 17% were between 26-29 years old (17%; *n* = 4), and approximately a third were between 30-39 years old (33%; *n* = 8).

Gender: Approximately 79% (*n* = 19) identified as women and 21% (*n* = 5) identified as men. No participants reported identifying as transgender or gender diverse.

Race/Ethnicity: Participants were asked to select all that applied. Approximately 50% (*n* = 12) identified as Latinx/Hispanic, 38% (*n* = 9) identified as White, 21% (*n* = 5) identified as Asian/Asian American, and 4% identified as biracial/multiracial (*n* = 1). There were no students who identified as Black/African American, Middle Eastern/North African, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or Native American/Indigenous.

Sexual Orientation: Approximately 79% (*n* = 19) of the students identified as straight, 17% (*n* = 4) identified as bisexual. Students also identified as queer (4%; n = 1), asexual, (4%; n = 1), pansexual (4%; n = 1), and/or questioning (4%; n = 1)

Disability: 17% (*n* = 4) reported having a disability.

First Generation: 58% (*n* = 14) reported that they were the first in their family to attend college.

Undocumented: Approximately 20% (*n* = 5) reported that they are undocumented, while 29% (*n* = 7) reported that someone in their immediate family is undocumented.

Health Services: Students reported that they are primarily accessing health services off campus (50%, *n* = 12), while a quarter report accessing health services on campus (25%, *n* = 6), and a quarter report that they do not access any health services on campus or off campus (25%, *n* = 6).

Mental health services: Most students report not accessing mental health service on campus or off campus (46%, *n* = 11). For those who do access mental health services, most report accessing this off campus (33%, *n* = 8) and with fewer report accessing these services on campus (21%, *n* = 5).

Through these sessions, we identified 5 themes which we describe below along with recommendations specific by theme.

1. Intentional Outreach;

2. Need for connections and relationships that are institutionally supported;

3. Institutional & Systemic Barriers to Access;

4. Help Seeking Barriers

5. Positive Access & Experiences

Intentional Outreach- Participants expressed a need for better advertising of resources- both for those in need and for those who may help refer students in need

Recommendations for Intentional Outreach

1. Advocate for a centralized community basic needs space staffed by folks knowledgeable about community experiences

"There's a knowledge gap that exists for these resources that I know are present. It's just you have to .. like dig around, and you have to... be tapped into communities for which it serves. It's a very decentralized system." ~Students with Dependents

2. Promote tax workshops more broadly, but also specifically for undocumented students and former foster youth.

3. Create a one-sheet on basic needs resources that specifically names who is eligible (especially for undocumented students)

4. Basic Needs resource trainings to help staff understand and better support student needs

5. Undocually training for basic needs staff, especially Cal Fresh staff

"I specifically have seen a lot of undocumented students have to navigate [convoluted resources] and then ultimately that falls on the students when they shouldn't have to be navigating this, but then they have to because they get conflicting information from different staff members across the campus" ~Undocumented Students

Need for connections and relationships that are institutionally supported- Participants expressed their care and networking within community. They expressed need to enhance community building, spaces and positions to serve their communities

Recommendations for Need for Connections & Relationships that are Institutionally Supported

1. Advocate for former foster youth resources- space or club

I think staffing really helps. I mean in the bigger campuses like Berkeley and UCLA where there's greater concentration [of students with dependents], like they have a building. They have an office, they have family-friendly places where you can bring your kids, and there're study spaces. I don't think Cal Poly was designed for student parents"-Students with Dependents

2. Explore creation of a Guardian Scholars program, or something similar, for former foster youth
3. More family and child-friendly accessible spaces to cater to more diverse groups of students
4. Work with admissions for tailored communications to admitted students with dependents about resources

"It's hard to navigate saying that you need financial support ... and then have to fill out this really long application, where you have to prove and submit paperwork and have to show documentation and so that can be a significant challenge." ~Undocumented Student

Institutional and Systemic Barriers to Access- Participants noted challenges in access based on laws, practices and policies, forms, and with systemic oppression more broadly

Recommendations for Institutional & Systemic Barriers to Access

1. For Cal Poly Cares and Meal Vouchers, provide a descriptor of why someone is being denied along with additional resources

One of the barriers that I wanted to talk about was the whole process and student account side, where they are placing holds on students' accounts. When they have financial aid and we end up in a circle of the student cannot add classes, because they have a hold, but in order to receive their financial aid, the need to have classes and so it's just a bureaucratic nightmare of a barrier for students." ~Pell Eligible

"You know transitioning from the foster care system to Cal Poly, it's been rough transitioning into higher education and not having support...There's a program for quite a lot of other marginalized communities, but there's not a program for foster youth." ~Former Foster Youth

2. Delete the "have you applied for this before" checkbox on the Meal Vouchers and Cal Poly Cares grant applications
3. Partner with OUDI, SDAB, and Ethnic Studies to work intentionally to address broader -isms

4. Work with University Housing to explore move-in options for students who do not arrive with a supporter (such as specialized parking/unloading)
5. Work with the Registrar's office to examine and change current hold policies

Help Seeking Barriers- Participants expressed some challenges in seeking help based on cultural norms, stigma shame and fear, feeling discouraged, and the taxation/burden of seeking help more broadly

"My parents always told us … don't take more than what you need... Don't take away from someone else"-Undocumented Student

"I feel like sometimes just ...reaching out .. for us is the hardest" ~Pell Eligible Student

Recommendations for Help Seeking Barriers

1. Provide intentional outreach with parents/supporters to promote and normalize student the basic needs resources
2. Social Norming Campaigns to normalize using these resources
3. Prioritize resources for students with highest needs (I.e. Meal Vouchers)

Positive Access & Experiences- Participants noted the friendly professional and student staff who help with basic needs, the successes of social media outreach, the quick dispersal of CP grant funds, and this research project itself as ways to improve access and help build community

"I have Calfresh also and the peer mentor...who helped me sign up for it was super helpful and really knowledgeable." ~Pell Eligible

"Oftentimes when you apply for stuff like that, like you're in an emergency and there's really sometimes not a lot of time, so I was really relieved with how quick the [Cal Poly Cares grant] funds were deposited because I thought it was going to have to wait like two weeks or you know there'd be back and forth or something and there really wasn't." ~Students with Dependents

Recommendations for Positive Access & Experiences

1. Use food pantry's social media best practices for other basic needs resources and make sure all BN resources are cross-promoting/tagging one another

Recommendations by Specific Areas and Broader Campus Wide Needs

This report contains 18 recommendations. For ease of use, we organized the recommendations by advocacy needs at the institutional level vs. action recommendations that can be accomplished by the Cal Poly Basic Needs taskforce:

Institutional Advocacy Needs:

1. Advocate for a centralized community space staffed by folks knowledgeable about community experiences
2. Advocate for former foster youth resources- space or club
3. Explore creation of a Guardian Scholars program, or something similar, for former foster youth
4. More family and child-friendly accessible spaces to cater to more diverse groups of students

Departmental Actions:

1. Promote tax workshops more broadly, but also specifically for undocumented students and former foster youth.
2. Create a one-sheet on basic needs resources that specifically names who is eligible (especially for undocumented students)
3. Basic Needs resource trainings to help staff understand and better support student needs
4. Undocually training for basic needs staff, especially Cal Fresh staff
5. Work with admissions for tailored communications to admitted students with dependents about resources
6. For Cal Poly Cares and Meal Vouchers, provide a descriptor of why someone is being denied along with additional resources
7. Delete the "have you applied for this before" checkbox on the Meal Vouchers and Cal Poly Cares grant applications
8. Partner with OUDI, SDAB, and Ethnic Studies to work intentionally to address broader -isms
9. Work with University Housing to explore move-in options for students who do not arrive with a supporter (such as specialized parking/unloading)
10. Work with the Registrar's office to examine and change current hold policies
11. Provide intentional outreach with parents/supporters to promote and normalize student the basic needs resources
12. Social Norming Campaigns to normalize using these resources
13. Prioritize resources for students with highest needs (I.e. Meal Vouchers)
14. Use food pantry's social media best practices for other basic needs resources and make sure all BN resources are cross-promoting/tagging one another

Next Steps

This report will be presented to the Basic Needs Taskforce, who will then create a "roadshow" presentation with key themes and recommendations for key campus partners and groups. The report and recommendations will be published to the basic needs website: basicneeds.calpoly.edu

Appendix A. Basic needs resource usage from 2019 to 2021.