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## Barriers to Higher Education Attainment: Students' Unmet Basic Needs

*College attainment is associated with higher incomes for individuals, greater revenue for the state and local governments, and improved outcomes for communities such as lower crime rates and better health.<sup>1</sup> The 21st-century economy requires more individuals with at least a college degree. Research suggests that California will experience a deficit of 1 million college-educated workers by the year 2030.<sup>2</sup> Students in California – and economically disadvantaged students in particular – face many obstacles to obtaining a college degree. This Brief is the first in a series highlighting some of these barriers and addressing policy solutions that help make college affordable and accessible for more low- and middle-income Californians.*

**M**any college students across the state experience food and housing insecurity. State and federal public supports have not kept pace with rising costs of living, leaving many students unable to meet their basic needs such as food and housing. Students facing housing and food insecurity are more likely to experience poor academic, health, and mental health outcomes. Policymakers can better support students by increasing Cal Grant student aid, improving on-campus awareness of and access to available food assistance, providing campuses with funding to help students who are experiencing homelessness and/or food insecurity, and boosting access to affordable housing.

### Several Programs Aim to Support Low-Income Students' Basic Needs

Students pursuing a college degree face two main costs: tuition and fees charged by the institution and student-related living expenses such as housing, food, transportation, and books and supplies (referred to as "nontuition and fees"). Of these living expenses, housing and food are two of the most "basic needs" that some students struggle to afford. Many low-income students qualify for grant aid that covers the cost of their tuition and fees. There are also a number of federal, state, and campus-based programs that are intended to help students pay for basic living expenses, such as housing and food. In California, these include:

- **The Cal Grant B access award.** This grant provides low-income students with a "living allowance" to help pay for basic expenses. In 2018-19, the maximum annual award amount is \$1,672.<sup>3</sup>
- **CalFresh food assistance.** CalFresh – California's version of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – is one of the most important tools to reduce poverty and hunger. The maximum monthly amount of CalFresh assistance is \$192 for a single person, although students receive less if they have earnings from work.<sup>4</sup> In 2017, AB 214 (Weber) was signed, requiring the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) to provide written

notice to certain Cal Grant recipients that they may be eligible for CalFresh benefits.

- **Campus food pantries.** Each of the 23 California State University (CSU) campuses operates a food pantry or food distribution program, stemming from the 2016 Basic Needs Initiative. This initiative aims to identify and implement solutions to support students' basic needs, with a focus on food and housing insecurity.<sup>5</sup> The University of California's (UC) *Global Food Initiative* also commits funding to establish food pantries at each of the UC's nine undergraduate campuses.<sup>6</sup>
- **Hunger Free Campus Initiative.** This program was created as part of the 2017-18 state budget agreement and supports the CSUs and UCs in addressing student hunger. The initiative provides funding to designated "hunger free campuses" that establish "meal sharing" programs, on-campus food pantries or regular food distributions, and a designated campus employee to help ensure students have the information they need to enroll in CalFresh.<sup>7</sup>
- **Homeless student liaisons on all campuses.** Assembly Bill 801 (Bloom), signed in 2016, requires the CSU (and encourages the UC) to establish a liaison to help homeless students apply for financial aid and navigate other system resources available to them. These resources could include priority registration, selecting courses, finding housing, and information about work opportunities.

## Existing Support for Low-Income Students Falls Short

The existing web of federal, state, and campus-based support programs for students has not kept pace with rising living expenses, leaving many low-income students struggling to pay the rent and put food on the table. For example, since 2006, the median rent in California has increased by 44%, whereas the maximum Cal Grant B award has gone up by only 8% (Figure 1). This means that rent accounts for a greater share of students' budgets, reducing their

ability to cover other basic necessities. In fact, more than 1 in 10 CSU students (11%) and 1 in 20 UC students (5%) reported experiencing homelessness over the past year.<sup>8</sup> While the state has made efforts to assist homeless students through AB 801, there has been no funding attached to this legislation, making implementation difficult for some schools.

Available food assistance also fails to meet students' needs. While more than 4 in 10 students at both institutions reported experiencing food insecurity (42% at CSU; 44% at UC), few receive CalFresh benefits.<sup>9</sup> Recent studies at the CSU and UC indicate that African American and first-generation students experience the highest rates of food insecurity and homelessness.<sup>10</sup> Many low-income students are denied CalFresh assistance because the federal SNAP law requires students to work at least 20 hours a week or qualify for an exemption.<sup>11</sup> The federal eligibility guidelines and exemptions for SNAP are complicated and difficult for administrators and students to understand, resulting in the underutilization of CalFresh.<sup>12</sup> In addition, many students are unaware of CalFresh and other on-campus services such as food pantries.<sup>13</sup>

While housing costs vary, state aid to support students' basic needs remains constant (and low) across the state.<sup>14</sup> The maximum Cal Grant B access award of \$139 per month, combined with the maximum monthly CalFresh assistance of \$192, covers less than one-quarter of basic housing and food costs in two of California's highest-cost regions; Los Angeles/South Coast and the San Francisco Bay Area (Figure 2).<sup>15</sup> For instance, a low-income student at UCLA is eligible for a maximum \$331 in aid, but could face monthly food and housing costs of \$1,414.

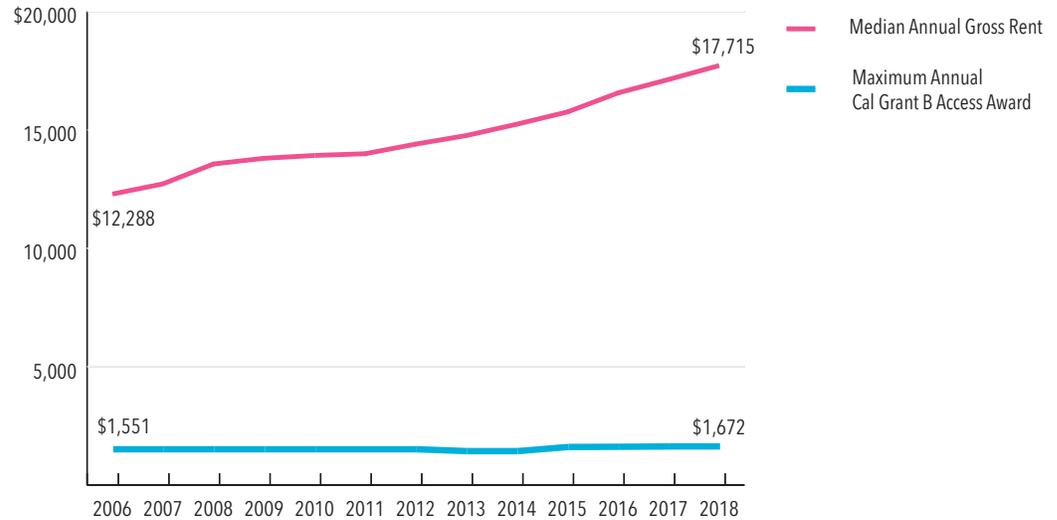
## How Are Students Impacted by Food and Housing Insecurity?

Unmet basic needs threaten student's health, well-being, and academic achievements. Food and housing insecurity among college students are associated with poor health and mental health symptoms such as depression and anxiety. Food insecurity also coincides with lower academic

FIGURE 1

## Student Aid Has Not Kept Pace With Rising Housing Costs in California

Student Aid for Living Allowance Compared to Median Annual Rent

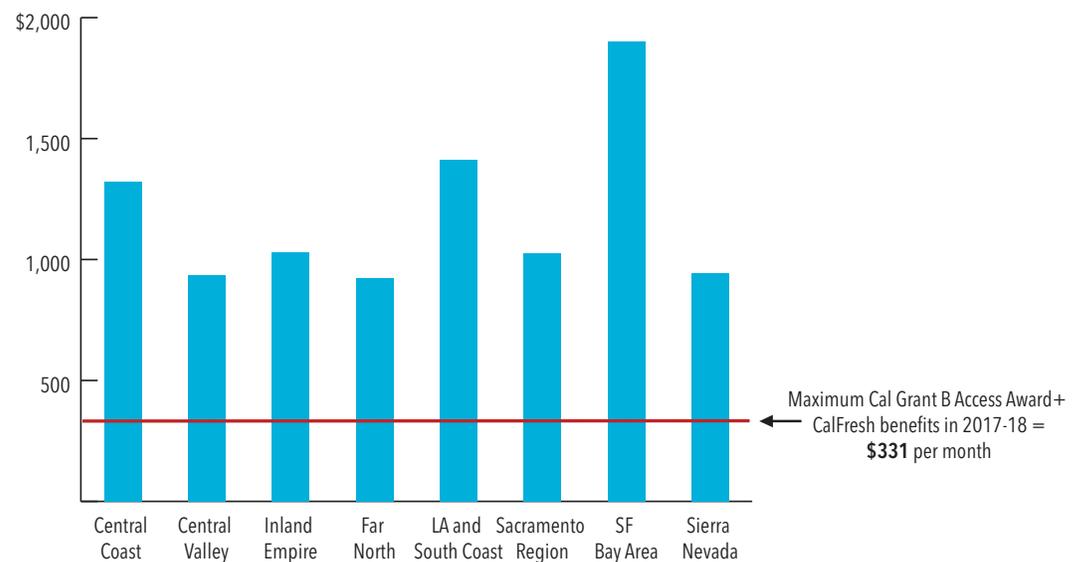


Note: Figures are not adjusted for inflation. Rent reflects gross rent, which includes utilities. For 2017 and 2018, rents are estimated based on the compound annual growth rate between 2011 and 2016. The Cal Grant B Access Award provides low-income students aid for basic living expenses. Source: California Student Aid Commission and US Census Bureau, American Community Survey

FIGURE 2

## Available Aid Covers Only a Fraction of Students' Food and Housing Costs in Every Region of the State

"Fair Market Rent" (FMR) for a Studio Apartment in 2018 and Food for a Single Adult



Note: Rent reflects gross rent which includes utilities. Food budget reflects USDA's Low-Cost Food Plan. The Cal Grant B Access Award provides low-income students aid for basic living expenses. Source: California Department of Social Services; California Student Aid Commission; US Department of Agriculture (USDA); US Department of Housing and Urban Development

achievement and higher rates of “inactive days,” where usual activities are stymied by poor physical or mental health.<sup>16</sup> Students who are concerned about their unmet basic needs often take on additional paid work to cover expenses. These students may enroll part-time, drop courses, or skip semesters – resulting in longer time to graduate and higher costs.<sup>17</sup>

## Policy Solutions

Efforts to reduce the gap between students’ basic needs and available support have progressed, as noted earlier, through state support and programs offered by the CSU and UC systems, but there is still considerable room for improvement. California policymakers should:

- **Increase the Cal Grant B access award.** Living expenses for many students exceed tuition and are the least supported by aid. Increasing the Cal Grant B access award and considering the geographic cost of living when setting award levels might allow students to limit their work hours, which in turn could help to increase the number of students graduating on time and reduce costs.
- **Improve on-campus awareness of and access to food assistance.** Improving awareness about CalFresh benefits and establishing application assistance on every public college campus would help facilitate enrollment of eligible students into CalFresh. Expanding awareness about on-campus food pantries and meal sharing programs could also increase the utilization of available supports.
- **Provide campuses with funding to help students who are experiencing homelessness**

**and/or food insecurity.** AB 801 requires certain campuses to establish liaisons for homeless students and former foster youth. However, there is no funding attached to this requirement, making it difficult for many campuses to comply. Providing funding for AB 801 would help campuses carry through the Legislature’s intent and better serve the needs of students. In addition, the Legislature could require all CSU’s to participate in the Hunger Free Campus Initiative, which provides funding to campuses that are helping students with food insecurity.

- **Increase access to affordable housing.** Statewide, policies that promote more housing production for all income levels and increase the production of affordable housing for low-income communities could help lessen the burden of high housing costs. At the campus level, requiring CSUs and UCs to prioritize low-income and homeless students for on-campus housing would ensure that resources are allocated to students with the greatest needs.

## Conclusion

The costs associated with a college degree have risen significantly in recent years. Available state and federal aid have not kept pace with these increases, leaving many students unable to afford basic living expenses. Students who have unmet basic needs have lower health and academic outcomes and take longer to complete college and enter the workforce. In order to meet the need for more college-educated workers, state leaders should invest in programs that ensure all students have their basic needs met while striving for a college degree.

**Amy Rose** prepared this *Issue Brief*. The Budget Center was established in 1995 to provide Californians with a source of timely, objective, and accessible expertise on state fiscal and economic policy issues. The Budget Center engages in independent fiscal and policy analysis and public education with the goal of improving public policies affecting the economic and social well-being of low- and middle-income Californians. General operating support for the Budget Center is provided by foundation grants, subscriptions, and individual contributions. Please visit the Budget Center’s website at [calbudgetcenter.org](http://calbudgetcenter.org).

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Noah Berger and Peter Fisher, *A Well-Educated Workforce Is Key to State Prosperity* (Economic Analysis and Research Network: August 22, 2013).
- 2 Hans Johnson, Marisol Cuellar Mejia, and Sarah Bohn, *Will California Run Out of College Graduates?* (Public Policy Institute of California: October 2015).
- 3 California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) 2018-19 Cal Grant Programs accessed from [https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/g-30\\_2018\\_cal\\_grant\\_comparison.pdf](https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/g-30_2018_cal_grant_comparison.pdf) on May 9, 2018.
- 4 Maximum monthly CalFresh benefits are annually established by the federal government. Current benefit levels are for federal fiscal year 2018, which ends on September 30, 2018. Earnings from work and other types of income reduce the amount of CalFresh benefits that an individual may receive.
- 5 The Basic Needs Initiative was created by the CSU in 2016.
- 6 The UC *Global Food Initiative* was created in 2014 to address the issue of food insecurity on UC campuses and throughout the world. For a discussion of strategies to address students' basic needs, see University of California, *Global Food Initiative: Food and Housing Security at the University of California* (December 2017).
- 7 "Meal sharing" programs encourage college students to donate unused meal credits to students who need them and any remaining credits to the on-campus food pantry.
- 8 University of California, *Global Food Initiative: Food and Housing Security at the University of California* (December 2017), and Rashida Crutchfield and Jennifer Maguire, *Study of Student Basic Needs* (California State University: January 2018).
- 9 University of California, *Global Food Initiative: Food and Housing Security at the University of California* (December 2017), and Rashida Crutchfield and Jennifer Maguire, *Study of Student Basic Needs* (California State University: January 2018).
- 10 University of California, *Global Food Initiative: Food and Housing Security at the University of California* (December 2017), and Rashida Crutchfield and Jennifer Maguire, *Study of Student Basic Needs* (California State University: January 2018).
- 11 For a more detailed discussion, see *Responding to the College Hunger Crisis* (Western Center on Law and Poverty: February 2018).
- 12 AB 214 (Weber), signed in 2017, clarified student eligibility for CalFresh; however, conversations with key stakeholders reveal that limited campus staff and education for students result in continued confusion. California's Department of Social Services does not collect statewide data on student enrollment in CalFresh. One report estimates that 78% of college students in California are eligible for CalFresh and do not receive assistance. See Young Invincibles, *Rethinking SNAP Benefits for College Students* (February 2018).
- 13 More than half (52%) of CSU students surveyed were unaware of a food pantry located on their campus and 40% had never heard of CalFresh. Rashida Crutchfield and Jennifer Maguire, *Study of Student Basic Needs* (California State University: January 2018).
- 14 This analysis focuses on state support only. Many low-income students are eligible for federal Pell Grants, which can be used to pay for living expenses. The average Pell Grant award was \$3,740 in 2016-17.
- 15 Figure 2 reflects the regional "Fair Market Rent" (FMR) for a studio apartment, which includes utilities, combined with the US Department of Agriculture's Low-Cost Food Plan for a single adult – this food plan currently costs \$268 per month. Regional FMRs are weighted by county population. Current FMRs will remain in effect through September 30, 2018.
- 16 Rashida Crutchfield and Jennifer Maguire, *Study of Student Basic Needs* (California State University: January 2018).
- 17 California Community Colleges Student Mental Health Program, *Meeting Basic Needs to Support Students' Mental Health and Success* (September 2017) accessed from <http://www.cccstudentmentalhealth.org/docs/CCCSMHP-Students-Basic-Needs-Fact-Sheet.pdf> on May 9, 2018.