



What It Really Takes to Meet Students' Basic Needs





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What It Really Takes to Meet Students' Basic Needs

Key Takeaways From a Virtual Forum
Presented by *The Chronicle* and Ascendium

HOST



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SPEAKERS



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College District



Jaime Hansen

Executive Director,
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Keith Curry, president of [Compton College](#), has a question: Do colleges know what their students need to succeed? Many administrators think they do, but true innovation and creativity require setting assumptions aside.

Ian Wilhelm, a *Chronicle* deputy managing editor, sat down with Curry on April 10 for a virtual forum, “Unapologetically Working for Change: What It Really Takes to Meet Students’ Basic Needs,” to explore how colleges can rethink old systems and develop new strategies to empower students. The conversation also included Tammeil Gilkerson, the chancellor of the [Peralta Community College District](#), and Jaime Hansen, the executive director of the national nonprofit [Swipe Out Hunger](#). The following comments, edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, watch the recorded webinar [here](#).

IAN WILHELM: Tammeil, as a community-college leader in California, how are you thinking about the issue of basic-needs insecurity among students?

TAMMEIL GILKERSON: In 2018, the state started an Affordability, Food, and Housing Access Task Force. On our campuses, we were seeing students with more basic-needs insecurities, which we were ill prepared to deal with. Keith was one of the architects of the task force, which we’ve since served on — a group of chief executive officers and trustees trying to understand how to build up support for students and the policy implications.

In 2023, we launched the [Real College California study](#), based on work at Temple University. [Sara Goldrick-Rab](#) supported us, but we took it on with [the RP Group](#) (the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges) and administered a large survey. The second part of the work was building practitioner-directed support — understanding that we, as CEOs, needed to build capacity on our campuses to meet students’ needs directly with the help of partner organizations. We’ve developed [the Real College California Coalition](#), which includes over 100 colleges in our state, and we put on an annual Basic Needs Summit. We had our eighth recently in the Central Valley, where we had over 400 practitioners learning from each other.

“We, as CEOs, needed to build capacity on our campuses to meet students’ needs directly with the help of partner organizations.”

WILHELM: Your experience speaks to how colleges can't do this work alone. They need to work with other colleges, national organizations, or state or federal governments if they can be partners. What did you find in the survey you mentioned?

GILKERSON: We had 88 colleges participate. Over 66,000 students responded. Two out of three reported a basic-needs insecurity. Nearly half were food insecure. Three out of five were housing insecure. About one in four were homeless. Black students — as well as American Indian and Alaska Native students — were more likely to report a basic-needs insecurity, along with LGBTQ+ students. Students aged 21 to 30 experienced higher rates of insecurity than younger students. One other finding that was particularly important to us was that three-quarters of all students were working or looking for work, which connects to how Pell Grant funding hasn't been raised with inflation.

WILHELM: Jaime, tell us about the national organization you lead, Swipe Out Hunger, which works to address student food insecurity.

JAIME HANSEN: We support programs like pantries, meal-swipe drives, and basic-needs centers, and do state-level advocacy. We know many people have misconceptions about who college students are today. Many are over the age of 22. Many are working while going to college. That makes them less likely to be eligible for social-safety-net services, so they need resources to ensure they can stay enrolled. More people need to understand that.

WILHELM: Keith, tell us about your experience at Compton College. Are some students hesitant to seek help?

KEITH CURRY: In 2023, at my institution, 47 percent of students had food insecurity, down from 59 percent in 2018. Our housing insecurity decreased from 68 percent to 58 percent. Student homelessness was at 24 percent, up from 18 percent in 2018.

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Students are able to receive one free meal a day at our cafeteria. We also have a farmers market, and they receive a weekly voucher of \$20 to purchase food there. If they're on California's [CalFresh](#) — through the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) (SNAP) — they actually get about \$50. All they need is their student ID. I do see stigma associated with services, but more students on our campus are taking advantage of them because they don't require an application. Colleges should be asking how they can be inclusive of all students receiving services and make receiving them as simple as possible. Students are more likely to stay in classes on our campus because of food resources.

HANSEN: Everything you said is true, and it's also about how students get treated when they ask for help. On your campus, everyone knows these services are part of the culture. They're not creating judgment. They're open to everyone. That flips the script on stigma.

GILKERSON: I've seen remarkable work done to build food pantries with dignity, which look like storefronts, or farmers markets, as Keith was talking about. What we're grappling with in California is the sustainability of various models and whether there's enough funding support for them. Half of our survey respondents in 2023 said they worried their food would run out before they got money to buy more. They skipped meals or they cut the size of their meals. That's not healthy.

“It's also about how students get treated when they ask for help.”

Also, a lot of us built basic-needs centers on our campuses — there was California legislation to support that — but if a center is on one side of campus, students who come to another side of campus may not know about it.

CURRY: Budgets are statements of values. It's important to use multiple pots of funding to continue these services. Students remember if an institution used to provide a service and no longer provides it — and they're telling others about the services we provide.

WILHELM: What advice do you have for institutions of all kinds — large, public community colleges or small, private, liberal-arts colleges — to build coalitions and share best practices for supporting students?

HANSEN: Students can be a powerful force, doing advocacy at the campus, municipal, and state levels. Swipe Out Hunger is here to assist. We can help with data. You want to gather as much survey data as possible about hunger on your campus.

CURRY: Leadership matters. The work in California, as it relates to community colleges, has been led by Dr. Gilkerson, who keeps everybody on task. It's important that we're having conversations with other leaders throughout the country about how to address these issues together, including with help from states, counties, and cities. We don't want to play in the sandbox by ourselves. We want more people in the sandbox.

GILKERSON: We need to be much more intentional about those relationships. We saw in our survey that regional differences were key, and we've had regional success working on bus transportation.

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HANSEN: Collaboration is going to be doubly important in the coming years, given cuts to SNAP, food banks, and other resources. We've got to break down silos and break down egos. I get asked whether food or housing is more important, but we can't choose between them. The food we're providing has to be stored and prepared in a kitchen.

CURRY: At Compton College, we're constructing new student housing with 251 beds and a facility for students who are parents. These things are intertwined.

GILKERSON: I'm so proud of Keith and happy for him. For me, with four colleges in my district and without state funding to help support building student housing, it's hard for me to create 400 new beds if that money might be better spent to keep basic-needs services going.

WILHELM: Are there creative approaches to funding these efforts, even in small ways?

CURRY: You can look at blending funding from different departments as part of a whole-college transformation. Philanthropists should step up more. If you keep track of

what your county government is posting online, you might find a creative way to partner. You have to know what they're doing, not expect them to come to you.

GILKERSON: I've partnered with [Rotary International](#) as president of [Laney College](#) and in my current role. We need volunteers to help run our fresh-food market distribution, and Rotary has volunteers. They've given funding to support basic-needs kits for students. I've also partnered with faith-based organizations. Churches wanted to fight homelessness, so we began working on building tiny homes at Laney College — small, sustainable homes in safe places around the community, for which students can be eligible. Going local can be a strategy that pays dividends.

HANSEN: The local level is where you get the most return on investment. I also wanted to note that, even though college students hunger at higher rates than other able-bodied working adults in America, they haven't been a prioritized demographic for food banks in many states.

WILHELM: Are there any other insights you'd like to share?

GILKERSON: Our nation is hugely wasteful with food. [Orange Coast College](#) in Southern California is doing a food-recovery program as part of their culinary-arts program, where food surplus is used — with proper processing — to feed the community. Similarly, when I was president of [Evergreen Valley College](#) in San José, we partnered with a grocery store that gave us some of their food surplus. You also have to consider that food banks may only get certain types of foods, and some students may eat different types — kosher foods, for example. You need to understand your student population and think about providing recipes for how to prepare food.

CURRY: We have a data-sharing agreement with our county related to CalFresh and SNAP, so we've been able to identify students who aren't getting them. We hired someone whose full-time responsibility is to encourage students to sign up for those programs. John King, the former U.S. secretary of education, used to say, "If a student has to choose between a Macbook and food, the Macbook always loses." Students aren't going to be successful unless we support their basic needs.