

Every Student is a Success Story:

Basic Needs Innovation at Compton College



December 2022

Compton College & NextGen Policy



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NextGen Policy is a nonprofit organization dedicated to progressive policy change to address environmental, social, racial, and economic inequities in California through justice-centered legislative advocacy, grassroots partnerships, and democratic civic engagement. NextGen Policy's work to achieve education equity includes addressing the rising cost of higher education and supporting students' basic needs. Many thanks to Arnold Sowell Jr., Executive Director of NextGen Policy, and the NextGen Policy team including Samantha Seng, Kimberly Sanchez, Milena Paez, and Andrea Serrano for their contributions and thought partnership.



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Compton College is dedicated to providing ongoing and comprehensive support to ensure students have their basic needs covered so they are free to pursue their education without worrying about their next meal or wondering where they will sleep each night. Research consistently shows the negative impact housing and food insecurity has on student success. Helping our students achieve a bright future is integral to the economic future of our region, state, and country, and we look forward to providing even more opportunities for our students to succeed.

– **Sonia Lopez**

**Compton Community College District
Board of Trustees President**

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Ensuring that California students have access to all the resources they need throughout their higher education experience is an economic equity issue and NextGen Policy fights to advance programmatic, budget, and policy solutions that will help achieve this goal. Effective student support programs must always consider meeting each student's basic needs, including: the cost of food, housing, transportation, institutional debt and affordable access to the Internet. And, without question, resources that support student basic needs helps to ensure that all California students thrive academically. NextGen Policy is proud to partner with Compton College to amplify the various innovative ways that California higher education institutions can support students by prioritizing the issue of basic needs in their campus budgeting processes.

– **Arnold Sowell Jr.**

Executive Director at NextGen Policy

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SECTION 2

Introduction

This policy brief titled, “Every Student is A Success Story: Basic Needs Innovation at Compton College” rightly emphasizes the importance of each and every student, affirming Compton College’s commitment to offer personalized support to help students succeed, no matter the circumstances. This policy brief highlights the impact of prioritizing students’ basic needs so they can access resources that lead to success. Prioritizing students’ basic needs means providing intervention and support programs that are fully integrated in all aspects of a college. Compton College centers its budget on meeting students’ basic needs - building a budget that supports student success.

This policy brief provides information on and insights about the innovative programs and initiatives at Compton College that are making a difference in the lives of their students. Long before the COVID-19 crisis exposed inequalities in education, Compton College students were disproportionately affected; many faced barriers to meeting achievement goals pertaining to student enrollment, success, and retention. Compton College is finding various ways to assist their students, from introducing creative food resources to building innovative student housing solutions.

The programs outlined in this policy brief can be modeled at other campuses and recommendations include:

- Dedicated federal and state funding for the purposes of eliminating barriers to basic needs for students is crucial for this work.
- Colleges should prioritize students’ basic needs and this should be reflected in campus budget processes.
- When engaging in students’ basic needs programs, colleges should disaggregate data by at least race and gender to monitor and evaluate student support services.
- Dual enrollment students should be included in student basic needs programs and services.
- Support unapologetic leadership about decisions based on students’ basic needs.

Throughout all programs at Compton College to support students, the data collected on these programs also demonstrated the need to support employee basic needs. Employees at Compton College additionally benefitted from access to housing, food and mental health support.

SECTION 3

Compton College 2024



While the [Compton College 2024 Comprehensive Master Plan](#) focuses primarily on traditional student success metrics, it is a transformative plan with recommendations committed to strengthening academic programs and student support services, as well as bolstering enrollment and facility growth.

To support the fulfillment of the [Compton Community College District's mission](#) and its implementation of the Completion by Design Framework and [Guided Pathway Divisions](#), Compton College has established plans for each operational area ([technology](#), [staffing](#), [enrollment management](#), and [student equity](#)), which integrate and align with the goals of its comprehensive approach to student success. By following the student-centered [Completion By Design](#) framework, stakeholders can concentrate on developing a holistic approach to addressing the student experience at Compton College.

Compton College has participated in several “California Community Colleges #RealCollege Survey Reports” released by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University and the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. The #RealCollege Survey is the nation’s largest annual assessment of students’ basic needs and fields from colleges and universities across the nation. In March 2019, 436 Compton College students participated in the #RealCollege California Community College Survey, and below are the results compared to statewide data on students’ experience with accessing basic needs. In the spring of 2023, the College will field the Student Basic Needs Survey to raise awareness about the types and prevalence of student basic needs on college campuses and to provide actionable data that our partners can use to advocate for students and improve services.

	Food Insecurity	Housing Insecurity	Homelessness
Compton College 2018	59 %	68 %	18 %
Statewide 2018	50 %	60 %	19 %
Compton College 2019	56 %	63 %	23 %
Statewide 2019	39 %	46 %	17 %

Compton College has been focused on addressing housing and food insecurities. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Compton College has become more aware of the other challenges students face outside of the classroom that prevents them from succeeding. Compton College surveyed all current students in the spring of 2021 to assess concerns about returning to campus. Student responses indicated that access to basic needs was an important factor. That is why Compton College has chosen to institutionalize the programs and services that make the biggest impact on students' well-being, such as emergency aid, CalFresh application assistance, adequate technology, mental health resources, and affordable and healthy food options. The next step is the development of student housing on campus.

On June 26, 2022, California lawmakers moved to include a student housing grant totaling \$80,389,000 in the 2022-2023 State Budget for the Compton Community College District (CCCD) to build its proposed 250-bed student housing facility on the Compton College campus.

Compton College serves as a pathway for many students to improve their financial status through education. Having student housing on campus supports students' ability to be more focused on education and career goals, offers a safe environment for student well-being, and helps create and foster a sense of independence for students. Additionally, on-campus student housing allows Compton College to better support historically marginalized and impacted groups such as foster youth, veterans, and formerly incarcerated students, all of whom report high percentages of basic needs insecurities.

The basic needs barriers students face are complex. Basic needs are fundamental to students' self-confidence and success at Compton College (and all institutions of higher education). Basic needs include, but are not limited to access to:

- **Food**
- **Housing**
- **Transportation**
- **Finances**
- **Child/Dependent Care**
- **Health and Wellness**
- **Safety**
- **Clothing**
- **Technology**

Compton College is removing barriers and eliminating the need for students to compromise or make choices between necessities and their education. At Compton College addressing students' basic needs is fully integrated throughout all parts of the campus and all staff are expected to be able to point students towards resources. The first step is promoting and prominently displaying a central single form for students to request basic needs resources.¹

Rather than having to declare what resources students are struggling to obtain multiple times to different offices and or programs, Compton College students only need to fill out [one form](#) to request assistance. All staff can guide students to this form and students will receive the information they'll need for all basic needs resources Compton College has to offer.

At Compton College, the director of Student Basic Needs and Success develops and coordinates initiatives related to the academic, student support, and social needs of students from culturally and socially diverse, historically disadvantaged backgrounds and disproportionately impacted equity groups. The director collaborates with faculty, staff, managers, and students to advance the District's Student Equity and Achievement goals of ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of race, gender, age, disability, or economic circumstances. In addition, the director provides leadership to the campus in the areas of basic needs, food, housing, and transportation insecurities, as well as the development of local partnerships with feeder high schools, community organizations, and businesses in meeting student basic needs and maximizing student success.

In closing, budgets are statements of value. Compton College is not only providing the resources, the research, and the staffing to support basic needs work, they are centering allocations of state and federal resources to support students and their success.



SECTION 4

Addressing Student Housing Insecurity



The COVID-19 pandemic brought California's student housing crisis to the boiling point. Students lost their jobs, which fueled high rates of homelessness. As wages remain stagnant, and the cost of living continues to soar, thousands of students are forced to choose between paying for their housing needs or skipping meals. Students experiencing housing insecurity more often than not experience other basic needs insecurity and are therefore working toward a higher education degree under extremely unstable and challenging conditions. Because these circumstances limit a student's ability to persist and complete their higher education, they are an obstacle to achieving the state's goal of 70% college degree attainment by 2030.

Housing can be the largest cost associated with attending college², surpassing the cost of tuition in some instances. At Compton College, housing costs claim more than 30% of students' available income, and students report having to move frequently.³ To address student homelessness, Compton College partnered with the Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD) to implement the Shallow Subsidy Housing Assistance Program (SSHAP). CRCD is a community development corporation in South Los Angeles striving to improve the quality of life in South Central LA. As part of SSHAP, students received a monthly rental subsidy, housing stability planning, and links to other services between September 2020 and January 2022.

The College's partnership with CRCD proved to be a valuable support for vulnerable students. Data showed a moderate but steady decrease in students facing housing insecurity.

Prior to receiving assistance from Compton College, **42.9%** of students enrolled in SSHAP were homeless at some point in the past year compared to **21%** of non-SSHAP enrolled students. After receiving aid, the number of SSHAP-enrolled students experiencing homelessness dropped to **29.4%**.

Addressing Student Housing Insecurity Cont.

Furthermore, 17.9% of SSHAP participants reported they had slept somewhere with no permanent housing to return to before they enrolled in the program. After they enrolled in the program, this number decreased to 5.9%. Trends show positive changes in the impact of finances on managing housing for SSHAP participants, as well as a decrease in moving in the past 12 months compared to the baseline survey.


Housing assistance through collaboration with community-based agencies can support short and long-term change for students who face housing insecurity and homelessness by providing stability. Ultimately, building housing is the best long-term solution to California's student housing crisis. Under Governor Newsom's leadership, California has increased its investments in student housing.

This year's 2022-23 State Budget appropriated an additional \$200 million for student housing, increasing the total state appropriations for student housing to \$2.2 billion over three years. Of the \$200 million for student housing, \$80,389,000 was appropriated to Compton Community College District to build a 250-bed student housing facility on Compton College's campus.



SECTION 5

Providing On-Campus Food Resources



Food insecurity is defined by the California Department of Agriculture as the disruption of food intake or eating patterns due to a lack of money or other resources.⁴ As a consequence of the pandemic, college-aged individuals experienced high unemployment rates. Many college campuses closed due to COVID-19 protocols, resulting in basic need services such as food assistance being frozen or reduced. These factors combined decreased the ability of students to consume consistent daily meals.⁵

The 2020 statewide survey of COVID-19 impacts on California Community Colleges (CCCs) found that half of all students enrolled in California's community colleges faced food insecurity.⁶ Similar reports conducted by the University of California (UC) Special Committee on Basic Needs and California State University (CSU) Chancellor's Office found that 44% of undergraduate students at UCs and 41.6% of undergraduate students at CSUs experienced food insecurity.⁷ The combination of food insecurity and stress can be highly detrimental to the academic success and health of college students. Food insecure students are more susceptible to low attendance and completion rates⁸ as well as low grade point averages.⁹ To stretch their food budgets, food-insecure students opt for cheap, highly processed foods that contribute to the overconsumption of sugar and fats,¹⁰ which could result in an increased risk for long-term health issues such as obesity and diabetes.

Compton College has implemented several programs to provide students with on-campus food resources. First, the College has a data sharing agreement with the Los Angeles Department of Public and Social Services (DPSS) to share student data for students who are interested in food resources. After receiving consenting students' information, DPSS then contacts students to obtain the remaining information needed to apply to CalFresh, a state-run program that provides low-income Californians with monthly food benefits. Within the first 30 days of this partnership, there was a 10% increase in the number of Compton College students enrolled in CalFresh.

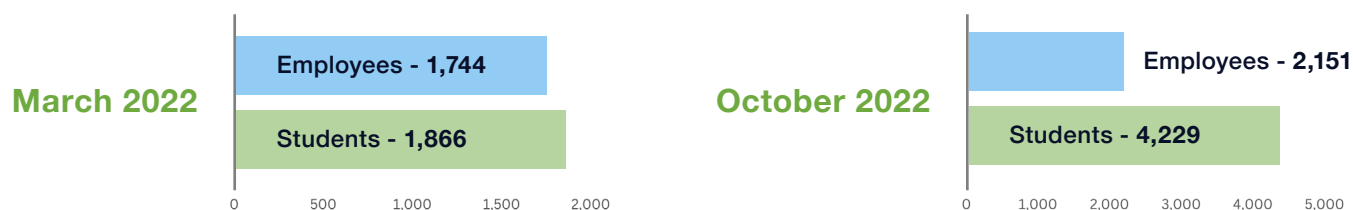
Providing On-Campus Food Resources Cont.

The College has since hired a student services advisor to support all eligible students in applying for or recertifying CalFresh. Furthermore, Compton College uses the data from the DPSS to provide eligible students with information about other basic needs benefits. Compton College and the DPSS continue to exchange data to support students' enrollment in the CalFresh/SNAP food benefits program.

Through a separate partnership with the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, Compton College provides another program to its students and the surrounding community: a monthly mobile food pantry. This partnership began in October 2021 and has since served an average of 150 families each month. The food pantry program will continue through 2022 and onward.

Students who received Everytable food resources in spring 2022, achieved a higher course success rate than the matched comparison group that did not receive these basic need resources.

An additional program is provided through the campus cafeteria, Everytable. At the start of the pandemic, students enrolled at Compton College could sign up to receive 10 meals delivered to their homes during the week. To date, Everytable completed 464 deliveries to 224 unique students and this program will continue through June 30, 2023. Additionally, since February 14, 2021, Everytable continues to provide free meals on campus to students and employees Monday through Thursday, averaging 350-400 people a day. The data also shows that Compton College employees also took advantage of basic needs support services. In just 2022 alone, at the start of the year about **1,744 employees** compared to **1,866 students** were served at Everytable, and in October that number increased to **2,151 employees**, with **4,229 students** served. For numbers of free meals served, at the start of 2022, 3,893 free meals were provided by Everytable and in October the college cafeteria served 6,332 free meals.



Compton College found that participation in the Everytable delivery service was greater among older students (over 24 years old) and female students, compared to their representation in the general population. Students who participated in the Everytable food delivery service achieved greater success and retention than the general student population. Though caution should be used in interpreting these results, students who self-select to receive the deliveries may already be high achieving.

Compton College has recently launched an additional program by hosting a weekly farmers' market on campus with a grand opening on November 2, 2022. Students can use their CalFresh dollars to purchase fresh food at the market using "market match" at a 2-1 ratio. Compton College is also giving \$20 in vouchers each week to all currently enrolled students for use at the farmers' market to ensure that every student has access to healthy fresh food.

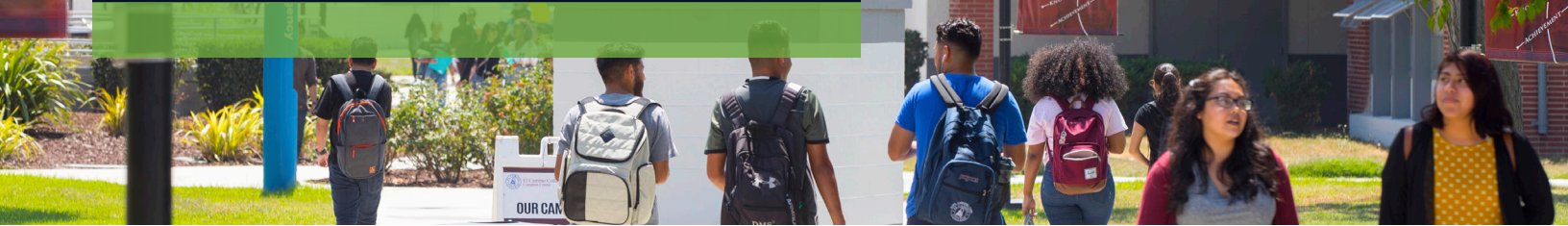
In recent years, California has led the nation in addressing food insecurity for students. In the 2021-22 State Budget, California fully funded universal school meals for all K-12 public school students regardless of eligibility. Current law, through AB 1747 (2016) and AB 214 (2017), requires public college and university cafeterias to participate in the CalFresh Restaurant Meals Program.¹¹ This legislation allowed cafeterias and restaurants on college and university campuses to accept EBT cards, therefore increasing access to EBT and meals. In 2019, AB 612 extended these services to California Community Colleges.

While continuing to implement these laws, colleges should look toward securing access to surcharge-free cash EBT and grocery EBT on campus too. Campuses should also seek to secure on-campus farmers' markets that accept EBT payments. Bridging the gap between students experiencing food insecurity and access to nutritious food is imperative to supporting their basic needs and having a better opportunity to achieve academic success.



SECTION 6

Meeting Student Transportation Needs



Not having a reliable method of transportation is a hardship for college students. The main transportation issues confronting students are the cost, location, timing, and reliability of public transportation options. The Biden Administration found that 40% of Americans lack access to affordable public transit. With only 57% of community college main campuses having transit stops within reasonable walking distance working students, parenting students, and low-income students are susceptible to an inequitable college experience.¹²

In California, **98% of community college students are commuters.**¹³

High parking fees pose an additional financial burden to students who drive to campus. According to the College Board, community college students spend an average of \$1,840 yearly on transportation. Yet even paying for a parking pass does not guarantee a parking spot on campus,¹⁴ as the majority of college campuses lack the physical capacity to provide all students with a parking spot.¹⁵

Lack of reliable transportation results in high rates of tardiness and absences, negatively impacting student success. Students who are repeatedly late miss out on crucial instruction, resulting in lower academic performance and achievement. Conversely, students who leave class early in an attempt to tailor their schedules to public transportation also miss crucial instruction. Irregular attendance and chronic absenteeism are better predictors than test scores of whether students will drop out before graduating.¹⁶

To support its students, Compton College has partnered with the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority to provide all enrolled Compton College students with TapToGo passes that are good for the entire semester. With TapToGo passes, students have access to several bus and rail services through multiple local transportation agencies. There are no time limitations for using these passes, meaning students have access to public

Meeting Student Transportation Needs Cont.

transportation to and from school or for any other needs, any day of the week, including weekends. Additionally, Compton College students park for free for the 2022-2023 year (summer 2022 – spring 2023) when they download a free student parking permit. Compton College is looking into extending this policy through the 2023-2024 year.

In California, there have been several legislative attempts to provide more affordable transportation options for students. Most recently, AB 1919 (2022) attempted to create the Youth Transit Pass Pilot Program, which would have provided grants for interested transit agencies to create or expand programs to fund passes for K-12 and college students to ride public transportation. As Compton College demonstrates, key partnerships and funding for partnerships with local transit authorities can help alleviate the burden of finding affordable and timely transportation for students.



SECTION 7

Providing Student Healthcare Services



A student's physical and mental well-being significantly impacts their ability to achieve academic success. Students who are at-risk or have significant health problems face challenges in fulfilling their academic responsibilities. In California, at-risk students are defined as students who may fail to earn a diploma for various reasons, including irregular attendance, low motivation, a past record of academic underachievement, economic disadvantage, or low scores.¹⁷

According to Active Minds, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting mental health awareness and education for young adults through education, research, and advocacy, 80% of college students reported that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted their mental health.¹⁸ The Center for Disease Control and Prevention defines mental health as including emotional, psychological, and social well-being;¹⁹ mental health influences how we feel, think, act and determine how we handle life's circumstances.

Low-income students and students of color are disproportionately living without basic health support.²⁰ The US Census Bureau reports that college-aged individuals have the highest uninsured rates of any group in the United States. In recent years California has taken meaningful steps to reduce barriers to healthcare coverage. The 2022-23 State Budget achieved the goal of providing universal healthcare coverage. This means regardless of immigration status, all Californians now have access to healthcare. Increasing student access to health care is associated with improved health, academic retention, and less debt.²¹ Students with poor mental health may have trouble maintaining attention during instruction, recalling academic information, and completing assignments in a timely manner, thus negatively affecting their grades and scores on standardized achievement tests. In time, as students continue with undertreated or untreated mental health issues, challenges to school completion become extremely difficult to overcome.²²

Providing Student Healthcare Services Cont.

Compton College has retained a focus on providing for students' mental health as the COVID-19 pandemic pushed this issue into a crisis. The grief, anxiety, loneliness, and depression students experience continue to spill into the classroom as campuses open and students return to college. In the spring of 2022, Compton College began a partnership with The Virtual Care Group, a private third party company, to provide students with 24-hour access to physical and mental healthcare services virtually. Students were introduced to The Virtual Care Group during Compton College's welcome week, where the group had a table promoting its digital health application. The app sends weekly announcements and emails through Canvas, Compton College's learning management system. Students do not have to sign-up to access the app; all students are eligible to speak with a licensed physician or therapist using a computer, phone, or tablet.

Further, Compton College has recently partnered with St. John's Community Health to hire an additional counselor who works with St. John's to provide in-person mental health services to students on campus. St. John's is one of the largest nonprofit healthcare providers in LA County. Currently, Compton College has two mental health counselors on campus to provide in-person therapeutic services. As Compton continues to invest in health services to students, the College plans to expand the health services most in demand by students.



SECTION 8

Eliminating Institutional Debt



As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment at community colleges dramatically decreased. Thousands of potential students never enrolled, and thousands of current students withdrew from school across all three public higher education segments due to pandemic-related hardships. To make matters worse, a little-known type of student debt, called “institutional debt,” increased significantly among low-income students, particularly with the onset of COVID-19. Due to economic, family, or health issues, thousands of students across the CCC system had to withdraw from school; however, they remained responsible for any student aid they had received and any unpaid student balances – so-called institutional debt. Institutional debt disproportionately impacts low-income students and students of color.

Earlier this year, a team of researchers from the UC, Berkeley School of Law; the UC, Irvine School of Law; and the UC, Merced released a groundbreaking study projecting that nearly 750,000 California students became indebted directly to California public colleges during the COVID-19 pandemic.²³ The report found that when students owe institutional debts to “Creditor Colleges,” the consequences can be catastrophic. For example, if these debts go unpaid, schools typically bar these students from enrolling in future courses further decreasing retention and enrollment rates. The current websites of at least 7 UC and 19 CSU institutions also state that students with outstanding debts could be referred to for-profit debt collection agencies.

Also included in the report is the leadership Compton College has demonstrated in this field to ensure that institutional debt isn’t a barrier for students to enroll in or continue their higher education. From spring 2020 to spring 2021, Compton found that the median fees owed was \$41.00 among 2,702 students, totaling \$527,531.22 in institutional debt. Of the students impacted by institutional debt, Latinx and Black students held a higher percentage of the total fees owed at 38.8% and 34.67% respectively. Between 2021 and 2022, Compton College has paid off a total of \$699,436.48 in institutional debt, and will be analyzing the data in the coming months to examine the effect of this initiative on student success.

Compton College used Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund II dollars to discharge the entirety of the **\$527,531.22 students owed**, removing holds placed on accounts and enabling students to re-enroll.

California has steadily increased the state's investment in supporting students to afford a higher education degree. In 2018 the state budget reformed the funding allocation for community colleges to a more student-centered formula, and in 2021 the state invested \$153 million annually to expand Cal Grant access to students attending a community college. In the latest 2022-23 State Budget, the Cal Grant Equity Framework was adopted and is pending full implementation in 2024, providing a much-needed overhaul of the state's financial aid system to eliminate outdated barriers for students and increase access to financial aid to 133,000 students. These investments are all headed in the right direction, but without eliminating institutional debt, these investments could end up paying for student fees. Institutional debt has other severe consequences beyond educational impacts. If those debts go unpaid and are placed in collections, students can see much harm done to their credit history and future financial well-being.

California has started addressing the issue of institutional debt through state funding. In the 2022-23 State Budget two funding sources are provided to CCCs that can go towards eliminating institutional debt. The Learning Recovery Emergency Block Grant provides \$650 million in General Funds support for CCCs to, among other items, "discharge unpaid fees due or owed by a student to a community college in the district." There was also a one-time Proposition 98 allocation of \$150 million for CCC Student Retention and Enrollment to re-engage with students who may have withdrawn due to the impacts of the pandemic and provide fiscal incentives for their return.

Additionally, AB 1958 was signed into law this year, creating the Community College Student Access, Retention, and Debt Cancellation Program to provide fiscal incentives to encourage the enrollment and re-enrollment of students impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but has yet to be funded. These efforts and CCCs allocation of these funds towards institutional debt, as demonstrated at Compton College, will help address institutional debt for students at CCCs, but more can and should be done to help all students at our public higher education institutions.

SECTION 9

Emergency Aid Delivered



Well before the COVID-19 pandemic, students struggled to meet their basic needs in part due to the lack of financial resources. Students from low-income households don't have the financial resources to pay for tuition and the real costs of attending college - housing, food, transportation, health care, and more. For these students, any unexpected cost due to an emergency or other life event could upend their educational trajectory.

For example, the loss of a job could result in a student being unable to pay their rent, this situation can create a cascade of negative consequences - the threat of losing their housing, which creates stress and mental health burdens, and if they lose their housing as previously discussed in an above section, this could severely impact their academic success and overall well-being and could lead to dropping out. According to a report conducted by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 90% of emergency aid recipients said they experienced lower rates of stress, which allowed them to maintain their concentration on their studies. Furthermore, 58% of students reported the aid helped them remain in college, while more than half said it limited the hours they had to work.²⁴

Emergency financial aid that is flexible and timely can be the difference between a student dropping out and earning their diploma. To address the severe emergency impact the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked on the lives of students, in the spring of 2020, Compton College partnered with Edquity, a third-party vendor, to process emergency grants.

To receive an emergency grant, students were required to apply through Edquity and complete a release of information request to allow Compton College to release student information to Edquity. Eligibility for emergency grant aid included being a currently enrolled student. Edquity received 292 applications for emergency grant aid and awarded 92 grants. Problems with the application process and eligibility restrictions were the main reasons an application was rejected by Edquity. In response, Compton College reviewed the application and process and

Emergency Aid Delivered Cont.

worked with students who had applied to eliminate unnecessary processing problems. Through this partnership, from June 2020 to April 2022, \$472,140 in emergency grant aid was distributed to current Compton College students. Through aggregate data Edquity pulled from the applications, 81% of students reported facing multiple challenges in securing food, housing, child care, transportation, safety, learning, and more. Housing, food, transportation, and learning challenges were the most often cited.

For 2022 alone Compton College has provided \$3 million dollars in emergency aid²⁵ to students and of that \$3 million, \$500,000 went to dual enrollment students.²⁶

Dual enrollment programs have increased throughout the nation and the state. These programs offer high school students the opportunity to better prepare for college, can help reduce the cost of a degree, and graduate in less time. These programs can be especially advantageous to students who are low-income. Dual enrollment students do not have the same access to financial aid as other current college students. Therefore it is critical that these students are equally included in all student basic needs supportive services at their college campuses.



SECTION 10

Closing the Digital Divide for Students



Well before the pandemic, students faced a digital divide, where access to and facility with the internet is a requirement to be academically successful and yet not all students have this access. Today's college students must have access to the internet to turn in assignments, access coursework materials, communicate with professors and classmates and so much more. This means students need devices (laptops, smartphones, routers, etc.) to access reliable high-speed internet, and support to navigate their campus, coursework portals, software, and online programs, especially for students who never had consistent access to a computer before college, to persist and complete their higher education degree.

As nearly all workplaces shut down when everyone went into quarantine during the outbreak of COVID-19, including college and university campuses, college students quickly found themselves in fully online learning settings. Nearly overnight, the pandemic greatly exacerbated the digital divide, and students who had previously struggled with this basic need were greatly impacted. In response, Compton College moved to ensure that every student and employee had a laptop and Wi-Fi hotspots available to ensure the ability to work on campus or remotely. Additionally, Compton College provided 519 headsets and 240 calculators to students during the pandemic.

Through the Compton College Laptop Loan Program, students could get a free laptop as long as they remained enrolled. In the spring 2020 semester, all currently enrolled Compton College students were sent an email outlining instructions for obtaining a laptop, by first submitting a Student Loan Laptop Program request online and then waiting for an email confirmation with instructions for how to pick up the device. Compton College had two in-person distribution days and then the College switched to remotely shipping the laptops to students' homes to ensure student and staff safety. All laptops included pre-installed licensed software needed to access college technological resources and services.

In the spring of 2020 semester, 548 students applied to the Laptop Loan Program and Compton College distributed 291 laptops. The 291 students who received a laptop through the loan program represented only 5% of the student body. The low rate of laptops distributed is attributed to students not checking their school email accounts to follow through with obtaining a laptop. To reach the initial goal of the program reaching 725 students, the program was continued through the fall of 2020, and an additional 288 laptops were distributed. This brought the total number of laptops distributed to 574.

As students and faculty reported that students were struggling with internet access during the pandemic, Compton College purchased 500 hotspots to lend to students. First, students had to submit an application, and then Compton College staff confirmed the student's current enrollment status. Confirmed currently enrolled students were then shipped a hotspot device. A total of 484 students applied for hotspot loans and Compton College distributed 258, which accounts for 5% of the entire student population. Staff reported two major challenges in disseminating the hotspots: students were not enrolled in courses or dropped their courses and students were not checking their Compton College email for notification of the availability of hotspots. Despite challenges to distribution, technology resources have proven to be imperative to student success and continue to be provided by Compton College through fall 2022.

Students who borrowed a hotspot achieved a much **higher academic success and retention rate than the general student body population.**

Hot Spot Compton College
Spring 2020

Unique Students	n=258 5%	n=5,544 100%
Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%
Asian	5%	6%
Black or African American	28%	23%
Latinx	59%	63%
Pacific Islander	0%	1%
White	2%	2%
Unknown or Other	6%	5%
Success & Retention		
Success Rate*	70%	61%
Retention Rate*	84%	76%



SECTION 11

Conclusion

Compton College is at the forefront of eliminating basic needs barriers. By taking a comprehensive, data-driven approach, while also listening to students to learn precisely what they need, the College can assist in their success. This policy brief outlined several key programs Compton College has implemented in the areas of housing, food, transportation, health care, institutional debt, emergency aid, and the digital divide. Compton College's programs should serve as a model for other colleges and universities looking to best support students to thrive and achieve academically. Additionally, the following five policy recommendations are provided as California leads the nation in addressing the real costs of college.

First, effective strategies to address student basic needs require dedicated federal and state funding. Compton College used both federal and state funding to create these programs and continually conduct analysis and review to determine which programs to continue or reform. Federal and state investments dedicated to meeting students' basic needs are critically important and higher education institutions should leverage these resources in ways centered on solving students' basic needs which in turn supports student success. Federal and state funding for students' basic needs should be continued and supported further in future federal and state budgets.

Second, colleges should prioritize meeting the basic needs of their students when making budget decisions. By prioritizing students' basic needs, Compton College stretches funding sources through innovative partnerships to provide services most in demand by their students and fully integrate basic needs services throughout the campus. All campus staff are expected to be able to direct students to any campus resource.

Third, as colleges engage in budgeting and programming that support students' basic needs, these decisions need to be data driven. Basic needs programs data should be disaggregated by at least race and gender to ensure that the programs created are working and equitable. Compton College data provided key insights to the programs created from which students were taking advantage of services, to which programs were making an impact on student success. With data and analyzing the creative partnership programs, Compton College was able to reform processing to serve more students and meet the needs of their students struggling the most.

Collecting data on students' basic needs initiatives can also capture what support employees may also need. As colleges monitor the data on basic needs services, identifying programs to support employees' basic needs such as housing, food, and mental health services should also be tracked and analyzed.

Fourth, dual enrollment students must be included in all student basic needs programs and services. Dual enrollment can be life changing for students who come from low-income backgrounds. Compton College provided critical emergency aid grants to dual enrollment students as these students also found themselves in crisis just as their current college student peers during the pandemic.

Finally, there should be strong support for unapologetic leadership about decisions based on students' basic needs. Compton College students have benefitted from innovative campus leadership that prioritized student basic needs and access to resources.

Compton College's dedication to its students has proved it to be an exemplary campus. By implementing a student-first stance and then reviewing budget options, Compton has provided the most in-demand resources and support for its student body. And this is only the beginning. Compton College will continue advocating and investing in its students' basic needs, improving their approach with each passing semester.

Endnotes

- ¹ In the 2021–22 CA State Budget, AB 132 provides for basic needs centers at California Community Colleges. Compton College has a department location for students on campus, and this brief provides an in-depth look at the multiple ways Compton College meets AB 132 by budgeting campus funds centered on meeting students' basic needs and fully integrating basic needs work throughout the campus.
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