

New Role Brings More Focus to Student Basic Needs

Colleges and universities have started hiring directors of basic needs to address growing food and housing insecurity among students.

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When Andrea Mora enrolled at University of California, Irvine, in 2012, she was a low-income, first-generation student. She was also 25 years old and an undocumented immigrant from Peru.

She'd spent seven years as a part-time student at Los Angeles Pierce Community College after graduating from high school and struggled to earn money and find financial aid to pay for a four-year education.

"All of those intersectionalities opened my eyes to a lot of inequity in higher education," Mora said.

She channeled her interest in these issues into student activism at the Irvine campus and became president of Dreamers at UCI, an advocacy organization for undocumented students, and an appointed member of the president's advisory council on undocumented students, which helped her see the gaps in services the university provided to underrepresented students. And she used her visibility as a student leader to advocate for more support services for undocumented and low-income students.

"I was fortunate to be part of a coalition across the UC system that was able to advocate successfully to the president of UCI at the time for resources and funding for undocumented students," she said.

Mora is now UC Irvine's director of basic needs and tasked with supervising the array of services the university provides to students whose backgrounds and life stories are much like her own: students from low-income or immigrant backgrounds; first in their families to attend college; Black, Hispanic or Indigenous, or BIPOC.

Mora now has professional counterparts at all 10 campuses in the University of California system. Many higher ed institutions around the country, including the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and New York University, also have employed directors of student basic needs and implemented various other programs to address student poverty.

College administrators nationwide were already starting to tackle the issue in recent years but homed in on it after the pandemic revealed stark economic disparities among students. Some were going

without enough food to eat; others were sleeping in their cars. Many lacked stable or affordable housing, while others had no internet service at home.

“For the campuses that were already focusing on basic needs, it kind of reaffirmed the reasons why we exist,” Mora said.

Mora hadn’t originally considered working on food and housing insecurity issues, but her mentors saw her passion and drive and encouraged her to do so. A month after she graduated in 2015 with a bachelor’s degree in history and global culture, she was hired by her alma mater to do just that. Student affairs administrators at UC Irvine used a one-time grant to create a new position for a food access and security coordinator. She was later promoted to basic needs coordinator in 2017, which she says was an acknowledgment of the growing needs of students and an expansion and evolution of efforts to address them. It was also a way for the university to make the position permanent.

“By advocating and listening to my peers’ needs at UC Irvine on food, housing and financial insecurity, my volunteer work and passion developed in that area,” she said.



Mora became director of the basic needs center in 2019. A former supervisor advocated for that position; they had seen the need for a new center, a larger staff and a director to oversee all aspects of helping students meet their basic needs. UC Irvine was one of the earliest colleges to have such a center.

“I’m very glad I made a decision back then to say to myself, ‘I need to stick with this,’ and not explore a different route, because the first couple of years were difficult,” Mora said. “Especially at a place like

UCI, where we have almost 30,000 undergraduate students and it feels like the work is never done.”

The UC system touts itself as being a leader on the basic needs issue and promotes its Basic Needs Initiative (<https://basicneeds.ucop.edu/about/history.html>), as a national model.

“The Basic Needs movement at the university has been pivotal in advancing student services, resources, research and best practices for historically underserved student populations,” the initiative’s website states.

California lawmakers signaled their support for such efforts by approving \$18.5 million in the 2019–20 state budget to fund initiatives to address food and housing insecurity across the UC system. The funding, which included \$15 million to target food and housing insecurity in general and \$3.5 million for rapid rehousing efforts for homeless and housing-insecure students, led to creation of the basic needs centers across the UC campuses, where students can meet with social workers for help with housing needs and shop in the free food pantry. Additional services include mental wellness resources and crisis help.



“In the past seven years, I went from being a team of one, on one-year grants and with no staff, to now running a basic needs center where we have 10 professional staff, including me,” said Mora.

She added that her position is now permanently funded by the university, and the center has a \$2 million annual budget. A new permanent center opened on the Irvine campus last month to replace the temporary center, which was housed in a trailer.

Garret Naiman, associate vice chancellor and dean of students at UC Santa Cruz, believes the director's position is key to harnessing all the services available to students in need. He works closely with Kednel Jean, the university's director of basic needs, who was hired in 2019.

"The reason I think a director is so important is that it adds visibility to this as a resource and the programs that our university can provide to students," Naiman said. "And it also provides some leadership around multiple multitudes of issues that are connected to basic needs."

The California Community Colleges were required by state law to establish or expand basic needs centers by February 2022 at each of the 116 institutions in the system, and to employ at least one basic needs coordinator by July 2022.

A national report (https://cccse.org/sites/default/files/Mission_Critical.pdf) released in October 2022 found that community college students, especially students of color and student parents, experience high levels of food and housing insecurity (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/10/21/high-food-and-housing-insecurity-community-colleges>).

New York University brought on Yvonne Erazo as the new director of basic needs earlier this month. John Beckman, senior vice president for public affairs and strategic communications, said the university has programs such as its Courtesy Meals (<https://www.nyu.edu/students/student-information-and-resources/courtesy-meals.html>), program, which provides students with emergency food assistance, and Swipe It Forward (<https://www.nyu.edu/about/leadership-university-administration/university-senate/membership/councils/student-government-assembly/swipe.html>), a student-designed initiative that allows other students to donate meals from their meal plans to those in need.

"The university wanted to have one person overseeing the effort, a person who was in a position to engage students directly and help them get the support they need, but who could also step back and advise on whether there are policy decisions that should be made about food accessibility," Beckman said.

He added that the position is not limited to food accessibility and is also responsible for a range of basic needs-related matters, including a childcare subsidy program for graduate students (<https://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/students-with-children/Application.html>).

David Thompson, practitioner-researcher at the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University, said college and university administrators have paid more attention to student poverty, including food and housing insecurity, over the last five to six years and allocated more funding for students' basic needs.

"With the pandemic, I think it became clear to a lot more institutions, and particularly a lot more folks in leadership roles, that students' basic needs were not being met," Thompson said.

Thompson said the Hope Center's researchers have been monitoring and tracking the increase in positions focused on basic needs and found approximately 400 jobs at more than 250 institutions related to student basic needs. Of those, 61 have "director" or "assistant director" titles, and 16 are at the dean or assistant dean level.

"There are many resources on campus to help students with basic needs through the Dean of Students' office, but there hasn't been a formalized director role at Temple like we have seen in a lot of other institutions," Thompson said.

The Hope Center also recently launched the [Hope Impact Partnerships Program](https://hope.temple.edu/education-training-services) (<https://hope.temple.edu/education-training-services>), which works with the institution's administrators and other institutions using real-time data to assess students' basic needs, campus policies and programs.

Blake Weiss, program director for basic needs at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, has worked at the university since January 2020 and started as the special projects coordinator. He said the office of the dean of students prioritized basic needs support for students and created the director's position on campus within the last two years.

"More four-year public institutions need to take note and need to continue to push for this type of work," Weiss said. "It's important for us to have a person in place to lead the support system that's there."

Mora believes that support system will always be needed.

"Having done this work for a few years now and continuing to be compassionate and be fully invested in it, I never think the work is done, and student needs are continuing to always emerge."

Read more by

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