

Higher Ed Rewired

Season 1, Episode 2

Leading the Research on Food and Housing Insecurity

Host: Oliver Wong

Guest: Dr. Rashida Crutchfield

(Ambient Sound)

“GO AHEAD AND TYPE IN YOUR ID NUMBER PLEASE”

OW: It's finals week at California State University, Long Beach, and students are stopping by the Beach Pantry. Joe, a geology senior comes a couple of times a week for the free food.

Joe: I've got some Top Ramen, a rice and bean thing, some pasta

...

Checking out sound continues and fades....

OW: Campus food pantries such as the one at Cal State Long Beach have become more common over the past decade. It's a sign that students look to their campuses for more than just a good library or student union. In these volatile economic times many need help with the basics - like food and even shelter. That was true of Imani (ee-mah- nee) Moses during her senior year.

Imani Moses: So in fall 2017 I had to move from where I was currently staying and I had nowhere to go. So I became homeless. I was sleeping in my car and kind of bouncing from different places and then I needed help. I realized that it was starting to take a toll on me physically and mentally

OW: Imani found herself in a situation far more serious than the usual starving student stereotype.

CRUTCHFIELD: You know when I was in college I ate ramen noodles or spaghetti for a week and a Rice a Roni or whatever because I partied too much and had to pull back on my budget. But this isn't what our students are experiencing, what our students are experiencing is a lack of means.

That's Dr. Rashida Crutchfield from Cal State Long Beach; she's been studying how students are navigating the difficult terrain of pursuing higher education while staying housed, clothed and fed.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: so many of our students are coming to university to find a fulfilling life as well as financial stability. But what financial aid used to cover, doesn't cover it anymore. So the real cost of higher education isn't just tuition. It's housing it's food it's bills. And a lot of our students really are not going through a rite of passage they're going through trauma which means that they are not getting food and that influences their whole physical and mental state.

[FADE IN MUSIC]

On this episode, we look at what Dr. Crutchfield and others have done to identify and address the basic needs of college students. I'm Dr. Oliver Wang and this is Higher Ed Rewired.

[POST - MUSIC THEME]

[SHOW OPEN PROMO - :20 - [Language Here](#)]

PROMO: *Higher Ed Rewired is a production of the California State University — the largest, most diverse four-year public university system in the country, and an engine of social and economic mobility. Higher Ed Rewired examines exciting innovations taking place across higher education that have the potential to improve student success and to positively change the environment in which we teach, learn and discover.*

[MUSIC UNDER - AND FADE OUT UNDER INTRO]

[SEGMENT A]

Welcome to this episode of Higher Ed Rewired. I'm Oliver Wang - professor of sociology at California State University, Long Beach.

Hunger and Homelessness are two blunt words we haven't typically associated with college students. In many ways though, housing and food insecurity have been problems hidden in plain sight and in more recent times, educators have made efforts to finally shine a spotlight on these issues. In 2016, Dr. Rashida Crutchfield and her colleague Dr. Jennifer McGuire at Humboldt State University, started a deep dive across the California State campuses to understand the experiences and needs of our students. Take for example hunger, aka food insecurity.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: so what we found was that forty one point six percent of our students were food insecure. We found 20 percent of our students were experiencing low food security so getting food perhaps feeling full but not nutritionally balanced food because they could not afford it. And that piece is really important. It's not about choice. It's about not having means to get the food that I need. And we found that 20 percent of our students were experiencing very low food security. So students regularly missing meals because they can't afford to eat and they are hungry.

OLIVER WANG: And likewise in the same way in which food security takes on many different forms. Homelessness as well takes on different forms especially for students. You wanted to describe a little bit about what those differences can look like.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: Sure. So a lot of people when they think of homelessness they think of someone usually a man usually an older man on the side of the freeway holding a sign and we don't discount the experiences of all kinds of folks who experience homelessness. But for our students a lot of times our students are very hidden so they're experiencing homelessness. Some students are street living. So I've talked I've spoken to students who are living in their car living under bridges living in barns living in tents. That experience exists. Far more of our students are doing what we

call couch surfing or dorm surfing. Yeah right yeah. So they're moving from place to place so that housing hustle. Right. So they might be with a friend this day in their car another day. With an auntie the next day but not having a stable place to stay.

OLIVER WANG: Right. I mean it's housing insecurity in the same way right in terms that lack of stability lack consistency.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: Sure. The Department of Education gives a definition for homelessness as a lack of fixed regular and adequate place to stay. Yeah. So HUD tells us that homelessness is only chronic homelessness and that street living experience or living in a homeless shelter. In education we're aware that that instability that lack of knowing where to go day to day has just like food security does, has an influence on your mental health your physical health and your ability to function your overall well-being. If I don't know where I'm gonna put my head tonight it's really hard to focus on my sociology test and my finals.

OLIVER WANG: I think for me I was certainly taken aback at the severity of how this is and in recognizing that there are different levels and layers to how different students confront this. But part of it is I think there is especially around both food insecurity and homelessness. There is a certain level of embarrassment or shame and so students are not likely to make this publicly known when they're talking with their faculty members or staff on a campus and unless it's a dire situation. As such I tend to think of these things as being problems that are hidden in plain sight. And we already know that students not just here at Long Beach but throughout the system you know they're dealing with trying to balance their class load. They're dealing with working part or even full time and doing

all these things and then you stack on top of this the idea that they don't know what their next meal is gonna come from or what their next bed is going to be. But certainly I imagine has to really be thought of as a greater problem a greater challenge for our students in just how do they navigate college when they have all of this other stuff to deal with along the way.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: What we have to recognize in higher education and in society as a whole is that we have this ongoing expectation and narrative that people in general are going to pull themselves up by their bootstraps right and make life work for themselves. In essence that's what our students are doing. I think a lot of people in general don't want to be seen as takers or people who use services and folks who are coming to college really want to see that they are taking control of their life and moving that forward.

But when you don't have food in your belly and you don't have a place to stay it's really hard to focus a lot of the students talked about as you said they're usually taking really full loads because they want to move their progress forward quickly. Often they're working upwards of a job or two or sometimes three. They may still have really strong contact with their family at home. I think some people assume that if you're experiencing homelessness you're disconnected from family, but sometimes family just can't afford to support you. And you're supposed to be a grown up now. So the physical manifestation of food insecurity just will cause -- like I'm hungry right now a little bit. So it'll cause me to be a little anxious a little jumpy a little more frustrated. It might cause me to withdraw or it might cause me to be more assertive.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: I think for us in higher ed especially as educators we get to take a step back and think if that student in the

back of the room is falling asleep or is agitated it might not be because they don't think I'm brilliant. It might be that they're not having a place to stay and they might not have eaten today. And that's a new perspective for us to really shift. Right.

OLIVER WANG: It requires a certain level of understanding and empathy that may not necessarily come from just whatever expectations we came in with. Along similar lines, I'm wondering, because the study you contributed to, I've had colleagues describe this study as being groundbreaking. I'm not asking you to pat yourself on the back here but can you describe the ways in which the study did break new ground. And you mentioned before that when you first started on this there were there was not existent research out there that was focusing on these things. And so when you were putting your study together what were the things that you were deliberately trying to explore that you just had not seen existing in other research.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: Right. So really no one has had done a study of this size on basic needs. The HOPE Lab which was once in Wisconsin and now at Temple has done some really interesting work and there have been a few folks who have been looking at food insecurity -- folks in Hawaii had been looking at food insecurity -- but really no one had done a study this big in a system this large. And so really we needed to find out what the prevalence was because you know the first thing people say is, Well honestly the first thing a lot of people say is this can't be true. And the next thing people say is Well how big is it really.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: And so this was the first study of its kind in a four year institution system like the CSU and then we wanted to not only find out how many but we also wanted to know what was going on for students in their holistic wellbeing. So not

just about. Well definitely about their academics. But also as you said about what is this doing for students and their mental and physical health. What's happening for them.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: We ask students about how many days they are able to do the things they're expected to do or that they're expecting of themselves. We ask them about their health and well-being. We ask them about their mental health. We ask them about their obligations with family and work. And we asked about their service use. And so it gave us a real picture that we had never seen before and that was really new. And it is, you know, I, I am glad that I have been able to contribute to this work but really our students are telling us what they need. And so you know I really view the work that Dr. McGuire and I are doing is really just amplifying their voices.

OW:

Professor Crutchfield and Maguire's study provided key data that's gone into the groundwork for the California State University's Basic Needs Initiative

It's designed to help students across the entire system become more academically successful by finding ways to support, well, their basic needs. For example, there are now food pantries on all twenty three campuses. This isn't just a place for students to find food, it's also a starting point to introduce them to other resources.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: With leadership from Chico State especially Stephanie Bianco and her team up there more and more of our campuses are doing application assistance for Cal Fresh. If you are eligible for work study and a number of different stipulations those are all indicators of income. And so you can be eligible for Cal Fresh.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: However applying for Cal Fresh is cumbersome and tedious. Yeah here at Long Beach State along with more than half of our CSUs, students get assistance with filling out that application and going through a validation process for that and that then can give students money on an EBT card to supplement their food needs which is really critical. It's a huge help for students. I talked to one student who said you know the only semester she was on the dean's list was when she was on Cal Fresh, because she was eating every day. She got breakfast every day.

So that's been a really important initiative for the CSU system. Here at Long Beach State, we have a program called the Student Emergency Intervention and Wellness program or we call it C-WEB. And that program C-Web has a number of programs and services but it really has been incredibly helpful for so many of our students who are in financial crisis and often on the brink of regularly not eating or being homeless.

OW: Here at Long Beach that office is run by a long time Cal State staffer:

My name is Ken Kelly, I'm director of the basic needs program and gender and equity center

It was quiet when we caught up with Kelly in his office, but earlier in the week he had his hands full.

.. that would have been last Monday. The busiest day I've had. There was a fire in our local sorority house of ours and we had to put up five students in emergency housing get the meals get was a whole bunch of stuff and they couldn't take any of their clothes, because asbestos was in the air, so all their soft stuff they had to throw out so we were getting clothing for them and then taking care of it. It was kind of a crazy day.

IMANI-- my village people, that's what I call them

OW: This is the same program Imani Moses got help from when she was homeless. She was struggling and a professor ---- Claire Garrido-Ortega --- told her she didn't have to figure out her problems by herself.

Imani Moses: ...and she let me know that we had resources here on campus for me to provide me with some housing. And I sat down with her and she asked me what do I need, filled out the application and I got a chance to talk to a few amazing young ladies in that office and they've been there helping me ever since.

OW: Imani Moses *did* graduate and now works as a Library assistant at Cal State Long Beach and plans to go on to graduate school in the near future.

While Imani's story isn't unique, Rashida Crutchfield found that there are differences in student needs across campuses and across the California State university system.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: this is something that impacts all 23 campuses. What we found is that it definitely is disproportional to certain folks. So we found that our African-American first generation students are hardest hit by these issues and I think that is a conversation that we have to bring to the forefront, that African-American students and students of color in general are disproportionately represented in these numbers. This is a justice issue.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: It is not just about access. It is also about overall marginalization of populations. We also saw higher rates for our DACA students, our dreamers, and our former foster youth, as well. For food security, women are more likely to be food

insecure than men. But the flip side is true for homelessness. So men are more likely to experience homelessness than women.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: From campus to campus though in doing interviews and focus groups with students, it was really interesting to see our students be really creative about how to get their needs met and how to survive and thrive despite dealing with these issues.

So, I met students here at Long Beach and in other urban environments, where they're largely sleeping in cars or couch surfing. I met a student here who's sleeping in a storage unit for most of the year. And, that's tough. That's really tough. It's not meant for human habitation. In Humboldt, I met students who were sleeping in tents. I learned about sleeping in barns. I learned about sleeping on farms in Fresno.

I was sitting with a group of young women, well, I shouldn't call them young women there. They weren't all young because a lot of our students are well beyond right. Perhaps what we think of as a traditional age student. But I sat with these women and they sat and shared recipes on how to make a cup of noodles last four or three meals. And they laughed and they joked and we all sort of laughed together because we were comfortable but then I think there was this moment where we all sat back and thought Oh this is bad. This shouldn't be this way. It was tough. It was a moment of unity but also shared distress.

OLIVER WANG: It makes me think of the ways in which back in the 1960s when the state of California established that the so-called master plan for education which /// was designed partly to help organize. What does the CSU do. What does the UC system do with her. Community colleges do. and that master plan became a

template for other state university systems to follow because California was ahead of the curve given that it seems like not you know no other state university systems have done some of the research I can imagine that these findings might hopefully help compel let's say the SUNY system in New York or the state college systems in most of the states in the U.S. because they have the primary educators for the people in their states that this would compel them to do similar work and explore. What are some of the similarities and differences and what are their students facing as well.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: I really think that us taking on understanding these issues is a courageous thing. I've now been able to travel across the country and support this work. You know folks who have had been trying to get this moving under the radar really are supported by the model that the CSU has provided, because it's scary. I think when we uncover when we are real and we really are awake to what's happening for students it means that we have to take on a responsibility. I think a lot of institutions or administrators and institutions think well what is our role in education like where does it stop. Where do we become educators and lean over into being a social service agency. I've heard a number of people say we're not a social service agency but we are tasked with student success. And in the CSU's Graduation Initiative. And really thinking about if we really want to make sure that higher education is accessible from all different kinds of people who are. Eligible and excited and on fire to do it and have the preparation to come here and do it. If we really want to have them graduate in a way that they will be self-sufficient and contributing amazing members of our community then we have a role to play in making sure that happens. Sometimes that means that we have programs and services on campus. Sometimes that means we recognize our opportunities to be good partners with you know

community agencies and the state to really engage in lots of different creative ways that that we have a role to play right.

OLIVER WANG: You know you earlier were comparing what our students are going to as a form of trauma again not having food security not knowing where they're going to be able to sleep and so they're coming to campus with all of these other burdens that in the past have typically been swept under the rug or not talked about for the reasons that with you and I have been talking about. What are some of the ways that schools can do more to help students who are dealing with all of these issues in addition to the emotional and mental stress that comes with dealing with these issues.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: There are a lot of things that we get to think about when it comes to trauma. And I definitely say that being food insecure and homeless is trauma. In general, we have to think about these issues as even if a student gets stability like once students find stability. So, now I'm eating every day and I know where I'm going to stay. Recovering from trauma takes a long time. So just because I am housed now doesn't mean that I'm done with the stress and anxiety right of what I've dealt with. And so I think for those of us who have had access and privilege and have never experienced homelessness, often we sort of look to our movies and think: OK, now they're housed and it's happily ever after. Right. And so we have to be aware as we continue to engage our students that they will continue to worry even if their lives have leveled out. And so we as faculty have to recognize that in the classroom our student affairs tend to be prepared for that. But we have to continue to stay connected to have high touch experiences with our students so that we can be supportive of their progress.

OLIVER WANG: Last question along these lines is for those who might be listening to this and feel compelled to want to find a place to start to help. Where would you suggest they start.

RASHIDA CRUTCHFIELD: Lots of different creative ways that people in the CSU and outside of the CSU can support what we're doing. Clearly financial support is incredibly helpful. The basic needs initiative for the CSU is continuing to grow to link researchers to expand our knowledge base and also to continually develop. How you know the different programs and services we have available here on our campus. Folks can definitely make fiscal as well as non-perishable items for our pantry and for our services. I'm interested in thinking about the creative ways that people can connect to students. So I think about our alumni for instance and think about how many empty nesters we have who might want to rent a room at an affordable rate for a student who needs it. I think there's so many creative ways that we can think about expanding and connecting our universities to our local communities.

OW: That was Dr. Rashida Crutchfield. She and Dr. Jennifer Maguire have finished phase three of the study looking at how the Cal State system is responding to students with (different) programs and services, and what are the supports and barriers to students using the services.

All three public college systems in California - community, state, and university continue to refine how best to support student success through The California Higher Education Basic Needs Alliance. Rashida Crutchfield also has a new book out: *Addressing Homelessness and Housing Insecurity: Strategies for Educational Leaders*". You can find links in the show notes of this podcast and on our website Higher-Ed-Rewired-dot-com.

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OW: And that's it for this episode of Higher Ed Rewired. If you're listening and you haven't yet subscribed to the podcast please do. You'll find the links on our website or search your favorite podcast player for Higher Ed Rewired - dot com.

[CLOSE SHOW PROMO - :30 - [LANGUAGE HERE](#)]

From lovely Long Beach, California -- I'm Oliver Wang... and for all of us here at California State University -- thanks for listening!

[MUSIC POST - AND OUT]