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ILLUSTRATION BY MARK STIVERS



OFF MENU

The hunger in higher education

BY OLLA SWANSON

College is a challenging time when students face new adult choices: Should I study hard or party hard tonight? Should I finish with my current degree or change directions? Should I join sorority/fraternity A or B—or none at all?

Then there are the difficult, sometimes life-altering choices: Should I eat or pay tuition?

This is reality for one in three California college students, according to a survey published last year by the California Student Aid Commission.

It's also reality for 32-year-old Eliva Martinez, who said she struggled with housing and food insecurity while attending classes at Sacramento State. Earlier this year, Martinez made the choice between continuing the fall 2020 semester or skipping it entirely so she could pay for food and rent.

"One of my professors helped me find the Sac State food bank and CARES, who helped me stay in school," Martinez said.

Crisis Assistance and Resource Education Support provides basic needs and resources for students experiencing food and housing challenges. Every semester, the

program aids about 250 students, with 50 students receiving emergency funds. Of those 50 students, 99% complete their semester and the average GPA has been 2.89.

"It is essential for students to have all the support they need to be able to achieve their academic goals, which we know will serve them long after they leave our campus," said CARES case manager Danielle Munoz. "Some of our students struggle to obtain the same amount of resources as their peers and through our safety net of support, we provide a more equitable learning environment."

Not all are as fortunate as Martinez to have these resources pointed out.

To raise awareness to students, the California Homeless Youth Project created a resource guide to help students find emergency food, housing and financial resources on their campuses.

"We wanted to have a sense of what types of resources are being offered for students with basic needs and insecurities at colleges in California," said Shahera Hyatt, the project director. "We wanted

to create a resource for students experiencing homelessness and those working most with them."

Food and shelter help for students is an ongoing project in California. Last year Gov. Gavin Newsom signed Senate Bill 173, which streamlined the Cal Fresh application process for college students. SB 1082, yet to be passed, could also benefit more than 100,000 students by improving existing student aid forms to identify Cal Fresh eligibility.

Martinez, with the help of CARES and the CSU Sacramento Food Bank, was able to stay enrolled in her classes. This fall will be her last semester and she will graduate with a liberal arts degree, on her way to becoming a teacher.

"With the help from CARES," Martinez said, "I can continue to fulfill my goal of being a teacher and inspire my students to fulfill their dreams." □

Want to learn more about resources for college students? Visit cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov. If you or someone you know is a Sacramento State student in need of assistance, email cares@csus.edu.

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