

LONG BEACH POST

Long Beach City College Fighting Student Hunger, Homelessness One Donation At a Time

by Jason Ruiz in Education

0



Food and other goods donated to the Long Beach City College Foundation Photo: Virginia Baxter

Nearly half of community college students are struggling with food and housing issues, with 20 percent of those suffering from hunger, with one out of eight experiencing homelessness, issues that not only affect their ability to matriculate toward college degrees, but also present challenges

for daily survival. These were the findings of [a report published earlier this month](#) by the Association of Community College Trustees and the Wisconsin Hope Lab.^[1]

The report, titled “Hungry to Learn,” surveyed over 4,000 college students at 10 community colleges across the country to better understand what kind of issues are impeding the progress of America’s college students. It also contained data linking food and housing insecurity to increased occurrences of clinical depression, severe anxiety, eating disorders and suicidal thoughts.

“Material hardship affects the level of effort that can be devoted to school,” the study reads. “It compromises students’ chances for degree completion and limits the institutions that the students can afford.”

It also pointed out that with the compound effects of these strains on student populations that community colleges would continue to struggle to improve their graduation rates as the issues persist. A presentation delivered by LBCC’s transfer center earlier this year showed that on average, 30 percent of LBCC students take six years to graduate or transfer from the school, a timeframe that was deemed “unacceptable” by Superintendent-President Eloy Oakley during his [State of the College address in February](#).

In an effort to combat those effects and help its own population of homeless and students struggling to eat balanced meals, Long Beach Community College District Trustees Sunny Zia and Dr. Virginia Baxter helped launch a task force to not only help drive donations toward the Long Beach City College Foundation helping support students in need of tuition and fee assistance, but also for food and basic necessities to help carry them through the holidays and beyond.

The short-term goal of the task force formed by the trustees is to support the basic needs of students facing hunger and housing instability by providing food, hygiene products, and scholarships to help with tuition, books and bus passes. The long-term goal of the task force is to provide support for housing LBCC’s homeless students.

“I feel that it is my moral obligation to take action locally for our students and address this issue that is pervasive nation wide. I would be compromising my values if I don’t take action otherwise,” Zia said. “We have to remember why we’re on this board to begin with, to serve the students and the community.”

Partners of the effort include Third District Councilwoman Suzie Price, employees from the Port of Long Beach, members of the Long Beach Rotary and local business owners, among a host of others. Already they’ve received support in the form of donations—56 boxes of food from Jewish Federation President Hank Feldman alone—and thousands of dollars in contributions to the scholarship foundation.

Baxter said that what has been amassed equals to a pantry or small store that LBCC students can come to weekly to “shop” for goods and food that they might not otherwise be able to afford. All

they ask is for their student ID to be submitted, a requirement for the school to compile data needed for grants.

“We’re not going to interrogate people but we want to help people,” Baxter said. “Maybe they’re not homeless but they’re still hungry, so we’re not going to sit there and judge people, but we hope to reach as many people as we can.”

She’s already written to two foundations in hopes of securing funds that can help subsidize students’ bus passes, utility bills, or in some cases, security deposits for apartments. Both Baxter and Zia have allocated parts of their trustee stipends to be donated on a monthly basis to the foundation as a show of solidarity with other donors.

“We’re hoping that we can sustain this and keep people donating,” Baxter said. “At this point, we’ve received more stuff than we’ve gotten cash, but that doesn’t mean that we won’t get cash.”

Several factors play into the issues facing homeless students. The report cited the receding coverage of federal Pell Grants, which used to cover 100 percent of cost of attendance but now only cover roughly 60 percent. Compounding that loss of coverage is the increase in the cost of tuition spurred by a cutback in funding to community colleges at the state level. Since 2000, the cost of community college has climbed by 28 percent, according to the report.

In an [Op-Ed in the New York Times published last week](#), two of the authors of the study, Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab and Katharine M. Broton of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, wrote of students selling plasma and skipping meals and others sleeping in libraries and abandoned buildings. The most recent numbers from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) suggest those stories aren’t anomalies, with 58,000 applicants registering as “homeless,” up from 47,200 in 2009.

They estimated that with 65 percent of American jobs projected to require post-secondary education by 2020, a continued hemorrhaging of college graduates could leave the country with a shortfall of five million college-educated workers. They argued that efforts already in place, like college food banks and scholarship programs need to be scaled up, and called for a top-down effort to ensure that students in poverty have the support they need to escape that cycle.

“Students are trying — so hard that they sometimes go hungry to learn,” they wrote. “When will we match their level of determination? A college education is a great tool for overcoming poverty, but students have to be able to escape the conditions of poverty long enough to finish their degrees or we’re wasting their time.”

If the study’s findings hold true, the task force’s efforts could have the potential to affect a large portion of students at LBCC. The study showed that of the affected populations, blacks and Latinos were the largest demographic affected by housing and food insecurity—defined as having at the least anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food or having difficulty paying rent. LBCC’s demographic makeup according to the school’s data places Latinos as the largest student population at 46 percent and African Americans at 18 percent.

The effort was first undertaken in Spring 2014 but officially launched November 17 ahead of the Thanksgiving holiday. The long-term goal of providing housing is probably a year or two away, according to the trustees, but Baxter said in the meantime, the city's health department has expressed willingness to house some students at their shelters until the program's ambitions are fully met.

Although the problem has a national scope, Zia said the failure to address the situation has not only been a failure of the American Dream, but also of the College Promise. What she and Baxter hope to promise through their efforts is a more level playing field to help ensure that their college experience is more focused on education than survival.

"No student should have to be hungry," Zia said. "I respect these students because I don't know if I could choose between a meal and going to school. I believe these students deserve our commitment and wherewithal and support to really transform their situations."