

BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Season 3, Episode 15 : What is the role of colleges in addressing food and housing insecurity among students?

Moderators: Drs. Susanna Curry and Arturo Baiocchi, Sacramento State Professors and Affiliates of the Center for Health Practice, Policy & Research

Guests: Professors Rashida Crutchfield and Jessica Wolin, CSU, Long Beach and SF State Faculty respectively and Directors at the Center for Equitable Higher Education at CSU Long Beach. So, here we go.

Please note: This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact Susanna Curry (curry@csus.edu) directly should you have questions.

Music lyrics:

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

Introduction

Susanna Curry: Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State's Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice (CRISJ) . We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. I'm Susanna Curry, Associate Professor, and I'm joined by my colleague Dr. Arturo Baiocchi. We are both also faculty affiliates of the Center for Health Practice, Policy & Research at Sac State. Today we will be talking about the issue of public higher education and student basic needs insecurity at an institutional level. We will be talking with Professors Rashida Crutchfield and Jessica Wolin,

who are also directors at the Center for Equitable Higher Education at CSU Long Beach. So, here we go.

Arturo Baiocchi: Alright Rashida, I'm so excited to have you here with Jessica to talk about this issue, and just right off the bat...I feel like we hear a lot about student homelessness today. You hear it about in the media. You hear it in news stories, and I guess I would like to hear from you as somebody who does a lot of research in this area of you know how new is it of an issue? And part of the reason I'm asking that question is, sometimes I feel there's a bit of pushback when I talk about the research that we've been doing on student homelessness that this isn't really a new thing. And for forever, students have been experiencing these sort of issues, and that this is kind of a new framing of an old issue, and I'm wondering if you could speak to that a little bit in in your own experiences doing this research.

Rashida Crutchfield: Sure and thanks for having us, and it's great to be with all of you today. I'm happy to talk about this. We're happy, cause it's a mixed bag, though right because many people have heard me say over and over again that Higher Ed has discovered homelessness like Columbus discovered America right like this is an issue that has been happening for a long time. I remember when I was in college in the late 1900s, that we had someone who always was, you know, we knew everyone was going to have an opportunity to have someone sleep on our couch in the dorm and that was just what it was, and I think a lot of us have this starving student mentality and narrative that suggests that struggle is embedded in the college experience that all of us at some point, ate a cup of noodles, and that was just a part of what we did. I think it's important for lots of us to remember that lots of things have changed over time, you know, even, for you know, the the GI Bill helped a lot of people, although it only helped a certain set of people really well. And I know when I went to college I could and did work, part time jobs and go to school full time and made it work. But the cost of housing and the cost of food, the cost of life has changed and definitely financial aid hasn't met with that change. I think the other thing that's really important as a part of the context of this is that higher education definitely has focused on what we always thought of as the traditional student, of a student who was 18 and 24, coming straight from high school, fairly resourced by their parents, and then, with a little extra effort, could make it work. But our new traditional student is an older student who is often supporting their own family, who is a caregiver. For potentially parents and children. Is a person of color. We have a very different landscape in terms of who we are serving, and our students in all of their power are definitely experiencing marginalization and struggle in a way that is different than when I was in college, and for those of us before.

Arturo Baiocchi: Yeah, I really appreciate this notion of difference, because I think that's the thing that some folks are not getting that while it may have seemed somewhat normative to have these challenges, and I myself worked, and there was a time in which I couch surfed for a couple of months. But what I hear from students and feel as a faculty member is like this is different. This feels very different, and students are describing situations that feel very unsafe. Not just that they are you know, struggling, making ends meet, but they're really experiencing depths of precarity that I certainly didn't know in college, and I didn't know anybody that was having these types of experiences. So there's been a shift, and I feel like that is hard to communicate to people. Because it seems like, yeah, everybody was eating ramen when they were going to school. And so, that's a real challenge.

Rashida Crutchfield: Yeah. And I think that it's a very different thing for me to skip a meal occasionally, because I maybe party too hard than sleeping in my car because I'm choosing between whether I'm gonna eat or or pay rent or buy my books or pay tuition. It's a very different experience.

Jessica Wolin: Yeah, I'd love to jump. I'd love to jump in here, and I'm so appreciative of you all having us join you in this conversation today. You know, in one research project that I got to work on. We interviewed leaders on a campus, and then we interviewed folks who are leaders in the community trying to address homelessness in the community, and we asked both sets of people, you know, whose responsibility is it to address student homelessness amongst students on that campus, and the leaders from the campus and the leaders in the community pointed fingers at each other and said, It's the other folks responsibility. And the leaders on the campus felt like this is really not a higher education institution problem. This is a larger community problem, and the folks in the community really showed their belief in the narrative where she is talking about, where they said, look our priority are folks in the community who are unhoused and who might be dual diagnosed, or struggling with severe mental health issues, and if a person is a student, it means they are better off than those folks and that if they have the wherewithal to be a student, then their homelessness is really not our problem. And I think when II in in that research? We asked them, well, do you know if the clients that you are serving, if any of them are students and they will, were, you know, their response was, Well, we've never really asked them that question. And I think this disconnect and the assumption that gets made about who is a student, what students', you know, challenges are are a significant barrier to students receiving the help they need. And I think within our institutions there are tremendous blind spots amongst leadership amongst faculty. And I know I've sat in meetings with campus leaders who have when talking about student homelessness. They've said things like, yeah but I mean, it's not like students are living under a bridge, and it's you know, clear that they don't know what the definition of homelessness is for students that that students, not having a safe, adequate stable place to live is homelessness and couch surfing is not a viable solution for a student to it's not a viable solution for anyone, and it's not a viable solution for a student. And so breaking these, this paradigm is an important part of addressing this problem.

Arturo Baiocchi: I really like the word you use blind spot, because I think that that captures it. Well, that I don't think it's necessarily mal intent on some folks. But I've also been in those meetings. and it feels like folks don't understand the depth of issues that students are experiencing, but also the scope. We're not talking about a few students, but a significant portion of the student body. And I think I saw this student survey once that said that half of all students in the U.S. are experiencing pretty significant levels of precarity, whether it's food, insecurity, or housing security. And so I can see how universities just don't know how to deal with that issue. That's a big segment of the student population. And this is not a space that they're comfortable with. But, on the other hand, service providers in the community are not seeing students as their clientele. And so there, students, there's a real risk of students kind of falling in in the middle of you know this hole in our safety net, which there are many holes in our safety net. But this is a new one, I think.

Susanna Curry: I'm wondering if, Rashida and Jessica, if you could kind of talk a little bit about that role of the institution, the institution of higher education. Because I know you've and I've been studying that and talking to a lot of leaders both here in California, and you also have a really good sense, I think, about what's going on nationally in terms of trends in systems. And so could you speak to that a little bit about what we're doing here in California, and then how that relates to sort of approaches in other states?

Jessica Wolin: Sure I can take this, and then I'm sure Rashida will have stuff to add. You know, I think, that a primary approach that's being taken by campuses around the country is to provide really important services to students to try to address their needs. So we've seen a proliferation of services like food pantries, meal swipes programs. In our state and expansion of programs like this on multiple, you know, campuses and at all levels in the community college level. In our State, the Cal State system, and in the University of California system. It is now, you know, common practice to have those kinds of services, emergency housing. Other attempts to try to address student needs in a very important way. And those kinds of services are essential and they are not sufficient. They are not the way we are going to address student homelessness, student hunger, student, financial insecurity. It is not the way we are going to get to the root of that, those problems through service delivery. And so we at the Center for Equitable Higher Education. Are looking at the all of the you know contexts that surround the student who's facing these challenges. And we know that there are approaches that need to be taken at multiple levels to truly address these problems. We need to be looking at the interpersonal relationships that students have that influence whether or not they're going to even accept services in the first place. We need to do a much better job of thinking about the role of faculty in this work. There is not a lot of research about or effort done to try to address how faculty can be gatekeepers to programs, how they address issues around stigma. What about the pedagogy in the classroom? Is it supportive of students who have multiple challenges they're facing? Or does it penalize students around things like attendance? Or, you know, with deadlines and flexibility that they might need? Then there are issues around the institutional approach, you know. It's important to look at the institutional level influence. Are faculty required to put in their syllabi a statement of supporting parenting students, students, students, addressing their basic needs. Do we have basic needs, centers on campuses that consolidate where students can access services. So they don't have to run all around campus to find different people to help them. Then there's issues at the community level like partnerships between campuses and community service providers. To try to address student needs that go beyond the bounds of the campus. And then we're looking at federal policy and state policy and things like, what kinds of financial aid do we offer students financial aid reform? Can we increase the level of a Pell grant for pell grants, for instance, for debt forgiveness. All of these things are necessary to try to address this problem. We are not going to provide enough services to get ourselves out of the fact that we have students who are financially unstable and need support in much broader ways.

Rashida Crutchfield: I think one of the I think this framing. Thank you. Jessica, really helps us think about addressing these issues as large ecosystems. I think sometimes when people think about like part of the problem is these larger societal issues of race and economic inequality, those feel really big. And so either we focus in on, you know, small entry points, or we get overwhelmed by those large entry points. And I think thinking about this in terms of layers, allows us to see that there are lots of entry points in getting at addressing this for students that I,

as a faculty person, can focus on my pedagogy and work with a basic needs center. And the basic needs center can provide that service. But we also have national leadership from folks like swipe out hunger or school house connect, or the Young Invincibles that are looking at Federal and State policies nationally more locally, John Burton Advocates for Youth and So Cal CAN are doing great work around advocacy in California. I think there are lots of different ways to get at addressing these issues, but we have to pick a lane and invest in those lanes, I think. It's important to understand that California has been a leader in this work. We have a lot of policies that are very new that have funded a lot of really important work here in California. So in many ways, California is ahead of the game. Nationally, a lot of campuses are still trying to figure out navigating their food pantry or thinking about a case management model and addressing basic needs. I'm I work with, you know. I'm a social work, professor, and you know, within a but I'm a macro social worker. So my students, I say, you know, if I fall down and I'm bleeding definitely. Bring me that Bandaid, because I need it. But I also need you to figure out why there was a crack in the sidewalk, right? And both of those things have to happen. Both of those things have to happen to address this. I also think it's important for us to lift up that we are modeling programs based on what we feel is great and what we believe is working for students. What may have worked in other program opportunities. Also, we sometimes model our programs based on community-based programs like WIC or food pantries and community, or or SNAP or CalFresh and those models can work well, but they often are definitely layered in the Protestant work ethic, where you have to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and prove that you're worthy for these services, and we have opportunities in higher education to remove some of that pro the performative nature of requiring people who are marginalized to prove that they're worth these services. If we stand in a notion that basic needs are student human rights that it's not about students being needy. But it is about our responsibility to retain students understanding the populations of students that we have, and really committing to a promise that we at some point intentionally made, but are forgetting that we, our promise is to support students to student success, and that it's not just about what happens in the classroom. But it happened. It's all about what's happening outside of the classroom to foster learning for students toward graduation.

Susanna Curry: Rashida, that was such a beautiful way to articulate, I think, some of what the what challenges we're facing right now, and what we're really grappling with. So thank you for kind of sharing all the work of the Center for Equitable Higher Education. I want to..you mentioned the promise of this work. I wonder if either of you could kind of speak to the promise of public education, and how that fits into this conversation.

Jessica Wolin: I think that I mean, this is such an important point. You're bringing up Susanna, and the issue of what are we committing to students when we tell them that they can come to a public institution to receive their education. What is that commitment? And I think that we haven't necessarily had this conversation fully given the reality that students are facing now, like nationally at a state level at a local level. What are we promising to students, I think, is a really important question that we're grappling with, and what we often hear from higher education institutions is the phrase, we are not social service providers like we need to stay in our lane and I think by thinking about these levels, these contextual levels, we understand that there is a role for institutions to play in, of course, educating students. But they are not exempt from understanding that they are a context of this student experience. And we have to like further that idea that higher education institutions cannot just say this isn't our thing. Our thing is the

classroom, and then everything else is somebody else's problem, because that just isn't the case in a lot of on a lot of campuses. There's the is housing that is being provided to students. And a very reasonable question is, what does it cost? How accessible. Is it to students? You know what policies are there around who has priority for that kind of housing? And how do we calculate what makes it affordable or not, and all of those questions are reasonable, and in addition to that. higher education has already gotten itself into the position of trying to address other kinds of student needs. There are health centers on most campuses. We would. We would not say that, you know we are not in that business. That is, you know, a much more accepted set of services to be providing students? And so I think a real question that we have at CEHE that we are really grappling with and trying to bring to the fore for higher education practitioners is, why is it that in higher education we think it's okay to ask students to leave their human rights at the door. And why is it okay to say to a student, Yeah, you should come, get this education, it's going to be provided to you by this public institution. But you should be okay with the fact that you don't actually have stable housing or enough food, and that is the question we are trying to call out and ensure that institutions see their role as they may not be social service providers, but they have a hand in solving this problem.

Rashida Crutchfield: Yeah, I think you're right on, Jess. And this is different at different institutions. But I think sometimes we, as institutions, see ourselves as partners in an ecosystem, but we may or may not build real infrastructure to make those partnerships last or really fruitful..so we know that we want to refer students to a community based organizations for needs that we can't address. But you can't just make a referral and be done with it, right? That this is a relationship that we have to build and cultivate in an ongoing way. We know I was thinking the same thing, Jess, like, we know that Student Affairs part. The part of the house in Student Affairs is fundamental to the higher education experience, right? And we've said to students that higher education is a vehicle for upward social and economic mobility. And we're going to have a robust Student Affairs department, but somehow that we're not going to connect that or link those silos with the academic side of the house, right? And so that real collaborative, those collaborative efforts, both inside our institutions, have to be woven, and those collaborative partnerships extending outside of institutions, have to be deeply woven in our process if we really want students to graduate. And then we have to make sure that that's working, that it can't just be about inertia, that we think it's working. But we haven't looked at the evaluative opportunities or the research opportunities to really show whether we are supporting retention or thinking about how we make, though that vehicle go well, and I think that investment in research to do that to really see whether we're doing what we say we want to do what we've promised to do at the end of the day is really happening.

Arturo Baiocchi: I really appreciate both of what you just said, well, Jessica, and what you just said, Rashida, because a few moments ago you were talking about, we're doing lots of things that we feel we should be doing it feels good. But do we actually know if it has an impact? And in the impact that we want? And it seems like what you just said is like we. We need to find that out. These are empirical questions that we need to research and then to something else that Jessica was saying. You know, as a as a faculty member at a public university like yes, like this is what brought me to be a professor at a public university, right? This mission, this idea. And I do feel sometimes being pushed. We're being pulled in different directions. And you know this narrative, like, you know, we're not a social service provider. I know where that comes from, that

come from, come from feeling like we're doing too much, or that we're being asked to be doing something that we weren't trained to do. But to your point, our positions are going to have to evolve. Our roles need to evolve. I just don't know what that role is, and I feel like none of us really do. And that also needs to be researched. What is the role of faculty. What is the best way? What you know? What is too much and what is not enough? You know. And I think that there's a lot of good intention on multiple sides of this. But I just know that we're not going back to a previous version of what a university should be. You know it's going forward. It's gonna have to evolve some way. And so it has to be in conversation and dialogue with all the stakeholders, but it also has to be in dialogue with data, and not just opinions and feelings about this. But really what do we know about us as best practices.

Jessica Wolin: I wanted to add a perspective to this, that you know we are all..everyone in this conversation is a faculty member, and we are, you know, we are all faculty in a public higher education institution. And it would, I feel like it. We would be remiss to not acknowledge that there are faculty who are going through these same issues, who are living in a state of financial precarity. And you know, on the campus where I teach. We like to say, you know, faculty teaching conditions or student learning conditions. And it isn't the case. That faculty, you know, or I'm saying a double negative faculty care deeply about their students, and I believe that faculty given the right tools, the right training, the right support and the time that they need to engage with students and to develop, you know, an approach in their classroom that is supportive of students with basic needs challenges. I think that's really possible, but it's not possible. If faculty are not paid well, if faculty don't have the time, they need to do their work, if faculty are overloaded, and if faculty themselves struggle with some of these same challenges. And I just feel like we have to acknowledge that it's a larger system than just the students. And it's this is a whole approach, that to looking at the whole institution and but like this larger context.

Arturo Baiocchi: Well, we just want to thank you so much for spending time with us and sharing your thoughts and and new perspectives. And you know, while it may seem bleak. It's nice knowing that we have such smart people thinking about these issues and helping us kind of connect the dots because it is. It can seem overwhelming and daunting. But I think you know, we have to move forward, and I think only through research and and having these conversations is the way that we're gonna do that.

Rashida Crutchfield: I think it seems bleak, but I'm also deeply inspired by what I see. I mean when, when when we started this work. No one was talking about basic needs. When I did my dissertation in 2012, and people were coming at me saying, We don't have people experiencing homelessness on our campus, and the fact that the narrative is changing, even though I want to shift the narrative even more. I think we're in a much better state than we've ever been before, and that gives us a vision, for where we can go.

Susanna Curry: That's really promising to hear, Rashida. I'm going to take, take a page from some other podcasts, I hear and ask you both to share. Where can we? How, where can our listeners find you or learn more about your work. Each of you could share that.

Jessica Wolin: Well, I'd say that the Center for Equitable Higher Education is based at Cal State University, Long Beach. We are a multidisciplinary group representing multiple campuses with student researchers, we have faculty researchers. We have practitioners engaged in our work, all focused on our mission of ensuring at least in our state, that students basic needs are met, and that we are a system that is striving for equity around student outcomes. And I'll leave it to Rashida to tell you exactly how you can reach all of us definitely.

Rashida Crutchfield: They can reach out to me at Long Beach State, and you can find me, Rashida Crutchfield, is not a typical name. So if you just Google me, you'll find my email address. But I also want to encourage folks to follow us on Instagram at Center4_EquitableHE, and you'll get updates from us there, too. There's more to come from us, as we have just ended a strategic planning process and a regrouping in terms of website and our outward facing advertising. But there's lots to know. And we look forward to telling you more about what's to come.

Susanna Curry: Wonderful! Thank you so much for your time, and look forward to hearing more from you soon. And thank you for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathy, and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all. You just listened to the Building Justice Podcast. The information contained in this podcast represents the views and opinions of the hosts and guests, and to not necessarily represent the views or opinions of Sacramento State, or CRISJ. Thank you for listening.