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Annamaria Cavaleri
University of Vermont

Gabi Cuna
University of Vermont

Kaia Palm-Leis
University of Vermont

Robyn Suchy
University of Vermont

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Community Colleges Meeting Basic Students' Needs

Annamaria Cavaleri, Gabi Cuna,
Kaia Palm-Leis, Robyn Suchy

<https://sites.google.com/view/dsp-community-college/home>

Of the students currently enrolled in post-secondary education institutions, more than 50% of college students are attending community colleges. Of these students, 36% are nontraditional students who are between the ages of 22 and 39, 29% first-generation students, and 20% are disabled students. Community colleges and their students are transforming what it means to participate in higher education by providing resources for students with diverse identities, overcoming exclusionary practices that sacrifice students' physical, mental, and financial wellbeing. As part of a digital storytelling project, we aimed to think critically about injustice in higher education by focusing on a specific population or concept, explore these topics through critical theoretical lenses, analyze existing research and best-practices, and present our work in a creative, digital medium. We decided to focus on how community colleges serve low-income students by supporting some of their basic needs: food, housing, healthcare, and technology. Drawing from our research and examples of community colleges who have led the way, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, we developed a website as an attempt to demonstrate some of the ideal ways that community colleges could support some of students' basic needs, thus constructing our ideal community college. Resisting the long history of elitism, exclusion, and sacrifice in higher education is difficult but community colleges are leading the way. Dismantling these oppressive structures by elevating community colleges and their practices that support the basic needs of students is a first step in a revolutionary reimagining of student success.

Annamaria Cavaleri (she/her) is a M.Ed. Student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program at the University of Vermont, and holds a BA in Psychology from Stony Brook University. She is passionate about working to improve reproductive healthcare access in higher education.

Gabi Cuna (they/them) is a graduate student in the University of Vermont's Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration M.Ed program and the AmeriCorps VISTA within the Center for Community Engagement at Middlebury College. They are passionate about equity and access within higher education and centering the voices of historically excluded students, faculty, and staff. In their free time, Gabi enjoys lazy days playing video games and board games and watching TV with their cat.

When most people envision higher education they think of ivory towers, vibrant campus greens, young people engaged in intellectual debate and revolutionary research, and a campus community built to help students transform “the best four years of their lives” into a successful future as industry leaders. This idyllic vision is not the reality of higher education in the United States. More than 50% of college students are attending community colleges, 36% are nontraditional students who are between the ages of 22 and 39, and 29% of students at community colleges are first-generation students, and 20% disabled students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021). Community colleges and their students are transforming what it means to participate in higher education and are liberating themselves from the elitist, exclusionary, practices that are meant to elevate the students that sacrifice their physical, mental, and financial wellbeing. Community colleges are not only uniquely situated to serve the students that are overlooked; they are meeting students’ needs in innovative ways that resist the traditional model of sacrifice for the sake of education.

As first-year students in the University of Vermont’s Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration Masters of Education program, we undertook a semester-long assignment in our Social Justice and Inclusion in Higher Education course entitled: Social Justice and Inclusion Through Digital Storytelling (or, DSP, Digital Storytelling Project). Our task was to think critically about injustice in higher education by focusing on a specific population or concept, explore these topics through critical theoretical lenses, analyze existing research and best-practices, and present our work in a creative, digital medium. Knowing that community colleges were underrepresented in research and that low-income students were often not served well by more traditional institutions, we decided to focus on how community colleges serve low income students by supporting some of their basic needs: food, housing, healthcare, and technology.

Kaia Palm-Leis (she/her) is an M. Ed student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program at the University of Vermont. She currently works in the Department of Student Life as the Graduate Assistant for Campus Programs. She is passionate about access and creating better college environments for students with disabilities.

Robyn Suchy (he/him) is an M. Ed student in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program at the University of Vermont. He received his bachelors degrees in Philosophy and English from Cabrini College and his work has focused on intersectional identity development of queer student leaders, disability and health advocacy in higher education, and emerging legal issues for students and institutions.

Drawing from our research and examples of community colleges who have led the way, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, our website is an attempt to demonstrate some of the ideal ways that community colleges could support some of students' basic needs. The basic needs that were explored in this project were food and housing security, health care and access to technology.

The website was designed with accessibility as a foundational tenet of liberation. Each image is accompanied by alternative text, which allows users who rely on screen readers to more readily engage with the content. Navigational menus were created so that website content could be easily accessed and followed. On each page, the fonts were carefully picked to ensure that they could be easily read by low-vision or visually impaired readers. Throughout the site, font sizes and colors were picked intentionally to ensure that they met accessibility standards set by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0, in collaboration with the Education Department's Office of Civil Rights. The steps taken to ensure that this website can be accessed by disabled individuals are seemingly small actions, but they combat the pervasive academic ableism ubiquitous throughout higher education (Dolmage, 2017, p. 34).

Housing

Throughout their higher education journey, students will face a multitude of academic and professional challenges which will contribute to their personal growth. On top of these typical hurdles, students from low-income backgrounds are also more at risk for housing insecurity. Research indicates that approximately 50% of community college students are housing insecure and nearly 14% are homeless (Goldrick-Rab, 2018, p. 11). Per Goldrick-Rab's research, students of color, LGBTQIA+ students, and former foster youth experience the highest rates of housing insecurity. These students are often in situations where they must decide between key resources like textbooks or paying rent or working more hours than they can realistically handle in addition to their coursework (Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d). The housing section of the website draws from contemporary examples of best practices led by Tacoma Community College's College Housing Assistance Program, which provides housing vouchers and roommate pairings, and California State University, Fullerton's Tuffy's Basic Needs Center, which provides emergency housing placement (Services and Eligibility—Dean

of Students | CSUF, 2022; College Housing Assistance Program: Tacoma Community College, 2022).

Food

Students cannot succeed when they're hungry. Studies indicate that more than half of all community college students are food insecure, and at least one in five is at the very lowest levels of food security (Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Additionally, food-insecure students report more difficulty attending classes, buying required textbooks and materials, and a higher likelihood of dropping classes (Spaid et al., 2021). This section of our website focused on both campus-based interventions and services offered in collaboration with the local community. Some initiatives such as campus food pantries are increasingly common in higher education. However, building a food and nutrition system with low-income students at the center led to more innovative practices such as a collaboration with campus dining services to provide fresh, nutritionally rich food and cooking demonstrations and allowing students to donate unused "meal swipes" to their peers in need. We additionally recognized that faculty and staff serve as key resources and bridges to student services at community colleges and should be able to provide snacks and information to their students without needing to purchase them on their own.

Community colleges are uniquely situated and positioned to develop reciprocal relationships with local, city, and county services in support of their students. Community college students come from a wide range of ages and familial statuses and if a student is struggling with food insecurity that may be a reflection of a family struggling with food insecurity. In addition to partnerships with local food pantries and kitchens, many students and their families may be eligible for additional financial aid but can be intimidated or discouraged by the complicated nature of applying and using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP). Our ideal community college would bridge these gaps with counselors to assist in understanding and navigating state and federal aid systems and would serve as advocates for students both individually and in advocacy efforts relating to students' basic needs and community college funding streams.

Healthcare

Access to healthcare is an essential part of any college student's success. Studies

show that community colleges are institutions with some of the fewest financial support and resources, therefore placing community college students at a disadvantage to accessing necessary healthcare (McKinney, 1998). Further, studies show that the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the demand for community colleges to be able to provide further student support, with over 70% of community college students having experienced emotional distress due to their basic needs not being met (Hejl, 2021). Historical trends have shown that community college students nationwide have not received the necessary resources to support neither their physical health nor their mental health (Hejl, 2021).

Studies also indicate that community colleges have high populations of low-income and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students, which are student populations that are disproportionately at risk for health complications (McKinney, 1998). This further highlights the need for healthcare programs in community colleges catered to student needs. Our ideal community college would implement programs to address both student physical and mental health. It would address the difficulty of students accessing prescriptions and health insurance coverage, and would offer an array of physical fitness classes free of cost to students. There would be mental health trainings offered, as well as college counselors trained in practices best suited to community college student populations. Our hope is that our vision for an ideal community college would best serve students and address the shortcomings seen in healthcare access for community college students across the nation.

Technology

When it comes to technology community colleges sit at a unique juncture of providing access and overcoming barriers for its students. Community colleges, who serve non-traditional and low-income students, have been providing online courses that allow these students to pursue a college degree while working and parenting (Levin, 2020). According to Levin, community colleges, like those in the California Community College system, have been uniquely set up to succeed due to the prevalence of distance education in these broad-access institutions. When institutions went online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, community colleges with infrastructure for online learning in place were able to invest their time and resources into fine-tuning systems rather than needing to start from scratch. Additionally, community

colleges, due to their higher proportions of low-income students, are more likely to see students struggle with accessing materials online. This includes both the devices needed to access materials and internet connection (Hart, 2021). To increase access some in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, university systems have used state and local funding to provide technology aid to students. The CUNY system, a mixture of two-year, four-year, and graduate institutions, was able to purchase 50,000 devices for its students (Sharp, 2021). In North Carolina, both rural and urban community colleges expanded internet access for their students, opening parking lots so students could access WiFi, working with local internet providers to create hotspots, and securing devices for the students through loan programs and grants (D'Amico et al., 2021). Our ideal community college would recognize that easy internet access is crucial to learning and would expand on- and off-campus access students by increasing the amount of time and locations where internet is accessible on campus and partnering with providers to secure affordable off-campus rates for students. Additionally, devices like laptops better support the online work students are required to perform. Ideally, community colleges should secure funding that would provide qualified students laptops free of cost and would offer emergency grants for device replacements.

Closing

We hope that this website will start a conversation about the ways colleges are and aren't centering the basic needs of their students and removing barriers to success. Resisting the long history of elitism, exclusion, and sacrifice in higher education is difficult but dismantling these oppressive structures by elevating community colleges and their practices that support the basic needs of students is a first step in a revolutionary reimagining of student success. We hope that college administrators who manage community college budgets and the legislators who set them keep the student population who attend these institutions and their needs in mind when directing resources. Community colleges sit in a unique position to provide great access to higher education through their community based connections and ability to use their funding to directly serve students. Four-year institutions should take note.

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