

Select Committee of the California State Master Plan
Maggie White, Cal State Student Association President

Good afternoon select committee chair Berman and members. My name is Maggie White, and I am a student at Stanislaus State University, and the President of the Cal State Student Association, which represents the nearly half a million CSU students across the state. I want to thank everyone here for the work you are all doing to improve public higher education here in California.

I want to address you all today on the topic of basic needs in higher education. Before I get into what I'm seeing as a student leader in the Cal State system, I want to acknowledge that this issue is not unique to any one system. The needs of students, to identify affordable housing, and to remain housed in college, to feed ourselves on a day to day basis, and to take care of our mental health during the rigors of our education, are, unfortunately, not unique to the students I represent. In my position I have had the privilege of working alongside student leaders from all corners of the state, and the stories I hear on a regular basis are truly heartbreaking.

I want to briefly touch on the topic of privilege. There is great privilege in getting to represent the truly amazing students of the Cal State system. There is great privilege in being able to work toward a college degree, and in my case, a masters degree. We know of the many benefits of that privilege — of opportunities for upward social mobility, of access to jobs and industry in this state. The privilege of just being able to pull yourself out of a life of poverty through hard work and resilience.

This privilege is a great thing, but this narrative has in some ways hidden the severe struggles of our students. As state leaders, you all must often hear of the struggles that your constituents face on a regular basis. People who are chronically homeless. People who are sick and disabled, struggling to make ends meet with expensive hospital bills. Single parents struggling to work and take care of their young children with little access to affordable childcare. School teachers working in challenging classrooms and not being paid or supported enough for all that they do. These challenges are overwhelming, to the individuals and to the state. And sometimes, I'm sure it may seem that the struggles of a college student are not as grave as these other concerns. However, while there is great privilege in attaining a college degree, the path to get there can be as challenging as any. And if a student lacks access to their basic needs – food, housing, mental health resources – they have a larger likelihood of struggling in college, dropping out before completion, and leaving the institution with debt but no degree.

With that being said, I want to break these issues up and address them one at a time. With respect to food insecurity, we've heard for years about the struggle that students sometimes face to feed themselves. A few years ago this issue became such a priority that we began to see both Associated Students organizations on campuses, and even campus leadership like the that of Fresno State, begin to address these issues by opening food pantries on campus. Since then, many different tactics have begun to be utilized on our campuses in the CSU, and you'll get to hear about many of them, I'm sure, from Dr. Denise Bevely, Director of Student Wellness and the Basic Needs Initiative, as well as other representatives from the systems.

Just a few weeks ago, the CSU released their systemwide basic needs report, and the findings were grim. It was reported that nearly 200,000 CSU students face some form of food insecurity. This is staggering. I think the assumption is that the college experience should be a struggle. Everyone struggles in college, so why should this generation be any different. But I would like to think that struggle ought to be more in reference to the academic rigors of a program, the mental and emotional growth that comes from interacting with diverse opinions in the classroom, not whether or not someone would be able to access enough sufficiently nutritious food to get themselves through the day.

The impacts of this issue of food insecurity should be obvious, but it also should not go without saying. Students who have trouble feeding themselves report having more trouble in class. This part is critical, because systemwide and statewide there continues to be a push to get students to the finish line of graduation more quickly. And while great work is being done to achieve this goal of higher graduation rates, if we're not addressing our students' basic needs, that work will not be truly maximized, nor will it be equitable.

The issue of food insecurity is obviously widespread, but it cuts differently among different student groups. While systemwide, 41.6% of students report some form of food insecurity, 65.9% of Black/African-American/1st generation students report some form of food insecurity. Among our students who are classified as underserved, their rates of food insecurity remain higher than the average. This means that as we continue to address this issue, the work must be done intentionally and with this state's dedication to equity at the forefront.

In regard to homelessness, unfortunately, CSU students have not remained unscathed from the statewide affordable housing crisis. Before getting into what we know about CSU's homeless students, I want to tell a brief story. Last week, very close to here at Fresno State, CSSA along with Assemblymembers Caballero and Arambula unveiled AB 2784, a bill to pilot a program to address student homelessness. For the press event, we worked with Fresno State student leaders to identify a student who had experienced homelessness to speak in support at the press conference. Their student leaders tried hard to find someone willing to speak at a public event, and came close multiple times, but no student out of the many who identified as homeless was willing to come forward and tell their story. The stigma of homelessness remains strong, and it is no different for our students.

And, unfortunately, far too many of our CSU students experience homelessness. 10.9% of students systemwide — 52,000 students — reported being homeless sometime within the last year. And again, our African-American, first-generation students reported higher than average numbers at 18%. I probably don't have to tell you that when you're homeless, turning in that paper on time, attending class, and participating in high impact practices and academic programs is probably the last thing on your mind.

This issue of homelessness in general, and student homelessness specifically, remains such a challenging issue to face, because there are so few low-cost solutions. While with food insecurity we've seen a number of advancements, from partnerships with county food banks, to donations from community members, to bridging students to CalFresh benefits, those types of low-cost options don't really exist when it comes to providing a safe and stable home environment.

Campus housing is not really a solution for most students, because on many campuses, the prices mirror the local costs of housing, and in most cases, there are not many vacancies in campus housing to serve those students who become homeless. With few campus-based solutions available, our homeless students join the countless number of other people who are homeless in the state, praying for additional solutions and resources to solve this issue.

I do want to mention that we have seen many campuses step up to try to help students who are homeless. Many campuses have created small amounts of emergency, short-term housing to help shelter our homeless students. But for many reasons, this is merely a bandaid. A good bandaid, but a bandaid none the less. While we know that many college-aged youth who are homeless seek shelter for safety, and these emergency short-term housing solutions offer our students that safety at least temporarily, they are not proven methods to keep individuals permanently housed.

This takes us to our last issue, mental health. All of these issues seems to relate to one another. If you're having trouble finding housing, you're probably struggling to feed yourself as well. And if you're experiencing homelessness and/or food insecurity, you will undoubtedly have struggles with your mental health. Of course, there are other factors that contribute to mental health challenges too: the difficulty of their studies. Their immigration status and the national climate. Interpersonal issues with family, friends, or romantic partners. These factors are all linked and layered.

In addition, cultural stigmas make it a challenge to even come forward when one has a mental health issue. I've heard from students of Southeast Asian background, for example, who carry a significant cultural stigma in seeking help with respect to their mental health. This type of stigma only compounds the issue of mental health for these students, and others who experience similar issues in their communities and households.

Students have worked hard for the past few years to try to expand mental health resources on campuses, but unfortunately, we have not been successful enough. We know that the national standard for mental health counselors on a college campus is one mental health counselor per fifteen hundred students. However, only 13 of our 23 campuses have anything close to or under that range. And at some campuses the ratio is much higher. At Fresno State, San Francisco State, and Cal State LA, the ratio is 1 to more than 3,000.

These ratios mean that on many campuses, to deal with the lack of mental health counselors, students report wait times of up to a month to see a counselor in person and a cap on visits through the year. No student, when they've found the courage to come forward and acknowledge their mental health issues, should have to wait so long and have such a lack of access to the help they need to be safe and successful on their campus.

Lastly on this topic, on all campuses, student fees are being used to pay for these mental health resources. This means that the most obvious way to expand these resources on campus is to increase these campus-based fees. But this only compounds the cycle of affordability and mental health challenges. Students are struggling with food costs, housing costs, and tuition and fees

that continue to rise. If the only solution with respect to mental health is to exacerbate another issue, that is not a solution.

I want to thank all of you for allowing me to speak to you today on these critical issues. I also want to thank the other student representatives here to address the issues of equity in student success and cost of attendance. All of these issues are intertwined, and I feel privileged to work alongside you to represent all college students in trying to solve these issues in partnership with our state and institutional leaders. Thank you.