

**Basic Needs Security at Modesto Junior College: Student &
Employee Focus Groups
Spring 2023**

Modesto Junior College
Office of Planning, Research, Innovation, and Institutional Effectiveness
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Basic Needs Security at Modesto Junior College: Student & Employee Focus Groups

Purpose

The purpose of these focus groups was to (1) understand the challenges faced by students with basic needs insecurities, (2) expand on student attitudes toward the basic needs programs offered on campus, and (3) develop an expanded employee view of campus experiences related to basic needs insecurity.

Method

Question Development

Two separate question sets were created: one geared toward students and their experiences and a second geared toward employees and their perceptions/experiences. These questions were adapted from recent literature aimed at understanding basic needs security in higher education (Crutchfield, Chambers, and Duffield, 2016; Crutchfield and Maguire, 2017; National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2014).

The student question set consisted of 20 questions to prompt discussion in specific topic areas. The topic areas covered included student background, food and housing, support, barriers, and ideas or suggestions on how to improve MJC basic needs programs. See Appendix A for the complete student focus group protocol.

The employee question set consisted of 16 questions to prompt discussion in specific topic areas. The topic areas covered included definitions of different forms of basic needs insecurity, campus perception of student basic needs insecurity, individual observations of basic needs insecurity on campus, identifying students with basic needs insecurities, barriers, best

practices, gaps in services, and needed resources. See Appendix B for the complete employee focus group protocol.

Participants

Participants for the student focus group were recruited based on their responses to the Student Basic Needs Survey (Phase 1 of this study; the analysis for this survey can be found [here](#)). Students found to be insecure in any of the Basic Needs categories put forth by the Chancellor's Office, i.e. food, housing, mental health, physical health, transportation, child care, and technology (California Community Colleges Management Information System, 2022), were provided the opportunity to participate in a focus group session. A total of seven Modesto Junior College students took part in this focus group.

Participants for the employee focus groups were recruited based on their current status as an employee of Modesto Junior College. Employees were grouped by their professional role at the college, i.e. administrator, faculty, or classified professionals. All employees of Modesto Junior College were provided the opportunity to participate in a focus group session. A total of 16 employees took part in these focus groups. Participants consisted of four faculty, eight administrators, and three classified professionals.

Procedure

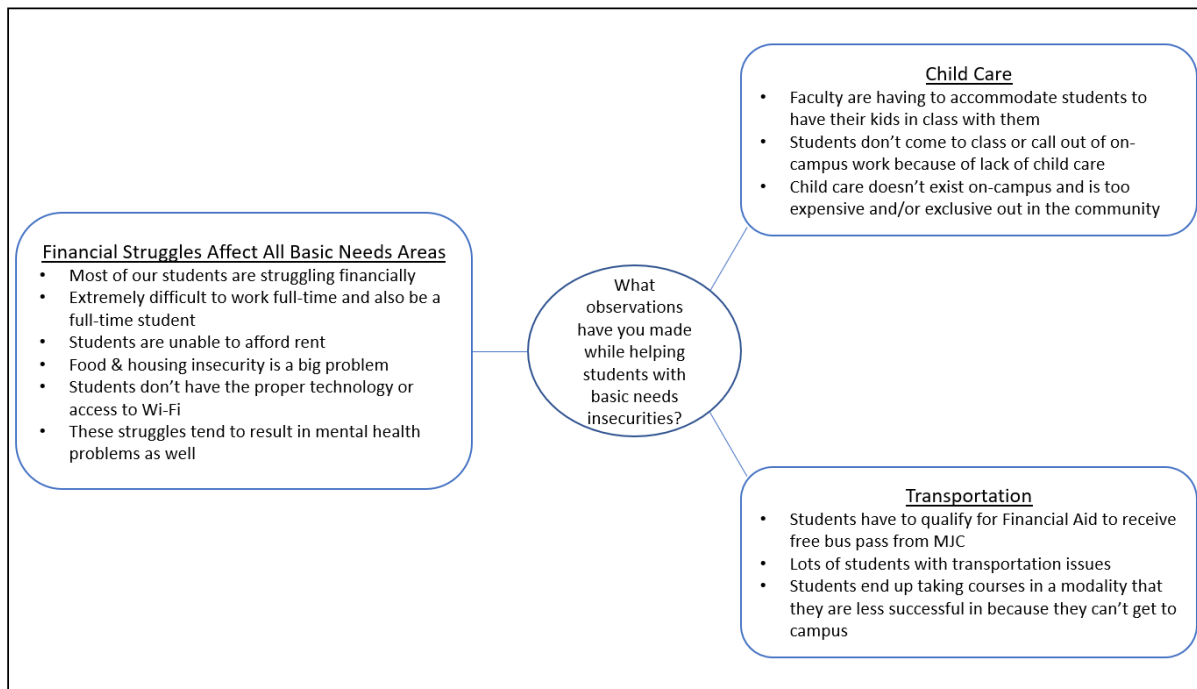
Upon arrival, participants were asked to review and sign the study's informed consent form. Participants were then informed that the focus group session would take approximately 60-90 minutes and would be audio-recorded. In an effort to maintain confidentiality, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym and to only refer to each other by their chosen pseudonym for the duration of the focus group. Once the ground rules for the focus group were established

(i.e. be respectful of others’ opinions, only answer what you feel comfortable answering, etc.), we began prompting participants with the questions listed in the protocol, in the order that they appeared. Prior to ending the session, all participants had an opportunity to bring up anything not previously discussed that they felt was important to understanding student’s basic needs security at Modesto Junior College.

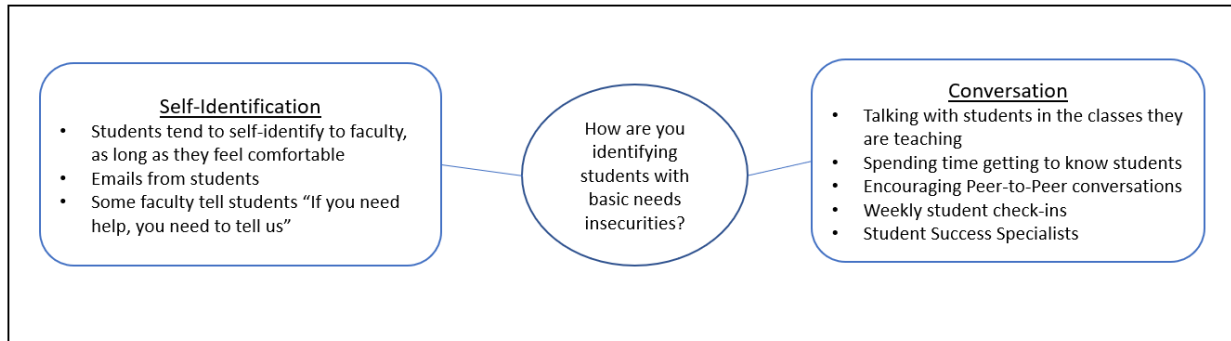
Employee Focus Group Results

A thematic analysis was conducted to derive common themes present in employees’ answers to questions asked during the focus group sessions. Themes were established through the use of the card sort method to sort and categorize the themes within each question.

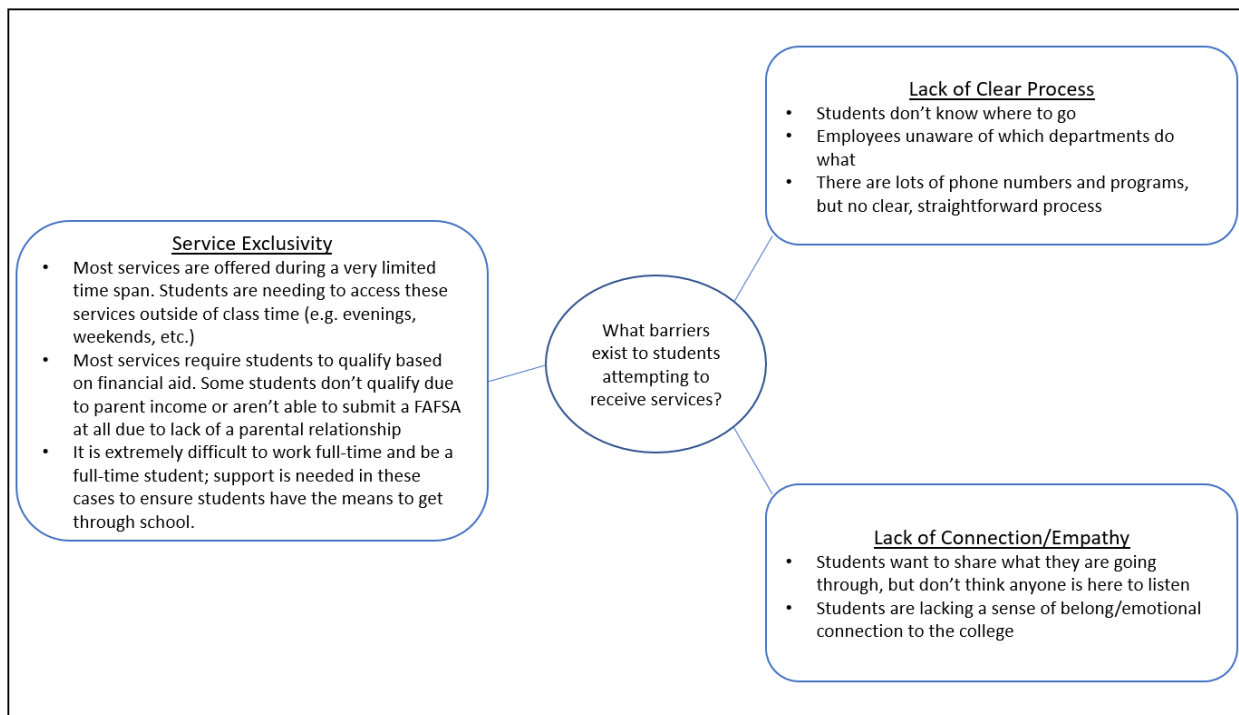
Employee Observations. Three main themes emerged from responses to the question “In what ways have you observed basic needs insecurity in the MJC student population?”: child care, transportation, and financial struggles affecting all basic needs areas.



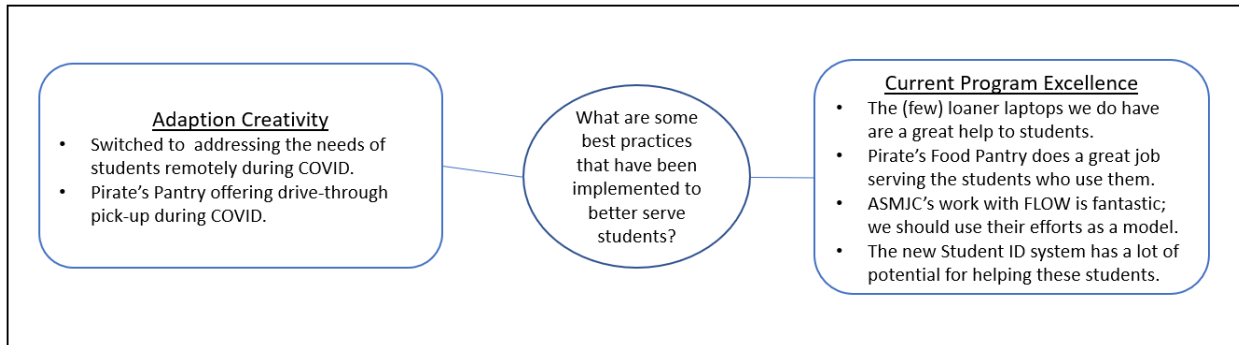
Employee Identification of Students with Basic Needs Insecurities. Two main themes emerged from responses to the question “How are you identifying students who have basic needs insecurities on campus?”: self-identification and conversation.



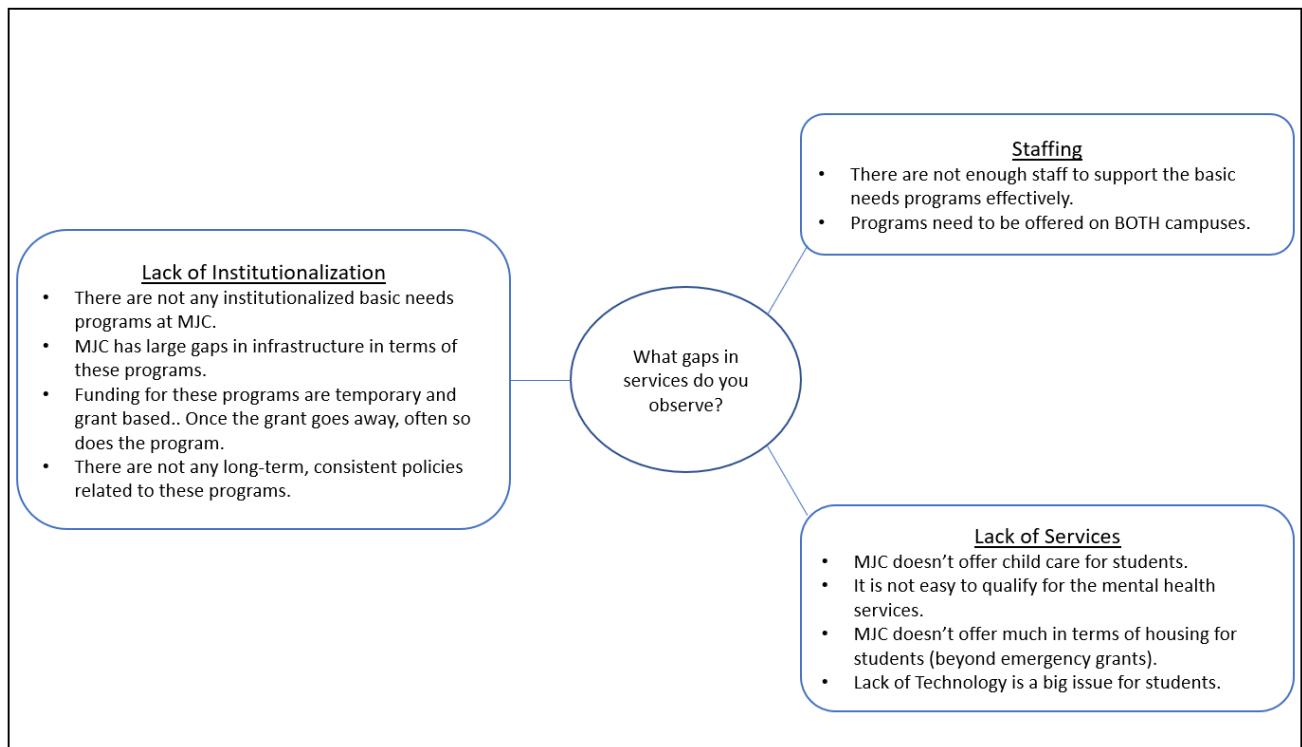
Barriers to Students Receiving Services. Three main themes emerged from responses to the question “What are some barriers that you have experienced when working with students who experience basic needs insecurity?”: service exclusivity, lack of clear process, and lack of connection/empathy.



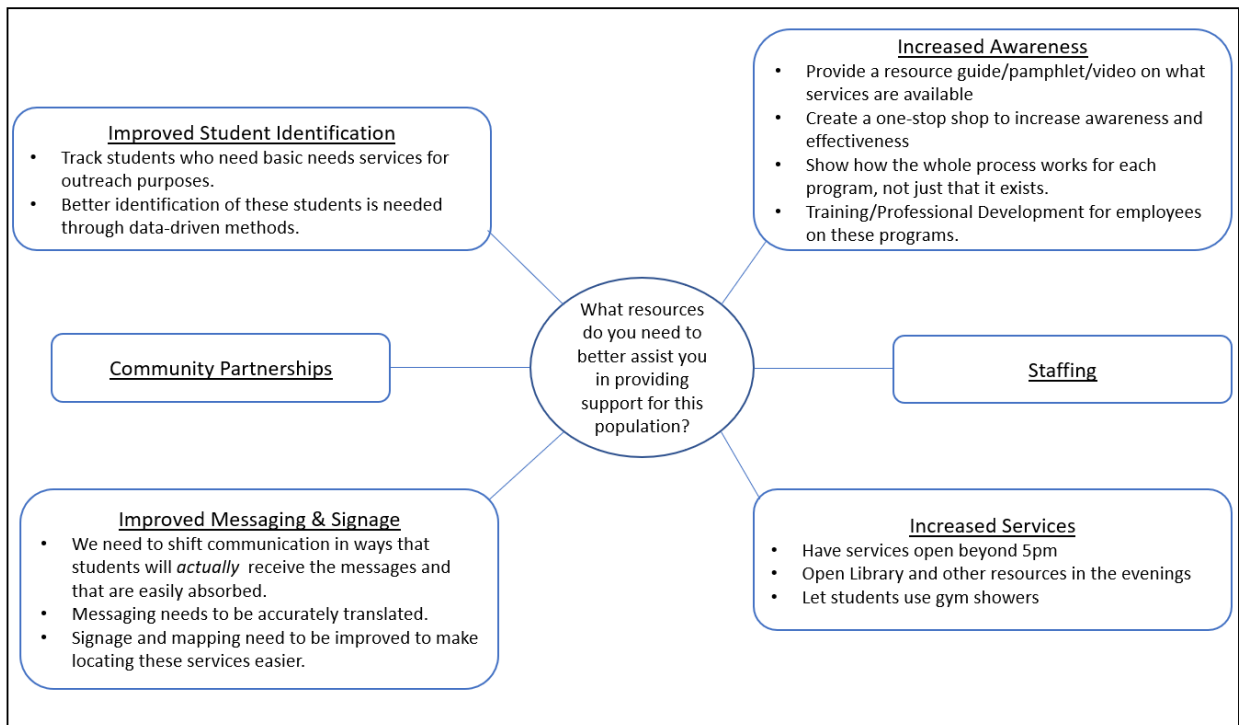
Best Practices at MJC. Two main themes emerged from responses to the question “What are some of the best practices that you or the college as a whole have implemented to better serve students?”: Adaption Creativity and Current Program Excellence.



Gaps in Services at MJC. Two main themes emerged from responses to the question “What gaps in services do you observe?”: Staffing, Lack of Services, and Lack of Institutionalization.



Resources Needed to Better Serve this Population. Six main themes emerged from responses to the question “What resources do you need to better assist you with providing support for students with basic needs insecurities?”: Increased Awareness, Staffing, Increased Services, Improved Messaging and Signage, Community Partnerships, and Improved Student Identification.

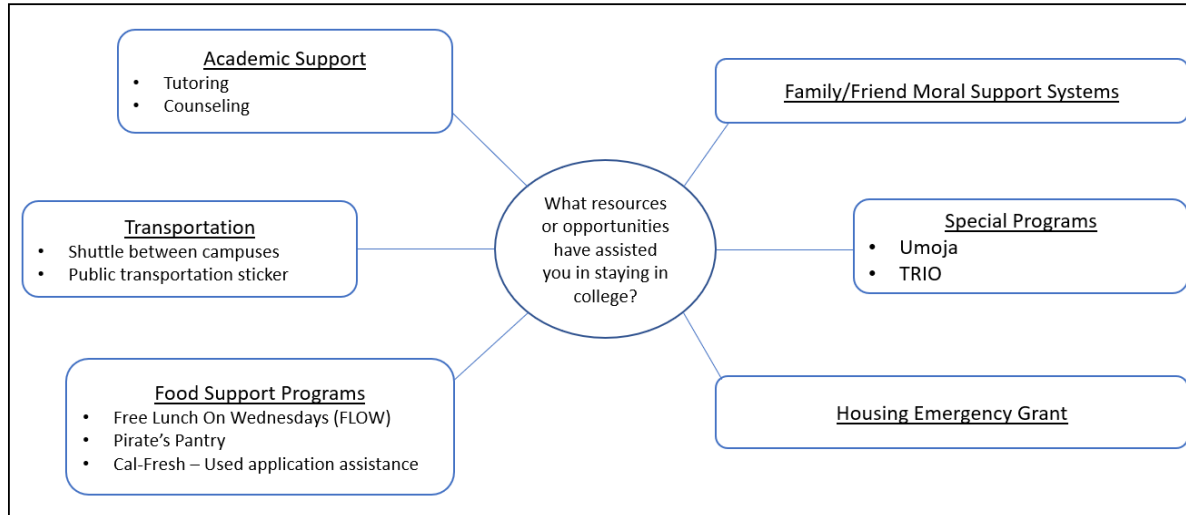


Student Focus Group Results

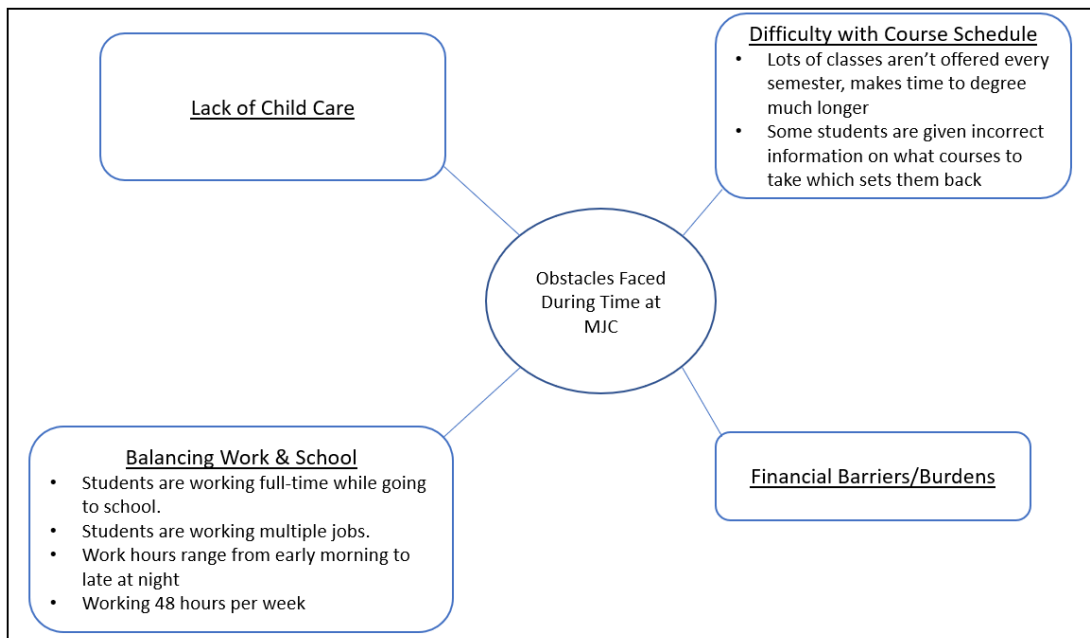
A thematic analysis was conducted to derive common themes present in students’ answers to questions asked during the focus group sessions. Themes were established through the use of the card sort method to sort and categorize the themes within each question.

Supports Used by Students. Six main themes emerged from responses to the questions “What has helped you succeed in college?” and “What resources or opportunities have assisted you in

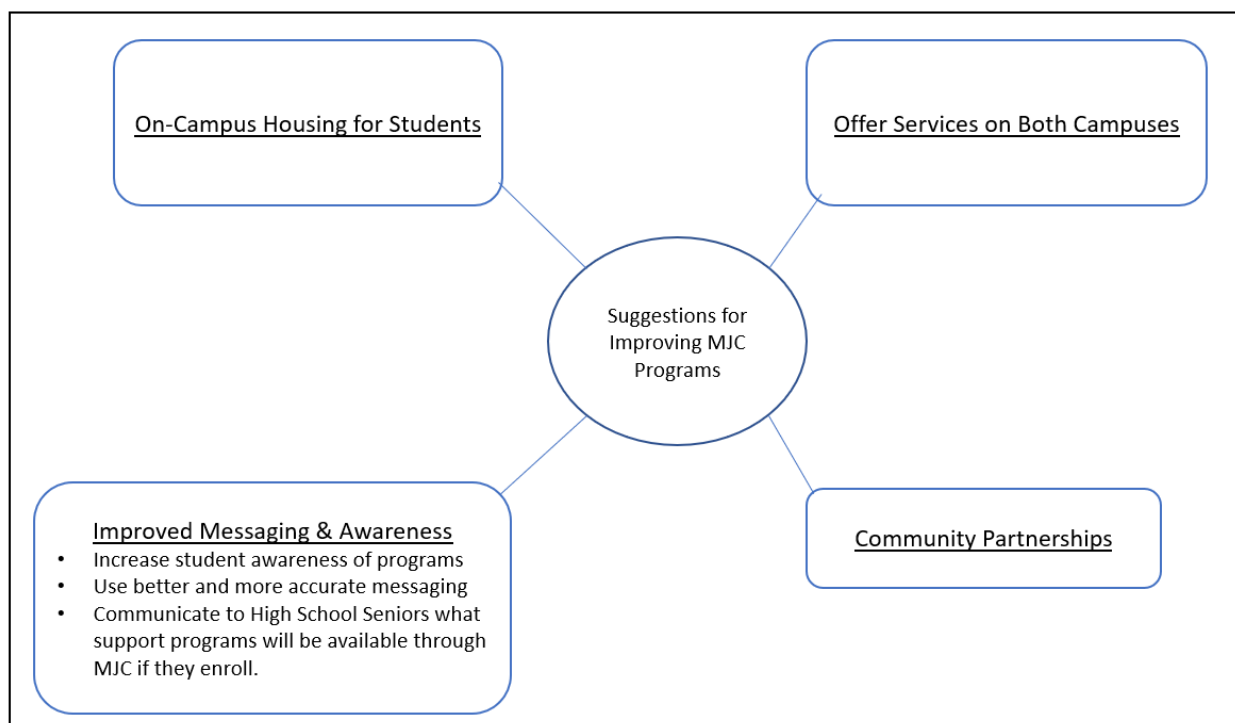
staying in college?": Academic Support, Family/Friends Moral Support Systems, Special Programs, Housing Emergency Grant, Food Support Programs, and Transportation.



Barriers Experienced by Students. Four main themes emerged from responses to the questions “What obstacles have you faced during your time at MJC?” and “How did you overcome these challenges?": Lack of Child Care, Difficulty with Course Schedule, Financial Barriers/Burdens, and Balancing Work and School.



Ideas on How to Improve Services. Four main themes emerged from responses to the questions “What advice would you offer other students who are experiencing similar challenges as you and are entering into Modesto Junior College?” and “If you could speak to the President of MJC, what are two things your campus could do tomorrow to make your life easier as a college student?”: On-Campus Student Housing, Offering Services on Both Campuses, Community Partnerships, and Improved Messaging and Awareness.



Discussion and Recommendations

The objectives of these focus groups were to (1) understand the challenges faced by students with basic needs insecurities, (2) expand on student attitudes toward the basic needs programs offered on campus, and (3) develop an expanded employee view of campus experiences related to basic needs insecurity.

When asked to identify the challenges faced by MJC students with basic needs insecurities, employees and students alike brought financial struggles and lack of child care to the forefront of the conversation. Additionally, many student participants addressed the difficulty of balancing work and school, a challenge that becomes even greater when you are struggling financially and/or don't have access to reliable child care. Students also pointed to prolonged college careers as a challenge faced by many as a plethora of core program courses are not offered every semester, making time to degree longer and ultimately prolonging the challenges mentioned above. Given these challenges, the college should investigate potential avenues for developing support programs geared toward child care and streamlining degree pathways.

In terms of programs already offered at MJC, students pointed to food support programs (i.e. FLOW, Pirate's Pantry, and Cal-Fresh Application Assistance), the free bus sticker program, emergency housing grants, special programs (i.e. TRIO and Umoja), and academic support (i.e. counseling and tutoring) as supports they are grateful for and use frequently. Moreover, employees commended FLOW, Pirate's Pantry, and the Loaner Laptop Program for being excellent examples of programs that are getting it right, specifically in how they adapted to continue serving students during the COVID Pandemic.

Although these programs are excelling in their service to students they are able to reach, employees and students both feel that improvements can still be made. Both groups felt that basic needs support programs need to be offered on both campuses to reach a broader range of the MJC student body. Employees added that this requires an increase in staffing and that this increase in staffing can also allow for support programs to be offered in the evening hours and on weekends, so working students and students in class during current operating hours are able to access the resources.

Related to reaching a broader range of students, both groups also feel the college needs to change their approach in getting the word out about these services and helping students access them. More specifically, employees explained that one major struggle for both employees and students is trying to figure out where to send their students in need of services and determining whether or not the programs they want to send their students to still even exist. Because of this, employees called for the institutionalization of basic needs programs on campus to ensure that students know where to go when they need assistance and employees feel confident in referring students to programs.

Both groups also encourage increasing awareness of these programs through both student and employee education of what is available and how the process works for each program. Students suggested informing incoming students of basic needs programs that are available to them and improving messaging and signage related to these support programs. Employees also shared this suggestion explaining that messaging needs to be accurately translated and put out in a way that students will actually receive and easily absorb (i.e. not email). Furthermore, employees urge MJC to provide training/professional development for employees to better understand what programs are available to students and how they operate. It would also prove beneficial to provide resource guides in addition to the efforts mentioned above.

References

- California Community Colleges Management Information System (2022). *California Community Colleges Management Information System - Data Element Dictionary – Special Population Data Elements*. Retrieved from: <https://webdata.cccco.edu/ded/sg/sg23.pdf>
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- Crutchfield, R.M. & Maguire, J. (2017). Researching basic needs in higher education: Qualitative and quantitative instruments to explore a holistic understanding of food and housing security. <http://www.calstate.edu/basicneeds>
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Appendix A. Student Focus Group Items

Thank you for taking time out of your day to participate in this study to explore your experiences as students at Modesto Junior College. Your participation in the survey was very helpful and we are hoping to learn more about your experience.

[Review Informed Consent]

This focus group will take approximately 60-90 minutes. As mentioned in the informed consent, we will be audio recording the focus group and taking notes as well. As we work through the questions today, please feel free not to answer any questions you don't feel comfortable answering.

Questions asked in this focus group will be related to the following topics: your experiences as students at MJC, perspectives on what things have barriers to your success in college, and what people, supports, and services are most important for you in college. We will be expanding on some of the themes you offered in your surveys.

Before we begin the focus group, please select a pseudonym for us to use throughout the group. Now please indicate your chosen pseudonym on your name cards. All group members should use these pseudonyms throughout the focus group.

BACKGROUND QUESTIONS

- Tell me a little about your life right now.
- Please describe your college experience.
 - What led to you becoming a student at MJC? How did you choose this school?
 - How long have you been attending MJC?
 - Did you attend school uninterrupted? If not, why were there breaks in your attendance of school (between high school and college or during college)?

FOOD AND HOUSING

- Where have you been living during your time at MJC? How long have you lived there? How often have you moved?
- How are you finding the food you need every day?

SUPPORT

- What has helped you succeed in college?
- Before you enrolled in college, what programs were you aware of that could assist you in your endeavor to obtain an education? Who made you aware of the programs?
 - How did you use these programs?
- What other resources or opportunities assisted you in staying in college?
 - Prompt is limited responses: MJC programs, financial aid, academic counseling, EOPS, Pirate's Pantry, other assistance?

- As mentioned by students: Given that you live (in a shelter, with friends, etc.), are there supports that have been particularly helpful?
- As mentioned by students: Given your experiences with access to food, are there supports that have been particularly helpful (food pantry, CalFresh enrollment, friends, etc.)?
- Who are the most important people in your life? Why?
 - What relationships or connections to people did you have that assisted you in staying in college?
 - Define roles – family member, teacher, mentor faculty, college staff, etc.
 - How often did you see them?
- Do you know people who have left school?
 - Why do you think you've succeeded in college and others have not?
 - Was it luck? Stubbornness? Involvement in extracurricular activities? Support from particular offices/programs on campus? Engagement with faculty? Family Support?

BARRIERS

- What are things that have kept you from succeeding in college? What obstacles have you faced?
 - Prompt: personal, institutional, financial, academic advising, etc.?
 - Given that you live (in shelter, with friends, etc.) are there ways that these obstacles have been particularly difficult?
 - Given your experiences with access to food, are there supports that have been particularly helpful?
- How did you overcome these challenges?
- How does where you're staying impact your college experience?

IDEAS OR SUGGESTION ON HOW TO IMPROVE MJC BASIC NEEDS PROGRAMS

- What advice would you offer other students who are experiencing similar challenges as you and entering into Modesto Junior College?
- What could others do to help you or other students living with similar circumstances to best handle college?
 - Prompt: Student services (financial aid, academic advising, EOPS, etc.), faculty, professors, the institutions?
- If you could speak to the President of MJC and the Chancellor of our District, what are two things your campus could do tomorrow to make your life easier as a college student?
- Is there anything else that you want to tell me about your experiences of being in college?
- Is there anything that we didn't talk about that we should talk about?

Appendix B. Employee Focus Group Items

Thank for taking the time to participate in this study to explore the experiences of students who experience basic needs insecurity at MJC.

[Review Informed Consent]

This focus group will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete. We will be audio recording the focus groups and taking notes as well. As we proceed, please feel free to not answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. Your participation is voluntary and pseudonyms will be used.

Questions will be grouped into the following topics: Your professional role on campus, your contact with students dealing with basic needs insecurity, your perspective of basic needs insecurity on campus (such as food and housing insecurity), and what MJC can do to improve services for this student population.

Before we begin the focus group, please select a pseudonym that we will use throughout the course of the focus group and indicate the pseudonym on your name card. All group members should use these pseudonyms throughout the focus group.

- What is your role at this institution?
 - In what ways do provide student services as part of your job function?
- What do you think the perception is of students with basic needs insecurities at MJC?
- How do you define homelessness for students?
 - How about housing insecurity?
 - How about food insecurity?
- The CCCCO breaks students' basic needs down into the following categories: Food, Housing, Mental Health, Physical Health, Transportation, Child Care, and Technology. In what ways have you observed basic needs insecurity in the MJC student population?
- How are you identifying students who have basic needs insecurities on campus?
 - What have been your experiences in supporting students who are identified?
 - Are there ways to improve this identification process?
- What are some barriers that you have experienced when working with students who experience basic needs insecurity?
- What are some of the best practices that you or the college as whole have implemented to better serve students?
- What gaps in services do you observe?
- What resources do you need to better assist you with providing support for students with basic needs insecurities?
- Is there anything else that you want to tell us about your experiences with students who experience basic needs insecurity?
- Is there anything we didn't talk about that we should talk about?