COVID-19 & Student Basic Needs:
Understanding impacts of the disruption and CARES emergency funding

Final Report
September 2020

Research Team
Daniel Celis, Mariela Cuna & Suyet Peralta Diaz, Masters in Social Work students
Tatiana Ybarra, Bachelors in Political Science student
Susan Roll, Faculty in Social Work
Jennifer Wilking, Faculty in Political Science & Criminal Justice

Special Consultant: Mariah Kornbluh, Faculty in Psychology, University of South Carolina

Project Overview

Funded through the Adelante Postbaccalaureate Pipeline Program, this project utilized interdisciplinary teams of student researchers to conduct focus groups to understand the impact of COVID-19 disruptions on student basic needs. Specifically, we sought to better understand how the disruptions associated with COVID-19 affected student food insecurity, housing insecurity and homelessness. We also explored how financial assistance to students (through emergency grants and CARES Act funds) affected students' spring academic performance, mental and physical wellness, and their likelihood to continue with their education at Chico State in the Fall of 2020. This project is a part of an on-going evaluation of basic needs services on campus, and was greatly enhanced through the opportunity to utilize students as co-researchers.

Adelante Research Project
Adelante is a newly funded program on the Campus which aims to provide Latinx and low-income graduate and undergraduate students a faculty-mentored, funded research experience. By collaborating with 4 Adelante co-researchers on the current project we were able to have students inform every aspect of the study – from participant recruitment, focus group protocols, qualitative data analysis and final results. The incorporation of student perspectives - all of whom have also been impacted by COVID-19 - strengthened the quality of the research and validity of the findings (Ozer, 2016).

CARES Funding
In April 2020, the US Department of Education allocated more than $6 billion for universities across the country to provide direct emergency grants to college students whose lives and educational pathways have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The funding was authorized by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The California State University system, which includes 23 campuses, received more than $262 million to allocate to students in emergency grant aid. Of that, $9,979,696 was allocated to support Chico State students.

In early May, 11,600 students were identified as eligible to be considered for the emergency grants under Section 484 in Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965. A total of 9,578 students received $11,193,694 in two rounds of emergency grants through the CARES funding. In addition, the campus contributed $439,745 towards emergency grants to assist students who did not qualify under HEERF guidelines, for a grand total of $11,633,059 in student support.

Methods
This study used focus groups to solicit qualitative data from a sample of Chico State students. In an effort to draw a sample of students who had experienced some recent financial challenges, the research team utilized a list of 469 students who had applied for an Emergency Grant between January – June 2020. The Emergency Grant Program is facilitated through the Basic Needs Program and Financial Aid to support students experiencing unexpected economic crisis with financial assistance in the form of a grant with the maximum of $500 (emergency grants for rental assistance and academic retention *may exceed* $500 on a case-by-case basis depending on economic need). Case managers through the Basic Needs Program had outreached to this same list when the CARES Funding became available, notifying them of the grant opportunity and helping them to apply. Thus, a large portion of the study population had received the first phase, second phase, or both of the CARES funds distribution.

An email was sent out to the list encouraging them to participate in a focus group and offering a $50 gift card to either the Campus Bookstore or Walmart[1]. Four time slots were offered and SignUp Genius was used to create focus groups of no more than 10 participants. All of the time slots filled within hours.

The Adelante Research team participated in a training on *How to Conduct Focus Groups* with Dr. Mariah Kornbluh, Community Psychology faculty from University of South Carolina. There

---

[1] The WalMart card restricts the purchase of tobacco, alcohol or lottery tickets.

was a special emphasis on how to conduct focus groups remotely, on Zoom as COVID-19 prevented in person implementation. The team then conducted a practice focus group with 4 volunteer students to pilot both the technology and protocol. The team also met with Jeremy Olguin of the Office of Accessible Technology to gain access to Otter, an online transcription tool, and integrate it into the Zoom platform.

Focus Groups were conducted on Wednesday, July 8th and Thursday, July 9th. A total of 26 students participated. In two cases when more than six students showed up, the focus groups were split into two to ensure a small, intimate setting that was more conducive to the online environment. Focus Groups were facilitated by 1-2 members of the Research Team, with a note-taker in each group. All sessions were recorded in Zoom and Otter for the automated transcription.

Focus Group participants were asked questions about how COVID and the campus closure had impacted them. They were asked to consider how and which University resources had been most helpful to them and their experience in accessing those resources. Finally, they were asked what feedback they had for both faculty and administrators in terms of their experiences with classes, communication and campus climate during the pandemic. A full outline of the Focus Group Protocol can be found in appendix A.

Data Analysis
Following the focus groups, the Adelante Research Team again met with Mariah Kornbluh to participate in a training on coding and thematic analysis. The Team then coded the focus group data using Dedoose, a secure web-based qualitative analysis software. Inter-rater reliability was achieved through taking a test through the software where the team scored over 80% consistency in coding. When any codes were not consistently applied, the two teammates talked through their decision-making ensuring consensus building. A subsequent test of reliability resulted in 92% matching codes.

Following the coding, the Team conducted a thematic analysis as a group with the following objectives:
- Compare and contrast results across focus groups
- Look for emerging themes by question and then overall
- Construct typologies and diagram the analysis
- Describe findings and use quotes to illustrate

Themes
The focus group data revealed a consensus among the Research Team that students generally experienced a similar string of events that unfolded over the course of the spring semester and into the summer. While every student's experience was certainly unique, they followed a similar trajectory. The onset of the pandemic led to loss of employment and access to campus resources, followed by difficult decisions around housing. This then created challenges with coursework and student life. Over time finances became more constrained, and stress levels and anxiety increased. There was clear consensus that the CARES money was incredibly helpful for those who received it and other campus resources that have buoyed students in this hard time. There

was also some critique in terms of what students would like to see the campus doing differently. These themes are more fully explored with sample quotes to illustrate the student experience.

Loss of Employment
First, as the pandemic came to Butte County and the campus and area businesses were forced to close, many students lost their employment both on and off campus. Student respondents in all 5 focus groups mentioned loss of employment. These comments related to the impact on their employment such as a loss of hours or losing employment entirely when businesses began to shut down due to the pandemic. Sometimes this was their own job, at other times it was their parents, partners, or roommates who lost employment. These changes often happened abruptly, such as students who worked in campus jobs, and were told not to return after spring break. This was also true for student internships.

And I was laid off. I applied for unemployment. Mm hmm. And the unemployment finally came through. I returned to work a couple weeks ago. So I got my unemployment for the weeks I was unemployed. Yeah. As a self supporting student, um, you know, how like, I have a house, I pay rent, pay all my bills, it was a challenge to pay, you know, stay on top of everything without a source of income.

Students who lost their jobs had to find alternative supports and resources, as outlined by this student:

I would rely occasionally on the food pantry in the past, but with my job normally It's stable enough where I can get groceries on my own without the aid of CalFresh. But because I was unemployed for quite a while, it did become a lot more difficult. So the COVID pandemic itself did play a big part in myself having to rely on external options or just not having any options.

Beyond the loss of personal employment, students also spoke to the stress and guilt for relying on family when parents were also experiencing financial strain:

I had a job from December until March. I was working at an after-school program, and it was really fun job because it was my first and I was getting income. And I didn't have to ask my parents for extra cash. But then on March 14 when the whole pandemic started - our work got canceled. And so from there, I had a housing problem where I was going to be able to ask my parents for money again, that's like, not like the best time to be in because it's like, it's stressful because you know, your parents issues and now you have to push your issues to them. So that was stressful.

Concern for the burden on families was a common theme in the focus groups. This finding is consistent with the scholarly literature which shows that Latinx and first-generation students often have familial obligations that differ from their peers (Silver and Roksa, 2017; Sy and Romero, 2008).

I know a couple of my friends that actually ended up doing the educational leave because they needed to work to assist their families because we have been so used to having you know, for example, for myself, my family has been used to me staying up here for summertime because I

usually work for campus. And as I you know, I can go back home like, I feel bad because that's an that's another mouth that my parents are gonna have to feed. My parents like, you know, they're not they My mom is a cook, you know, at McDonald's and her hours were cut off as well. Because, you know, the whole pandemic, my dad is a construction worker and his hours has also, you know, been cut off and I feel like going back home for me like it might be an option, but I don't think it might be the best option both for the housing and for the food insecurity as well.

The link between the student's and their family's situation was made very evident in all five of the focus groups. Not only did students lose jobs and access to resources, but often their families did as well.   This then became a predicament for students in terms of their options for housing, jobs and finances, as in this statement from a student:

My parents are paying for my tuition and our county's hit like very badly, like everything is shut down. I don't know if it's been like five, six months. So it is nearly impossible for them to send me money and I can't even ask them for it. So I think that college should at least start something that creates some jobs on campus, which will be safe and students can just work and make some money so that at least they feel like they have something they can see on that pay tuition fee somehow, because my tuition is due and even though I have it now, I'm so scared of paying that because once I paid I'm not sure if I'll be able to eat food for a while.

Limited Access to Campus Services
When the campus shutdown, students lost access to many of their usual places and programs (such as the library, the DREAM Center and PATH scholars). While many programs continued to be offered, hours and how to contact staff was not always clear.

The library was a central resource that many students spoke about losing and missing, whether for internet access, access to fast computers with sufficient data and programs, and as a quiet place conducive to study. Some examples include:

I use the library, like all semester like it was such a great place to be able to focus and you can rent out a room if you have like group projects. So I definitely agree with him that it's too bad that students don't have that option anymore.

So I do utilize the third floor of the library quite often to focus mostly because back home like in my apartment, I do have quite a few roommates. And I lived for a few years in an area where there's a few families and with younger kids and occasionally newborns that would live above me or beside me. So being at home normally wasn't really an option if I had to do schoolwork, especially due to the fact that I just can't concentrate naturally. The library was a great place to be to focus or it would be quiet and where I would get the most quality work done.

Student's certainly felt the impact of access to good computers and Wi-Fi in regards to their ability to keep up in school and perform well academically, as this student outlines:

I'm in the computer science department so I need a computer all the time to do any assignment and my laptop is pretty slow.   A lot of assignments I'm doing I used to go in the lab and do it over there because the computers are fast. But right now like doing the assignment is so hard,

um, it's faster to do it on a pen and paper and then writing the code than normally doing it. So that's making it a little harder and I don't think I'm learning that well, because of this thing and I'm lagging behind in most of my classes because of this.

Student Life

During all five of the focus groups, students discussed what it is like being a student during the pandemic. Many students mentioned how their new environment affected their ability to be a full-time student, with several students discussion challenges in adapting to different learning environments. Participants especially struggled to balance the responsibilities of being a student while living with family.

By way of example, this student highlighted the drastic changes in their daily routines due to the pandemic:

Because it went from like, having you know going to work. Sometimes I had like morning shifts or afternoon shifts. So it was like morning shifts, classes, sometimes to the WREC and then till the library, It was like a complete like a schedule that I had. And then I came back home and it was like, okay, readjusting myself making a schedule for myself, and then having like other things to worry about as the pandemic was going. So it was a transition But I think it took time to transition.

Again, moving home while being a full-time student was very impactful for several respondents, especially those who may be Latinx or first-generation college students. Specifically, moving home brought additional familial responsibilities (i.e., income, providing childcare, etc.), and impinged on resources necessary to be an effective student, like wi-fi.

As a first gen sometimes for them is difficult to understand, like, the workload that you have. And like sometimes they're like, Oh, I have to go to this store but you're like no, like, I want you to be fine. I'll go to the store or I'll go and do like all of the errands you have to run. And that's like time that takes from you and also being home. And so it's like, even like sharing their Wi-Fi like, I have two sisters that are also in school so they have to connect to the Wi-Fi too. And my grandma loves Netflix too. So she watches Netflix and the Wi-Fi goes crazy. So I feel like it's also understanding that like, right now we're not the full time students that we were we have too much going on at home. That it's just hard to adjust.

Decisions around Housing and Where to be

Students were then faced with making decisions about housing – for many this meant weighing the barriers and opportunities to stay in Chico versus moving home with family. This theme emerged in four of the five focus groups. A central implication of this decision for students was their ability to still attend to their coursework and balance their new circumstances.

This is clear in this student's statement:

The pandemic has affected my housing in the sense that classes were made to be online, right? A lot of us were forced to go back home. And for a lot of us home isn't really the most stable place to really be, you know, doing schoolwork. That's kind of the reason why we left in the first place. And so, yeah, that's kind of something that the pandemic and COVID has really affected.

Food & Housing Insecurity
Every student in each of the 5 focus groups talked about their struggles to obtain adequate food and sustain stable housing as their resources became constrained. They frequently cited examples of juggling resources to cover the most pressing expenses and then being left short for other expenses.

This student explains their dilemma:
Honestly, maybe this was just for me but the housing and food obviously that takeaway from other took away money from me spending money on other stuff like say my car needs to be fixed or another like all the other outside things that should have been fixed, but couldn't be fixed that it's been money at somewhere else.

Similarly, this student outlines the challenges of balancing less than adequate resources:
I would say that it's affected like my housing situation definitely and food. I mean, I think the first thing that I thought about when this whole thing started was like putting myself in survival mode of not knowing. Like this the first two things you think of you don't think about, you know, your car payment or gas or, you know, electricity. You kind of just think about like having a roof over your head. And I think that not having a job and not knowing when I'm going to be able to work again is very scary. And that actually provides foods so it kind of goes together. So it's definitely been hard.

Students voiced that securing housing was difficult before the pandemic hit but afterwards was made worse as students' lost their jobs or hours.

I couldn't work enough hours, I was really worried that I would be unable to pay for my rent, because we rent a two bedroom because we moved my mother in here with us, like a year ago to help take care of her. So it's a little more expensive than some and me and my fiance, we're splitting the rent. And when she lost her job, she couldn't pay her portion of rent. And I was still worried about my portion of rent.

Mental Health
With the loss of jobs and campus supports, student housing and food insecurity increased, resulting in increased stress and anxiety. Mental health issues were discussed in four of the five focus groups. Notably, there was an extended discussion in one focus group, with mental health being mentioned thirty-one times. Several quotes illustrate the connection between financial strain and insecurity and mental health, such as in this student's statement:

If our mind is on survival we can't think and study and you know, all the stuff that you need to do in university.

Students were very keen to the connection between their limited resources, the advent of the pandemic, and their mental health. This student really gets to the heart of the issue in their discussion of the hierarchy of needs – the theory that only once people's fundamental physiological needs are met can they move towards self-actualization (Maslow, 1943):
The first thing that comes to my mind is about hierarchy of needs. And I feel like that kind of puts you on the basic survival sort of mindset. But just it's constant anxiety. I mean, it's not it's not a

place where you would be able to study. Um, that's, that's gonna come to my mind. Um, and I feel like when I think about being a student, it's that top part of hierarchy of needs, you know, just having all the security of belongings and everything like that, so that you could try to find knowledge and think critically. And when you don't have that, there's no way that you could be a student basically, it just is. I think it's impossible. Mentally we are not. As humans, we are not made that way. If our mind is on survival we can't think and study and you know, all the stuff that you need to do in university.

Not surprisingly, students discussed the added anxiety they felt related to the risk and reality of contracting COVID-19.

I think this has been impacted me a lot mentally. I'm in Los Angeles. And everything is I can't walk out my door without like a mask on. And it's like, every time I walked out, it's putting myself at risk of getting this. And unfortunately, I did get it. Um, but I like thankfully, I'm like fine. I had a very mild case. But I think it just took a heavy toll on me. And then I have like, my summer class, like right after and I was just not like not in the mood for like school but like I had to do it and like I did it. But I think this just took a toll a lot mentally on me.

Students also made direct connections between housing insecurity, and stress and anxiety. This student talks about the challenges of supporting one another in the pandemic and how that impacted their mental health in this discussion:

I had to figure out a way to pay the rent because I couldn't cancel my lease agreement. And I'm not from Chico, I'm from Sacramento. So it was very tough being here by myself, worrying about the rent. I do have one roommate who went back to her family's home I she doesn't live in Chico either. I have no family that's living in Chico so I was trying to follow the protocol of staying home and it was very tough By myself for three months, and I really tried hard to not go back but then after three months, I was like, you know what I had enough of this. It was it was mentally exhausting being home every single day. And my, my family's very good with like calling and other virtual communication. Its just it's not the same as first of all in person But it was very hard. I was mentally exhausted. I had long hair, I cut my hair short because I was just mentally I needed a change. I didn't know what to do and on one day, I just cut it. it was mentally like really impacting

Comments made by participants highlighted how the pandemic increased what was already happening to students. Many students were struggling with their mental health, housing, and food insecurity before the pandemic. Many shared their opinions on how the pandemic only intensified these experiences for students.

I feel like it takes a toll on them dramatically to where we realize that there are certain mental health issues that people have. And it takes having to be unhealthy and not eating right to show you those. And I think post-pandemic It probably elevates those situations more.

Most students agreed that learning while at home hindered their abilities to be a student and would like more support from their professors. Such as this student who requested their professors to be more flexible in the upcoming semester,

I know a lot of educators say they have to be like, not neutral, but like, kind of have the same standards and like, like, they can't be like giving any special treatment to certain students. But I think moving forward especially on zoom, I think we have to like you have to treat every student as an independent in the class and understand each independent situation because like what you were saying, like, we're not the same people we are when we're in Chico or like, over there. Our spaces are different. You're playing a different role. You might have had to take on a different job. I guess just treating each situation as an individual situation. Then rather saying like, well, I can't do that, because then I would have to do it for everyone. But it's like we're all in different areas. Now. Like you kinda have to scratch that.

It was clear across the focus groups that learning from home and the transition for most students is not conducive to their learning, and adjusting to the transition has been challenging.

CARES Funding
Students in the focus groups had a high likelihood of receiving either the first phase of funding, the second phase of funding, or both. In each group, students were asked to share their experience with the funding - did they know about it, did they apply and receive the funding, and was it impactful in terms of helping them meet their basic needs. Overwhelmingly, those students who received the funding had a deep sense of gratitude for the support and were able to use the money to pay for living expenses due to losses attributed to COVID.

By way of example, one student said, *the thing that I feel like helped me the most was the CARES grant act, because that allowed me leeway to like actually look for another place…my home and hometown don't necessarily have a house to go back to. So for me, it was very important to find housing here. So definitely the CARES act helped me a lot with putting a deposit down paying like the first rent for that other apartment.*

And another student said, *I received the Phase I grant automatically, I think it was about $800 and then I received the Phase II. I also applied for the $750 from basic needs and that really helped because I was in a situation where I was kind of behind on rent and you know, I had a problem my car and I was able to get everything paid for.*

Finally, one student made very clear their relief in receiving the CARES support, with this statement:

 I didn't want to tell anyone what was happening because I'm like, I'm a grad student, and I'm a social worker. And I felt like everyone had all these expectations for me. And so I didn't really tell anyone or access a lot of resources, but if it weren't for the CARES thing, I would have lost my home. I would have been totally screwed.

Several students were forthcoming that their citizenship status prevented their eligibility for the Phase I funding, so they were grateful to be able to receive Phase II, as one student who was experiencing both housing and food insecurity outlined, *I would go to the pantry sometimes when I was able to fit it in my schedule, but sometimes I wouldn't be able to. The grant money, I was very thankful that they had Phase II because I was only eligible for Phase II, because I'm a DACA student.*

Several students who had received an emergency grant from Financial Aid were called just prior to the Phase II deadline to be sure they knew about the availability of funding. These students were clearly grateful for the check-in, as one student described, *it was nice to have someone checking in – kind-of making sure I'm alive.*

While there was a great deal of appreciation for the CARES support, there were also questions and concern about what happened to the rest of the CARES allocation to our campus. One student brought it up in this way:

My question is, well, I guess not really a question, but my confusion with the CARES funds is to understand that there was about 19 million dispersed to campuses, right? And then only half of it was dispersed to the students, right? And then last semester, we paid our full tuition, and then we got cut off in the middle of the semester, and we didn't have access to any of the things that are on campus. So I was expecting to get a refund, at least for something, right? And so, to me, the 900 dollars helped. But it wasn't enough.

Basic Needs Program
Many students talked about support from the Basic Needs Program on-campus. Resources and services available through the Basic Needs Program include the Wildcat Food Pantry, emergency funding, emergency shelter, rapid re-housing, support to apply for CalFresh, and support navigating housing issues off campus, including landlord and roommate problems. Students can access services in person through the food pantry, and on-line via the application for assistance.

Many of the comments relating to the Basic Needs Program mentioned the Wildcat Food Pantry, a finding consistent with a previous study demonstrating that among basic needs services, students at Chico State are most aware of the food pantry. Among the food pantry comments, the majority were positive, discussing how they used the pantry pre-pandemic, to supplement food during the day on campus, or to stock their kitchen during the week and weekend.

I would go kind of everyday but mostly like every three days like whenever I would be on campus like all day and I be really close to it since I have all my classes in Holt. Like, like okay, maybe I should go to the pantry and walk all the way across campus, but I really love that they have like canned beans or like fresh lettuce and like bread in the freezer and also how they have like feminine products. Like thats very helpful, it helps so much.

Students who could continue to access the pantry during the pandemic, also found it very helpful. For example:

I have been relying quite a bit with the Wildcat Pantry. Just because at the beginning of the pandemic, when everything started to shut down, I was out of work for quite a while, which caused my finances to be quite tight and difficult to deal with and manage. So I did have to rely for a while on the Food Pantry which is limited but some of the things there did help quite a lot.

While most respondents found the pantry very helpful, comments also regarded the limitations of the pantry, and suggestions for improvement. For example, one student discussed the limited

pantry hours during the pandemic, *So it's open for such a short time like and most of my classes overlap that time so I have like 15 minutes when I'm running in the sun to reach before it shuts down. So I think we can open it for a bit longer.*

Additionally, students mentioned their desire for more varied offerings at the pantry, such as more culturally appropriate foods, and more protein.

I was gonna say I think I would agree about the protein. But I know our school has a farm. And I know we sell that meat. So I don't know. I know students who've done the class where they cut up the animal and like they get to take home that meat. But like how you know I'm saying some of those resources can head to the pantry.

Additionally, one student described feeling like they were over-using the pantry, *I would go out every three days, sometimes every day of the week. I would feel kind of bad sometimes going very frequently. But I don't know if that was just me.* Another student did not use the pantry, do to feelings of shame or stigmatization. *I would refer clients there and I would go with my peers but I never utilized it I don't know. I think something with my childhood and shame I just didn't know.*

In addition to the Food Pantry, students also mentioned CalFresh, the emergency grants, and the assistance they received from Basic Needs case managers in accessing the CARES funds, and assistance with off-campus housing issues. In all of these cases, student comments were varied, including positive feedback and pointing out challenges with the resource, or ways the service could be improved.

One student noted in particular, the helpful assistance she received in the food pantry, in getting her CalFresh application approved.

I was applying for CalFresh and I was not being approved because, um, I was I didn't have the requirement of like you need to be working while you're receiving which is so weird to me. Like I was, I was doing internships, there's like no way for me to work. There's like, literally not enough days in the week for me to work and do my internship and go to school. That's how I kind of got to know them and the girl and I remember her name, but she was really awesome. She helped me do the application and she helped me in terms of like what I need to do in order to be approved.

Similarly, another student mentioned the help they received from a Basic Needs case manager in applying for CARES funding.

Yeah, it was that one for like when something impacts or, or something like that, I applied to that one and I got that one and it helped and I also got the CARES act, and also like from the food pantry. I think I applied like a week or two weeks before this whole shebang happened. And what's then they kept contacting me to see like how my application went or if I needed anything, and I feel like that that was helpful.

Students also faced challenges with the programs. For example, a student applied for an emergency grant to find funds were unavailable. Another student experienced the suspension of their CalFresh support.

I did have an experience with the basic needs emergency funds, like, probably like a month or so ago. I did have an interview with them, where essentially, I thought was going to receive the funds when I started the interview. But towards the end of it, they just told me that there was no funds left.

Faculty & University Responsiveness

Focus group participants were given the opportunity to reflect on how they felt their instructors and the University as a whole responded to the pandemic. These comments were largely in response to two questions:

- What is one thing you would want a college professor to know in order to better support students during the pandemic?
- What is one way you would want the University administration to invest in better supporting students during the pandemic?

Testimony from students was decidedly mixed on these topics. Some students shared praise and gratitude towards faculty and the University – and for others there was some frustration and disappointment. By way of example, some students talked about faculty actively reaching out and adapting to the remote teaching environment with opportunities for engagement, while others seemed to go silent. Simple communication was interrupted, in that while the majority of faculty use email to communicate, for many students, email has not been the best form of communication. This could be due to accessibility issues and/or inability to check email.

An example of a positive experience with faculty was outlined by this student, who said,
So, when, before the pandemic, they, they I think they honestly been, like, supportive and like, always been understanding. But when the pandemic hit, I think they got more understanding, luckily, like they were like, okay, it's okay. Like if you cant submitted it like on time, I understand because there was a lot of students that well like, they didnt have access to the internet or they had like a very not reliable living environment like they were homeless or housing insecure. And I appreciate that and I hope that they keep on being understanding. Also, like if people that don't even have access to the internet.

Many students expressed a desire for faculty to understand that everyone's circumstances are different, and scheduling work around classes can be challenging, such as in this student's concerns:
My teacher, she changed her hours for her zoom classes. So it was really hard for me to because I was working during the times that she would teach. So I would kind of ask her if she would kind of change it. But she would always tell me that like Other students are also busy too. So I should kind of take time. But then I couldn't take time because I was working during those times. Yeah. So I would like the teachers to know like they should be, like more lenient when it comes to like, like zoom classes or like deadlines and things.

Many students have had to adjust to different roles, as many are taking on more responsibilities that vary from the roles they had prior to Covid. Students echoed a need for faculty to be more flexible and understanding to each student's special situation, as not all student experiences are the same.

When considering the topic of University responsiveness, again the issue of communication rose to the top. Email seems to have some real limitations, out lined in the following examples from students:

Especially with the lack of communication from the university. I just want to have that too. It's been a little. Uh it's been a little off. They've been slacking, but I would say they dropped the ball quite a few times. They had opportunities to show that they're improving and just and just didn't.

But I noticed it's been really quiet. Um, like, [another student] *had mentioned, like, they've kind of been really quiet with like reaching out to students. Um, at least in my experience, I'm not sure if I'm not getting the emails, but I think it'd be really nice if like they checked in with the students like every maybe month or especially, maybe like, soon in July, just to give students resources to prepare for the fall semester.*

This student further helps in illuminating the limitations of email for communication:

I was fortunate because I was constantly checking my emails for updates. A lot of people don't typically have their email notifications on. And when they do receive emails, they just focus on emails from professors or anything that's school grade miss anything with class related, because I generally, honestly, sometimes I do ignore a lot of emails sent from it's not from my teachers or anything. And when I did apply for the grant, and there was a deadline, there was a certain deadline to it. And I told many friends about it like the day or two before the deadline and they, if I wouldn't have told them they probably wouldn't have applied for it at all. And that was like three or four My friends that I've told that to do and even realize it all shoot, I wish I knew I was like dude, it's deadlines like tomorrow so you should get it done right now so it takes would be nice knowing a lot of people don't check their emails at all

Due to a lack of email outreach or a student's inability to check email, students stated that perhaps email is not the best form of communication for students, many stating that they were not aware of campus services that were sent out via email. Many suggested the university utilize texting to send student alerts and reminders about on-campus services or send a reminder to remind students to check the opportunities available via email. Overall students stressed communication being an important part of campus responsibility during the pandemic, as in this quote: *definitely more communication from the school. You know, you can never have too much communication.*

Students who had built connections prior to the pandemic with on-campus support programs seemed to be more connected with campus programs and services. Many students get the majority of their information from these offices and special programs. Across all of the focus groups it was clear that for students who had established relationships with on-campus support

programs, such as PATH Scholars or MESA, prior to the pandemic, their sense of connection to the University and on-campus support staff was stronger, post-COVID.

So, the intern I got to know about this from the international office, and they've been really great like they've been made sending mails every day, at least like 4 to 5 mails and they keep telling us everything that's happening and they're like, don't worry we are with you and anything that's happening on campus, they will share the link even though we are not eligible for most of them, they would still just let us know about it and yeah, they've been great help. So that's how I'm just communicating with them and I get all the information from them

The constant communication allowed for students to access a broad range of resources and feel more connected to the campus community.

I got a lot of my information from the PATH scholars office. And so yeah, it worked there and they did a really good job about letting us know that these services, not only letting us know that these services were available, but convincing us to apply for apply for them because I wouldn't have and they were like, yeah, just do it. Just do it.

Representation
A final theme that emerged in only one of the focus groups, but was a relatively long and emotion-filled discussion was that of the lack of representation by Black, Hispanic and other faculty and staff of color on the campus. The topic came up as the students were talking about who they can ask for help. Raised initially by a student who identified as white, the conversation was quickly picked up and there was strong agreement across the group that there are significant barriers for students of color with regard to accessing and received support, because of the lack of representation on the campus.

Several of the quotes from that focus groups make clear the consensus by those students on this topic. The discussion began with this student:

Well, so a lot of students aren't going to ask for help from like a white woman, because they don't feel comfortable asking for help from a white woman because of their own historical trauma or they're only like other people. Probably people here that can speak better on this topic. I just know from my interviews from my thesis and personal experiences, well, they're not personal my experiences when people I know in my program that I went through, I get overexcited when I speak about things that I'm passionate about...But you know if your say, so I'm a former foster youth, and I am white and had a lot of trauma. But I was able to find mentors throughout school, because there were a lot of white women that were professors that, you know, saw me and they're like, Oh, you know, you are a great student, and I will mentor you. But then maybe someone that doesn't look like me. They're all white professors. So they couldn't find mentors. And so they didn't reach out for help, and they needed that access and so like, maybe they didn't find out about the second CARES grant or, you know, other things like that. It's just easier for me to access resources. So that's what I'm talking about.

Several students then asked to speak to add their strong agreement, such as the testimony from these students:

Yeah, I do. I 100% agree with you, [other student], representation at Chico State sucks. Especially because we have this whole, like diversity thing, you know, diverse, right? We put token students on our website. We tried to act like you know, we're very diverse how to have a very diverse campus. But what happened really was they started encouraging more people of color to go to our school because we were so heavily impacted with white students. And what ended up happening is yes, we got a lot of people of color to attend our schools. But our accesses or resources or access to our resources are still Very bad and the representation like she said is still very bad. And as much as Yes, we have more like BIPOC students, does it mean that we have more BiPOC staff that can really, you know, understand students and can really know how to help us.

One of the reasons why I started going to the MESA center was because there's a lot of people of color like it's Hispanic, I can go I'm half Hispanic, and well all my roommates are Hispanic and we feel like comfortable going to the MESA center because you see similar faces maybe from the same town and figure or language and That's where you feel safe. And I would feel unsafe here or there when you're not in someone else's shoes whose from a different race - they may not have a program that they feel they might feel at home, or feel like special in and have like those needs fulfilled. Because I know I'm appreciated at MESA and its for Hispanics and they make it feel cool there. They make people feel safe. People feel safe and believe that they can have friends and all that. That's my take.

And sometimes I feel like we like you know, [another student] said that we have you know, um, you know, Chico State values diversity, we have logos like that. And for example, I myself, I catch myself, you know, especially with my work I advertise that we are Hispanic serving institution, but I myself don't even know what that means. You know, I don't even know what it means to be an Hispanic serving institution, I just the title that Chico State holds. So like, the question that like I caught myself on someone was like, What Doesn't mean like, you know, it's Hispanic. And I was like, Whoa, like, what does that mean? Like, I don't even know what being a Hispanic serving institution means. Like it just means what we have 25% or higher of Hispanic serving institution, but what resources do we offer, you know, what do we really offer to these students?

Consistent with the other comments, another student expressed the following:

I totally agree with representation. Like, I'm a nutrition major, and like there are hardly any people of color like, BIPOC, I think I've had like three professors that were of color and the rest are white females. But they were great. But you know, I can't be like, Oh, hey, like this, but of course, I'm very like, appreciative of like, the Dream Center and the STAR center. Great to have like people of color there and like, you know, be relatable. not come off as like weird. Like, like, like that they don't understand you or like they're not taking you serious. They're just like, Oh, okay.

Thus, while the issue of representation did not come up in all of the focus groups, it was clearly an important topic in the one focus group in which is was raised. Students want greater representation so they feel comfortable seeking support and services from faculty with similar

lived experiences. Students discuss the critical role of identity-based student-led organizations (i.e., MESA) as a form of needed support in promoting college perseverance. The quotes from the conversation in this focus group indicate that greater representation of people of color in faculty and staff positions is a topic that students feel passionately about and is worth attention.

Conclusions and Implications
The 26 students who participated in the focus groups brought to light the many challenges that students, particularly those who are under-resourced, were facing four months into the pandemic. Their experiences match stories from across the country and are not unique to our community.

The dramatic turn of events in mid-March of this year caused many students and their families to lose employment which had rapid repercussions on their ability to pay their bills and make ends meet. An added loss was the closure of many campus resources as well as connections to programs and instructors that had previously been a source of support. As the weeks went on, maintaining stable housing became a challenge for many students, whether they stayed in the immediate area or returned home to stay with their families throughout the State. It was clear that for many students, while families are a strong support system, at times their limited resources became an added stress for students both financially and emotionally. In every focus group, students made a clear connection between the growing uncertainly and instability caused by the pandemic, and their levels of stress and diminished mental and physical health.

To mitigate the implications of the pandemic, the CARES funding was a welcome relief for many students. Campus support programs, especially for students who had engaged with them prior to the onset of the pandemic, were helpful for students to gain information about resources and to feel connected. Teaching faculty, in many cases, were a source of support, and in other cases students needed additional support and understanding. Student perceptions of the broader University response were also mixed, with many expressing concern about their not receiving adequate and effective communication. Finally, there was a rich discussion about the lack of representation by Black, Hispanic and other faculty and staff of color on the campus. This is not a new critique at Chico State nor is it unique to our campus, but important for faculty, staff and administrators to know that it remains a topic of great importance to students.

Moving forward, the voices of these students give us some important cues for improving the health and well-being of our campus community. Fundamentally, it is clear that many of our students are living very close to the margins in terms of their financial stability – which has clear and direct implications for their ability to be successful at Chico State. The abrupt loss of employment for many of these students had an immediate impact on their ability to make ends meet, indicating that very few of these students have savings, families with resources, or others sources of support on which they can rely in a crisis.

While the Basic Needs Program, emergency grants and the CARES funding have been incredibly important for many students to get by, they are limited resources and, in the end, not enough to sustain students living at the margin, especially as we move into the fall with no end to the pandemic in sight. For many students, their instructors are their main source of connection to the campus. Thus, when the campus closed, faculty who made extra efforts to reach out to students and keep them engaged, made a significant impact. On the contrary, those faculty who were

unable or unwilling to keep students informed and connected immediately after the start of the pandemic, really did a disservice, especially for students without strong social support networks.

Many of the existing programs at Chico State have been and remain a strong source of care and support for students – MESA, PATH Scholars, the Dream Center and the Star Center were all named as places where students feel connected. The University should be applauded for their work to create the many programs where especially some of our most vulnerable students can go for support, mentorship and connection.

In an effort to better support students moving forward, the University would do well to look at two of the themes in particular: communication and representation. While email is used as a central mechanism to alert students about important topics and opportunities, such as the availability of the CARES funding, it is not effective in reaching the target audience. Whether this is unique to the unusual circumstances of the pandemic or not is unclear, but certainly critically important to address as this pandemic continues and we move into more uncertain times. Finally, the University must take a hard and careful look at the lack of faculty and staff on the campus who represent the student body. It is a significant and tenacious problem that has come up time and again and is even more prominent now as we have seen the incredible growth and visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement. The University should commit significant resources to programs such as Adelante! which engages specifically Latinx and first-generation students in research so that they will become the future faculty on our Campus.

References

Maslow, A.H. (1943). "A Theory of Human Motivation". In Psychological Review, 50 (4), 430-437.

Ozer, E. J. (2016). Youth-led participatory action research: Developmental and equity perspectives. In Advances in child development and behavior (Vol. 50, pp. 189-207). JAI.

Silver, B. R., & Roksa, J. (2017). Navigating uncertainty and responsibility: Understanding inequality in the senior-year transition. Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 54(3), 248-260.

Sy, S. R., & Romero, J. (2008). Family responsibilities among Latina college students from immigrant families. Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 7(3), 212-227.