



Understanding Barriers to Usage of Basic Needs Programs at Chico State: Survey Results¹

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In collaboration with students in the Interdisciplinary Course on
Housing & Homelessness

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Introduction

This project sought to understand barriers to access basic needs benefits at Chico State. It is part of a broader research agenda to evaluate the effectiveness of Basic Needs programs on our campus. This evaluation, which began in January of 2020, and is led by principal investigators Jennifer Wilking and Susan Roll, has leveraged both quantitative and qualitative data to understand how Rapid ReHousing and usage of the Food Pantry affects student wellness and academic performance.

The following reports provide insights into how Basic Needs services are impacting Chico State students:

- Chico State Basic Needs Project: Pantry Evaluation (October, 2021)
- Chico State Basic Needs Rapid ReHousing Partnership Affordable Housing Services Assessment (October, 2021)
- Accessing the Wildcat Food Pantry & Outcomes of Student Success: Executive Summary (July, 2022)

While these studies suggest use of Basic Needs Programs positively impacts student wellness and academic success, it remains unclear why some students who need Basic Needs programs do not access them. Recent research finds that as few as 38% of food insecure students reported food pantry use (El Zein, Mathews, House & Shelnut, 2018). Understanding barriers to usage was one of several potential research projects proposed by Basic Needs Staff to the evaluation team in the Fall of 2021. Principal investigators Susan Roll and Jennifer Wilking selected this project due to the potential impact of the findings for increasing usage of programs that benefit students. Thus, the primary purpose of this study was to understand the reasons students, who may need basic needs resources, are not using those resources, in an effort to widen access to BN programs.

The research project is improved by the contributions of students in Introduction to Research Methods (POLS 331W-07) and Community and Organizational Change (SWRK 305). Evidenced in the literature, the use of student voice improves authentic campus-based research outcomes (Brasof & Levitan, 2022). Students in these classes participated in an interdisciplinary, community based research course, in which they helped to develop, analyze and distribute survey results, and developed community change campaigns based on the survey findings. Examples of the projects are outlined in the discussion section.

Methodology

Researchers employed a mixed methods approach to understand common barriers that inhibit students from accessing basic needs programs. An application to the Institutional Review Board was approved prior to any data collection. This sequential, mixed methods study included a survey of 430 students at CSU, Chico who met eligibility criteria, described in the “Sample” section below, with 421 completed surveys. The sample size varies for each question,

depending on how many respondents skipped a given question or set of questions. In the discussions below, we provide numbers of respondents after each statistic provided, and provide the sample size for each question.

Based on their responses to the survey, students were invited to participate in focus groups in late spring of 2022, and focus groups were conducted in May and June. This initial report focuses on the quantitative findings. A subsequent report will integrate the qualitative results.

Sampling Strategy

To best understand barriers to Basic Needs Program utilization, it is appropriate to survey students who likely need these resources, but are under utilizing or not using the Basic Needs program. To identify students who may need Basic Needs resources, researchers identified students who come from neighborhood characterized by relatively low socioeconomic status through merged institutional data that included the permanent address of students with census tract data². The census data included information about the census block such as the percentage of households that fell below the poverty line. If a student's permanent address was located in a census tract where 25% or more of households experienced poverty, they were invited to participate in the survey (N=1,372). Of the invited students, 430 students completed the survey, for a response rate of 31%. The purpose of this sampling strategy was to intentionally sample students who are more likely than their peers to require Basic Needs Resources.

Sample Demographics

The demographic profile of the sample suggests the sampling strategy was successful in reaching students who need basic needs resources. 421 respondents answered questions regarding food insecurity, and, 65.3% (n=275) of the respondents identify as food insecure, according to the two item food insecurity screening questions.³ This is roughly 25% higher than the average level of food insecurity identified on national college campuses (41.6%) (e.g.). However, it should be noted, this study employed the two item screener for food insecurity, while the other studies employ the 6 or 12 item measure of food insecurity used by the US Department of Agriculture. This estimate of 65.3% is also higher than the pre-pandemic estimate of 46% of Chico State students experiencing high food security using the full food security measure (Bianco, et.al 2016). Additionally, 29% (122 of 421) of respondents identified as housing insecure according to the two item housing insecurity screener.⁴

² This hypothesizes that individuals from high poverty areas are the most likely individuals to access basic needs. It is possible these individuals have access to other resources for food and housing, that individuals in a slightly higher income bracket do not.

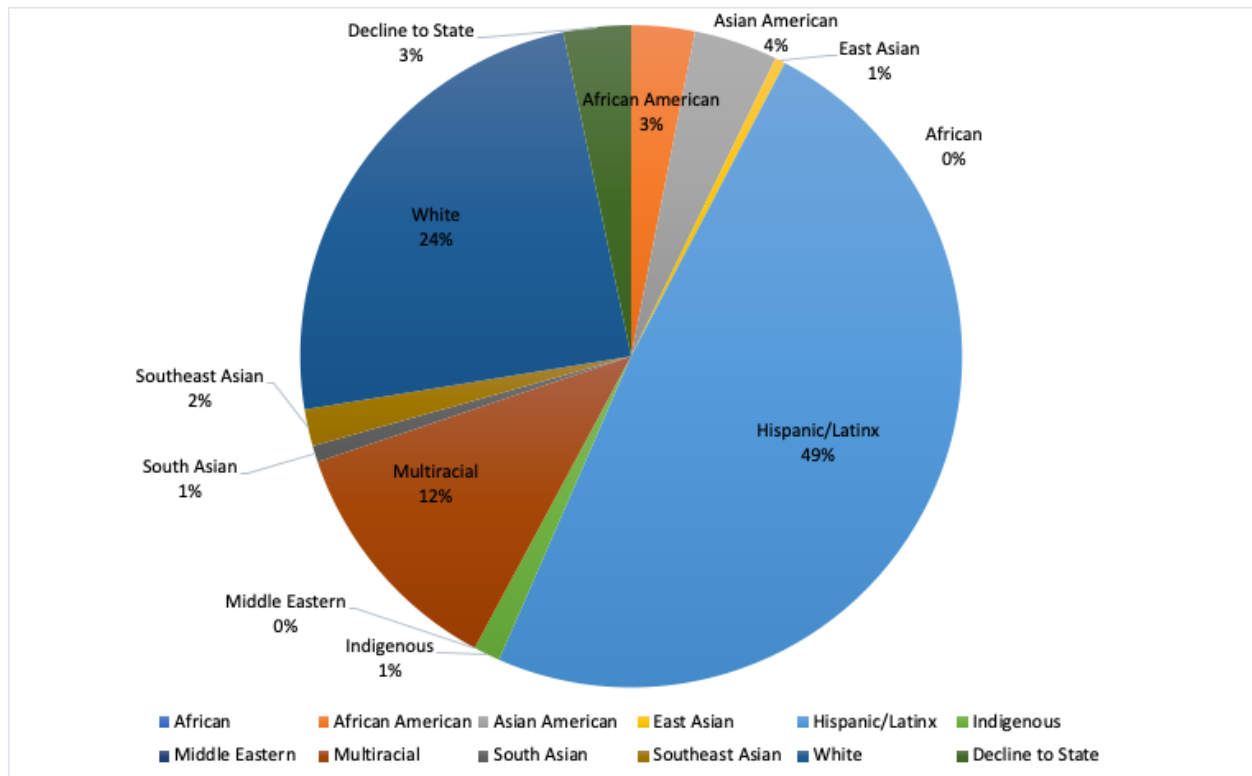
³ Specifically, respondents are considered food insecure if they responded "often" or "sometimes" to either of the following statements: "I/We worried that food would run out before I/we got money to buy more" and "The food that I/we bought just didn't last and I/we didn't have money to get more."

⁴ The two item housing insecurity measure asks, "In the past 12 months have you been unable to pay or underpaid a rent or mortgage?" and "In the past 12 months, how many times have you been unsure of

The primary purpose of this study is to understand the reasons students, who may need basic needs resources, are not using those resources. Indicators of food and housing insecurity discussed above, suggest the sampling strategy was successful in identifying students whose basic needs are not being met. Responses to questions regarding use of basic needs programs suggests the need of basic needs programs is greater than usage of these programs among the sample. 63% of the respondents do not use the food pantry (n=252), while 23% have used the food pantry once or twice (n=92), 11% report using the food pantry occasionally (n=43), and 3% use the food pantry frequently (n=13). 85% of respondents have not applied for the Basic Needs emergency grant (n=352), and 99% of the respondents do not use the Rapid ReHousing Program (n=405).

In addition to levels of basic needs and insecurities, as well as program usage, the sample has the following attributes: 77% identify as first generation, 11.5% (n=417) are student parents, and 63% (n=421) of the sample is employed. 73.6% (n=387) of respondents identify as female, and 71.9% (n=399) fall between the ages of 18-24. Just over a majority of respondents identify as Hispanic (50.5%, n=378), and a complete breakdown of racial, ethnic and regional identities can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Race, Ethnicity and Region in Sample



where you are going to sleep at night?” Respondents are coded as housing insecure if they answer yes to the first question and/or indicate that they have unsure of where they will sleep at night one or more times.

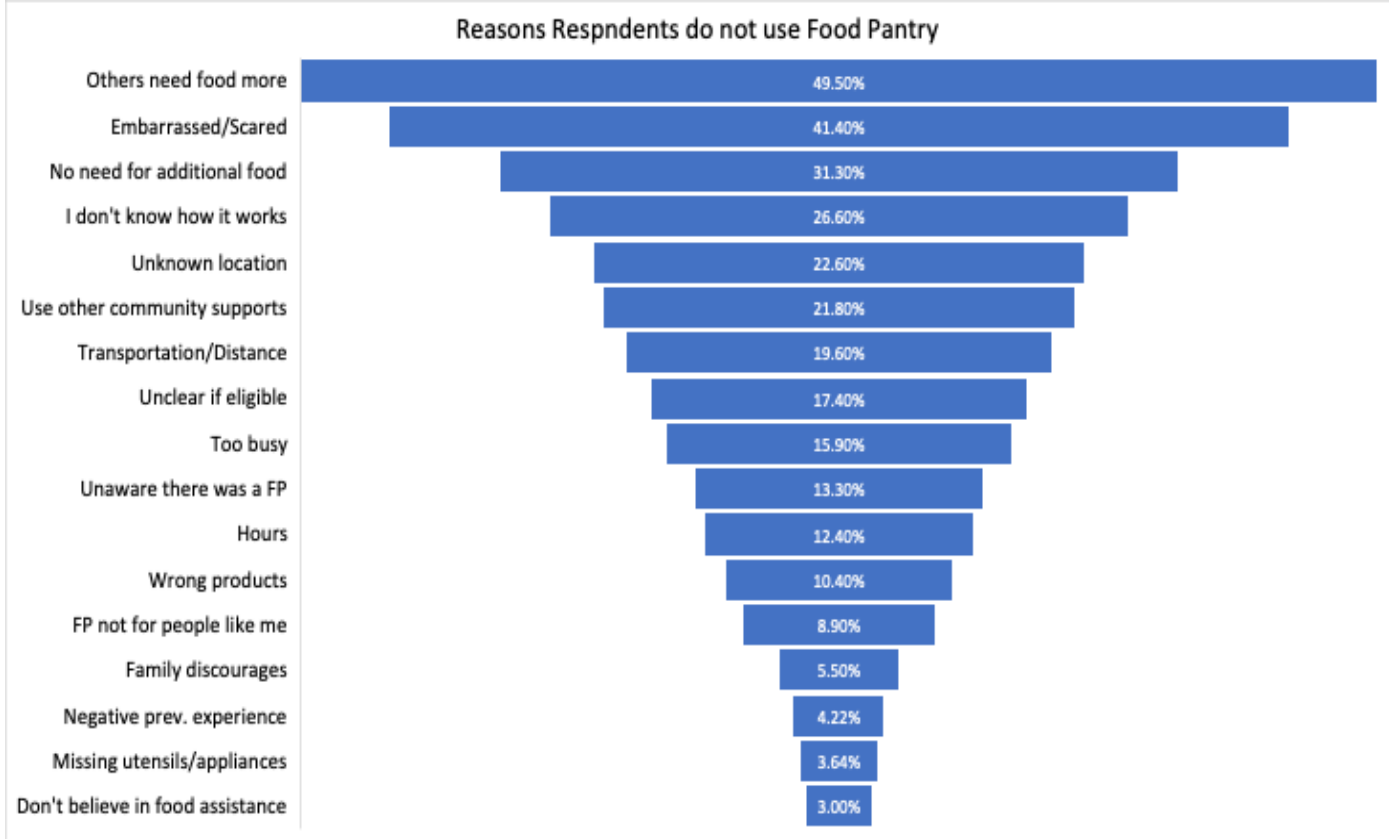
Results

Consistent with the purpose of the study, the bulk of the survey focused on reasons for usage or non-usage of Basic Needs programs, including the Food Pantry, Emergency Grant, and Rapid Re-Housing Program. Across these programs, the primary barriers identified relate to perceived need relative to others, and awareness of these programs and how they work. The next sections explore the barriers in more depth, by the program.

Barriers to Usage of Food Pantry

To understand barriers to food pantry usage, respondents were asked a series of questions regarding the reasons they do not use, or underutilize the food pantry. Respondents could select more than one reason, and thus the totals do not sum to 100. The reasons provided to survey respondents were grouped into four categories, reasons relating to: need, access, awareness and other. Figure 2 describes the percentage of respondents who identified with each reason provided, in order of % of responses. Respondents who did not identify with any of the reasons provided could write in a response.

Figure 2: Food Pantry



Due to sample size considerations, this analysis will focus on the top five reasons provided by students for not using the food pantry. These reasons relate to perception of need, stigma, and awareness. Cross-tabulations will be used to further explore and understand who holds these perceptions and why.

“I feel others need the food more than I do”

The highest number of respondents selected this item, with nearly half of all surveyed feeling that others need the food more than they do (49.5% n=204).

According to the two item food security screener used in the survey, we know that 35% of students are food secure. Thus, it is possible that students who **do not require** food support were selecting this item, in which case this is an accurate and direct assessment by students, rather than a barrier to food pantry usage related to misperception or stigma. To explore this possibility, we cross-tabulated this response with the measure of food security. Only 31% (n=63) of those who selected the response that others need the food more were **food secure**, meaning that 70% of respondents selected this item despite having a need for food.⁵ Similarly, roughly a quarter or 24% of respondents who selected this item also reported that they did not need food. This supports the idea that while one quarter to one third of respondents said others need food more because they did not need food, nearly $\frac{2}{3}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of respondents selected this response, despite themselves having a need for food support.

Put another way, 35% of the total number of survey respondents (n=141) experience food insecurity and believe that others need the food pantry more than they do.

The demographics of the survey can assist in understanding who is most likely to feel that others need the food pantry more. While perceptions of who is in need is not significantly related to gender, race and age are significantly correlated with this perception. More specifically, respondents in the age range 18-24 are more likely than other age groups to state others need the food pantry more. Additionally, respondents identifying as Hispanic and White are most likely to select that others need the food pantry more. Note, however, that sample size limitations prohibit a more finite analysis.

“I am embarrassed or scared to access the pantry”

After the perception that ‘others need the food pantry more’, the second highest % of respondents identified embarrassment or fear as the reason they did not access the pantry (41.4% n=98).⁶

⁵ Specifically, to not violate cell size requirements of the Chi Square analysis, racial categories of Black, Asian and regional identities had to be collapsed into one category.

⁶ Note, this option was included in the last set of options available to students regarding barriers to food pantry usage. This was grouped in the category, ‘Other reason’. 193 respondents or 45% of the total

Again, this perception or stigma, may be related to need. If respondents do not have an ostensible or objective need for food, they may feel more embarrassment in accessing the pantry. To explore this, we cross-tabulate this response with the two item measure of food insecurity. Only 18.4% of respondents who selected that they felt embarrassed or scared to use the food pantry (n=18) were **food secure**. The remaining 81.6% of respondents who identified as embarrassed also identified as **food insecure**. This is similar to our other measure of need - the response that the individual has not needed food. 17% (n=17) of respondents who said they were embarrassed said that they have not needed food, while 82.6% (n=81) of those selecting this item have had a need for additional food or supplies.

There is no statistically significant difference in who identified embarrassment as a barrier, based on either gender or race, and small cell sizes prohibit a valid test of the relationship between age and perception of embarrassment (see footnote 5).

“I have not needed additional food or supplies”

Of the respondents who answered the set of questions relating to need (n=412), roughly 1/3 said that they do not use the food pantry because they have no need for additional food or supplies (n=129). On the face of it, this is a straightforward reason to not use the food pantry. However, when cross-tabulated with the two item measure of food insecurity, this becomes more nuanced. Of the 129 respondents who said they do not need food, 58% (n=75) are food secure, while 41% (n=54) are **food insecure** according to the two item metric.

It is worth noting that this difference between perception of need, versus reported shortage of food (measure of food security), is similar to what is evidenced in metrics of homelessness among college students. For example, when asked directly if a student is homeless, only 3% of students self-identify as homeless. But, when asked where they have slept in a one month period, roughly 12% of students sleep in a place that federal law identifies as unhoused or homeless (Goldrick-Rab, et. al, 2020).

“I don’t understand how the pantry works”

Of the respondents who answered items regarding awareness (398 of 430 total respondents), 26.6% selected the item “I don’t understand how the pantry works” (n=106).

Of the respondents selecting this item, 72.6% were food insecure (n=77) and 70.5% (n=74) reported having a need for additional food.

There are no statistically significant relationships between sense of understanding of how the food pantry works, and age, gender or race/ethnicity.

sample, skipped this set of questions. Thus, the 41.4% of respondents who selected this option was out of a total of 237 respondents who answered this question.

“I don’t know where the food pantry is located”

Similarly, 22.6% (n=90) of respondents identified not knowing the location of the food pantry as a reason they did not use or underutilized the food pantry.⁷

Of the respondents selecting this reason, 65% are food insecure and reported having a need for additional food (consistent with the level of food insecurity in the sample).

There are no significant relationships between race/ethnicity, gender and age. Understanding of how the food pantry works, and where it is located, is likely associated with experience on the Chico State campus. Unfortunately, the survey did not ask how much time the students had spent on campus, and was administered just as students were returning from Covid-19 shutdowns.

Barriers to Usage of Emergency Grant (EG)

While the WildCat Food Pantry is the most visible of the Basic Needs Programs at Chico State, the Basic Needs Project offers many services beyond food support, including emergency grants, and both emergency and longer term housing. We now turn to exploring barriers to these programs.

To understand barriers to accessing both the emergency grant and housing programs through Basic Needs at Chico State, respondents were first asked if they had applied for either program in the past year. If a respondent selected yes, they did not receive follow up questions regarding reasons they did not apply. Unlike questions regarding the Food Pantry, which included four different sets of specific barriers, reasons for non-usage for the emergency grant and housing supports were not separated into categories.

With respect to the emergency grant, respondents were asked “What are some of the reasons you have not used an Emergency Grant from Basic Needs? Select all that apply.” Options included:

- I have not needed an emergency grant in the past year
- I was unaware that emergency grants were available through Basic Needs
- I feel other students need the grant more than I do
- The application process feels overwhelming/difficult
- I am embarrassed to apply for emergency funding
- I am not sure I am eligible (e.g. financial need or citizenship status)
- I have had a negative previous experience with accessing services on campus
- Other _____

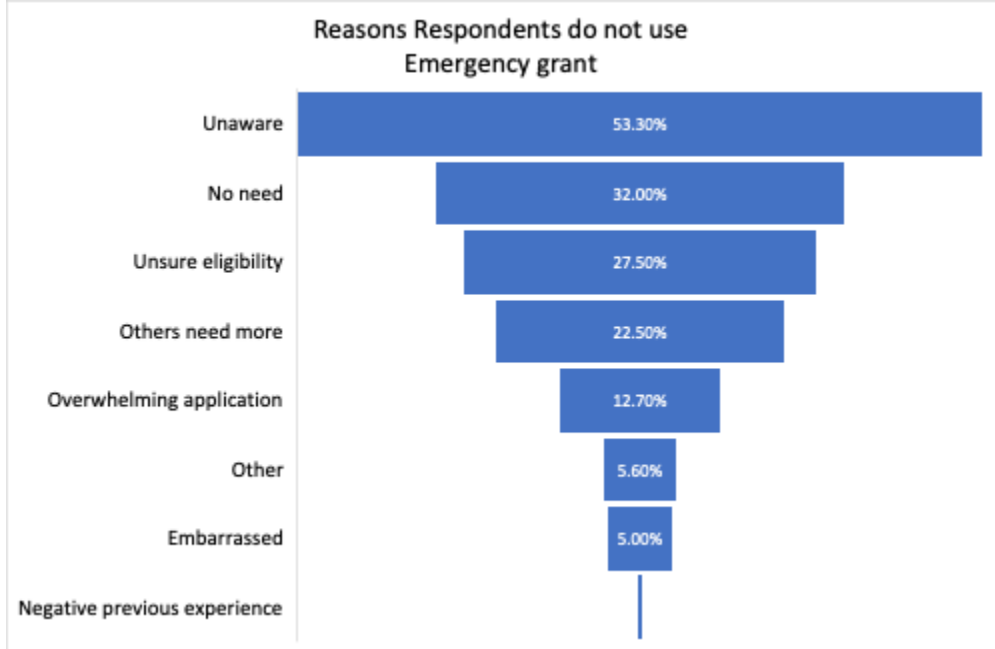
Similar to the questions regarding the Food Pantry, these response options were informed by key stakeholders, including Basic Needs Project staff, and student co-researchers.

⁷ As we would expect, this is almost perfectly correlated with reported usage of the food pantry. 93% of respondents who said they did not know where the food pantry was located, also report never using the food pantry.

As previously mentioned, respondents who self-reported as applying for the emergency grant, did not receive the follow up question regarding reasons for non-usage. This thus affects the sample size. 15% (62) respondents reported having applied for the emergency grant in the past year. An additional 31 respondents did not answer the questions regarding the emergency grant, leading to a possible sample size of 338 for the questions regarding barriers to emergency grant usage.

Figure 3 provides the reasons, in order of response rates, that students do not access the Basic Needs Emergency Grant. The most common reason selected was lack of awareness, then lack of need, lack of understanding about eligibility, and then a sense that others need the grant more.

Figure 3: Emergency Grant



As a first step, it is helpful to understand “need” for the emergency grant among the sample of respondents who addressed this set of questions regarding barriers to emergency grant usage. Similar to the sample broadly, among these 338 respondents, 64% (n=217) are food insecure, and 27% (n=92) are housing insecure. Interestingly, and similar to the disconnect between self-reported need and more objective measures of food and housing insecurity discussed above, 32% of the respondents say they have not had a need for an emergency grant (the second highest reason given for non-usage).

To understand this further, we first explore the response “I have not needed an emergency grant” in more depth. First, respondents may report not needing the emergency grant, because they access other basic needs supports. Of the respondents who report not needing the Emergency Grant, between 19-29% access either the WildCat Food Pantry (29%, n=30) or other community food supports such as CalFresh or other food banks (18.5%, n=20). Second, and going back to a disconnect between perceived need, and more objective Basic Needs deficits, of the students reporting not needing an EG (n=108), 40% are food insecure according to the two item screening measure (n=43).

The primary reason provided for non-usage is lack of awareness of the emergency grant (53.3%, n=180). Again, this may be related to need. While the emergency grant is prominently featured on the Basic Needs Project website, unlike the Wildcat Food Pantry, this service is much less visible as it does not comprise a physical space, and thus students with BN deficits would be more likely to have visited the website. In other words, students may be unaware of the emergency grant because they have not needed it. This does not appear to be the case. Of respondents stating they are unaware of the EG (n=188), 79% are food insecure (n=142). 39% identify as housing insecure (n=71).

There are few significant differences in need or awareness of emergency grants on the basis of race/ethnicity, gender or age. The exception to this is race/ethnicity and perceived need. White respondents are more likely than students of color to respond that they have not had a need for the emergency grant, students who self-identify as Hispanic, Black, Asian-American, Indigenous, South-East Asian, East Asian or of Middle Eastern descent are all more likely to have identified as needing an emergency grant.

Barriers to Use of Basic Needs Housing Programs

Respondents were first asked, “In the past year, have you received short term emergency housing, or participated in the Rapid ReHousing Program?” Only 3 respondents replied yes, and thus did not receive the follow up questions with barriers. This is not surprising, as BN housing programs are much more limited given the expense of these services, relative to the WildCat Food pantry and the Emergency Grant.

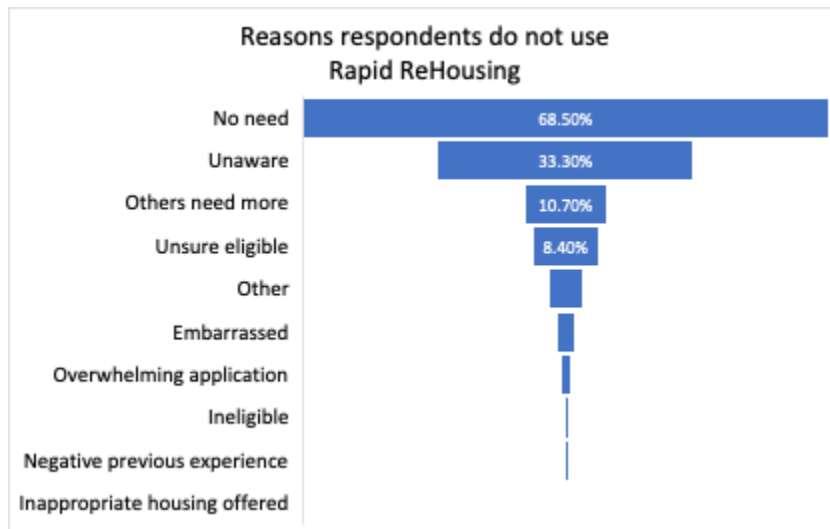
A total of 391 respondents answered questions regarding barriers to the Rapid Rehousing program. Of these respondents, rates of housing insecurity and food insecurity are comparable to the broader sample, described above.

Respondents who had not used the program were asked, “What are some of the reasons you have not used the Rapid ReHousing Program through the Basic Needs Project?” Response options included:

- I have not needed help with my housing
- I was unaware of the Rapid ReHousing Program
- I feel other students need the housing assistance from than I do
- I attempted to use the Rapid ReHousing Program but was ineligible

- The application process feels overwhelming/difficult
- The housing assistance I offered was not appropriate to me
- I am embarrassed to ask/receive for help with my housing
- I have had a negative previous experience with accessing services on campus
- I am not sure I am eligible (e.g. financial need or citizenship status)

Figure 4: Rapid ReHousing Program



Reasons for non-usage of Rapid ReHousing are provided in Figure 4, in order of responses. The most frequent reason provided for non-usage of BN housing supports is lack of need, with 68.5% of students reporting not having needed the Rapid ReHousing Program. This corresponds closely to rates of housing insecurity among the sample, with roughly 30% of the sample identifying as housing insecure. Interestingly, and similar to previous findings in this report, there is a portion of the respondents who report not needing Rapid ReHousing (n=268), who, by other metrics such as the housing insecurity index, require housing support. In this case, 19% of students who report not having a need for RRH also identify as housing insecure (n=51). While gender and age are not significantly related to this item, race and ethnicity are. White respondents are more likely to report not needing RRH, while students of color are significantly more likely to report having a need.

After not having need for RRH, the second most cited reason is lack of awareness (33.3%, 130). Among the students who are unaware of the program, 46.9% (n=61) are housing insecure, a rate higher than evidenced in the broader sample. This suggests that while some students are unaware of the program because they have not needed it (53.8%, n=69), a significant number of students need housing assistance, but are unaware of that resource. Age, gender and race/ethnicity are not significantly related to awareness of RRH programs.

Discussion/Recommendations

While much of our evaluation work for the Basic Needs Program has centered around impact on students, this study took a unique approach by surveying students who would be likely to need basic needs support, but who did not access it, in order to understand why students may not be using available programs. The results give some insights into how our campus might improve access to Basic Needs resources for our most vulnerable students.

Across the different Basic Needs programs explored: the Wildcat Food Pantry, emergency grant, and Rapid ReHousing program, several consistencies emerge in the top reasons for non-usage selected by survey respondents. For example, misperceptions relating to need were in the top three barriers selected for each program. Among respondents reporting that they did not need the program, or that others needed it more, a substantial portion of students evidenced a need according to metrics of either housing or food insecurity. For example, 40% of respondents who stated that they did not need the food pantry, identify as food insecure. Also, 70% of students who stated that others need the food pantry more were food insecure. This suggests relatively broad misperceptions about basic needs, and for whom Basic Needs programs are intended.

To address these misperceptions, students in an interdisciplinary class on housing and homelessness made several recommendations to the end of normalizing usage of basic needs resources. First, almost all project groups suggested renaming the food pantry away from the Hungry Wildcat Food Pantry, to names less suggestive of dire need or more socially acceptable, such as the Wildcat Food Market or the Food Lounge. Additional marketing and outreach could also focus on educating students about food insecurity and the various forms food insecurity can take, in order to help students make the connection between their experiences and legitimate need for campus food support.

Lack of awareness is the second main barrier that emerged across the different Basic Needs Program examined. For all three programs, students selected lack of awareness of the program (Emergency grant and Rapid ReHousing Program), or awareness of how the program works and where it is located (Food Pantry) as some of the main reasons they did not access the resource. While the Basic Needs Program does impressive outreach via Social Media and in classroom presentations, more can be done to raise awareness of Basic Needs services across campus. To address this lack of awareness, students in the interdisciplinary class designed creative tik tok videos that walk students through a visit to the food pantry, including a tour of everything the pantry offers. As program capacity permits, the Basic Needs Program could also consider increasing the profile of the Emergency Grant and Rapid ReHousing programs in their social media campaigns.

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