



**Affordability, Food, and Housing  
Access Taskforce Report:  
ADDRESSING AFFORDABLE  
TRANSPORTATION NEEDS**

*May 2021*

Community College League of California

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COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE LEAGUE  
OF CALIFORNIA

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# OVERVIEW

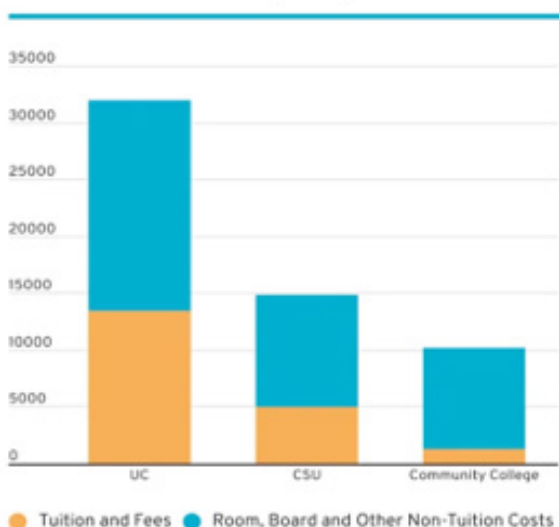
Transportation challenges confronting community college students are often overlooked when compared to the daunting needs of housing and food insecurity. Yet transportation still ranks high as a basic student need, and especially in California because of inadequate public transportation options, the high cost of car maintenance, gas, parking, the long distances required of students commuting to rural colleges, and traffic in urban and suburban communities. For years the cost of transportation or access to reliable transportation has been identified as a barrier to student retention and success.

## Significant factors cited include:

- Access to a reliable car
- Access to good public transportation
- Cost of parking and parking fees

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) estimates that the average full-time community college student spends \$1,760 per year on transportation, which exceeds students' costs at private and four-year institutions.<sup>1</sup> The higher expense is due primarily to the lack of student housing availability and reliance on commuting to college while juggling the demands of work and family responsibilities. In California, transportation costs match or exceed the cost of annual tuition for a full-time student. In a 2016 report on college's true cost, The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS) surveyed over 12,000 California community college students who identified transportation as a significant barrier to attending college full-time.<sup>2</sup> The cost of gas or public transportation contributed to the difficult choices students had to make regarding staying in college, taking fewer classes, and working full- or part-time to make ends meet.

## Tuition vs living expenses



Source: Public Policy Institute of California analysis of IPEDS data, 2017



According to the TICAS survey, ninety-eight percent of California community college students commute to their institutions. Students who live on campus can reduce their transportation costs by half – to under \$1000 per year – but this is not an option for most California community college students. Programs such as Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), have stretched their meager state-supported budgets to provide bus passes, as well as food and gas cards to help students stay in school. Based on the average financial aid provided per full-time student, non-tuition-based costs far exceed the financial aid students receive to support their education.

## The Real Cost of College

Although tuition is low at community colleges, most college expenses go to non-tuition costs and are often not reflected in financial aid allocations. The original model for community colleges was that students lived at home and attended their local community college; this is an outdated and largely inaccurate concept of today's community college student. Students are commuting longer distances to attend a community college, absorbing transportation costs to and from work and college. Yet, institutional support structures and funding are only beginning to move from the initial assumption that students who attend community colleges live locally while sharing a home with parents or family.

The graph reflects the mismatch between tuition costs and living expenses for college students among California's higher education segments.

<sup>1</sup> American Association of Community Colleges, *Data Points: The Cost of College; Volume 4, Issue 25, December 2016.*

Available online at: [https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/DataPoints\\_No25.pdf](https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/DataPoints_No25.pdf)

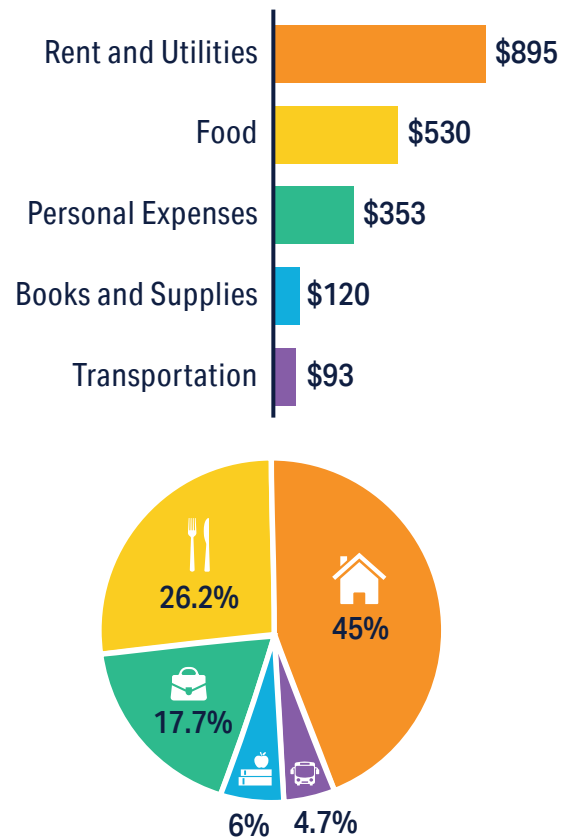
<sup>2</sup> The Institute for College Access and Success, *On the Verge: Costs and Tradeoffs Facing Community College Students, April 2016.*

Available online at: [https://ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy-files/pub\\_files/on\\_the\\_verge.pdf](https://ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy-files/pub_files/on_the_verge.pdf)

**To break down these non-tuition expenses**, the California Student Aid Commission surveyed 150,000 California college students in 2018-2019 for the Student Expenses and Resources Survey (SEARS).<sup>3</sup> The students who participated came from all higher education segments, answering questions about their experience and perceptions concerning college affordability.

The survey results revealed meaningful differences in expenses for college costs when broken down by race/ethnicity, age, and region, as well as insights about students' perceptions of their ability to pay for expenses beyond tuition, such as textbooks, housing, utilities, food, transportation, and other essential costs. Survey findings related to the most significant obstacles to success – the costs of college and balancing school and work – clarify student needs. Below is a snapshot of the various non-tuition-related costs for college students in California.

### How Students Spend an Average \$1,911 per Month in Non-Tuition Expenses



Source: California Student Aid Commission 2018-19

Students spend approximately five percent of their disposable income on transportation, which varies by area, commuting distance, and whether a student works. Although a seemingly small part of the cost of attending college, this adds to the direct cost of attending and completing college while also lengthening the time to completion, which adds to college's overall cost.

The following proposed solutions include support to fund and develop partnerships with local transit agencies for free or reduced transit passes, access to public transportation, expanding transportation routes to each college, and exploring increased rideshare options. Additional research is needed to finance college-funded shuttles, housing within walking distance to colleges, and assess campus parking fees. Most importantly, it is essential for districts and colleges to work with local transportation agencies to create networks between transit authorities and work with local communities to help students work, live, and travel within their region.

<sup>3</sup> California Student Aid Commission, 2018-2019 Student Expenses and Resources Survey, Volume 4, November 7, 2019. Available online at: [https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/2018-19\\_student\\_expenses\\_and\\_resources\\_survey\\_web.pdf?1575327209](https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/2018-19_student_expenses_and_resources_survey_web.pdf?1575327209)

# Lack of Access to a Reliable Car and Good Public Transportation Options



Urban and suburban California community colleges were intended to serve their local communities. The original community or junior colleges were extensions of K12 school districts for much of the 20th century, and this model was embedded deeply in the community college's mission. The first state law establishing oversight of early college classes to local high school districts stated:

*The board of trustees of any city, district, union, joint union, or county high school may prescribe postgraduate courses of study for the graduates of such high school, or other high schools, which courses of study shall approximate the studies prescribed in the first two years of university courses. The board of trustees of any city, district, union, joint union, or county high school 'wherein the postgraduate courses are taught may charge tuition for pupils living without the boundaries of the district wherein such courses are taught (Caminetti, 1907).<sup>4</sup>*

Urban and suburban community colleges were funded by local taxes and students who lived within the immediate service area attended junior colleges for free, commuting a short distance

from their homes. Colleges in rural areas, however, have not traditionally benefited from this early local support. To attend, students needed to move close to the college and find housing. For many other rural students, college was never an option, and in the middle part of the 20th century many more career options didn't require a college education.

This model, of course, has been completely transformed in the 21st century and students are no longer restricted in their choice of community college by where they live.

***But along with this transformation, a college education has become even more essential.***

For community college students who do not have a reliable car, this means getting to and from college is increasingly challenging. Complicating this commuting challenge are the poor public transportation options, especially in suburban and rural areas. Many low-income communities have few transportation options. In rural areas, the need for a car to commute long distances, combined with the diminishing job prospects that require skilled workers with a college degree, creates a college and career desert. Without transportation, these communities are effectively locked out of the opportunities available to those with a college degree or certificate.

<sup>4</sup> California Department of Public Instruction, *School Law of California*. (Sacramento: State of California, 1907), sec. 1681, page 94.

## Access to a Reliable Car

For students who do not have access to reliable transportation, owning a vehicle poses an enormous expense for those least likely to afford it. Community college students are uniquely vulnerable to the high costs of gas, insurance, and the expense of maintaining a vehicle. Even if a student can find a car they can afford, if the car breaks down, they are faced with the cost of repairs or purchasing a new vehicle. This “living from paycheck to paycheck” dilemma many students face means every unexpected expense may result in not finishing out the semester, and the additional cost of paying again for retaking units.

In rural areas, bad weather conditions can make a road impassable or dangerous, preventing students from attending class regularly. And, in low-income families, vehicles are often shared. For these students, affordable housing close to the campus or on-campus housing provides a safety net to attend college. For many Californians, the commuter model of attending community college is not sustainable. The cost of housing near most California community colleges is high. The lack of affordable housing while attending school also increasingly denies access to many working adults who are potential students.



## Ridesharing

Rideshare or carpool initiatives have been implemented to a limited extent at colleges with incentives that focus on lowering greenhouse gas emissions. These programs, such as [Solano College's](#) Free Rideshare and Carpool Parking, provide incentives such as free parking, designated parking spaces, and even priority registration options for students who participate in ridesharing or carpooling. The challenges in scaling these



programs are that most students attending community colleges also work and care for families, making a simple back and forth route from home to school and back again the exception, not the norm. Still, colleges should explore these programs more deeply. Mobile apps like [Scoop](#) help students locate one another more easily by using an algorithm to identify destination and direction. Such apps can be integrated into the college's apps for ease and help with promotion.

# *Increasing Access to Public Transportation*

In 2016, Assemblymember Holden introduced Assembly Bill 2222, which proposed that the state create the Transit Pass Program, providing free or reduced-fare public transportation access for California community college students.<sup>5</sup> The proposed cost of \$20,000 per transit agency would have been funded by the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) and administered by the California Department of Transportation. Community college students would benefit from reduced transportation costs; the state would benefit from the reduced greenhouse emissions. This bill did not pass, but it is worth noting that the concepts are still needed today.



**Rio Hondo College** introduced an innovative cross-agency partnership in 2012, offering a free public transit pass to all full-time students. The Go Rio Pass partnership included Foothill Transit Authority, Montebello Bus Lines, Norwalk Transit, and Los Angeles Metro Lines. During the first few years of this program when transit passes were free to students, bus ridership increased by 40 percent. The program has since transitioned to the U-Pass sticker, available to all students for \$50.

**Sierra College** is in the planning phase for an initiative to expand affordable transportation options to its students. The effort would establish a regional student transit pass to provide Sierra students with unlimited rides on all regional transit providers, allowing students to commute to and from school and work. Discounts for rideshare services would also supplement travel to and from campus during later hours when bus routes become more limited. The College plans to support the initiative through various funding sources, including a student transportation fee, foundation resources, and potential grants from regional transportation and air quality agencies.

<sup>5</sup> Assembly Bill No. 2222, Transit Pass Program: free or reduced fare transit passes. California Legislature 2015-16. Introduced by Assembly Member Christopher Holden, February 18, 2016. Available online at: [https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201520160AB2222](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160AB2222)



**The Hope Center**, which sponsors the #RealCollege movement, is also working on funding transportation research in partnership with local agencies. Funded by **The Kresge Foundation**, the **Heckscher Foundation for Children**, **DVP-PRAXIS** and **RISE**, this project will attempt to build evidence on the efficacy of transportation supports in diverse locations, specifically:

1. A discounted “U-Pass” for community college students in Los Angeles
2. Free unlimited Metrocards for students enrolled at the City University of New York
3. Free bus service for students attending Amarillo College in the Texas panhandle.

Between 2019 and 2021 the Hope Center is working in collaboration with **Compton College**, **Los Angeles Community College District**, **Rio Hondo College**, and their local transit partners to serve students.

In 2018, California Community College Chief Executive Officers commissioned a survey addressing how colleges handle students’ basic needs at their institutions.<sup>6</sup> In this survey, 60 percent of all colleges either had a free or reduced rate transit pass available to students, with an additional seven percent of colleges looking to develop these partnerships. These services vary from bus passes provided at no cost based on the number of credits taken each semester, student fees funding the passes, and grant-funded passes. Like many initiatives, the pandemic has slowed down further progress towards expanding these partnerships.

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<sup>6</sup> California Community Colleges Chancellors Office, 2018 Basic Needs Survey Report, page 7.  
Available online at: <https://ccleague.org/sites/default/files/training-materials/2018-basic-needs-survey-report-print.pdf>



Orange County Community Colleges provide an example of the way colleges are partnering with their local transit authority. These colleges include [Cypress](#), [Fullerton](#), [Santiago Canyon](#), [Santa Ana](#), [Golden West](#), [Orange Coast](#), [Saddleback](#), and [Irvine Valley Colleges](#). All colleges are at various implementation stages working with the Orange County Transit Authority (OCTA) to provide free or reduced transportation passes to all students. The initial year's funding was through a grant provided by the Low Carbon Transit Operations Program (LCTOP), a part of the Cap-and-Trade Program, allowing students an unlimited fixed-route bus ride on OCTA bus networks at no additional cost for the first year. In 2019, in its first six months of implementation at Fullerton College, 111,921 students accessed an OCTA bus using this free pass. In addition to the transit passes, OCTA provides the opportunity for a free marketing partnership by providing wraps on their buses to promote attendance at each respective community college and increase ridership (see below). The partnership is an excellent example of a mutually beneficial community-based partnership.



[Cabrillo College](#) has implemented a transportation fee that students approved to provide free access to the Santa Cruz Metro system. The student fees offer roughly \$700,000 to the transportation agency and ensure that routes are staffed to connect students to the college's campuses in Aptos and Watsonville.

Another successful example of providing flexible transportation options is [Santa Rosa Junior College's](#) free ride service. Fully funded by a Student Transportation Fee, transit passes include trips on the Santa Rosa, Petaluma, and Sonoma County bus lines and the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) train. Regardless of whether they use the transit pass, each student is assessed a one-dollar fee per unit, up to ten dollars per semester. Half-price Eco-Passes are available for the SMART train.



# *Cost of Parking and Parking Fees*

The California Education Code sections 76355, 76360, and 76361 authorize each community college district's governing board the option to charge health, parking services, and transportation services fees and the Education Code also establishes the maximum increase of those fees by the same annual percentage.<sup>7</sup> In 2021-22, these parking fees were capped at no more than \$59 per semester. Colleges may choose to charge lower fees or not charge for parking at all; students receiving financial assistance may be exempt from these fees. Education Code section 76300 (g) includes federal financial aid, Promise grants, the CalWORKs Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, Supplementary Security Income/State Supplementary Payment Program, or a general assistance program as programs that qualify students for an exemption.



## **A Diversity of Needs and Challenges**

It is critical to recognize that colleges across the state face a very different mix of opportunities and challenges. Our colleges range from large to small, urban to rural and differ in many other ways. A college may depend on parking fees to provide safe, accessible parking opportunities on campus, while others utilize them to build facilities to meet campus needs. An approach that works for one college regarding parking fee policy, may not work for another. Thus, colleges are encouraged to have an equity mindset balanced with campus needs when considering parking fee policies. Colleges may find the strategies on the next page helpful, but by no means are they intended to apply to every college in the state regardless of local needs and priorities.





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## Parking Fees

In addition to carpooling parking spaces mentioned in the previous rideshare section, an example of an innovative approach is [Bakersfield College](#) which takes a tiered approach to parking. More desirable parking spaces, such as those closer to services or buildings, are considered “premium spaces” and students have the option to pay for these spots. Other parking spots on campus are less expensive or free. This model takes a practical approach which allows the college to reduce parking costs for most students while allowing those who can pay to choose a higher-tier parking area. While creative, this approach also calls into question the equitability of providing access to all students. Those students who can afford college and its hidden costs continue to enjoy advantages that students who are already bearing the disproportionate inequities of college costs do not.

Another built-in inequity to parking costs is that student parking fees often subsidize faculty and staff who may not pay fees to park at all. In a 2017-18 study on the California State University system by Cal Matters, estimates showed that of the entire parking fee budget, only six percent was paid for by employees.<sup>8</sup> Students or visitors pay the remaining 94 percent of this revenue-based parking budget. Community colleges take a similar approach, often offering parking as an employee perk; whether, or how much, employees pay for parking varies widely from college to college. In addition, most community colleges pay for all or much of their campus safety operations through parking fees and parking citations. The fact that colleges must choose between accessibility and paying for campus safety operations through fee revenue creates inherent and unintended inequity.

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## Parking Citations and Fees

Monitoring parking on college campuses creates another challenge for students by providing an incentive to cite parking scofflaws, leading to catastrophic results for students already struggling to pay their bills. One or two parking tickets can derail students' ability to stay in college by leading to additional debt. When a \$35 or \$45 parking ticket is ignored, a hold is often placed on a student's record leading to an endless cycle of debt and rancor that can obstruct student success.

The pandemic has further revealed the dependency on parking fees and ticketing to support essential campus operations. Most colleges are not charging parking fees during the pandemic which is leading to substantial revenue losses for campus operations. The parking fee structure also means colleges pay more for staffing to monitor parking, adjudicate parking disputes, and handle complaints, thereby creating a vicious cycle. This negative cycle reinforces that those who can least afford college are most affected adversely by these fees.

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<sup>7</sup> California Education Code, Title 3, Postsecondary Education, Division 7, Part 47, Chapter 2, Article 2, Authorized Fees. Available online at: [https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=EDC&sectionNum=76360](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=EDC&sectionNum=76360)

<sup>8</sup> Watson, A. Cal Matters. “Another hidden cost of college? How student parking fees are subsidizing faculty, staff”, June 6, 2019, updated June 23, 2020. Available online at: <https://calmatters.org/education/2019/06/california-college-cost-csu-student-parking-fees-subsidizing-faculty-staff/>

# PROMISING PRACTICES AND POSSIBLE POLICY SOLUTIONS

We recommend the state acknowledge the impact that insufficient transportation options have on a student's ability to complete college. The cost of maintaining a vehicle, campus reliance on parking fees and parking citations, and poor public transportation or ridesharing options all contribute tremendously to the actual cost of college. We encourage revisiting Assembly Bill 2222, which looked at alternate sources of funding by aligning transportation with the state climate change goals in reducing carbon emissions. We also recommend the state legislature continue to consider investing in our students by subsidizing transit passes with funds deposited in the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. This investment will meet the twin goals of reducing the amount of carbon that goes into our atmosphere and direct funds generated by the state's cap-and-trade system towards underserved populations.

There is an excellent opportunity to encourage better public transportation options and collaboration with public transportation authorities, explore ways to transport students to campus using fewer vehicles, and eliminate parking fees that go to support of employees, not students. Below are some practical recommendations.



## Parking Considerations

It is time to fund campus safety staffing and facility maintenance appropriately. This change would allow colleges to reduce or remove parking fees, eliminate dependence on parking citations as a revenue source, and be more creative in spending necessary resources on support for students and not enforcement.

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## Statewide Access to Public Transportation

Many colleges have implemented agreements with local transportation agencies to provide free or reduced bus passes for students. We encourage legislators to establish agreements throughout the state to assist in the creation of partnerships with transportation agencies across all regions. A statewide MOU agreement with all transportation authorities would create an aligned network of free or reduced transportation options for students. This recommendation would help ease college negotiations for reduced passes and create a state and inter-county transportation network giving students more accessible access to school-work-home connections while supporting the state's climate change goals. In addition to transportation access, the expansion and coordination of bus routes are desperately needed to align schedules to class times.

One of the secondary effects of the pandemic was the reduction of local bus routes. As our transportation authorities restore this access, colleges must work with these agencies to align primary class demand hours with the routes that serve the colleges. This alliance with local colleges and governments would be a promising step to increase ridership, support public transportation, and address the state's goal to reduce greenhouse emissions.

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## Ridesharing

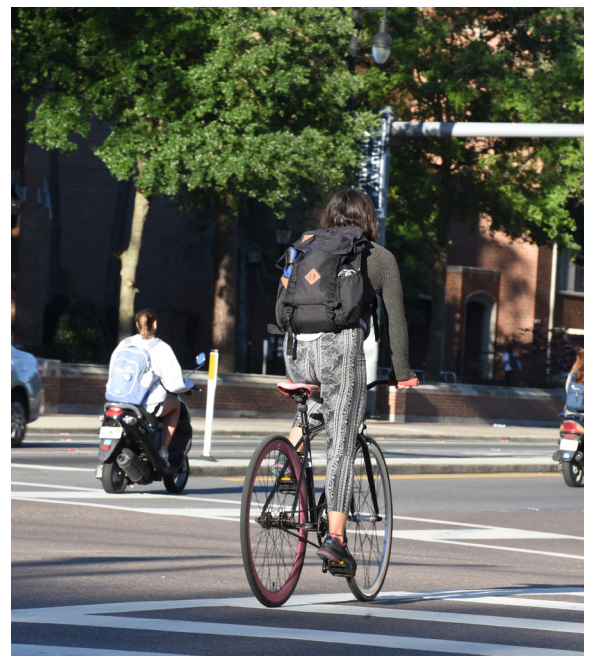
Colleges need to invest in technology to create more robust ways for carpooling to become a practical reality. Creating incentives for ridesharing could include:

- Premier parking spaces for those who carpool
- No parking fees
- Priority registration
- Aligning cohort scheduling for those in shared meta majors
- Drop off/pick up spots located along bus lines to help transport students quickly and efficiently to campus

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## Safe Access Routes

As colleges create sustainability plans to align with the state's sustainability goals, colleges and their surrounding communities are encouraged to explore creating bicycle and pedestrian safe-access routes to and within campuses. To do this properly, colleges will need to identify funding for proper maintenance and renovations required for better pedestrian and bicycle routes and safe crossing lights throughout the campus. An additional recommendation is to implement secure bicycle parking. Instead of the tiered preferred parking, which requires charging fees to students for improved convenience and access, colleges could incentivize bicycle use by providing premiere secure bicycle parking close to high traffic buildings.



# CONCLUSION

Transportation costs are an essential component of a student's total cost of attending college and should not be underestimated. Because most community college students are commuters, the cost of and access to transportation dramatically affects students' ability to succeed in and complete college.

Transportation impacts those who can least afford college or have diminished access to education, which underscores that much more needs to be done to create awareness and equitable support for funding this overlooked college cost.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Established in the spring of 2018 by the Chief Executive Officers of the California Community Colleges (CEOCCC), the **Affordability, Food & Housing Access Taskforce** provides system-wide recommendations to address the prevalence of food and housing and lack of affordable access experienced by our students. The Taskforce aims to proactively engage in discussions and make recommendations for interventions and solutions based on research and input from leading scholars, practitioners, and students regarding housing and hunger challenges.

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