



PHOTO BY DREW A. KELLEY, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Joanna Rodriguez utilizes The Spot, a center for basic needs at Irvine Valley College.

SERVICES

CRITICAL SUPPORT ALLOWS STUDENTS TO FOCUS ON THEIR EDUCATION

Food, housing, direct aid, referrals available

By Nicole Gregory
contributing writer

Helping students meet the basic needs of living, such as having a place to live, enough food and the ability to pay for emergency car repairs, is one critical way to boost their chances for academic success — which is why it is a priority for the colleges in the South Orange County Community College District.

“We have a food pantry, which we call The Spot,” said Martha McDonald, vice president of Student Services at Irvine Valley College, naming a source of support for students that she said is particularly popular. The Spot provides free bags of groceries, snacks, personal care kits and help applying for Cal Fresh, the food assistance program.

“We also have students with housing needs, and we provide emergency hotel vouchers for a local hotel that we partner with,” she said.

To help students connect with local and state programs that can offer assistance, McDonald and her colleagues arrange meetings with case workers. “We have a partnership with Cal State Fullerton with their social worker program,” McDonald said, adding that CSUF students work as interns in IVC’s Basic Needs Center. The center provides students with resources such as community dental referrals, therapists for mental health counseling, transportation, child care and more.

“Irvine is a very affluent community, and from the outside it looks like our students don’t have a lot of needs,” said Erin Pollard, director of College Equity Inclusion and Access at IVC. Yet, she said, “more than half of our students are eligi-

ble for financial aid, which means they’re at risk of not having the financial means to pay for the basics of living, starting with food.”

The high cost of living in the area directly impacts community college students, Pollard said. “We have families or individual students who earn decent income, but they can’t afford to live in our area. They’re in need of housing support and food support. Last year we had 186 students request housing support from us who were in unstable situations and about to lose their housing.”

At Saddleback College, more students need food than ever before. “We’ve seen a rise in basic needs services,” said Jennifer LaBounty, vice president of Student Services at Saddleback. “The most pressing is food insecurity.”

Hunger directly impacts a student’s ability to do well in college. “If you’re

hungry, you can’t do well in your classes, you can’t think clearly,” LaBounty said. Saddleback’s C.A.R.E. (Community Allocated Resources for Everyone) Corner connects students to food, diapers, clothing, hygiene products and financial assistance.

LaBounty said the California state chancellor has stated as an official mission that all community colleges must address basic needs of students, and the state provides funding for that. But donors help, too, LaBounty said, particularly by providing gently used clothing for students.

The need for housing is complex, but both colleges in the district approach it with an array of solutions, including emergency grants for students who may be out of work temporarily and can’t pay their rent.

Students

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A more comprehensive solution is in the works. “Irvine Valley College and Saddleback have plans to support students through residential housing on campus,” LaBounty said. Until then, she said, Saddleback offers referrals to community partners that can direct students to local low-income housing, as well as social workers who may provide housing resources.

The needs of students, many of whom are working parents, can be wide-ranging and the colleges in the district work to address them all. “In the past couple of years, we’ve really been concentrating on expanding our support from just being a food pantry to true holistic support,” said Pollard at Irvine Valley College.

She gave a recent example of a student who is a single mother of four and is facing \$2,000 in car repairs, which includes fixing the brakes and replacing old tires. Her car is now unsafe and she can’t continue driving it to her job or to school until she can fix it. Pollard and McDonald will help this student with emergency funding. “We can get her car in working order and keep her as a student,” Pollard said.

And this is the ultimate aim — making sure students can continue to attend college and reach their academic goals.

“So often, the students we lose that don’t return to us are the students in these kinds of categories. They want to be at IVC, they want to be continuing their education, they just can’t do it,” Pollard said. “So that kind of support has really been life-changing for the students who’ve been able to help.”

LaBounty said she experienced this herself years ago.

“I was a student with four young small children and going back to school,” she said and described a typical mindset of students in that situation. “Your time is consumed by making sure everyone is eating and has clothes washed and there’s a clean place to rest your head. You’re in an increased state of stress, and psychologically, the cortisol blocks learning. And when your stomach is growling, you’re embarrassed, you feel less-than, you have imposter syndrome and think maybe you shouldn’t be focusing on this.

“Some of our students have two or three jobs and are not able to reach that economic mobility. We want to remove those barriers for students and increase their ability to learn in the classroom.”

McDonald concurs. “How can you prepare for an exam if you’re living in your car or if the home you’re living in doesn’t have Wi-Fi? How are you going to have that dedicated, focused time to study? The approach we have taken here is that we’ve embraced the Caring Campus framework,” she said.

At Irvine Valley College, she explained, every employee is tasked with checking on students to find out if they’re OK or if they’re having trouble with basic needs.

“What that means is that anyone on campus, whether you’re faculty, whether you’re a staff member, whether you’re a manager, you go out of your way to ask students how they’re doing so that we can identify those needs that maybe they’re not sharing. And that has worked out quite well in terms of students being willing to share information, not just at the financial aid counter, but maybe with our custodial staff. Our philosophy is that it doesn’t matter what each of our titles are — our main role is to support our students.”



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Irvine Valley College’s The Spot provides students with fresh fruit and vegetables, personal care items and other assistance.



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