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**Higher Ed’s Degrees of Hunger**

There's something wrong when many California public-university students can't get enough to eat while campus presidents' compensation is soaring.

BY [CHARLES CHIEPPO](http://www.governing.com/authors/Charles-Chieppo.html) | JULY 21, 2016

Two recent studies of students in California's public universities, along with a new report on public higher-education chief executives' compensation, show that our public colleges and universities are a microcosm of the larger society. In this case, that's not a good thing.

[A University of California survey](http://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/regmeet/july16/e1attach.pdf) found that nearly one in five UC students went hungry in the past year and that an additional 23 percent were "food insecure," lacking reliable access to sufficient affordable, nutritious food. In all, more than 40 percent of respondents suffered from hunger or food insecurity, and nearly 30 percent of those students said they had experienced difficulty studying because of hunger. The problem was even worse among African-American and Latino students: Around 60 percent reported experiencing hunger or food insecurity, about twice the rate for white students.

These stunning numbers come on the heels of [preliminary findings](https://presspage-production-content.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/1487/cohomelessstudy.pdf) published earlier this year from an ongoing California State University study finding that between 8 and 12 percent of that system's students were homeless or displaced from permanent housing and that 21 percent lacked access to nutritious food.

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Meanwhile, [a *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey](http://chronicle.com/interactives/executive-compensation#id=table_public_2015) found that the average annual compensation for presidents of American public colleges and universities rose 4.3 percent last year, to $431,000, with at least five of them pulling down more than $1 million. Clearly there is something wrong with this picture.

A March report on the University of California system by State Auditor Elaine M. Howle provides some idea of where the problems lie. Despite the depth of California's recent fiscal crisis, the audit found that UC's annual salary costs rose in eight of the last nine years, reaching $13 billion during 2014-15. Salaries of officials in 14 of the system's top 15 leadership positions topped $400,000 that year.

In 2010, the UC system launched what it called its "Working Smarter" initiative, which was designed to generate administrative savings and revenue that could be redirected to classrooms and research. UC claims the initiative has yielded $664 million in savings and revenue, but the audit found that the university couldn't substantiate either the $664 million number or the amount redirected. The audit also found that the university failed to monitor 18 programs that don't directly relate to teaching students.

Recommendations from the audit include conducting a detailed cost study every three to five years, the results of which should be used as a basis for setting tuition and state funding requests. The report also calls on UC to conduct a systemwide assessment to identify ways to reduce employment costs and to develop a system to substantiate savings and new revenue generated by the Working Smarter initiative.

I have long advocated for paying public-sector leaders enough to attract top talent. But that priority must be weighed against others in the competition for limited resources. Leadership pay clearly comes up short when compared to tuition and fees that leave a shocking number of students quite literally not knowing where their next meal is coming from.

The struggles of California's public college and university students bear more than a passing resemblance to our nation's growing income-inequality problem. But unlike that wider issue, recommendations from California's state auditor at least provide a starting point for finding the resources to ensure that no college student is forced to choose between food and books.

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