

Bonni: [00:00:00] Today on episode number 237 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, Rashida Crutchfield shares about meeting the needs of our students.

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Bonni: [00:00:22] Hello and welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:49] Today I'm joined by Dr. Rashida Crutchfield for the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast. She's an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach. Crutchfield was commissioned to lead research on food housing and security by California State University Office of the Chancellor. The system wide study on basic needs has garnered statewide and national attention. She's provided input on state policy and provides support and advice to staff faculty and administrators across the state and nation who wish to replicate and expand resources for basic needs in secure students.

Bonni: [00:01:33] Crutchfield was part of the leadership team that developed the Applied Social Work Projects- a culminating course for master students in the SCULB School of Social Work. This includes an expansive community assessment of a local area and requires that students have an integrative process in which they develop, implement, and evaluate a research based collaborative partnership project and response to a social problem identified by the students and community stakeholders. And sadly I didn't even get to talk to her about that in this particular interview. She has so much to offer and maybe I'll just have to use that as an excuse to get her back.

Bonni: [00:02:15] A little bit more on Dr. Crutchfield, she's an advocate committed to amplifying the voices of marginalized communities through

research and service, which you aren't going to hear a lot about in this upcoming interview. Prior to her work at CSULB, she served on the staff of Covenant House California, a shelter for 18 to 24 year olds experiencing homelessness. Dr. Crutchfield was named Faculty of the Year by the Cal State Student Association in 2018. She's also authored or coauthored research articles on collegiate homelessness and most recently coauthored Homelessness and Housing Insecurity in Higher Education: A Trauma Informed Approach to Research, Policy and Practice. This monograph is used as a resource for colleges and universities across the country.

Bonni: [00:03:06] Rashida, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Rashida: [00:03:09] Thank you for having me.

Bonni: [00:03:10] I would love to start by having you share a little bit about how you got into this work.

Rashida: [00:03:16] Before stepping into academia, I was a practicing social worker. So that included a lot of different work mostly in community and a little bit in policy, a lot of community organizing. Just prior to working at California State University Long Beach, I was a staff member at Covenant House California which is a shelter for homeless youth ages 18 24. Covenant House is a national organization, but for us here in California, I was working at a shelter in Hollywood and there was a resident at the shelter who was living there and trying to enroll in a community college nearby. She's a brilliant young woman who had dealt with a lot of obstacles and had done very well in school and was really looking forward to going to college. She went to the financial aid office to finalize all her forms and was told by a financial aid administrator that she needed the tax forms from her parents to get her financial aid. She let them know that she was homeless.

Rashida: [00:04:24] This was in 2007. So this is way before anyone was even remotely talking about this issue. And so the administrator really had never experienced that before and told her "you don't look homeless. You don't seem homeless. You're probably just having a fight with your parents, you should go back to them and get their tax forms but you've already missed the deadline so you'll just have to wait until next semester."

Rashida: [00:04:49] For this young woman who had only six months in temporary housing that would have been devastating. So fortunately she came back to this shelter and told folks about it. We have a very feisty nun at Covenant House

named Sister Margaret Farrell who went to bat for her like an angry momma and really let them know that she had to be enrolled and this was her circumstance.

Rashida: [00:05:16] So for me, I was really interested in what happens for everyone else who experiences this issue and really found that there was nothing. There had been no research, there'd been no exploration in any systemic way about the experience of students having dealt with homelessness in college. So my interest was born from there.

Bonni: [00:05:39] What you're describing has been part of a topic I've been kind of obsessed with in recent years and that's this whole idea of context. For me, as I look back- you mentioned 2007, so I started teaching in higher education in that context in 2004. And as I mentioned to you before we started recording, I absolutely have felt really clueless about all these areas of these issues of the kinds of context that our students can come enter into the educational world into.

Bonni: [00:06:10] I just absolutely had no experience or no knowledge of it. But I guess I'm feeling a little bit less guilty because you say there was such little work that has been done. And so what would you identify for us as any of us that are in this realm of higher education, what are some really key things we need to wake ourselves up to?

Rashida: [00:06:31] I think higher education right now as we know it is supposed to be something that people of all kinds can use to leverage to gain overall well-being, but especially economic self-sufficiency. But we come from a long history in higher education of universities being for the elite, being for folks who could pay for it or who stood out as exceptional. As we shift our missions to use higher education to really impact equity and marginalization of people, we have to think about how to we really reframe and change what we think of for higher education and who we think of going into education.

Rashida: [00:07:19] One of the things that I think about is we have this narrative of the starving student. So it's this rite of passage, I went to college and had no idea how to budget- and this is true for me. I was 18 years old and occasionally partied or maybe bought some boots that weren't as essential as I thought they were. And then I might eat a cup of noodles or cut down on my meals at the end of the month because I overspent what my parents gave me. I mean we weren't rich, but definitely my bills were paid.

Rashida: [00:07:52] I think a lot of people think about the college experience as a little bit of struggle that builds character. What we're experiencing with our students now though is not about character building, we're talking about trauma. Students who can't make their ends meet who skip meals, or are living in their car, or from place to place because they don't have the financial means to cover those expenses.

Rashida: [00:08:23] They have potentially a full financial aid package. But that financial aid package after tuition, after the various bills that one has with an education doesn't cover living in a place like California or even in places like Chicago or New York or lots of places in the nation. The gap between what financial aid covers and the actual costs of higher education is getting wider. And our students are still coming to college despite those odds in order to have that college experience to learn and grow and be economically self-sufficient but are doing that at great expense to their well-being.

Bonni: [00:09:08] Thank you for sharing the story from your personal standpoint. I'm picturing the boots and I think for my students often some of them are like "oh gosh I went out to sushi" and we're in Southern California that's kind of an expensive dining habit to get into. But what you're really saying is that this is us. I certainly see this from my own background as projecting my context onto other people. We need to shift that paradigm. What are some ways that we can glean more about the context of the kinds of students that we serve?

Rashida: [00:09:44] Well I think just talking about the sheer numbers is important. We know that there hasn't been a nation wide study about issues of homelessness, or food insecurity, or hunger across the country, but there are studies that are taking place that help us really understand what this means.

Rashida: [00:10:04] Chancellor Timothy White of the California State University system commissioned our study of basic needs in 2015 and assigned me to lead Phase 1. And I have also been co-principal Investigator with my colleague, Dr. Jennifer McGuire at Humboldt State University. And we did phases two and three. And so we found that over 41 percent of our students are experiencing food insecurity and 10.9 percent of our students had experienced homelessness in the past year. And that is staggering. I think it is important for us as we think about these issues to not think about this as something that is happening to one or two students. This is a real issue that we have to understand in a very global way.

[00:10:59] As you started embarking on this research, and I know your collaborations are so powerful as well, what were some of the surprises that you encountered? You talked about how you first got into it, but then once you started getting more than knee-deep into it, what were some of the surprises along the way?

Rashida: [00:11:16] There are a lot of things that I've learned in this process that really make me upset or sad but also make me inspired about what's possible for students. I've talked to so many students- just for the study I have spoken to now almost 300 students about their experiences with these issues and listening to students talk about what they do. So I've spoken to students who are sleeping in their cars, are bouncing from different people's couches. I spoke to students who were sleeping in storage units on the street, in tents, in barns. I spoke to one student in San Diego who was sleeping on a boat. And he said people really romanticise that. But he is a young man who is probably 6 feet tall. And he said it's like sleeping in a coffin. It's not a yacht. It's not meant for human habitation. And he doesn't know how to swim.

Rashida: [00:12:17] But he found someone to sell him this boat and dock it out off of the port cheaply and so that's his survival mechanism. And I would never have imagined that. I sat with a group of women, so there were three women, there were four of us in a focus group. And they were sharing recipes on how to make a cup of noodles last for most of the day. And they laughed and they joked. And we laughed and joked and it was "I use hot sauce" or "you split the packet and you add some seasoning salt." And they talked about that to make sure that it didn't get watered down and they made jokes and then we stopped and took a deep breath and thought, "oh this is bad. This is not OK." And that is moving. It is both inspiring because they are creatively making their way through the universities despite all of the circumstances and they shouldn't have to.

Bonni: [00:13:22] One of the things that is striking me so much right now as I'm hearing your stories is that it seems like it might be harder for them to come across as profoundly as we want them to because we have glamorized these things. The cup of noodles is like the rite of passage, I'm not sure if you use that phrase earlier or not. And sleeping on people's couches, that's kind of-

Rashida: [00:13:45] That's romantic.

Bonni: [00:13:46] Yes. So how do we shift our own perspectives, let alone other people's perspectives, to the gravity, the enormity of these challenges?

Rashida: [00:13:56] I think it's important for us to think really take a step back and think about how do I feel when I am hungry? So, this morning I skipped breakfast. And I'm feeling a little hangry right now. Right. So feeling a little edgy a little bit hard to concentrate. You might be able to tell. It's a little bit stressful but I know when I finish talking to you, I'll get up and grab a piece of fruit from my kitchen. If I didn't have that opportunity, if my next thought was well do I buy my book or do I buy food for next week? How would that make me feel? How would that make me feel in the present? And what kind of long term stress would that cause?

Rashida: [00:14:46] For me, I travel a lot because of the research that I do. And I think that's pretty lucky. But I also get really tired, so when I'm moving from place to place every time I pick up my stuff and put it down in a new place it feels a little uncomfortable. And if I do that over multiple times, I start to get really exhausted. But I also know that at the end of all of that, I'm going to come home and sleep in my own bed. For our students, they don't get to do that. There is no "my own bed." There might be at the end of that trail, a car. Like one of the students I spoke to was sleeping in her car near her high school because she felt safe there because she had very fond memories of being at her high school. And she was sleeping in her car and woke up to three police cars surrounding her pointing lights into the car demanding that she get out of the car.

Rashida: [00:15:43] That's terrifying. That's terrifying. So if we reframe even our own experiences to understand that that instability over a long period of time equates to trauma, then we can really better understand what our students might be going through.

Bonni: [00:16:00] Some of the examples that you shared there, I'm excited because I know that there are some amazing things that institutions are doing to combat that. You talked about do I buy the textbook or do I buy next week's meals? I'm just excited to have you share a little bit what are some of the creative ways that institutions are working to better support these kinds of learners?

Rashida: [00:16:21] Our universities in California and nationally are really doing some exciting things to respond to the needs of students. I think first we have to be clear that this is an issue, even at elite private universities. This is an issue. Once we acknowledge that, we can do something about it. And there are lots of interesting things that we can accomplish if we work together.

Rashida: [00:16:46] Definitely making sure to do research, to be aware of the prevalence of homelessness or food insecurity on your campus is so important. Dr. Maguire and I have some tools. We are openly sharing the tools that we use for this assessment. So I definitely encourage folks to check those out.

Rashida: [00:17:07] But beyond that, campuses are developing programs and services. Across the country, campuses are developing food pantries. I think food pantries are a really good start, but cannot be the end of the response. Food pantries definitely help students with their immediate needs. But there are some ways to think about long term efforts.

Rashida: [00:17:32] At Long Beach State University, where I am faculty, our staff and faculty and administrators have developed a program called the Student Emergency Intervention and Wellness Program. It's a mouthful of a name, but it's meaningful because we are thinking about the students experience as well as their overall well-being. So we have emergency grants and it's important that they be emergency grants and not loans because adding a loan that has to be repaid quite quickly then just makes things more difficult for students. So we have emergency grants.

Rashida: [00:18:09] We have a program called Feed a Need. So our students who have meal plans on campus donate one meal per semester and then we can put those donated meals that are then matched by our food services (on our campuses, the 49ers shop) that matches those donations and then students who apply for our program then can get those meals put on their ID card. And then they can go to our dining services and swipe to get those meals and they are not differentiated from other students. So we don't have any special coupon or anything, they are just like every other student. There's an organization called Swipe Out Hunger that can support campuses across the nation to develop those kinds of programs.

Rashida: [00:18:57] We have emergency housing on campus. We are finding really creative ways to redistribute food, because often we have too much food on campus and then it gets wasted. So in in line with our attention to basic needs. We're also linking with sustainability models. So those are some creative things that we're doing. Long Beach.

Rashida: [00:19:20] Humboldt State has a great program called Oh Snap. Chico State has led collaborative efforts across the CSU to have us enroll students in Cal Fresh. Cal Fresh is the state iteration of SNAP, colloquially what many people think of as food stamps. Students are categorically ineligible for SNAP unless they

meet a wide array of eligibility requirements and so it's very difficult for students to access SNAP as well as other social public services so we are systemically providing application assistance so students can get these long term supports. So these are some great things that are already in place and I encourage folks to think of the best way to support what's best for them their campus.

Bonni: [00:20:12] One of the things I wanted to ask you about because I'm not sure why it just felt so near and dear to my heart, there were two themes coming out of this. One is wanting to reduce the shame and stigma around this. And I know there's lots of work done around here. And then specifically I remember reading something and I'm sorry to say I can't remember where, I was going through link after link sending it to be a people at my institution as well. But there was something around getting young women feminine hygiene products and how that was being done and I don't know, did I see it on one of your websites? Did I go on a trail? But I thought I just I'd love a future or anything else about reducing the stigma and then anything if it struck any chords in terms of feminine hygiene products.

Rashida: [00:20:52] Sure. I think about it in our pantries we can offer food, but we can offer a lot of things. I mean in our pantries specifically at Long Beach State, we do offer feminine hygiene as well as school supplies. Because I think for a lot of us we don't realize just how important and how critical the little things are. So not having toilet paper is a big deal. Not having feminine hygiene supplies really can turn into a humiliation for someone who has to figure out how to make those things happen. In general, I think that it's important for us to talk about these issues a lot on campus in different ways.

Rashida: [00:21:34] One of our staff on our campus, Dr. Jeff Klaus likes to name the food pantry and some of our food alternatives as food scholarships because scholarships are good. There's not shame associated with going of financial aid, although it is public welfare. But we don't think about it that way because we've normalized financial aid as a system of support on campus. So connecting these kinds of services in a normal way, in a normalizing way diminishes stigma.

Bonni: [00:22:08] When I hear about these ideas and as I said I kept sending them over to people that I feel in solidarity with at my institution. Sometimes it can just feel too big. And when an issue feels too big, sometimes our natural human response- not yours obviously- but lesser people can say "oh this is just too big, I could never help." But we certainly can.

Rashida: [00:22:27] "I'm just going to back away. It's just too much."

Bonni: [00:22:30] Yeah. What is our place as individuals are those seemingly small things but that turn out to possibly have a big impact that we can actually do?

Rashida: [00:22:42] Definitely educating ourselves about these issues is the first thing. I mean not only the prevalence, but also the fact that this really is a justice issue. These circumstances disproportionately impact our students of color, our undocumented students, or former foster youth. We really have to think about our role as equitable educators not only in terms of how we connect with students but also how we think of students overall.

Rashida: [00:23:12] One of the things that I have learned as a faculty, I should only speak for myself, but I am going to generalize and say that a lot of us as faculty think of ourselves as brilliant and riveting in our classes. And sometimes if a student is falling asleep in the back of the room, or seems disengaged, or just doesn't seem to think we are as brilliant as we think we are, sometimes we assume that they're not prepared, or slacking, or they're lazy. But it might mean that they haven't eaten today or they didn't have a place to sleep last night. I think as faculty, we get to engage our students about whether or not they did the assignment. But we also can ask them, did you eat? And then that means that I need to know what services are available on campus.

Rashida: [00:24:02] I think also even mentioning these issues is important. So for many of us, we have taken the lead to incorporating information about food and housing security in our syllabi. So students may or may not read those syllabi. But we often go over them at the beginning of this semester. So when I'm starting my class, I'll talk to students about accommodations for veterans or undocumented students, religious holidays, students with disabilities. But I also add "if you are struggling with your food or housing security, you can talk to me or you can go to XYandZ programs and services and they will be able to help you." And some students will come to me and say I didn't even know that that was available. Thank you for mentioning it.

Rashida: [00:24:54] But I have also in my study, in collecting qualitative data, heard students say I didn't say anything to my faculty but because it was in the syllabus I knew that it was happening for other people and I wasn't alone. So going back to your question about normalizing and stigma, just how we talk about these issues or if we talk about these issues allows students the ability to seek services.

Bonni: [00:25:22] One thing we haven't talked much about is just the toll that this can take on researchers like you and people that are doing this. And I know that with all of this, you still have hope. And you thought that you might be able to share a story as we close this part of our conversation that helps us have hope.

Rashida: [00:25:42] Yeah I had a student a couple of years ago she- to maintain her privacy, she named herself Rain for the purposes of the study, but also she was my student. She was a student in social work. And I really had an open line to her because she was sleeping in her car. And sometimes she was sleeping on the floor in a one studio apartment with a large family, parts of her family were undocumented and she really couldn't stay there. She was in graduate school. She had gotten a bachelors in social work and was getting a master's in social work and was living mostly in her car and often skipping meals.

Rashida: [00:26:22] She thought a lot about quitting school because it just felt so overwhelming. So she got support for me. She got support from my colleague, James Ferreira. Once she started disclosing, people wrapped themselves around her and really helped her push herself push her way through college. She is now in a doctoral program, in her second year. I'm excited to say.

Rashida: [00:26:52] And I think we have to be careful with really exemplifying the special students because we cannot expect students to do this all on their own. And while we cheer them on, I think the moral of that story is when people respond, when students are already being brave enough to persevere, that we respond to retain them. That is an example of success and it gives me hope as I see more and more faculty, staff, administrators, and students wrap their arms around each other students to make sure that they graduate and are able to achieve the goals that they set for themselves. That makes it all worth it- even when I'm tired.

Bonni: [00:27:39] Thank you so much for sharing Rain's story. And thanks to her for being that vulnerable and getting to be the example for hope.

Rashida: [00:27:48] Yeah.

Bonni: [00:27:49] This is the point in the show where we each get to give our recommendations and I have two today. The first one is one that I heard about on a podcast. It is a tool to help us look at the impact of geography, specifically zip codes, on children's possibilities to be able to rise out of poverty. This story doesn't have a lot of hope by the way because more than any other factor,

ones zip code is going to hugely have a devastating effect on that. And it's called The Opportunity Atlas. So you can go to The Opportunity Atlas and it helps answer the question using anonymous data from 20 million Americans that they followed from childhood to their mid 30s. And again asking that question of what gives children the best chance to rise out of poverty? And you can actually go and look at different zip codes within the areas you live, or places you've visited, or places you're curious about or are researching about. So they talk about being able to trace the roots of today's affluence and poverty back to the neighborhoods where people grew up. And it's just one of those really- I found it a fascinating tool and one that I like to spend a little bit more time on. So that is The Opportunity Atlas.

Bonni: [00:29:04] And then the second one is when we talk about such big ideas like we have today. We've talked about big ideas but we've also, thank you Rashida, you've given us real practical steps too because we're not we don't get to be isolated in this, you can try. But these are our students, these are the people that we want to be serving well. So I found a post by Mark Hoefer to be one of those that's just a real practical one. And he entitled it Small Hacks to Increase Student Voice. And sometimes I think we just need to browse things like this and take a look at some of the ideas and sort of do a little self audit for our self on are there opportunities that we're missing out on to expand our students voice? A couple of examples he gives, which we've talked about a lot on the show before, providing an audience for students work. And you can do this in big and small ways and he's got some examples there.

Bonni: [00:29:56] I'm hearing this phrase a lot and I don't know if I just missed the party or the party has just gotten started. But "passion projects," I used to call them "development opportunities" which I just crack up. But I like "passion projects" a lot more. That's what Google call when they let their employees- or I shouldn't say let them- they ask their employees to spend 20 percent of their time on passion projects, not on some pre- defined thing. So this idea that our students can have passion projects and bring their voice into that. That's something I'm planning on experimenting with in the spring, so if anyone listening knows more than I do, which wouldn't be hard, about passion projects, I would love to hear more. How to help students find meaning in their work, it was just a really inspirational post. I hope people will go take a look at Mark's post. Mark has been, by the way, on the podcast before. And probably just about time to have him back. So Rashida, I'm going to pass it over to you for your chance to give some recommendations or a recommendation.

Rashida: [00:30:52] Your conversation about passion projects made me think about my passion planner, which is a product that was developed by a student who has since graduated. But it's a great way to organize myself. And so I just wanted to throw that out there because I like to support what they're and I always like to support the inventiveness of my students.

Rashida: [00:31:14] Taking us to a very different direction, I really want for me as you said, this work can be pretty exhausting. And so I like to read to sort of take myself out of what I think about everyday. But of course I stay pretty morbid and read a lot of what people call speculative fiction or science fiction but I'm a super nerd so I call it speculative fiction.

Rashida: [00:31:38] One of my favorite writers is Octavia Butler. And she died too soon at I think 56. She is probably the most known for *Kindred*, which was written some time ago. But my favorites are books called *The Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. Octavia Butler was prophetic in developing this dystopian world in the United States that had a president who wanted to turn back time to a time to a time that was easier and ended up re- marginalizing primarily people of color. I don't know if any of this sounds familiar but this book was written, *Parable of the Sower* was written in 1993 and *Parable of the Talents* in 1990. So in some ways these books used to take me out of my world and in fact now they kind of put me back in it.

Rashida: [00:32:35] But there's so much art and nuance to the world that she creates that I just find myself also in these books because she is a woman of color who has characters of color which can be so rare. So especially as she was developing and succeeding as a writer. So these are my favorites that I'm forwarding to you.

Bonni: [00:32:55] Thank you so much for sharing Octavia Butler's books with us. I'll be linking to those in the show notes and also on the recommendations page of the website, as well as the passion planner. And thank you so much for sharing your research with us. I didn't mention this earlier, because it's not necessarily the focus, but you did win an award from Cal State from this. And one of the things I'm just so happy you won the award just because I want this to give out even more, this is tremendous, tremendous research. I'm going to be linking to everything you sent me and I hope people will just go up there and start clicking away, getting even more into the work we should be doing.

Rashida: [00:33:34] I'm so appreciative of the CSU for that award. And I also was recently recognized by our California State Student Association and I am very

appreciative that people are noticing that good work is being done. I really think what this is about is amplifying the voices of students so I don't mind seeing myself, but I also think really what this is about is our movement for our students and the fact that their voices are out in front of this is what makes it all meaningful.

Bonni: [00:34:07] Oh that's so wonderful. What a joy it was to get to talk to Rashida Crutchfield today for Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm thankful to the people at Cal State for sending me her information and her helping us to acknowledge all these award winners in the past and upcoming episodes. And I'm just grateful for her research on all of those who she's collaborated with.

Bonni: [00:34:33] Thanks to all of you for listening. I hope that she'll consider going to teachinginhighered.com/237 and go check out all of the resources that are posted there some of which we talked about but some of which will just help you really be able to explore these issues even more than we were able to in this short time. Thanks so much for listening and we'll see you next time for episode number 238.

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