

Rams Against Hunger

The purpose of this research brief is to describe the Rams Against Hunger (RAH) students' demographics and academic preparation compared to the CSU population overall as well as compare the academic performance of RAH students who received the RAH meal swipes (recipients) to students who applied but did not receive meal swipes (waitlist). Additionally, the qualitative responses from the application materials are summarized and select quotes are highlighted so that the self-reported financial situation of these students can be included.

Executive Summary

In summary, RAH students are very diverse (nearly three-quarters are first generation and/or students of color) and have lower than average levels of high school academic preparation. The majority of RAH students are juniors or senior undergraduates and are borrowing student loans at higher than average levels. There is evidence of higher levels of student success for RAH recipients compared to the RAH applicants that are waitlisted. Persistence to the following semester is higher for students who receive the meal swipes compared to those that do not receive the meal swipes. Additionally, the waitlisted RAH applicants have a statistically significant lower term GPA the semester they apply (and do not receive the meal swipes) compared to the semester prior to applying. This negative correlation between GPA and application semester is not present for RAH applicants who receive the meal swipes.

Considering the positive associations between meal swipe receipt and student success among those who apply and the demographics of RAH applicants (upper class diverse undergraduates) increasing the number of possible awards could have impact on the 3rd and 4th fall persistence gaps for students that have historically had the highest rates of attrition at the later undergraduate years.

Background

SLiCe estimates that about 10% of CSU's student population experiences food insecurity; therefore, in FA16 there are approximately 2,800 students in need. RAH is an effort to address this issue by providing participants with 75 meal swipes (at a Residence Hall) a semester. This program began in SP15 and is currently serving 51 students with over 100 students that are waitlisted in FA16. The cost for these meal swipes is approximately \$500 per student and the program consistently has more qualified applicants than funding for meal swipes. The program intentionally does not advertise beyond word of mouth in specific offices that serve lower income students because of high demand/low level of funding. Demand for the program is growing (from 33 applicants in SP15 to 211 applicants in SP16) despite the intentional lack of marketing and an increasingly larger proportion of RAH applicants are being waitlisted. The program is entirely funded through donations and considering the gap between recipients and SLiCe's approximate estimate of food insecure students on campus there is a need to increase the number of students that can be funded each semester.

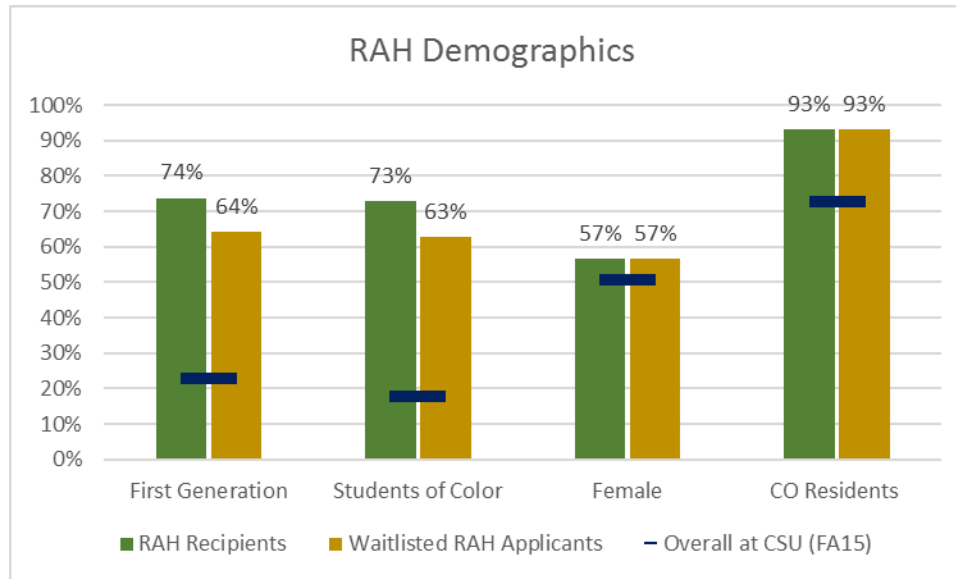
Population

This analysis includes the 320 unique individuals who submitted RAH applications in SP15, FA15, and SP16. Among these individuals, about 60% (191 students) received the meal swipes. Among the waitlisted, the majority are denied because the program lacked funding. Occasionally some applicants do not meet the eligibility criteria because the program requires that students file a FAFSA and have an EFC below 10,000 as well as utilize student loans that are offered. RAH participants are compared to all waitlisted applicants (regardless of eligibility) because these students all applied for the program based on their perceived need.

RAH Demographics and Academic Preparation

Figure 1, below, shows the demographics of waitlisted applicants and recipients as well as the overall levels at CSU (for reference).

Figure 1.



The majority of waitlisted applicants (64%) and recipients (74%) are first generation students and CO residents (93% for both groups) as well as students of color (63% of waitlisted applicants and 73% of recipients). Fifty-seven percent of students in both groups are female. First generation, resident, and students of color are considerably overrepresented among the RAH populations compared to CSU overall. Overall at CSU (FA15), about 23% of students are first generation, 18% are students of color, and 73% are CO residents. Females are also overrepresented (although to a smaller magnitude) among the RAH population (51% overall compared to 57% among the RAH students).

The academic preparation measures for RAH applicants and recipients are very similar. Among the RAH students the average index is 107, average high school GPA is 3.5, and average ACT score is 21.3. Overall at CSU (FA15 freshman profile), the average ACT composite score is 24.9, the average index is 115, and the average HS GPA is 3.6. Across these measures of academic preparation, the RAH students have lower levels compared to the average freshman profile at CSU.

The financial aid profile of RAH students indicates that these students are low-income (70% UG applicants and 84% recipients received a Pell grant at one point) and most are utilizing all available student loans. About 75% of RAH students have borrowed loans at CSU. On average, junior and senior recipients borrow about \$26,000 during their time at CSU and junior and senior applicants borrow about \$24,000 during their time at CSU. For comparison, the average loan debt at graduation in 2016 is \$23,347 and about 36% of undergraduates in 2015-16 utilized loans.

Academic Characteristics

Among RAH students, over 50% of both recipients and applicants are undergraduate students who first applied for RAH during their junior or senior year. Additionally, about 32% of both applicants and recipients are sophomores and a small number are second-year freshmen or graduate students.

The distribution of major college is relatively similar across the RAH groups (waitlisted applicants and recipients); however, there are some differences between the RAH students and CSU's overall major distribution. Students with majors in Health and Human Sciences are overrepresented in RAH compared to overall (27% compared to 17%) and students with majors in Agricultural Sciences and Engineering are slightly underrepresented compared to CSU overall (2.5% compared to 6% and 7% compared to 12%; respectively).

Academic Performance

The CSU term GPA is statistically lower for the waitlisted RAH applicants in the term they are denied meal swipes compared to their prior term but is statistically the same for the RAH recipients across the same time frame. For instance, among applicants the CSU term GPA the semester prior to their first application is 2.86 but the average term GPA for this group decreased to 2.73 the semester they were denied the meal swipes ($p=.021$). Among RAH recipients the CSU term GPA the semester prior to application is 2.90 and this group's average term GPA decreased a nominal amount to 2.86 the semester they received the meal swipes ($p=.371$). A possible explanation for this association is that the receiving the meal swipes prevented a significant drop in term GPA for recipients compared to applicants.

The persistence (enrolled or graduated) in the semester following the RAH application term is high for both applicants (93%) and recipients (98%). However, the 5.5 percentage point difference between the groups' persistence rates is statistically significant ($\chi^2=.008$). Again a possible interpretation for the positive association between receiving meal swipes and persistence is a positive impact of the program.

Self-Reported Information

Among the RAH students, a majority provided qualitative responses regarding their financial situation and how the program could benefit them on their RAH application. A majority of these students' report working outside of school (some with 2 or more jobs), but their pay or financial aid only covers their basic bills requiring them to go without food sometimes. A smaller number of students indicated that their food insecurity is related to supporting family members. Nearly all of the RAH applicants stated that the food swipes would facilitate their academic success at CSU by worrying less about paying for food and having improved health/nutrition. These students feel that their ability to study is negatively impacted by their hunger. The following section provides some direct quotes from students' applications.

RAH Application Quotes

"I have been working very hard to find another job opportunity, but unfortunately I have not found a secure job placement. There have been weeks where we have only have one meal a day or if we have additional meals, they are extremely hazardous to our health and well-being."

"I work three jobs in the summer and one in the winter to support myself. I am part of the fostering success program and the AAC program, both of which help me find financial aid options. I use the food back as often as I can to come up with

healthy meals but sometimes they don't have enough food some weeks or not enough protein to sustain a rounded diet. So I have food stamps to try and help fill in the holes. But sometimes I still come up short.”

“I support myself right now. My parents are divorced and can't support me at all. I work at Key Bank but only make enough for rent. I have a hard time getting food.”

“I work two jobs, one work study and one hourly at CSU, they are both minimum wage and it is hard to make ends meet, pay for utilities and food all while little by little paying my students fees. There are days where I will only eat if a friend offers to pay for my food.”

“I currently do not have a job, and I am only living on the little scholarship money I received from my refund to pay for my everyday expenses. Money is getting very tight for me right now, I try to only eat once a day so I don't have to spend money on food. I am trying to be very careful on what I spend my money on. I have been looking for a job but unfortunately I have not gotten any. This is one of my stressful semesters since I have been in college and because I only eat once a day I tend to loose energy very quickly, which affects my school work significantly. This program would be a substantial help for me because at this point I don't know what my next option would be.”

“My EFC is 0. My wife and I have a four-year-old daughter named Rikki, and are expecting a baby boy in late October. My financial aid pays some of our living expenses (I pay our rent and as many other bills as possible up front for the whole semester as soon as it comes through), but it is then gone. My wife babysits some, and I occasionally sell orchids that I grow on eBay, but neither of these brings in much. My wife will not be able to babysit much after the baby comes. I make sure that she and my daughter eat well, but I often live for extended periods on whatever I can find. I can't afford to eat on-campus, or to buy food to bring to school most of the time, and I am there all day on most days, so I'm hungry a lot.”

Conclusions

The findings from this study show positive associations between receiving the RAH meal swipes and student success (measured by persistence to the following semester as well as individual's changes in term GPA). There is also evidence that need for the program exceeds the current capacity.

It is possible that increasing the capacity of RAH could have an impact on the graduation rates at CSU for students of color and first generation students. The majority of RAH students are diverse upper class undergraduates. Data analyses at CSU show that the persistence gaps by demographic group increase as the students' time at CSU increases. In order to decrease the differences in graduation rates by demographic group the persistence to 3rd, 4th, and 5th fall semesters for first generation, low-income, and students of color must increase. The RAH applicants (who meet the financial requirements of the program), but do not receive meal swipes is a self-identified group with which a minimal financial commitment might make an impact on their ability to be retained through graduation.