Episode 113

PART 2: Spring Flex Day Keynote 2021: Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab, Addressing Students' Basic Needs with a Culture of Caring During the Pandemic

00:00:00 **Dr. Sara**

Establish for the student and establish for yourself that basic needs are an academic concern. We're not talking about this stuff because we're told to as a matter of social justice, and somebody said we needed to do that to fulfill some value of the institution.

00:00:16 **Dr. Sara**

There's no other way to teach our students the material that we're there to teach. They are not going to learn it some other way.

00:00:22 **Christina**

Hi, I'm Christina Barsi.

00:00:27 **Sun**

And I'm Sun Ezzell, and you're listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast.

00:00:29 **Christina**

Our mission is to find ways to keep your ear to the ground, so to speak - by bringing to you the activities and events you may not have time to attend, the resources on campus you might want to know more about, the interesting things your colleagues are creating, and the many ways we can continue to better help and guide our students.

00:00:47 **Sun**

We bring to you the voices of Mt. SAC, from the classroom to completion-

00:00:51 **Speaker 1**

And I know I'm going to achieve my goals, and I know people here are going to help me to do it.

00:00:58 **Speaker 2**

She is a sociology major and she's transferring to Cal Poly Pamona! Psychology major, English major.

00:01:03 **Sun**

From transforming part-time into full-time-

00:01:04 **Speaker 1**

I really liked the time that we spent with Julie about how to write a CV and a cover letter.

00:01:12 **Christina**

Or just finding time to soak in the campus.

00:01:14 **Speaker 1**

To think of the natural environment around us as a library.

00:01:18 **Christina**

We want to keep you informed and connected to all things Mt. SAC. But most importantly, we want to keep you connected with each other. I'm Christina Barsi, Mt. SAC alumni, and producer of this podcast.

00:01:28 **Sun**

And I'm Sun Ezzell, Learning Assistance Faculty and Professional Learning Academy Coordinator.

00:01:33 **Christina**

And this is the Magic Mountie Podcast.

00:01:38 **Christina**

In case you missed Spring Flex Day 2021, we are featuring the keynote speaker, Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab. She is a professor of sociology and medicine at Temple University, president and founder of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, and author of Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream.

00:01:59 **Christina**

Dr. Goldrick-Rab's research on the basic needs among college students sparked the #realcollegemovement legislation addressing food and housing insecurity and a growing understanding of/and support for meeting students' basic needs at colleges across the country.

00:02:14 **Christina**

In this episode, we are featuring part two of Dr. Goldrick-Rab's session, where she focuses on some solutions to the difficulties outlined in last week's episode. If you haven't listened to part one yet, pause this episode and start there. And if you're joining us again, enjoy.

00:02:35 **Dr. Sara**

So, now, that we've seen the problem, let's look at what happened in terms of students being able to get some help. So, this is what we see and these are the data I believe from the California community colleges in this chart. Only a small fraction of students actually access support.

00:02:50 **Dr. Sara**

So, for example, let's take unemployment. We saw that a fair number of students lost their jobs and we can see actually in California, that about the same fraction of people who lost their jobs did imply for unemployment. And that's terrific. That's actually something we don't see in the rest of the country. We see much higher rates of people losing their jobs and much lower rates of people actually applying for support.

00:03:16 **Dr. Sara**

So, here, it looks like California might've been able to get the word out. But when we see SNAP access, for example, when we just showed you numbers on widespread food insecurity and the rates of around 40%, you see that only 13% of students applied for what in California, you call, CalFresh.

00:03:35 **Dr. Sara**

The vast majority of students who did not apply didn't either know the program was available or didn't think they were eligible. That's really not an accident because the way that the legislation is written and the way that much of the guidance around this program is written seems to imply that we want students to think they're ineligible for food supports. When in fact, they are.

00:03:59 **Dr. Sara**

If you want somebody to believe they're eligible for a program, then you say students are eligible in less, and then you indicate who's not eligible. That's the opposite of how this program is written down. It says students are not eligible in less, and then proceeds to conditions that would make them eligible. So, really, does not appear to be an accident that we have this problem. And it's a lot for colleges to overcome.

00:04:30 **Dr. Sara**

In addition to that, while we saw widespread basic needs insecurity affecting almost 60% of students, we see that only 25% of them applied for emergency aid. One of the most common practices at community colleges around the country. And critically here, we see that 25% of students literally did not know that the program existed. And 14% said they did not know how to apply. So, those are barriers that can be overcome and that information can lead us to next steps.

00:05:03 **Dr. Sara**

So, as we design student services, and as we approach the teaching of students, I want to urge you to center the Wu Tang's lessons in your practice. Now, I'm hoping that everybody listening is very familiar with the Wu Tang. Maybe you could indicate in the comments if anybody is familiar with CREAM.

00:05:24 **Dr. Sara**

CREAM is a critically important lesson for higher education to learn. If you listen to the song, you'll hear a focus on getting the next dollar. What it means is that a student is focused on where money is coming from rather than what they are learning.

00:05:43 **Dr. Sara**

This is something that keeps people up at night. It's something that makes people stressed, and it is something that can rule your every day. And this isn't just an anecdote or a guess at what happens to people. This is based on good evidence from brain science research. If you want something great to read, I recommend a book called Scarcity.

00:06:04 **Dr. Sara**

The book Scarcity explains what happens cognitively when you don't have enough money. Things, actually, it becomes like a pressure on your brain. It crowds out the kinds of long-term thinking that we want our students to be able to engage in. It makes it harder to plan for the future. In fact, it makes it harder to also be optimistic and hopeful. Something that psychology shows is important for resilience and survival.

00:06:36 **Dr. Sara**

So, if we recognize that that's actually what's happening to our students, if we know that fact, then when we look at a student who for example, has their camera off, who isn't engaging with us, who is asleep in the classroom, it will lead us to at least different hypotheses about the "why," if not different conclusions. Let's go and now talk about putting that into practice.

00:07:05 **Dr. Sara**

So, the first thing that is really important to do as you're helping students is to affirm that they are not alone in having these issues. And I've just given you data, and I'm sure you've also seen other data that would help you to do that. Students who experience basic needs insecurity tend to think it's not something they're allowed to talk about. That it is their own fault, that they cause this problem themselves, and that they are among only ones who've ever dealt with it.

00:07:34 **Dr. Sara**

You need to counter that narrative in their brains if you want to get through to them and help them see that help can be available. Part of the way you can do this is to actually just be human with them as well. So, sharing your struggles.

00:07:48 **Dr. Sara**

So, for example, let me just tell you about a student who has given me permission to speak about her. She's one of the students I taught last term; her name is Souja. And Souja is a disabled mother of two children. One of whom is queer. She has for years been trying to get her college degree. She and her husband both escaped abusive living situations when they partnered up. And they are living in their first house together of their own with their kids. And they moved in right during the pandemic.

00:08:19 **Dr. Sara**

Souja is having a great deal of trouble focusing on school right now. She has a two-year-old and a 12-year-old at home. The two-year-old, of course, always wants to be in her lap and the 12-year-old is having trouble with online school. And Souja and her husband are facing homeownership and paying their gas bills during a very cold winter for the first time in their lives.

00:08:46 **Dr. Sara**

When I met with her recently to check in on how she was doing in school, she really didn't want to talk to me about her sociology classes, which is purportedly what I was there to discuss with her. Instead, I said, "How are you?" And she started talking about that gas bill. My strategy was therefore, to focus first on the gas bill to help her see what her options were.

00:09:09 **Dr. Sara**

Now, I might have additional information that maybe the usual faculty member does not have, but frankly, all the information I shared with her is either available in the local gas company's website or on our institution's website. So, I spent a few minutes with her, maybe about five minutes explaining how she might address her gas bill.

00:09:29 **Dr. Sara**

Then her daughter climbed into her lap. Now, one way to try to deal with this is to just kind of talk over the child and to, you know, put it aside and say, "Alright, let's talk about your statistics class." But there was almost no way, frankly, that Souja was going to be able to focus on that conversation as long as her daughter was literally climbing all over the computer.

00:09:52 **Dr. Sara**

So, I used my Zoom tools and I put on my virtual background, made it a funny thing. And I took one of the funny hats that you can add with the filters and stuck it on my head. I then asked Souja if she could put the graduation cap, which is in her Zoom filters on her head and her daughter then slid in and the graduation cap hit her head. We kept the hats on our heads to entertain her daughter while we had our conversation about her statistics class.

00:10:24 **Dr. Sara**

That made our conversation easier. I can tell you that Souja will remember the conversation. I can also tell you that Souja got tangible information from the conversation, and I can further tell you that she did not walk away feeling embarrassed that her issues in her life had become part of it, because it all became a teachable moment. And that's what I mean by being human with students.

00:10:50 **Dr. Sara**

Now, I'm sure many of you do this, but I just want to encourage you to lean further and further into it. Establish for the student and establish for yourself that basic needs are an academic concern. We're not talking about this stuff because we're told to as a matter of social justice, and somebody said we needed to do that to fulfill some value of the institution. Maybe we are, but we are also doing this because there's no other way to teach our students the material that we're there to teach. They are not going to learn it some other way.

00:11:23 **Dr. Sara**

And we can take a lesson here from high school teachers and elementary school teachers who know perfectly well that if they have not distributed the milk in the morning to students, or they have not let them go to lunch so that they can get something to eat, there's almost no point in standing in front of them and trying to do instruction in the afternoon.

00:11:43 **Dr. Sara**

Now, you could do a couple of different things here, and I'm going to show you on the next couple of slides some more specifics about short surveys that you can do, and about quick check-ins that you can do.

00:11:52 **Dr. Sara**

But first, I want to emphasize that to make basic needs insecurity part of the academic enterprise, means addressing it on your syllabus. Your syllabus is fundamentally the place where you lay out your expectations for learning in your course.

00:12:06 **Dr. Sara**

The goal in putting a basic needs statement on the syllabus is the same goal that you have when you put a statement about resources for students with disabilities, or when you put a statement about course attendance; you need to say something to the students that encourage them to think of addressing their basic needs as a way to get to graduation. Not as a way to lean on the government, not as a way to make excuses or anything else.

00:12:31 **Dr. Sara**

Put all that aside. This is about getting them to graduation. Direct them towards support and invite them to connect with you. We have a brief on our website under resources that is freely available for you to use with anybody that you want to.

00:12:47 **Dr. Sara**

So, I want to be very clear; it is creative comments licensed, the resource guide under resources on our website is about the syllabus statement and the welcome survey I'm going to show you next. It is available to you and you can use it immediately.

00:13:01 **Dr. Sara**

The survey, which I would suggest start with a welcome survey as you begin the semester, or if that's too late for you, then go ahead and put it later in the term. The survey is actually intended to convey care to the students first and foremost, but also for you to get a little intel on what's happening with them. So, these are just some sample questions.

00:13:22 **Dr. Sara**

You can ask them what sorts of responsibilities do you have outside of this class? What challenges are you facing? What concerns do you have about your technology? What do you want me to know about you?

00:13:33 **Dr. Sara**

This allows students to say things to you. Like, "You know what?" As one of my students said; "I'm just worried about paying for food this term." Or "I'm worried about my mom, she has COVID." Or "I've got three kids and I'm dealing with that."

00:13:46 **Dr. Sara**

Let me tell you what I did with that information last term. When I had a student who was absent, I would send them a quick note. And my note would say something like, "Hey, I noticed you weren't there today or I noticed you didn't submit this assignment. I know you told me you've got three kids. I know you've got a lot going on. How are the kids? And how are you?"

00:14:08 **Dr. Sara**

Those notes get responses. Notes that say, "You are missing today and you need to attend class, or you're going to fail," those notes don't get responses. So, this is just another approach. And you could do this a couple of times during the term, even if you're not able to process or use all of the information; the act of doing this, makes them feel you caring about them.

00:14:29 **Dr. Sara**

Sending strategic emails to students is a proven strategy. Researchers at the University of California Davis recently published a study and it is summarized on the Hope Center website. There is a resource again about a caring culture in the classroom where we summarize this for you. You can send students strategic emails, they need to the student's name at the top.

00:14:52 **Dr. Sara**

It cannot just be "Dear students." It needs to say, "Dear Koji, I see you submitting your assignments this semester, good job. You're really on track. In order to succeed in this class, I need you to keep doing that. In addition, if you run into trouble and you don't understand the instructions, I need you to reach out to me or reach out to the writing center. There are supports available to you if things go wrong. For example, look at our basic needs website."

00:15:20 **Dr. Sara**

This is a couple of sentences. You tailor it to each student. Now, I understand some of you have big classes and that's going to take a bit of time. But I promise you the return on this is so high. You're going to have more students feel more supported. They're going to ask fewer questions at the end, and they're going to have fewer students who tell you later that they just didn't know what you were talking about.

00:15:40 **Dr. Sara**

There are a number of resources that are outside of your campus that are available nationally. And I want to point you towards those just in case your student isn't comfortable with accessing resources on their own campus or in case you don't find them sufficient.

00:15:54 **Dr. Sara**

Covidcollegesupport.com are guides built by students for students. It's worth taking a look at to see if there's something there that might be useful to you.

00:16:04 **Dr. Sara**

RiSE, which is a California-based organization is operating a student navigator network during the pandemic where students can actually send a note and they will receive a response and even a call from a student navigator who is trained in order to support them.

00:16:21 **Dr. Sara**

Sometimes students are just more comfortable that way, but I do see in the chart all kinds of other good information on supports on your campus. Here, I'm just extending the number of things that could be available, that you might direct students to.

00:16:35 **Dr. Sara**

Text messages, if you can do them. Now, I use a platform, I use something called Slack. We use it actually at the Hope Center for work purposes. And what I decided to do was just create a Slack channel for my students. And that enabled me rather than sending a text message on my own phone, to actually just message the students. And I find that they check that way more than they check their emails.

00:16:57 **Dr. Sara**

But as I noted earlier, you can use information from those little check-in surveys in those texts, which gives the person the sense that you took the moment to actually care about what they said.

00:17:08 **Dr. Sara**

Now, let's also think about instruction and assessment. I want to encourage you to center flexibility in your design. Now, the goal of online instruction - and I am not first and foremost, an expert on online instruction. All I'm going to talk here about is the tools of online instruction that can be useful for addressing basic needs.

00:17:31 **Dr. Sara**

But the most important part is to remember it is not your goal to simply replicate your in-person classroom in an online environment. That isn't a constable. It is necessarily going to have to be delivered in a different way. And it's really important that you integrate as much asynchronous time as you can for the students.

00:17:49 **Dr. Sara**

I know we stress a lot the importance of the connecting, but there are ways to connect asynchronously as well as synchronously. What I did was I offered students optional times to meet in person. A couple of different times a week, I would just say, "If you want to do this time or that time" or whatever they would choose, I pick the time that was most convenient for the most students and we would have a hangout to discuss things.

00:18:13 **Dr. Sara**

In addition, we offered a lot of asynchronous material so students would read something, do something, and then reflect on something asynchronously. I see in the channel there that someone is recommending Pronto rather than Slack since it's built into Canvas. That's terrific to know about, and, um, I recommend it even though I have not yet tried it. So, hopefully, you will try it and report back.

00:18:39 **Dr. Sara**

It's also important that you help students focus on seeing their growth across the term, not just focusing on whether or not they're meeting absolute standards. This is particularly important during the pandemic where students who have always, for example, gotten Bs or As might find that this is not working for them at this time. You need to help them see that they are nonetheless making progress in your course, even if they're not hitting the bar that they are most used to getting.

00:19:07 **Dr. Sara**

I also want to encourage you to think about ungrading. And I don't know if there's perhaps a group of you that have already been discussing this at Mt. SAC. But there is a great book, just recently out edited by Susan Blum, and includes a lot of work from many folks, including my dear friend, Jesse Stommel, who co-created the Digital Pedagogy Lab.

00:19:27 **Dr. Sara**

I spent years hating grading students for many reasons, including that I never really felt like it was helping them learn. And then I learned that it doesn't actually help them learn. The science is that it gets in the way of learning. There are so many good alternatives to grading. You can use qualitative assessment, you can have them read each other's work and score it and provide feedback on it.

00:19:51 **Dr. Sara**

You can have them self-assess using a rubric that you create or one that they create. This creates more trust and more focus on learning. And at least the preliminary data that we have from instructors who have been doing this, this seems to work better for the most marginalized students, which would be the students who frankly populate your classes disproportionately.

00:20:14 **Dr. Sara**

I want to give you a quick example. There are lots of them out there, but I know that some have concerns about upgrading because they teach in STEM areas. So, my friend Clarissa teaches at Central New Mexico Community College, and she teaches chemistry, organic chemistry. And you can see here how she adapts and she's doing this right now during the pandemic.

00:20:33 **Dr. Sara**

So, she has students take the exams closed book, but they grade the exams themselves rather than her grading them. Essentially, they are scoring the exams. As they take the exam, they use an emoji to actually indicate how confident they are, that their answer is right. Which lets them know for example, where they were essentially guessing or where they really thought they were right. And then it turns out they're wrong.

00:20:57 **Dr. Sara**

They sort out the wrong answers and decide how to assign points, what do you think matters most in the exam, and then they submit their corrections. She then looks at all of that and provides some written feedback and a point total, not a grade like an A, B, or C. Many of us have students doing this throughout the term, ask them then to write a self-assessment of how they see themselves during the term. And at the end, we have them tell us what grade they think they've earned.

00:21:28 **Dr. Sara**

Now, I can tell you that since I started doing this several years ago, I have not had one single student appeal their grade or tell me I got it wrong. And I've gone from having grades that were almost all As and Bs to having the whole range of grades in my class, all the way As through Fs.

00:21:44 **Dr. Sara**

Students award themselves Cs, Ds, and Fs now in my course, when they see that they did not put any effort, they did not learn the material. And they come proactively and ask for whether they can retake the course, whether they can make up material, and so on and so forth. It has dramatically changed what instruction feels like. And frankly, has reduced stress.

00:22:09 **Dr. Sara**

A couple of other things - I heard the prior conversation, I know you're starting to be back in person with some of your students, at least you're going to try, but there are ways to watch even when you're online with your students. So, signs of trouble could include things like the student simply missing, they're not completing assignments. I think we all know that that's a sign.

00:22:29 **Dr. Sara**

If they're not responsive, and if they're not responsive, for example, within a series of days. Or because I am recommending that you do survey your students, that they are indicating some form of basic needs insecurity. Now, all of these things can give you a heads up that at least, it might be time to trigger some sort of sign to your support staff and advisors to bring in some additional help for that student.

00:22:53 **Dr. Sara**

Now, I want to talk for just a moment about one practice that I think is absolutely critical and that faculty need to be very aware of particularly because the federal government is making an uncommon, unprecedented investment right now.

00:23:05 **Dr. Sara**

So, emergency aid works better to address students' basic needs than almost any other basic needs support that would come after a student is in trouble, because it's more flexible, because it gives students the dignity of having cash so they can decide where the dollars need to go.

00:23:22 **Dr. Sara**

And when it's done right - and unfortunately, it's often not done right; emergency aid can really convey care. But emergency aid is often hard to do very well. Doing it well requires telling everybody about the program, making sure that everyone is aware of it. It requires making sure that the application process is low barrier.

00:23:44 **Dr. Sara**

Now, I know that there are many reasons to have a student, for example, do an interview or meet with someone to try to figure out what their needs are. But this has an unintended consequence of pushing students to essentially learn to perform their poverty in order to get help. This is a racialized and gendered practice that has significant unintended consequences.

00:24:05 **Dr. Sara**

This causes students to learn to do bad behaviors and it penalizes those that will not engage in them. You want the students to demonstrate to you that the conditions of their lives are the kind that emergency aid is meant for. Stop there, and then find a way to make a decision.

00:24:23 **Dr. Sara**

We're seeing, unfortunately, during the pandemic, more decision-making through larger and larger committees, and unfortunately, more reliance on administrative records, which are unfortunately disconnected from students' realities.

00:24:38 **Dr. Sara**

So, students, FAFSA's rarely, if ever now, include the relevant information about their actual ability to pay for school during the pandemic. So, it is important that you have an application, but it's also important that the timing here moves quickly.

00:24:52 **Dr. Sara**

The Hope Center's most recent survey suggest that it takes an average of 13 days for a student to actually get help. I think we all know that when you're in a crisis, you need funds now; ideally the same day or within two days. Fortunately, when it's done well, emergency aid helps.

00:25:11 **Dr. Sara**

I'm excited to share with you that just last week, Edquity, which is an emergency aid company that I help to build, that's using findings from my research to help students around the country right now - we just released the results of a study done at Compton College. At Compton, students that you can see, the results of which are on the screen; those students received emergency aid last May.

00:25:35 **Dr. Sara**

We then followed those students at Compton through the end of the summer, to see how many of them actually graduated. You can see here that the students who received emergency aid were twice as likely to graduate than those who did not. Now, remember, usually students with emergency aid fare worse than other students when you look at their outcomes because they're getting emergency aid precisely because they're in a lot of trouble.

00:26:02 **Dr. Sara**

So, the very fact that here we actually see a doubled graduation rate, really speaks to the importance of emergency aid done right.

00:26:11 **Dr. Sara**

The last thing that we really need you all to do is to advocate. Now, just this morning, a major announcement came out that James Kvaal, someone I've known for a very long time who has been heading TICAS (The Institute for College Access & Success) in California has been appointed the United States Under Secretary of Education. He will be the champion for higher education in this country, assuming that he is confirmed by the Senate.

00:26:38 **Dr. Sara**

This is a remarkable opportunity for California community colleges to make their needs heard in Washington. We need to be sure that your students, even those who are adult dependents actually get stimulus payments. We need more emergency aid funding and we need more of it to flow to the nation's community colleges. We need to get rid of work requirements in SNAP and in all other programs, particularly given high rates of unemployment.

00:27:07 **Dr. Sara**

We need to direct money to institutions to increase the support available both through instruction - and that means more full-time faculty, and ideally faculty on the tenure track and improve the working conditions of both staff and faculty.

00:27:21 **Dr. Sara**

And finally, I believe that this is the moment to look at the innovation that we created in the 20th century when we expanded access to public education from elementary to secondary school, and consider whether it is now time to do so for post-secondary education.

00:27:38 **Dr. Sara**

Your advocacy on these issues is going to be absolutely critical to bringing those supports to your work and to your students. In other words, if you think college costs too much, if you think that things are not okay for the students; this has to become a primary voting issue.

00:27:54 **Dr. Sara**

And I think with that, I believe that I'm finished with my formal presentation. Thanks so much for having me. I really appreciate all of you. I know how tough it is.

00:28:05 **Christina**

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00:28:19 **Christina**

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