

CHEBNA 2026 · CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

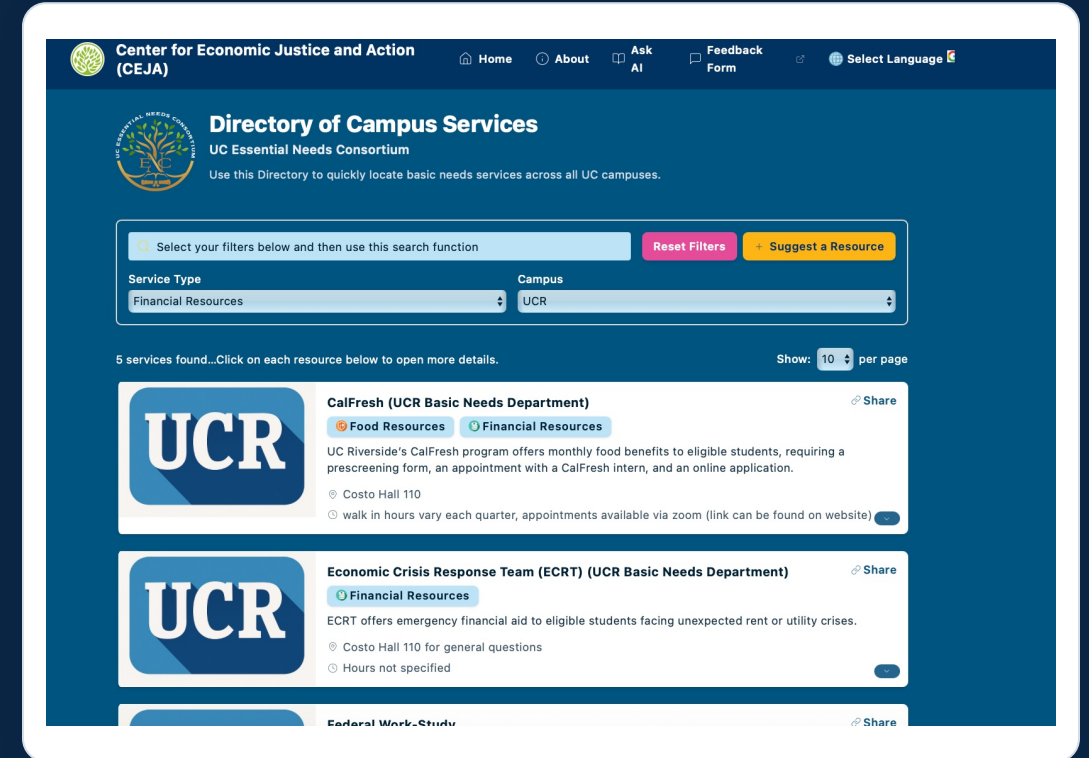
UC Essential Needs Directory

An AI-powered platform connecting University of California students to food, housing, health and financial support across every campus

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ucbasicneeds.ucsc.edu · January 30, 2026



Live at ucbasicneeds.ucsc.edu · Also on the App Store

The challenge: basic needs insecurity

Help exists on every campus — but students struggle to find it when they need it



Food insecurity

Many UC students struggle to afford nutritious food on a regular basis.



Housing instability

High cost of living and limited campus housing create instability.



Fragmented resources

Services are scattered across campuses, departments and websites, with inconsistent access.



Information gap

Students often don't know what resources exist or how to access them.

From student research to launch

Five years of work, shaped by students and basic needs staff across the UC



Student research

CEJA research surfaces students' experiences with food and housing insecurity



UCOP funding

UC Office of the President funds the work; focus groups with students and staff



Universal design

Several years of UI design with the ASSIST Lab, prioritizing accessibility



UC-wide partners

Development meeting with partners across the UC at UCLA, fall 2024



Public launch

Directory and AI navigator launched in January 2026



iOS app

UCBN brings the directory and Ask AI to iPhone and iPad

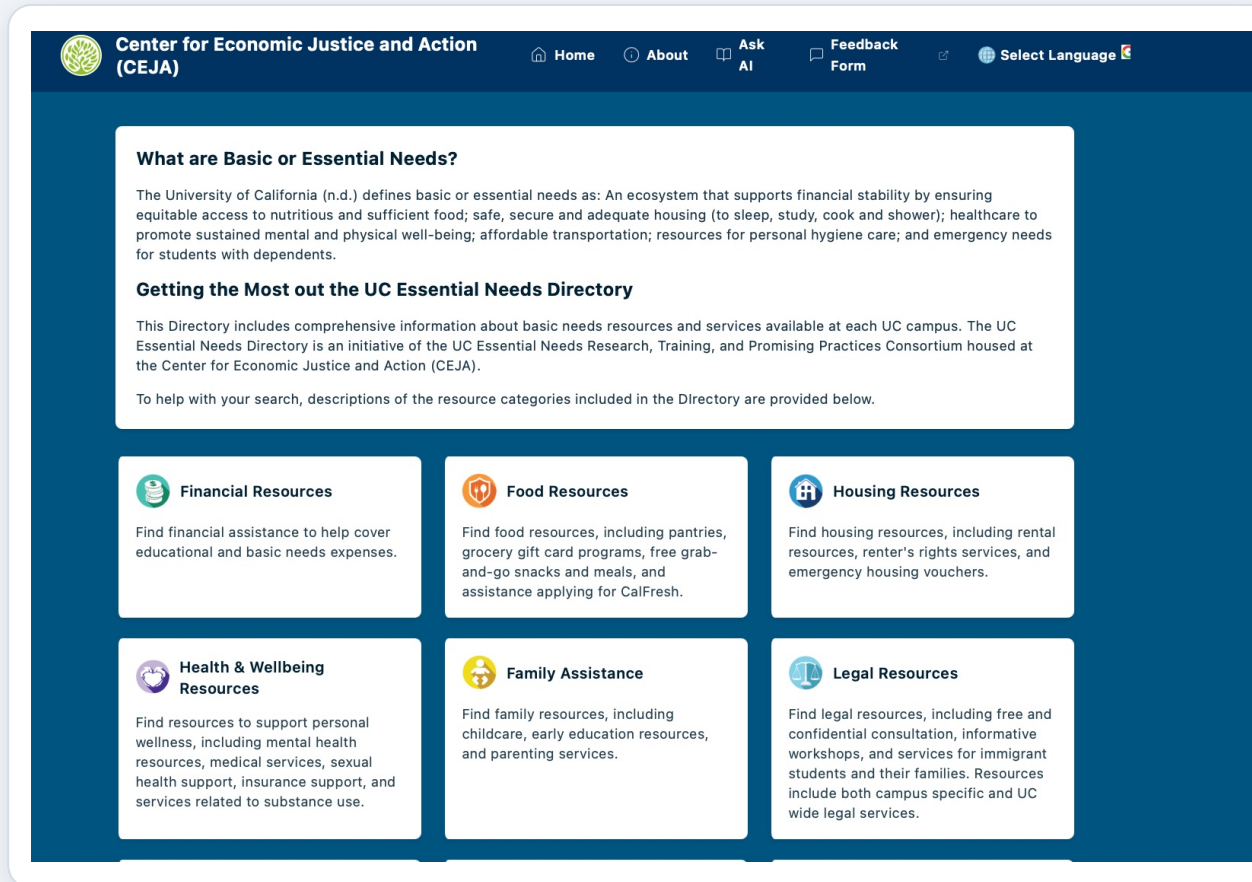


“The most rewarding part has been seeing students get real value from it.”

Nayan Bhatia, graduate student developer · UCSC News, January 9, 2026

One directory for every UC campus

A unified platform from the UC Essential Needs Consortium, housed at CEJA



Multi-campus directory

All UC campuses plus systemwide services



Semantic search

Finds resources by meaning, not just keywords



Ask AI

Plain-language answers with cited sources



Multilingual

Google Translate integration across the site



Community-driven

Students and staff suggest and rate resources

Built for the whole UC system

Coverage at a glance



300K+

UC students

the population the platform is built to serve



10

UC campuses

plus UC DC and systemwide services



1,000+

resources

curated, cited and kept up to date



11

service categories

from food and housing to legal and tech

Ask AI is available 24/7 on the web and in the iOS app.

A directory students can actually search

Filter by campus and service type, or just describe what you need



Filter by service type and campus



Semantic search across all resources



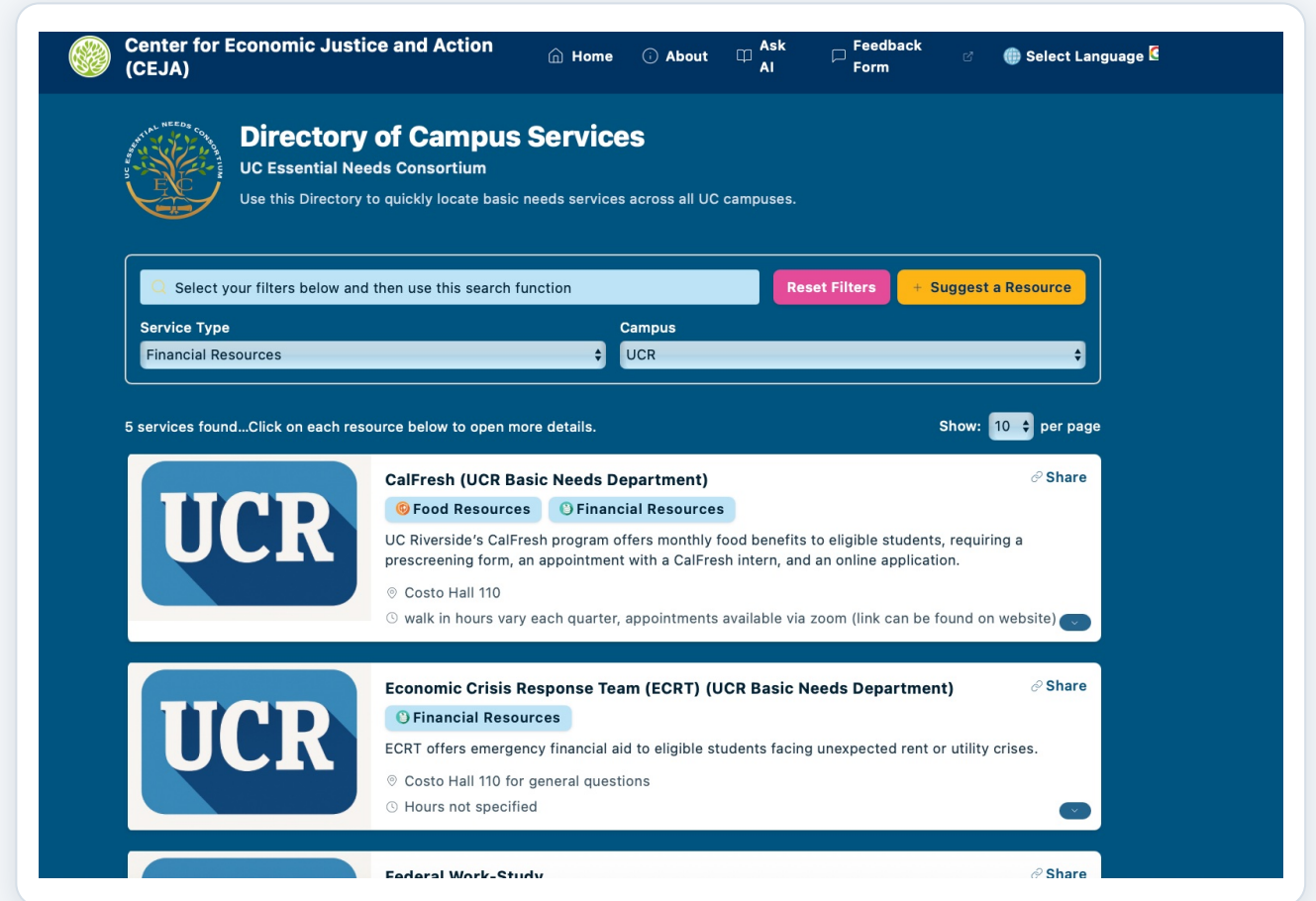
Contact details, locations and hours



User feedback and ratings



Source citations for every listing



FLAGSHIP FEATURE

Ask AI: intelligent resource matching

Large language models turn a student's plain-language question into a cited, campus-aware answer.

- ✓ Understands complex, conversational questions
- ✓ Answers with citations to the original sources
- ✓ Matches students to multiple relevant resources
- ✓ Uses the student's selected campus for context
- ✓ Available 24/7, on the web and on iOS

EXAMPLE

I just lost my job. Where can I get groceries near UC Riverside this week?

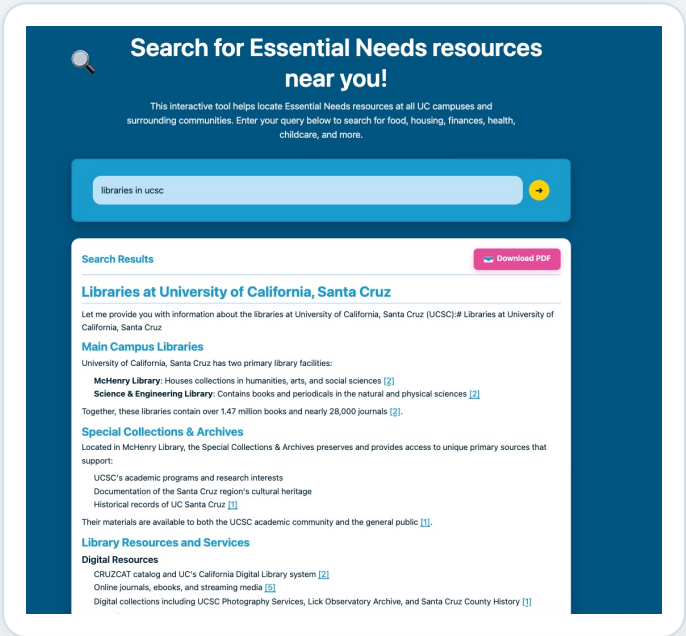
Here are places to start:

- Campus food pantry — free groceries for enrolled students [1]
- CalFresh — monthly food benefits; interns help you apply [2]
- Emergency aid — one-time grants for unexpected crises [3]

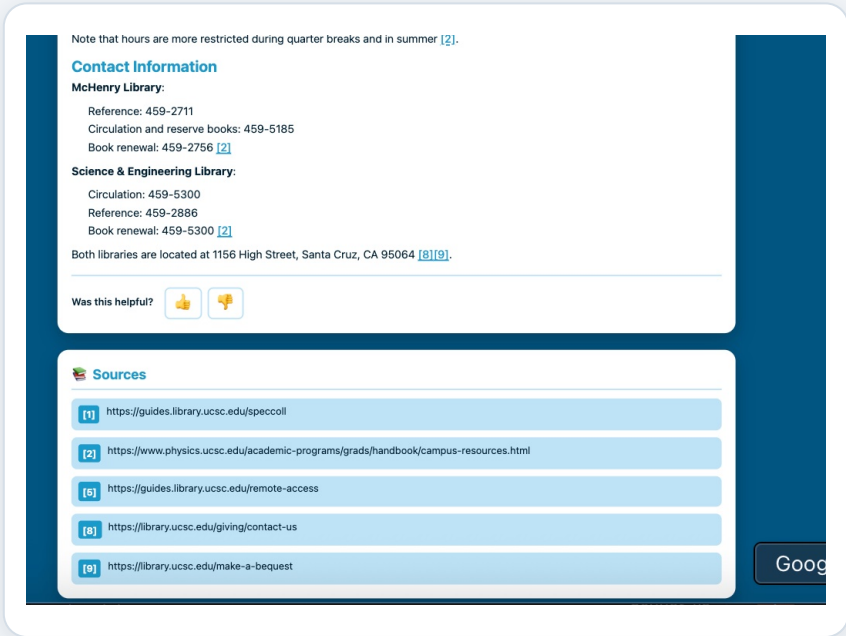
Illustrative example

How Ask AI works

From a plain-language question to cited, actionable answers

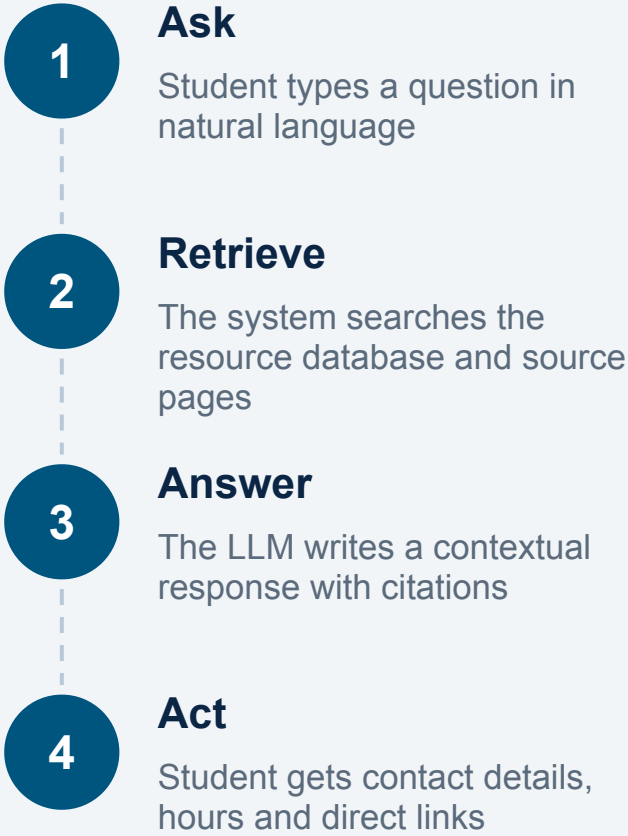


Query & answer



Contact details & cited sources

Real example: a student asking about libraries at UC Santa Cruz receives a structured answer with numbered citations and a source list.



Every resource, fully detailed

Each listing gives students what they need to take the next step



2-1-1 San Diego

Off Campus ResourcesCare Coordination

211 San Diego is a 24/7, multilingual nonprofit that connects residents to a real-time database of 6,000+ community, health, and disaster services, fostering integrated, person-centered care.

Virtual

Calls Open 24/7, Administrative office open Monday – Friday 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

About This Service

As a local nonprofit organization, 211 San Diego is the region's trusted source for information and connections to community, health, and disaster resources. Help is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and in more than 200 languages. We maintain a database of more than 6,000 services and resources that are updated on a real-time basis and our Community Connectors help connect San Diegans to the accurate information they need. We believe access to health and social services provides a foundation for individuals and families to build and sustain healthy lives, so we're collaborating with service providers in the San Diego region to build a more efficient, equitable, and accessible system that addresses the whole health of a person through integrated, person-centered care.

Contact Information

211help@211sandiego.org

211

Visit Website

Social Media

Was this resource helpful?

HelpfulNeeds Improvement

Citations / Sources

- <https://211sandiego.org/>
- <https://211sandiego.org/resources/>
- <https://211sandiego.org/covid-19-information/>



Service description

What the service offers and who it's for



Location & hours

In-person, virtual, and when it's open



Contact & social

Email, phone, website and social links



Feedback

“Was this helpful?” ratings from users



Citations

Sources behind every piece of information

Built with the community

Students, staff and resource managers keep the directory current



Resource suggestions

Anyone can suggest a new resource to expand coverage.



Feedback system

Rate resources and comment on quality and helpfulness.



Admin panel

Resource managers update information in real time.



Accessibility focus

Multilingual support and inclusive design for all students.

Suggest a New Resource

Know a resource that should be listed? Help us expand our directory by sharing the details below.

Resource Name *

e.g., Campus Food Pantry

Campus *

— Select Campus —

Service Type

— Select Service Type —

Description (Optional)

Brief description of the resource...

0/2000

Contact Information (Optional)

Website

https://...

Email

contact@example.com

Phone

(555) 123-4567

Location

Building name or address

Cancel

Submit Suggestion

NOW ON THE APP STORE

UCBN for iPhone & iPad

The full directory and Ask AI in students' pockets, free.



Choose a base campus, or browse all campuses



Filter by category; save and share resources

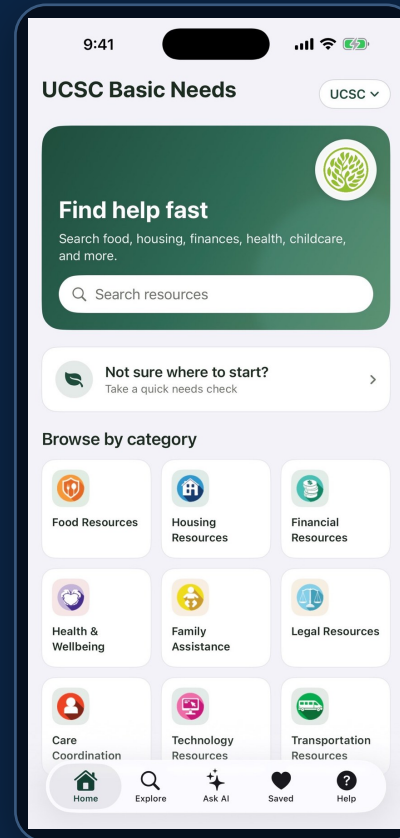


Ask AI uses the selected campus for context

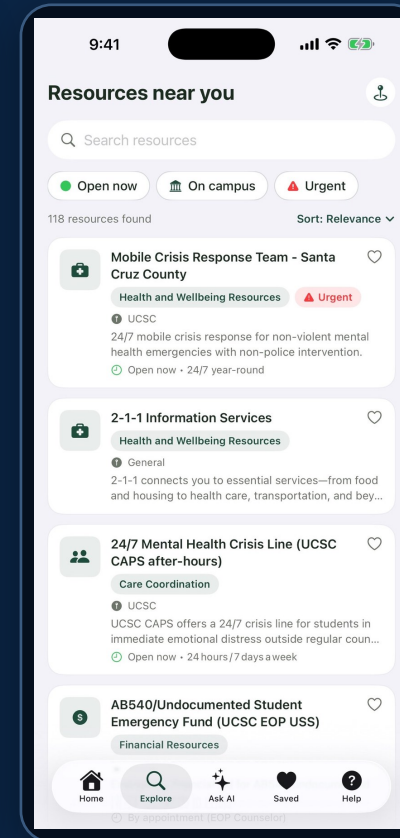


Not an emergency service: call 911, or call/text 988

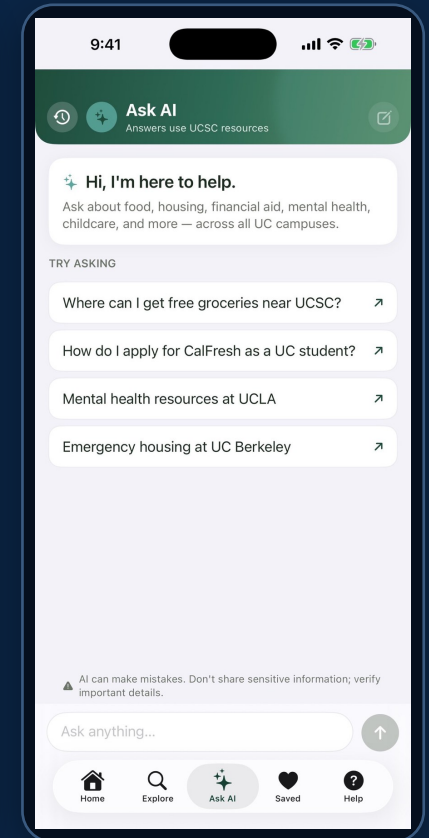
apps.apple.com/us/app/ucbn/id6781016780



Home



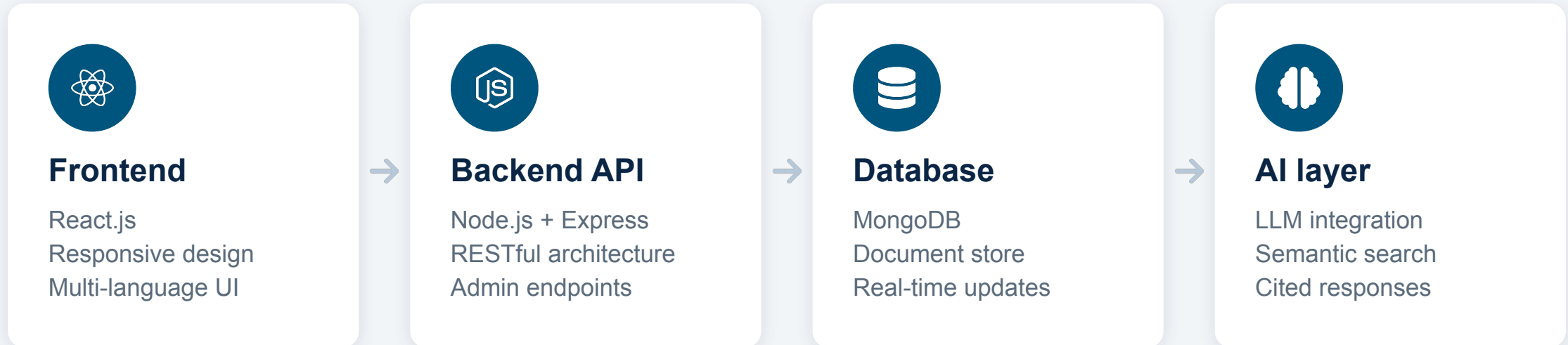
Explore



Ask AI

Technical architecture

A modern, production stack designed for scale and reliability



Built for scale & reliability

- Production system available to the entire UC system
- Admin panel for resource management
- Citation-based responses with source tracking
- Continuous integration and deployment



Collaboration

- Center for Economic Justice and Action (CEJA)
- UC Essential Needs Consortium

Roadmap

Where the platform is headed next



DONE

Shipped

- iOS app on the App Store
- Campus-aware Ask AI
- Community suggestions & feedback
- Multilingual web experience



NEXT

Smarter AI

- Multi-turn conversations
- Personalized recommendations
- Predictive resource matching



NEXT

Deeper data

- Real-time availability status
- Integration with campus housing & dining systems
- Android access



NEXT

Community

- Usage analytics to guide resource allocation
- Peer support and community forums
- Expansion to other university systems

Acknowledgments

Collaborators & partners



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UC Essential Needs Consortium

Tim Galarneau, Project Lead and Education & Training Co-Director



ASSIST Lab

Prof. Sri Kurniawan, guidance on interface and universal design



Student developers

Kaushik Hariharan and Rishita Wairagade



Special thanks

To all the students, basic needs staff, and administrators across the UC system who contributed feedback, resources, and support to make this platform a reality.

THANK YOU

Questions & discussion

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WEB

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IOS

[UCBN on the App Store](#)

