

Student Supports: The Role of Social Safety-Net Programs in College Student Success



Summary

Across California, many college students struggle to meet their basic needs while attending school. Because colleges and universities already work with students on financial aid, they are well-situated to help connect students to safety-net benefits. However, data limitations have historically been a large obstacle to assessing eligibility and then encouraging eligible students to apply and enroll.

To overcome these data limitations, the California Policy Lab (CPL) worked with the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC), the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), the University of California Office of the President (UCOP), the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), and the California Department of Education (CDE) to link data from these agencies and create the Student Supports database. CPL maintains student privacy by linking individual-level data from multiple agencies without ever receiving personally identifiable information (PII). Agencies use a process CPL developed which encrypts the data before it's ever transferred.

As part of this comprehensive research project, CPL is focusing first on college students' access to CalFresh benefits, before turning to other safety-net and financial aid programs.

Four project phases

Phase 1 - Student interviews, landscape scan, and data linkage

CPL created the Student Supports database created in 2021. CPL conducted interviews with students to better understand common barriers to participation that same year (see: [Addressing the barriers college students face when accessing CalFresh food benefits](#)), and conducted a landscape scan in 2022 to understand existing outreach efforts at colleges throughout the state. In 2023, we expanded our database to include California Department of Education (CDE) CALPADS data to extend our analysis to K-12 students.

Phase 2 - Estimate take-up

CPL produced descriptive estimates of CalFresh participation rates in 2022 and again in 2024 to include the latest data (see: [California Community College and University of California student participation in CalFresh food benefits](#)). To estimate eligibility and take-up, the CPL team simulated eligibility measures for CalFresh, using income and other qualification requirements, and published those estimates in 2024 (see: [Filling the Gap: CalFresh Eligibility Among University of California and California Community College Students](#)).

We are currently (2024) extending our analysis of CalFresh take-up to include K-12 students. We will also be investigating continuity of participation across transitions, including college transfers and the transition from K-12 to college.

Phase 3 - Estimate association with student outcomes

CPL will examine the relationship between CalFresh participation and outcomes among college students (persistence in college, progress toward a certificate or degree, academic achievement, and credential completion). We will attempt to draw comparisons between students who participate in CalFresh and similar students who do not.

Phase 4 - Evaluate promising outreach efforts

CPL will identify opportunities to evaluate promising or innovative CalFresh outreach efforts, and seek to support our partners' and other stakeholders' efforts to connect more eligible students to CalFresh using administrative data. See recent experiments where we tested various types of "nudges" to alert college students about their eligibility and encourage them to apply: [Outreach to California College Students Encouraged Them to Apply for CalFresh](#). We also plan to use our eligibility estimates to support our partners' efforts to identify likely eligible students for their own independent outreach efforts.

Data

The Student Supports Database includes the following data from Academic Year (AY) 2010-11 through 2022-23.

CDSS: includes CalFresh enrollment and issuance data. Through CDSS, we have also obtained data on CalFresh applications via [GetCalFresh.org](#) from 2019-2020.

CSAC: includes FAFSA data including student and parent income, and CalGrant application and payment data.

CCCCO: includes enrollment information, course data, student characteristics and program participation, and outcomes including number of credits earned, grade point average, and completion of a degree, credential or transfer to a four-year institution.

UCOP: includes enrollment information, major, student characteristics and more limited program participation, and outcomes including number of credits earned, grade point average, and degree completion.

CDE: includes enrollment information, student characteristics, program participation, and outcomes including graduation, course grades, test achievement levels, and A-G completion.

Future linkages: We plan to incorporate data from the [University of California Consumer Credit Panel](#) to investigate long-term financial outcomes associated with CalFresh use in college and explore additional inputs for eligibility estimates. We are also in early conversations with the California State University Chancellor’s Office about adding this higher educational segment to this important research.

Select media coverage of this research:

[Many California Students Eligible for CalFresh but a Fraction Enroll](#)

“Rothstein added that the growth of eligible UC students taking advantage of CalFresh is a hopeful sign that outreach efforts to students can work. He noted that UC campuses started to invest in on-campus basic needs centers around the time of the uptick.” *Inside Higher Ed* (June 2024)

[How do California college students qualify for CalFresh? Here’s how to know, how to apply](#)

“What this means is that students are leaving money on the table,” said Jennifer Hogg, a research manager at the California Policy Lab. “That 235,000 low income students could be getting help to pay for food during school, but are not.” *Sacramento Bee* (June, 2024)

[Student use of state food aid widespread, and increasing, says new Berkeley report](#)

“The report offers a striking picture of food insecurity among college and university students in every region of California, with higher percentages of students of color and older students reporting that they use the benefits.” *UC Berkeley News* (Feb, 2022)

[Reminder emails and postcards lead to higher rates of CalFresh applications from college students, study finds](#)

“An estimated 7,000 students applied for CalFresh “as a result of the first round of outreach,” according to the researchers. And “during the six weeks following outreach, 10,000 contacted students applied for CalFresh.” *EdSource* (Aug 2022)

[Valley College Students Needn’t Go Hungry, Says One Who’s Been There](#)

“In the Central Valley, where hundreds of miles of fertile farmland yield a third of all the produce grown in the United States and farmers brag that they are feeding the world, college students often go hungry while trying to juggle classes and family demands.” *GV Wire* (March, 2022)

[CalFresh provides vital support for UC Davis students](#)

“The percentage of UC students, particularly undergraduates, receiving CalFresh benefits has increased dramatically since 2016-17, when the university system increased funding for its Basic Needs Initiative, which sought to encourage the use of CalFresh by low-income students who were eligible for the benefits.” *The Davis Enterprise* (Feb, 2022)

Eligibility for CalFresh among college students

CalFresh eligibility rules for students are complex and generally require them to meet additional criteria relative to non-students, potentially dissuading eligible students from participating. Students must first meet the citizenship requirements and household income limits that apply to CalFresh applicants generally. Due to the so-called “Student Rule,” enacted in the 1970s, students must also meet an exemption to be eligible. Examples of exemptions include receiving a Cal Grant A or B, working twenty or more hours a week, having a child under the age of twelve, participating in a campus program to increase employability, receiving CalWORKs, or planning to not enroll in school the following term. During the pandemic, exemptions were expanded to make accessing benefits easier. For more information on eligibility, see the diagram on page 7 in CPL’s recent brief: [Addressing the barriers college students face when accessing CalFresh food benefits](#).

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