

Findings from CPL's Student Supports Project

Many college students struggle to meet their basic needs while attending school. Public higher education institutions are well-situated to connect students to safety-net benefits like CalFresh (California's version of SNAP), but data limitations have made it difficult to track eligibility and enrollment. To address this, the California Policy Lab is partnering with California's higher education systems and state agencies to understand the role that CalFresh plays in supporting California's college students. This fact sheet describes some of the key findings from our research.

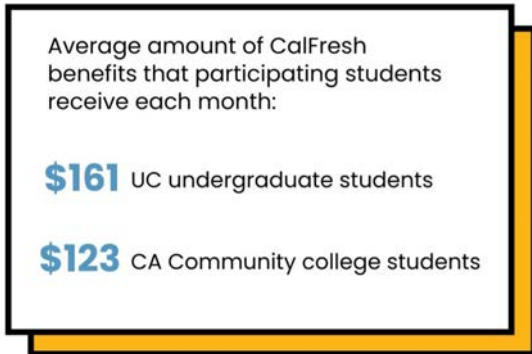
Many eligible college students are not participating in CalFresh

- One in three UC undergraduate students (33%) and one in five CCC students (20%) [are eligible for CalFresh](#).
- Only about a quarter of eligible students are receiving CalFresh (26% of eligible CCC students and 22% of eligible undergraduate UC students). This means that 300,000 college students are eligible for CalFresh each term but aren't participating — missing out on \$140 million in benefits.
- Student participation rose by about 9% during the pandemic after student eligibility rules were broadened so that more low-income students were eligible.
- Over one quarter (28%) of California public high school students participated in CalFresh at some point in high school. One in three of these students won't be eligible to continue participating when they go to college because they won't meet a student exemption (that's required to participate in CalFresh).

1 in 4

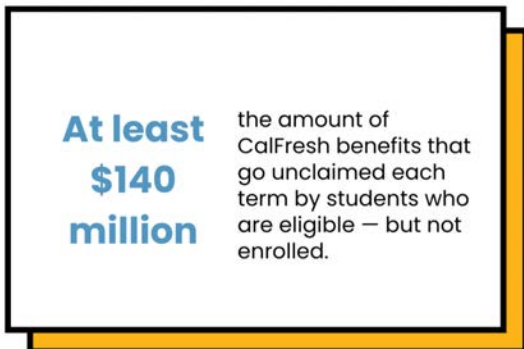
the number of California Community College and U.C. students who are eligible for CalFresh and who actually receive the benefits

CalFresh student eligibility rules and misinformation may hamper participation



- Special [restrictions on college students](#) (commonly called the “Student Rule”) limit who is eligible, and also can be confusing and push students away from even applying. Our research showed that after these rules were temporarily eased during the pandemic, the share of low-income students who were eligible for CalFresh [increased dramatically](#), from 35% in Fall 2019 to nearly 69% in Fall 2021.
- On average, UC undergraduate students receive [\\$161/month](#), and CC students receive [\\$123/month](#). But students may not realize this, or may underestimate their potential benefits.

Simplifying messaging and focusing outreach to eligible students may boost participation



- Working with our partners, we [tested “nudges” to students](#), and found that email notifications are a low-touch, low-cost intervention that have a small but positive impact on CalFresh applications and enrollment.
- Repeat communications, including email and postcard follow-ups are more effective than one-shot emails. Simple messages also elicit stronger responses.
- Take-up of benefits among eligible students varies by campus, region, and student demographics. Students and schools with larger take-up gaps may benefit from more support.
- The pandemic policy changes show that creating broader, simpler eligibility exemptions can help connect more low-income students to benefits.

This unique research partnership is made possible through our partners:



Publications released through the Student Supports Project

1. [How Much Do College Students Get from CalFresh Each Month? \(2025\)](#)
2. [Trends in Community College Enrollment and CalFresh Eligibility During the COVID-19 Pandemic \(2025\)](#)
3. [Many California Community College Students Are Eligible For—But Not Receiving—CalFresh Benefits \(2024\)](#)
4. [Filling the Gap: CalFresh Eligibility Among University of California and California Community College Students \(2024\)](#)
5. [CalFresh Participation Among California’s College Students: A 2021-22 School Year Update \(2024\)](#)
6. [Emailing College Students and the Impact on CalFresh Applications \(2022\)](#)
7. [California Community College and University of California student participation in CalFresh food benefits \(2022\)](#)
8. [Addressing the barriers college students face when accessing CalFresh food benefits \(2021\)](#)

Acknowledgments

This project is made possible through support from the Spencer Foundation. This research was also supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305A220451 to The Regents of the University of California - Berkeley. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education. This research is also supported with funding from the Research Innovation and Development Grants in Economics Partnership (RIDGE). CPL is also grateful to Arnold Ventures, the University of California Office of the President Multicampus Research Programs and Initiatives, MRP-19-600774 and M21PR3278, The James Irvine Foundation, and the Woven Foundation for their generous support. This project is also part of the [Accelerating Recovery in Community Colleges \(ARCC\) Network](#). The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders. All errors should be attributed to the authors. For questions, please reach out to Jennifer Hogg (jennifer@capolicylab.org).
(This fact sheet was updated in March, 2025)



The California Policy Lab generates research insights for government impact. We are an independent, nonpartisan research institute at the University of California. This research publication reflects the views of the authors and not necessarily the views of our funders, our staff, our advisory board, the California Community College system, the University of California Office of the President, the California Department of Social Services, the California Student Aid Commission, or the Regents of the University of California.