

College Students and CalFresh: Key Findings

Many college students struggle to afford basic needs such as food and housing. Colleges and universities can connect students to safety-net benefits like CalFresh (California’s SNAP program), but data gaps have limited understanding of eligibility and participation. The California Policy Lab (CPL), in partnership with higher education systems and state agencies, studies how CalFresh supports California college students. This fact sheet describes some of the key findings from our research. Our findings to date focus on California community colleges and the University of California. Future research will include the California State University.

Many eligible college students are not receiving CalFresh

1 in 4

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

- One in three UC undergraduates (33%) and one in five community college students (20%) [are eligible for CalFresh](#).
- Only about a quarter of eligible students participate (26% of CCC students and 22% of UC undergraduates). Each term, roughly 300,000 eligible students miss out on \$140 million in benefits.
- More than one quarter (28%) of California public high school students participated in CalFresh. For those who go straight to college, one in three lose eligibility because they do not meet a student exemption.

This unique research partnership is made possible through our partners:



CalFresh improves financial stability and student outcomes

Average amount of CalFresh benefits that participating students receive each month:

\$161 UC undergraduate students

\$123 CA Community college students

- Among community college students, sustained CalFresh receipt increases the probability of earning 30+ credits in the first year and persistence to a second year.
- UC undergraduate students receive an average \$161/month, and CC students receive \$123/month.
- Students who also participate in CalWORKs, which provides cash assistance for families with children, receive an additional \$256 per household member each month.

Policy changes to expand access have increased participation

25%

increase in CalFresh student participation during the pandemic.

- Special [restrictions on college students](#) (the “Student Rule”) limit eligibility and may discourage applications. When these rules were eased during the pandemic, eligibility among low-income students rose from 35% in Fall 2019 to nearly 69% in Fall 2021. Student participation rose by 25% while pandemic-era policies (which also provided more generous benefits) were in effect.
- More students enroll in CalFresh when their academic program is classified as an exemption to the Student Rule (a local program to increase employability, or an “LPIE”), as a result of AB 396.

Simplifying messaging and focusing outreach to eligible students may boost participation

**At least
\$140
million**

the amount of CalFresh benefits that go unclaimed each term by students who are eligible – but not enrolled.

- Working with our partners, we [tested “nudges” to students](#), and found that email notifications are a low-cost intervention that have small but positive impacts on CalFresh applications and enrollment.
- Repeat communications, including email and postcard follow-ups, are more effective than one-off 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.

Publications released through the Student Supports Project

1. [The Impact of Nutrition Assistance on College Student Success \(forthcoming\) \(2026\)](#)
2. [Broadening the Safety Net: The Impact of Increased CalFresh Access for University of California Students \(2025\)](#)
3. [CalFresh Participation Among California’s College Students: A 2022–23 School Year Update \(2025\)](#)
4. [CalWORKs Participation Among California’s College Students \(2025\)](#)
5. [Supporting Young People’s Food Security: CalFresh Participation During and After High School \(2025\)](#)
6. [How Much Do College Students Get from CalFresh Each Month? \(2025\)](#)
7. [Trends in Community College Enrollment and CalFresh Eligibility During the COVID-19 Pandemic \(2025\)](#)
8. [Many California Community College Students Are Eligible For—but Not Receiving—CalFresh Benefits \(2024\)](#)
9. [Filling the Gap: CalFresh Eligibility Among UC and California Community College Students \(2024\)](#)
10. [CalFresh Participation Among California’s College Students: A 2021-22 School Year Update \(2024\)](#)
11. [CalFresh Participation Among California’s College Students: A 2020-21 School Year Update \(2024\)](#)
12. [Emailing Eligible College Students Resulted in More than 7,000 Students Applying for CalFresh Benefits \(2022\)](#)
13. [Reminder Postcards and Simpler Emails Encouraged More College Students to Apply for CalFresh \(2022\)](#)
14. [California Community College and UC student participation in CalFresh Food Benefits \(2022\)](#)
15. [Addressing the Barriers College Students Face When Accessing CalFresh Food Benefits \(2021\)](#)

Acknowledgments

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