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Staying Enrolled in CalFresh Helps Community College Students Stay in School

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Nearly half of California community college students report struggling with food insecurity. SNAP food benefits (known as CalFresh in California) can help reduce student hunger. Alleviating hunger among students should lead to improved educational outcomes, but rigorous research on this topic remains scarce. Our recent study ([The Impact of Nutrition Assistance on College Student Success](#)) helps to close that gap, using a compelling matching design with large-scale data to measure the impact of CalFresh food benefits on college students' educational outcomes.

Key findings

- Students who retain CalFresh throughout their first year of college are more likely to complete 30 or more credits in their first year (+1.4 percentage points, 5% increase) than comparable eligible students with disrupted access to CalFresh.
- Students enrolled in CalFresh were also more likely to return for a second year of college (+2.6 percentage points, 4% increase).
- For students whose goal is to earn an associate's degree or to transfer, the impact on credit completion was slightly larger (+1.8 percentage points).
- A simple cost-effectiveness analysis, focused only on the academic benefits, shows that CalFresh can be a highly cost-effective intervention for supporting student success.

Discussion

Many students start community colleges but do not finish. There are many reasons for this, but a commonly cited factor is the influence of other events in students' lives that prevent them from focusing adequately on their schoolwork. CalFresh participation may help students maintain the necessary focus, both by alleviating hunger and the associated cognitive load of poverty, and by enabling them to reduce their work hours.

Two early indicators of student success in their first year are whether they complete enough credits to stay on track and whether they re-enroll for a second year. Students who meet these milestones are much more likely to eventually earn a degree or successfully transfer. Measuring the effect of CalFresh on student academic outcomes is challenging because students who receive CalFresh benefits differ in many ways from those who do not. Our study addresses this challenge by using rich administrative data on students' and their families' backgrounds to construct comparison groups of CalFresh participants and non-participants who are similar in a wide range of observed characteristics. We focus on students who had participated in CalFresh prior to college. Among these, we compare participants only to non-participants who are eligible for benefits — and thus in similar financial circumstances to participants — but do not participate. We also adjust for a range of family and student characteristics. For more detail on the data and methods, please refer to the study: [The Impact of Nutrition Assistance on College Student Success](#).

Using this comparison strategy, we find that students who participated in CalFresh throughout their first year of college were meaningfully more likely to earn 30 credits and to persist to the second year — differences that were statistically significant. Our estimates of CalFresh effects represent roughly a 5% increase in credit accumulation and a 4% increase in persistence relative to these baselines. Effects were even larger for degree or transfer-intending students.

While a four or five percent increase in student success rates may seem small, the cost of CalFresh benefits is also much lower than other intensive interventions that are effective in supporting student success, such as tutoring and mentoring programs. A year of CalFresh costs \$860 per student, on average, while these programs often cost many thousands. A simple cost-effectiveness analysis shows that the academic benefit per dollar spent is higher for CalFresh than for leading traditional interventions. CalFresh also has other, non-academic benefits that are not captured in this analysis.

Policy Implications

Higher education policy has traditionally focused on academic support services, such as advising and tutoring. Those interventions remain important. But this research suggests that addressing students' basic needs is also part of supporting student success. Given CalFresh's low incremental cost and the program's substantial non-academic benefits, facilitating access for eligible students represents a cost-effective complement to traditional student success programs. As colleges and states work to improve completion rates, reducing barriers to safety-net participation deserves a place alongside investments in academic support services.

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