

CalFresh and Student Hunger: What You Need to Know

Food insecurity—a lack of access to adequate and nutritious food—challenges the efforts and aspirations of many college students across California. Two district-level studies found that 61–73% of their California Community College (CCC) students struggle with food insecurity, which aligns with the national community college rate of 67%.¹⁻³ At California's public universities, food insecurity impacts 42% of University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) students.^{4,5}

As a coping strategy, students experiencing food insecurity may eat less during each meal, skip meals entirely, or eat more affordable meals that lack sufficient amounts of vitamins and nutrients. Food insecurity impacts physical and mental health and is linked to higher rates of obesity, depression, and anxiety.⁶⁻⁸ It can also hinder students' ability to focus, which in turn can affect their academic performance.⁹

A variety of issues contribute to food insecurity on college campuses. Many students are expected to fund their room, board, and educational expenses on their own while taking classes. Focusing more on academics requires working fewer hours, which may lead to financial challenges. In addition, students are burdened by rising tuition and fees that have outpaced increases in financial aid.^{10,11} Food is a flexible living expense compared to set costs like rent, so students may spend less on food as a strategy to manage their limited budgets. College students experiencing homelessness may also experience food insecurity due to a lack of places to store and prepare food.

CalFresh, California's version of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, can provide significant long-term support to college students experiencing food insecurity. This program gives eligible low-income households monthly financial assistance to buy the food they need. Yet, 3 in 10 people who were eligible for CalFresh in 2015 were not enrolled, and California ranked 48 out of 51 (counting the 50

states and Washington, D.C.) in CalFresh participation.¹² Similarly, California's college students are under-enrolled. For example, a study found that an estimated 27% of CSU students were eligible to receive CalFresh benefits, yet only 5% reported being enrolled.¹³

A lack of awareness and challenges in the application process prevent students from fully utilizing CalFresh. A recent study found that about 40% of all surveyed CSU students had never heard of CalFresh or believed it was not offered on their campus.¹⁴ Confusing eligibility criteria also present barriers to enrollment. College students must meet numerous requirements based on their household income, the number of people in their household, the federal work rule, and work exemptions, and student status.¹⁵ CalFresh outreach and enrollment efforts on campuses play an important role in helping students meet their nutritional needs.

Which California Laws Apply?

AB 1747 (2016): College Student Hunger Relief Act of 2016

[AB 1747](#) increases the likelihood that on-campus restaurants and cafeterias participate in the Restaurant Meals Program, which allows students to buy prepared food with their CalFresh dollars.¹⁶ This particularly benefits students experiencing homelessness who may not have a place to store food and cook meals. This law established a funding account to support collaborations between on-campus food pantries and CDSS-contracting food banks. AB 1747 also improves access to funds for CalFresh outreach at California's public campuses.¹⁷

AB 214 (2017)

In an effort to increase CalFresh enrollment, the California Student Aid Commission now notifies Cal Grant recipients who meet eligibility requirements under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program about their potential eligibility for CalFresh.¹⁸

A college student who is enrolled at least half-time must also work at least 20 hours per week or qualify for a work exemption in order to be eligible for CalFresh. [AB 214](#) requires the Department of Social Services to create and maintain a list of college programs that allow students to be exempt from the CalFresh work requirement.¹⁹ This builds on [AB 1930 \(2014\)](#) which allows certain college programs to count as “employment training programs”—increasing the likelihood of students receiving work exemptions and being eligible for CalFresh.²⁰

What Can I Do?

- Help students access immediate assistance by referring them to a [local food bank](#).
- Conduct CalFresh outreach in partnership with campus programs that serve low-income students, current and former foster youth, and/or youth experiencing homelessness. Frame CalFresh as a form of financial aid, reducing stigma.
- Collaborate with [college and state programs](#) (e.g. work-study, Educational Opportunity Program, [Extended Foster Care](#)) that allow participants to be exempt from the CalFresh work requirement in order to reach potentially eligible student groups.
- Partner with your local [County Social Services Agency](#) to boost CalFresh outreach and enrollment efforts on campus.
- Pursue funding for CalFresh student outreach efforts. Contact [Colleen Ganley](#) at the CCC Chancellor's Office or [Araceli Esparza](#) at the CSU Office of the Chancellor for details.
- Pursue collaborations with [local food banks](#) and/or with your local [CDSS CalFresh Outreach prime contractor](#) to support a campus food bank.

How Are Campuses Taking Action?

Ventura Community College

During the first two weeks of school, Ventura College has a back-to-school event where they table with other campus offices to distribute information about CalFresh and giveaways. Outreach efforts continue throughout the year via emails, texts, and calls to eligible students. Using a simple [checklist](#), Ventura College makes it easy for students to apply.

Los Angeles Trade Technical College

Once a week, students at Los Angeles Trade Tech can receive fresh fruits and vegetables at an outdoor food pantry on campus. The pantry is managed by St. Francis Center Los Angeles, a participant in the City of Los Angeles' recycLA program. In addition, pantry volunteers help students create long-term stability by providing case management and emergency shelter assistance.

Check out other higher education best practices: [Student Food Access & Security Toolkit](#)

Stakeholder Spotlight

Staff Perspective

In a 2018 survey of higher education professionals at California's public colleges and universities, a little less than half of the 59 respondents said that they were notifying Cal Grant recipients about their potential eligibility for CalFresh.²¹

Student Perspective

“Often times it feels like I have to decide to pay for bills or groceries or books. I do not rely solely on financial aid for my school expenses and often times I end up having to pay out of pocket. But I also do not have the funds to support myself and pay for school at the same time without living on the streets. I do not want to choose between buying a \$150 book or eating for a week.” Female, 27, part-time CCC student²²

Top Takeaways

1. Food insecurity affects students in all three of the state's public higher education systems, impacting physical and mental health as well as academic performance.
2. Lack of awareness and confusing eligibility criteria prevent eligible students from taking advantage of the financial assistance that CalFresh provides.
3. CalFresh outreach and enrollment efforts on college campuses play an important role in helping students meet their nutritional needs.

Additional Resources

CalFresh Resources

[CCC Basic Needs Resources](#)

[CSU CalFresh Outreach Programs](#)

[UC Student Food Access Security & Basic Needs](#)

[UC CalFresh Nutrition Education Program](#)

[CDSS CalFresh Outreach Toolkit](#)

[JBAY CalFresh Tools & Resources](#)

Determining Student Eligibility for CalFresh

[Eligibility Basics & Student Eligibility](#)

[CalFresh Handbook 63-4.5: Student Eligibility](#)

[CalFresh Student Work Exemptions](#)

[California Food Bank Directory](#)

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