

REPORT

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SNAP on College Campuses: Findings and Recommendations to Address Food Insecurity

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Summary

Food insecurity and hunger are important issues that impact a significant number of students across the U.S. “Food insecurity” refers to a lack of reliable access to enough food to lead a healthy life. Recent research found that 44% of higher education students experienced food insecurity, a rate significantly higher than the 13% reported among U.S. households.¹ Having food insecurity affects both physical and mental health and can ultimately influence student academic outcomes.² Addressing food insecurity and hunger on campus can have a dramatic impact on the health of students as well as on their educational outcomes.

Food assistance programs, such as the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), are one of the primary means for addressing food insecurity in the U.S.³ SNAP provides food benefits to low-income families. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) administers CalFresh, the state’s version of SNAP. SNAP funds are granted to states to administer programs, sometimes with state-based rules in addition to federal regulations. Federal rules for adults include a work requirement of 30+ hours per week. College students must work at least 20 hours per week or meet another exemption criteria, such as studying in a school or training program approved as part of Local Programs That Increase Employability (LPIE).⁴

In 2021, the California Legislature passed AB396, which would allow some programs at colleges to qualify as LPIEs.⁵ The bill was then signed into law by Governor Gavin Newsom. To qualify as an LPIE, a program must be approved by the California Department of Social Services as containing at least one employment and training component.⁶ The law potentially increased the number of college students eligible for CalFresh.

In California, single people whose gross monthly income is less than 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL) — \$2,510 per month — are eligible to apply for CalFresh benefits. A completed application, review of financial paperwork, and an interview are required. If approved, single students can receive up to \$291 monthly. Recipients can use the benefits to purchase approved food items at locations where Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) is accepted. They must renew their benefits every six months and recertify annually.

While many institutions of higher education (IHEs) were utilizing different programs to try to address food insecurity among their student populations, many created or expanded efforts through the campus basic needs center or office to connect students who might qualify for CalFresh benefits. Although California has invested in student basic needs, there are no specific rules or requirements for campus programs or activities from CalFresh or any of the state’s public higher education systems: University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community College (CCC). While these systems had not provided extensive guidance to

campuses as of the outset of this study, the California legislature provides funding to Chico State University to run the Center for Healthy Communities (CHC).⁷ CHC supports all 149 public IHEs in outreach efforts for CalFresh enrollment with guidance and resources.⁸ Additionally, CHC works directly with a cohort of 50 campuses to support their activities to connect qualifying students to CalFresh. CHC also helps schools expand the number of academic programs approved as LPIEs.

To take advantage of changes in CalFresh student eligibility, institutions have implemented a variety of programs. Institutions do not directly register students for CalFresh, but staff can help identify students who may meet the qualifications for benefits, get approval for programs that could qualify as LPIEs, promote the availability of CalFresh to qualifying students, and assist students in getting connected to and prepared for the application process.

A systematic review of the different approaches to CalFresh promotion and student support services gives us an opportunity to learn from those on the front lines – the program workers and student applicants – about characteristics of effective programs, challenges to implementation, and recommendations for building successful programs and outreach campaigns.

This information can help policymakers, SNAP program administrators at state and local levels, campus leaders, and basic needs directors to design programs that effectively address food insecurity.

Study Purpose

California is among the first states to have implemented a rule change that expands access to SNAP benefits for higher education students. Other states are considering similar measures. This study seeks to take advantage of specific circumstances in California to provide evidence on effective campus-based and program practices for connecting students to CalFresh. The evidence can inform multiple audiences in specific areas:

- **Campus administrators and staff** can establish methods that will allow the most effective use of CalFresh as a tool to address food insecurity.
- **CalFresh leadership** can create more effective and efficient programs for student populations.
- **California state policy leaders** can use the study to institute policy changes aimed at improving CalFresh for college students.
- **Policymakers and IHE campus leaders** in other states can draw on the study data when considering similar expansions in their SNAP programs.

Because the rule change was not accompanied by specific guidance from CalFresh or the IHE systems, institutions are implementing varied approaches. The opportunity thus exists to review the different types of campus activities and learn from the staff

responsible for outreach and enrollment efforts about what is working, what has not worked, and what lessons can inform other institutions, CalFresh program administrators, and policy leaders. This study intends to identify those elements of policy and administration that improve SNAP access for higher education students experiencing food insecurity.

Study Objectives

The objectives of this study were to (1) identify effective campus-based and CalFresh program practices for connecting students to CalFresh and other food assistance programs, and (2) develop recommendations for SNAP/CalFresh policy, administrative practice, and institutional programs. The importance of these objectives was illuminated by a Phase 1 study participant who noted: “It’s clear [SNAP] was never intended for students, and this is something that’s been added on. How can we just make access to information a little bit easier?”

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

- How are universities implementing the recent changes to student CalFresh eligibility?
- What tools, support resources, and policies would be most helpful to university staff who facilitate the enrollment in CalFresh and who administer other university food assistance programs?
- What are students’ beliefs about CalFresh and other campus food assistance programs, and what are the barriers to participation? What tools, support resources, and policies would be most helpful for promoting and supporting student enrollment in CalFresh?
- To what extent does student use of Cal-Fresh and other campus programs (i.e., campus-based food pantries) impact food insecurity?
- Among food-insecure students, what impact does participation in CalFresh and other campus-based food assistance programs have on students’ academic performance and self-reported health?

Study Design and Methods

Study Sites

The study team worked with basic needs offices at institutions in the three public higher education systems in California: UC, CSU, and CCCs. We recruited schools with on-campus basic needs programs that connect students with the CalFresh application process. In addition to the home institutions of the study team – UCLA and CSU-Fullerton (CSUF) – we engaged the study sites of UC Davis, Fresno State, Los Angeles Mission College, and Napa Valley College (Exhibit 1). All institutions are currently part of the Center for Healthy Communities (CHC) program, although this was not a requirement to be a study site.

Study Advisory Board

At each study site, we invited one member of the basic needs staff and one student worker to join our study advisory board. We also invited community partners with expertise in food insecurity and with higher education students to participate in the study advisory board, engaging with staff from CHC, the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC), and Nourish CA. Advisory board members provided guidance and feedback on our study design, preliminary findings, and final recommendations.

The study consisted of three phases. In Phase 1, we interviewed key stakeholders at each study site; these included basic needs administrators and staff, as well as students who were familiar with the programs for CalFresh because they either worked in the office or had had experience in applying to CalFresh. Participants were asked about the programs available on campus, different approaches to promote CalFresh and various campus food assistance programs, challenges and successes connecting students with these programs, and recommendations for improvement. Interviews were conducted via Zoom by a member of the study team and were recorded and transcribed. Two coders on the study team conducted thematic analyses of the transcripts. These analyses informed the content in Phases 2 and 3 of the study.

In Phase 2, we conducted a survey of a representative sample of the student body at each partner campus. The survey was administered during the Spring 2024 term, and 4,165 students participated. Survey topics included:

- USDA 10-Item Food Security Scale
- Housing insecurity
- Use of campus food assistance programs
- Awareness and perceptions of CalFresh
- Experience applying for CalFresh
- Academic performance (self-reported)
- Physical and mental health

- Demographics, including year in school, age, gender, race and ethnicity, Pell Grant status, and employment status

Phase 3 of the study involved two virtual focus groups consisting of institutional administrators (n = 12), and two consisting of students (n =15) who had experienced food insecurity, applied for CalFresh, or used campus-based food assistance programs. Student focus group participants were recruited from the sample of students who completed the Phase 2 survey. Each of the students who participated in the focus group was a current CalFresh recipient, although this was not a requirement for participation.

Those in the focus groups were asked to add more detail to the recommendations given by participants in Phase 1, discuss the merits and drawbacks of each, and provide advice and considerations for implementing the recommendations. We also asked the groups to make additional recommendations that were not discovered in Phase 1. The focus groups were recorded, and the audio files were transcribed and coded by 2 members of the research team.

The findings were reviewed by our study advisory board, who then provided feedback on the recommendations, including feasibility, barriers to implementation, strategies for overcoming barriers, and prioritization.

Results

The study team reviewed publicly available information about each study site, as well as materials provided by partners in the basic needs offices at each site.

Exhibit 1 shows the characteristics of each participating campus, services offered by the basic needs offices, and food programs available, based on publicly available information.

Exhibit 1 / Characteristics of Study Sites

	CSUF	Fresno State	Los Angeles Mission College	Napa Valley College	UC Davis	UCLA
Enrollment size	39,556	21,294	9,172	7,111	39,679	46,430
Faculty/staff size	>2,200 faculty	1,100 faculty		~800	>38,000	>51,000
Rural, urban, or suburban campus	Suburban	Urban	Suburban	Suburban	Suburban	Urban

EBT accepted on campus	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	Yes	Yes
Student body race and ethnicity						
Hispanic/Latinx	50%	57%	75%	47%	21%	18%
Asian	22%	12%	5%	14%	32%	30%
Black or African American	2%	3%	4%	5%	4%	6%
American Indian or Alaska Native	<1%	<1%	N/A	N/A	<1%	<1%
Pacific Islander	<1%	<1%	N/A	1%	<1%	<1%
White	16%	17%	12%	25%	24%	26%
International	3%	5%	N/A	N/A	16%	14%
Unknown	3%	4%	3%	2%	3%	4%
Students qualifying for financial aid	43% Pell Grant	N/A	48% Promise Grant 49% Pell Grant	32% Pell Grant	27% federal loans 9,618 undergraduates receive Pell Grants	63% undergraduates have some financial aid 8,715 undergraduates receive Pell Grants
First-generation college student	32%	N/A	4,495	N/A	37% of undergraduates	29% of undergraduates

Source: Websites for each campus and California higher education system (UC, CSU, CCC) were searched for the characteristics included in Exhibit 1.

N/A = Not available

Note: The information available online was not consistent across study sites; this information is for general comparison. Information was collected in the 2023–24 school year.

Basic Needs Services Offered

The most common basic needs services offered on campuses included connections to food assistance, housing assistance, and mental health services, along with assistance in meeting transportation challenges. These programs sometimes shared physical space and resources to cross-promote services to students. Some institutions do not have significant communication between different programs, and at least one campus had only one staff person in charge of all basic needs services (though at the time of the interview, they were seeking to hire a student assistant).

Campus Food Assistance Programs

Most campuses reported that institutional programs to address student food insecurity had existed for many years before the CalFresh rule change. These included:

- Application assistance for CalFresh
- Food pantries/closets
- Cooking classes
- EBT on campus
- Food distribution services (e.g., food boxes or connections to food surplus from campus events)

Student Survey Results

Exhibit 2 shows the characteristics of the students who responded to our survey, the UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs.

Exhibit 2 / Sociodemographic Characteristics of Student Sample (n = 4,165) by School System

	Total	CCC (n = 366)	CSU (n = 2,184)	UC (n = 1,615)
Age in years (mean, standard deviation)	24.3 (7.3)	32.8 (11.6)	24.4 (7.0)	22.4 (4.8)
Gender				
Male	19.5%	15.9%	19.3%	20.7%
Female	59.4%	55.7%	61.6%	57.3%
Nonbinary	1.9%	1.1%	1.3%	2.9%

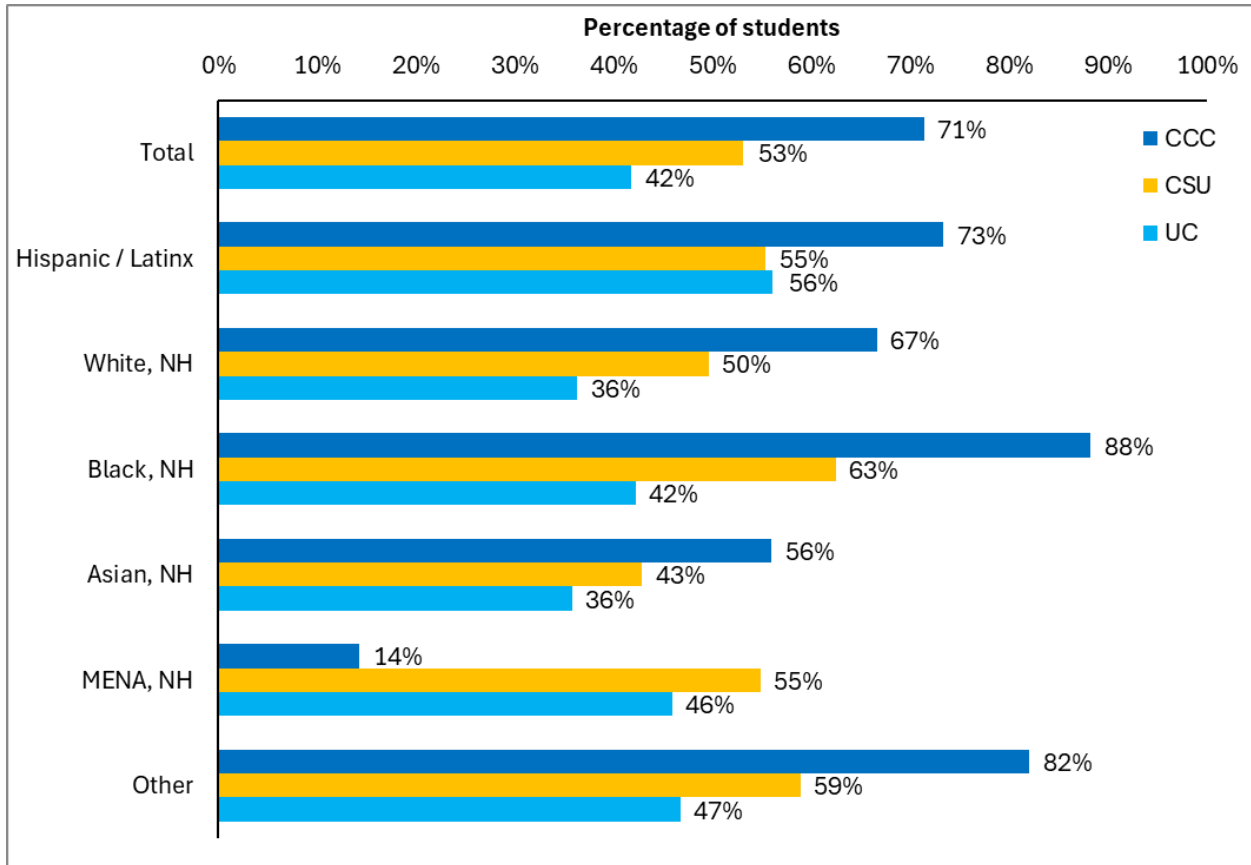
Transgender	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.5%
Other	0.3%	0.3%	0.2%	0.4%
Missing	18.6%	27.1%	17.4%	18.2%
Race and ethnicity				
Hispanic/Latinx	31.3%	42.1%	41.9%	14.7%
White, NH/NL	14.7%	6.8%	12.6%	19.3%
Black, NH/NL	3.3%	4.6%	2.6%	4.0%
Asian, NH/NL	19.9%	6.8%	13.9%	30.9%
Middle Eastern/North African, NH/NL	1.8%	1.9%	1.4%	2.3%
Other race	10.2%	10.7%	9.8%	10.7%
Missing race	18.8%	27.1%	17.9%	18.3%
First-generation college student				
	43%	51%	51%	29%
Transfer student	26%	20%	35%	14%
Parenting student	8%	24%	10%	2%
Student with disabilities	9%	10%	8%	10%
Foster youth	2%	4%	2%	1%
International student	6%	1%	4%	8%

Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: Data from Napa Valley College could not be included due to a low number of survey responses. "Other race" includes American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and multiracial. NH/NL = Non-Hispanic/Non-Latinx

We found differences in food insecurity by school type. We used the validated USDA 10-item module to capture food insecurity during the past 30 days. High rates of food insecurity existed, with more than 70% of students at the California Community College (i.e., LAMC) reporting being food insecure, followed by more than half of CSU students and 42% of UC students (Exhibit 3). Rates of food insecurity varied by student race and ethnicity, with results similar to what we see in the literature. Non-Hispanic Black students and Hispanic students experienced the highest rates. At LAMC, two-thirds of non-Hispanic white students reported food insecurity.

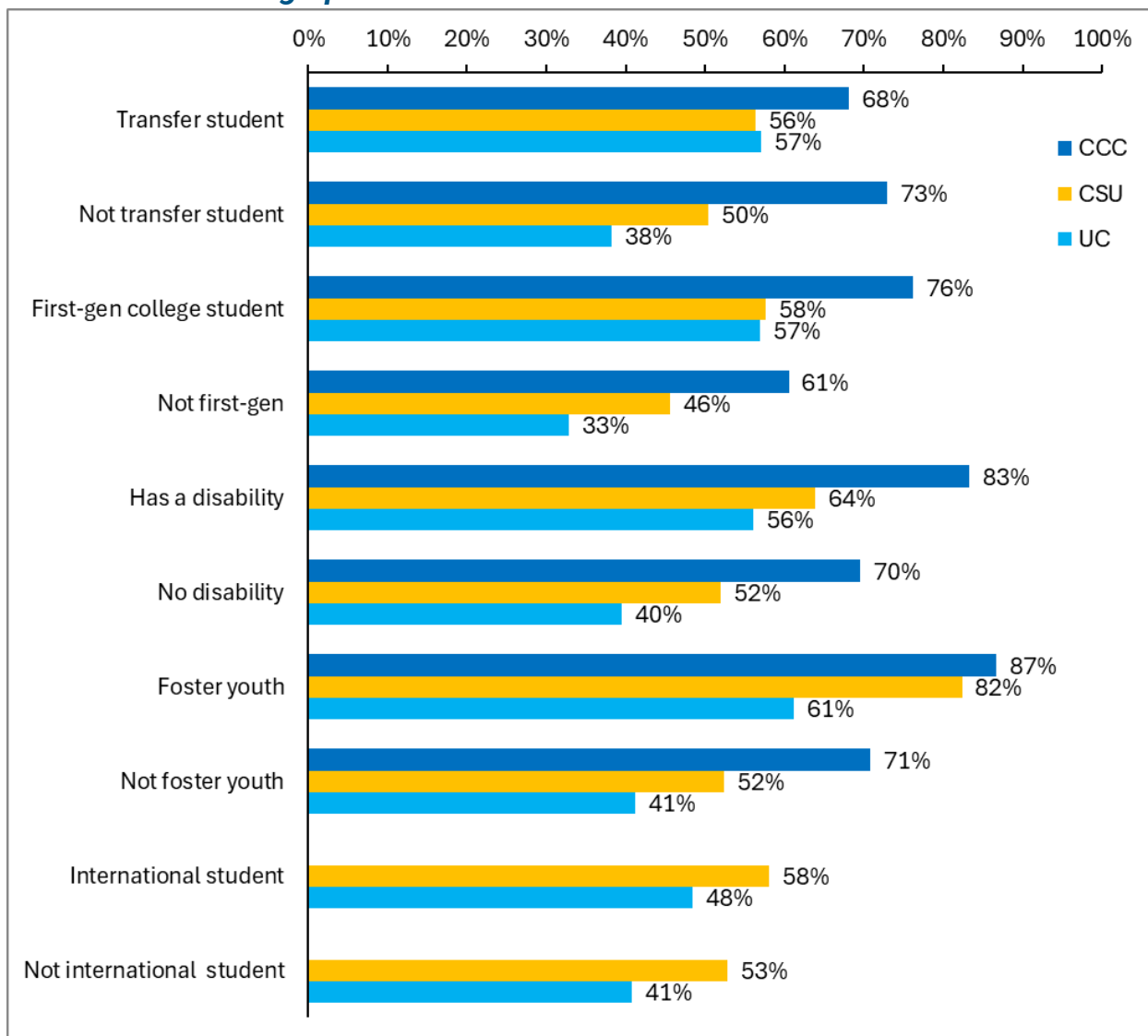
Exhibit 3 / Food Insecurity by Race and Ethnicity Among the Three School Systems, by Race and Ethnicity



Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Exhibit 4 shows that food insecurity also varied by student sociodemographic characteristics, with foster youth, students with disabilities, and first-generation college students reporting the highest rates of food insecurity.

Exhibit 4 / Differences in Food Insecurity Among the Three School Systems, by Student Sociodemographic Characteristics



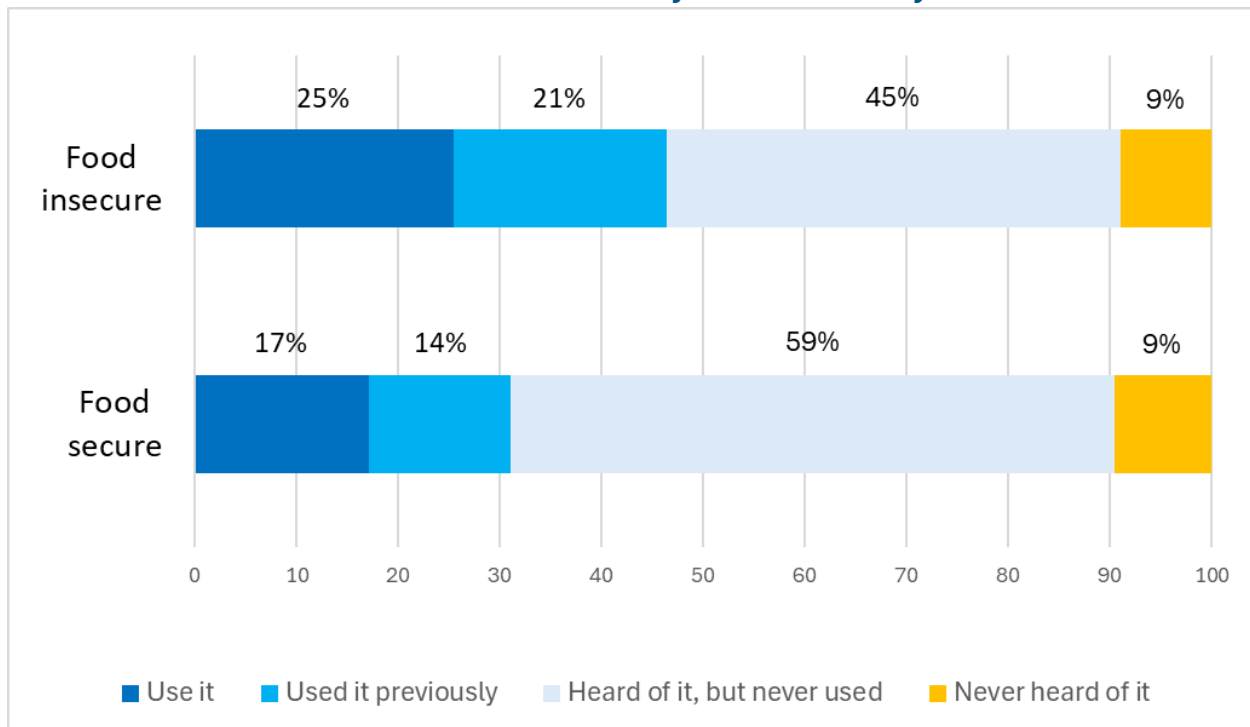
Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Because there are sociodemographic differences among the student bodies of the three school systems, we conducted logistic regression models so that we could control for student characteristics. Adjusting for student race/ethnicity, income, parenting status, first-generation college student status, foster youth status, and disability status, we found that compared to attending a UC, attending a community college increased the odds of a student’s being food insecure 2.65 times (95% CI: 1.88;

3.73), and attending a CSU increased the odds by 30% (95% CI: 1.10; 1.54). These findings underscore the importance of institutional factors and campus food assistance programs (e.g., campus-based CalFresh application assistance and campus food pantries) in addressing student food insecurity.

Students experiencing food insecurity were more likely than food-secure students to use CalFresh (26% vs. 17%) and to have heard of the program (21% and 14%, respectively) (Exhibit 5). However, nearly 45% of food-insecure students had never used CalFresh, and 9% had never heard of it, suggesting that more food-insecure students could benefit from being connected to CalFresh.

Exhibit 5 / Use and Awareness of CalFresh by Food Insecurity Status

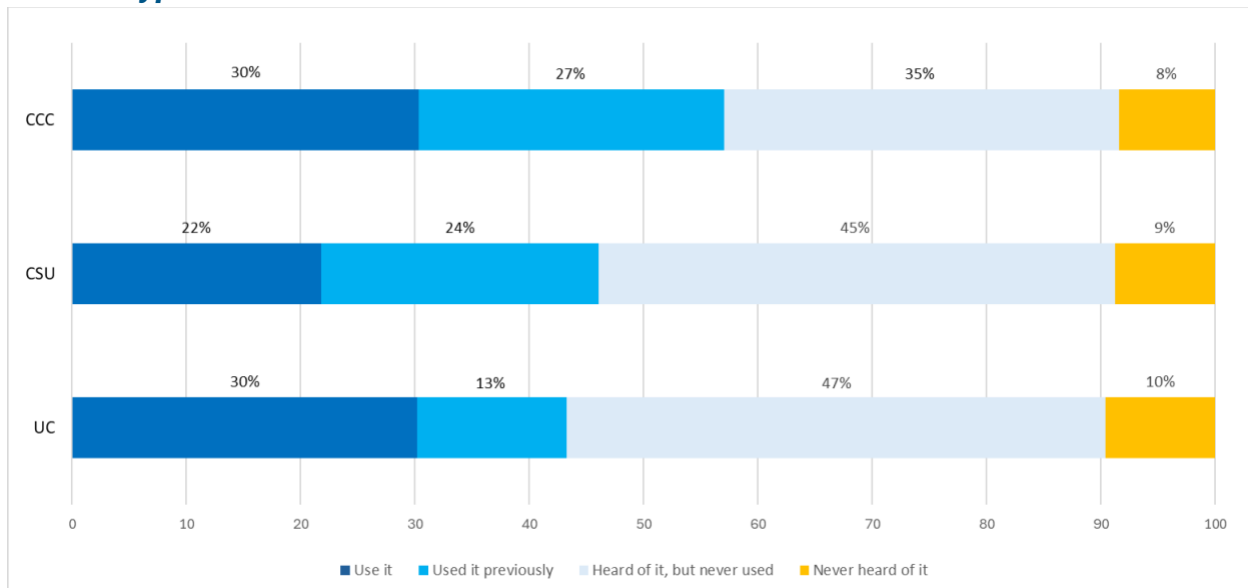


Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: p-value for chi-square test of differences <0.001

Among students experiencing food insecurity, significantly fewer students at the CSUs reported using CalFresh compared to the California Community College and UC students (Exhibit 6). It’s possible that students at the CSUs might experience more barriers to enrolling in CalFresh. Similar rates of food-insecure students at the three systems had never heard of CalFresh.

Exhibit 6 / Use and Awareness of CalFresh Among Food-Insecure Students, by School Type

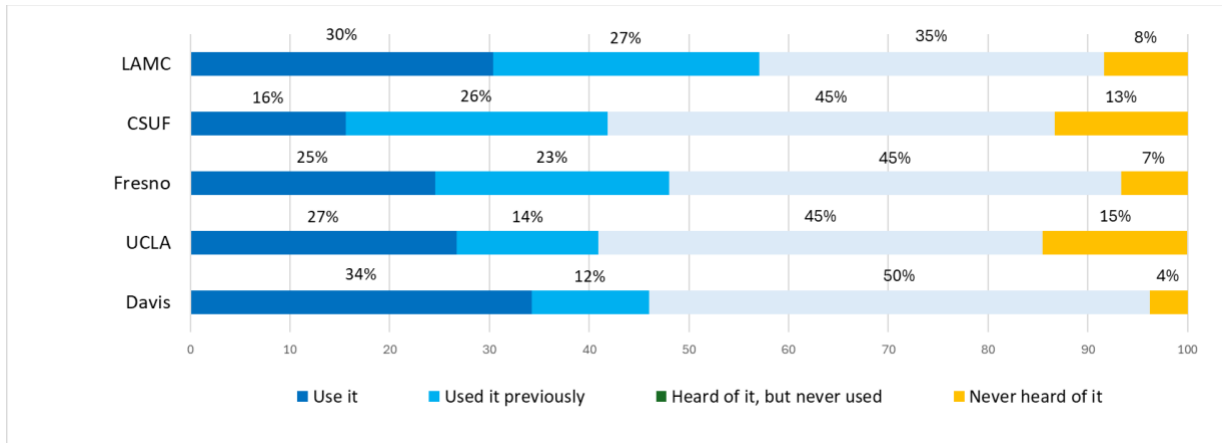


Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: *p*-value for chi-square test of differences <0.001

We found differences not only by school type, but also by school (Exhibit 7). Among the Cal States, food-insecure students at CSUF were significantly less likely to report currently using CalFresh than food-insecure students at Fresno State. CSUF food-insecure students were also more likely to report not knowing about it than their Fresno State counterparts. We saw similar differences among the UCs, with more than one-third of UC Davis food-insecure students reporting currently using CalFresh, compared to more than one-quarter of UCLA food-insecure students. Additionally, 15% of UCLA food-insecure students had not heard of CalFresh, compared to only 4% of UC Davis students. While not asked in the student survey, findings from Phases 1 and 3 of this study point to Fresno State and UC Davis as engaging in more activities to increase student awareness of CalFresh and to facilitate student applications compared to CSUF and UCLA.

Exhibit 7 / Use and Awareness of CalFresh Among Food-Insecure Students, by School

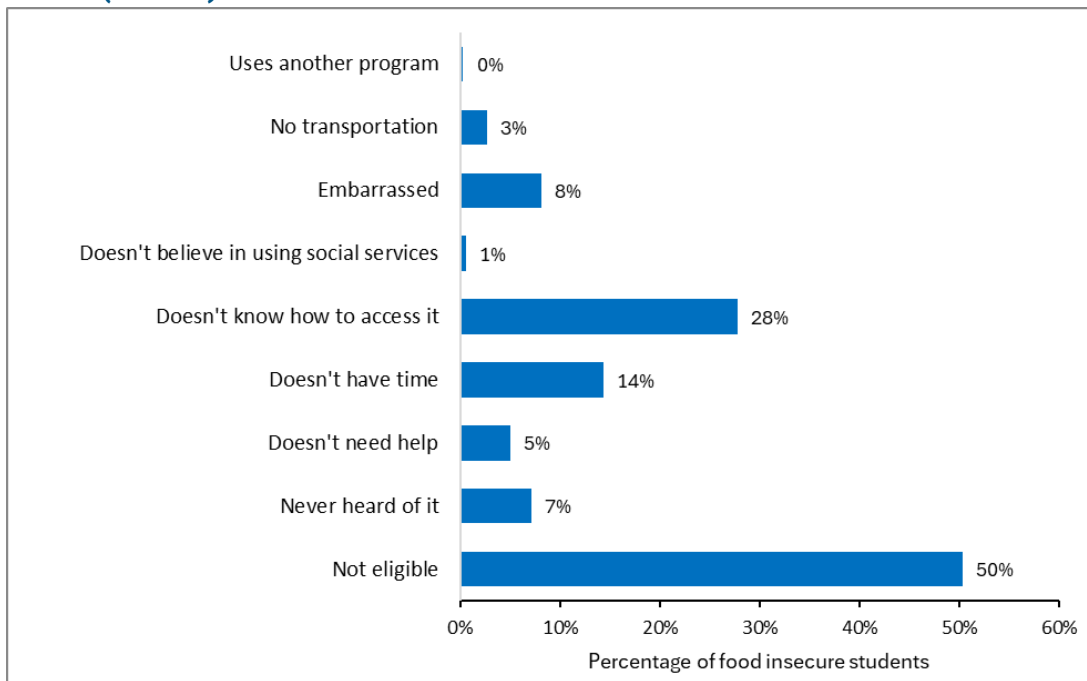


Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: *p*-value for chi-square test of differences <0.001

Among food-insecure students who had heard of CalFresh but had never used it, the primary reasons for not doing so were that they believed they were ineligible for it (50%), did not know how to access it (i.e., apply for it) (28%), and did not have time to apply (14%) (Exhibit 8). Stigma and embarrassment are frequently reported as reasons why students do not apply for SNAP.⁹ The relatively low rate of 8% that we found could be due to the efforts of the participating campuses to normalize access.

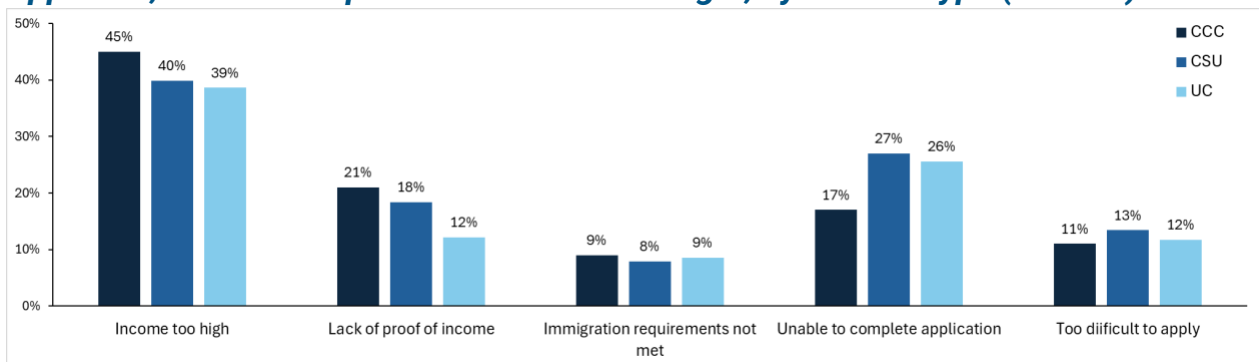
Exhibit 8 / Reasons Food-Insecure Students Who Have Heard of CalFresh Do Not Use It (n=777)



Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

We asked students about their efforts to enroll in CalFresh. Since the beginning of their semester/quarter, 27% of CCC students, 28% of CSU students, and 22% of UC students had tried without success to enroll in CalFresh (p -value = 0.0157). The top reasons students reported for not being able to receive CalFresh were that their or their family’s income was too high to qualify, they lacked the requisite proof of income, or they were unable to complete the application process (Exhibit 9). No statistically significant differences in reasons existed by school type.

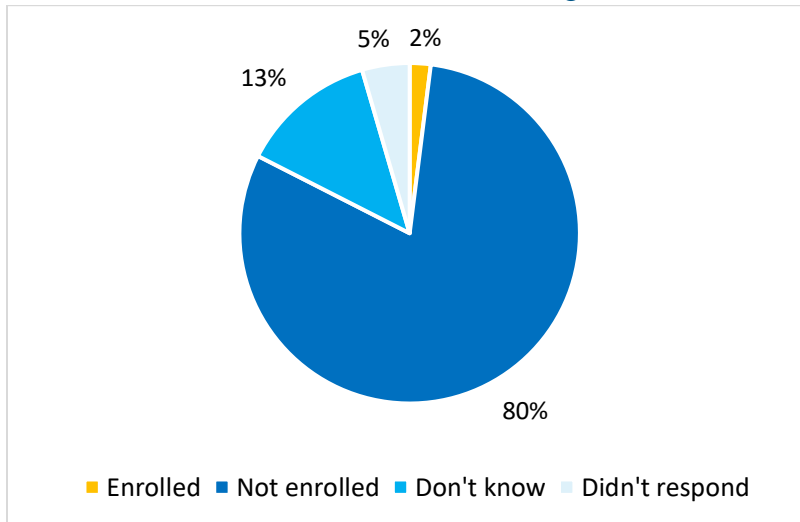
Exhibit 9 / Among Students Who Tried to Enroll in CalFresh but Were Not Approved, Reasons Reported for Not Receiving It, by School Type (n = 695)



Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Being enrolled in an LPIE allows a low-income student to be eligible for CalFresh. Despite campus efforts to increase awareness of LPIEs, only 2% of students reported being enrolled in an LPIE, and 13% reported not knowing whether they were enrolled (Exhibit 10).

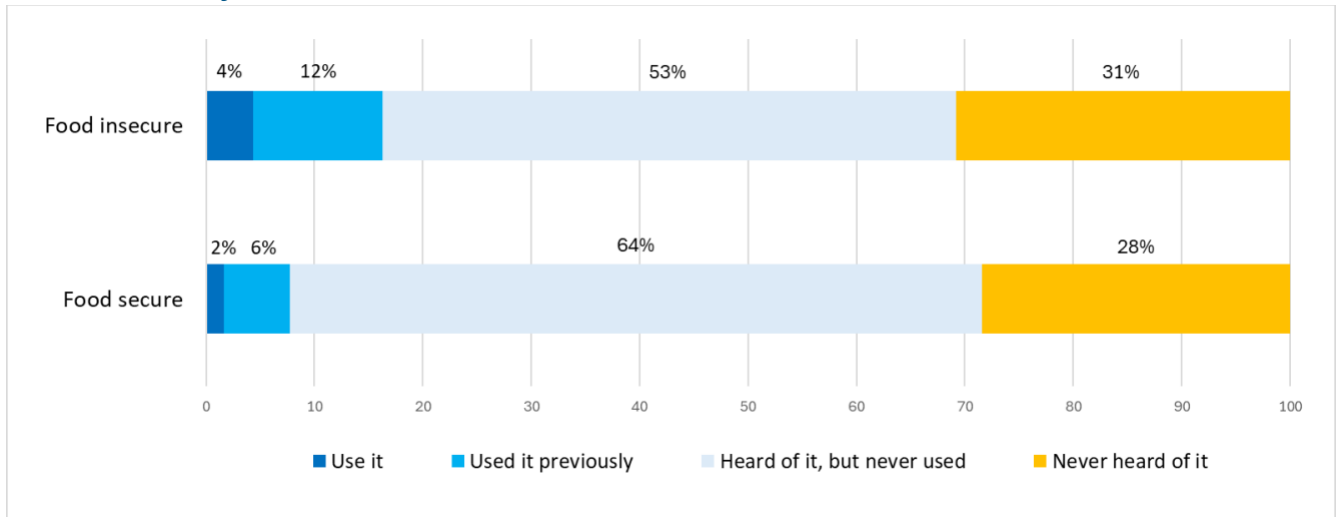
Exhibit 10 / Enrollment in a Local Program to Increase Employability (LPIE)



Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Students experiencing food insecurity were more likely than food-secure students to have used the resources and assistance available on campus to apply to CalFresh (16% vs. 8%) (Exhibit 11). As we found in study Phases 1 and 3, navigating the CalFresh application process can be difficult for students, and about 30% of food-insecure students did not know that their campus provided assistance to apply to CalFresh (Exhibit 11).

Exhibit 11 / Use and Awareness of Campus CalFresh Application Assistance, by Food Insecurity Status

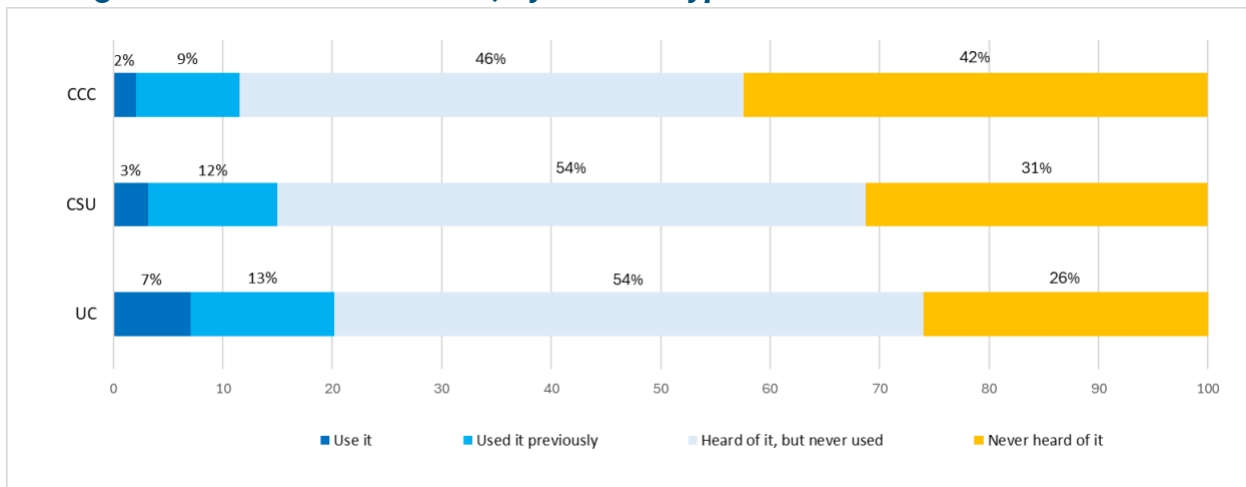


Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: p-value for chi-square test of differences <0.001

Among students experiencing food insecurity, significantly fewer students at the CCC and the CSUs reported using their campus CalFresh application assistance compared to the UC students (Exhibit 12). As shown, more than 40% of food-insecure students at the CCC were unaware the assistance existed, compared to 26% of the UC food-insecure students.

Exhibit 12 / Use and Awareness of Campus CalFresh Application Assistance Among Food- Insecure Students, by School Type



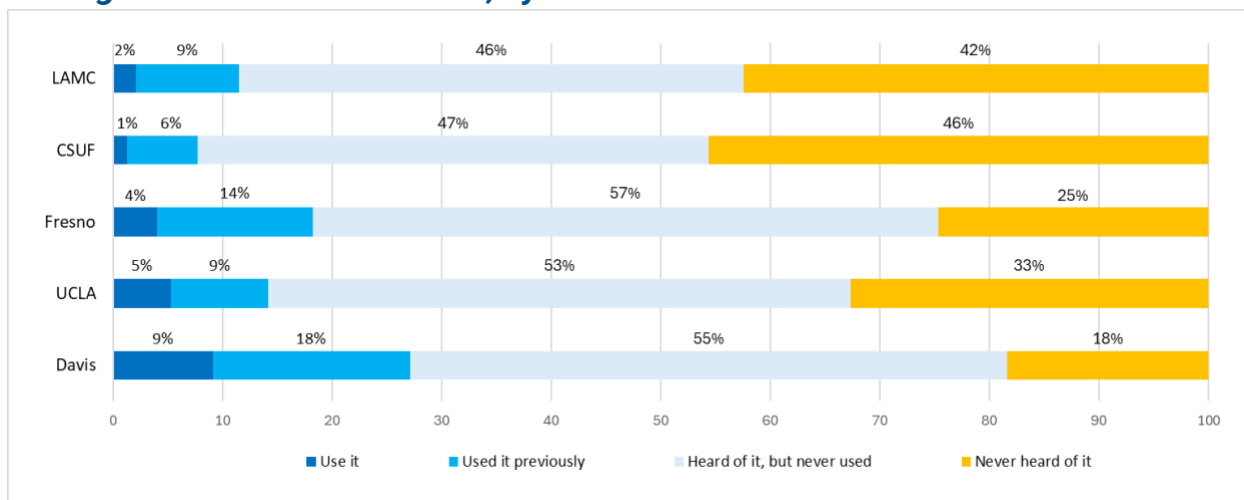
Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: p-value for chi-square test of differences <0.001

We found differences not only by school type, but also by school (Exhibit 13). Among the Cal States, food-insecure students at CSUF were significantly less likely than food-insecure students at Fresno State to report using the campus CalFresh application assistance. We saw similar differences among the UCs, with more than one-quarter of UC Davis food-insecure students reporting having used campus resources to apply for CalFresh, compared to 14% of UCLA food-insecure students.

Many students were not aware of this campus resource. More than 40% of food-insecure students at LAMC were unaware that this assistance was available (Exhibit 13). Among the CSUs, CSUF food-insecure students were significantly more likely than their Fresno State counterparts to be unaware of the assistance (46% vs. 25%). One-third of UCLA food-insecure students were unaware of the resource, compared to 18% of UC Davis students.

Exhibit 13 / Use and Awareness of Campus CalFresh Application Assistance Among Food-Insecure Students, by School

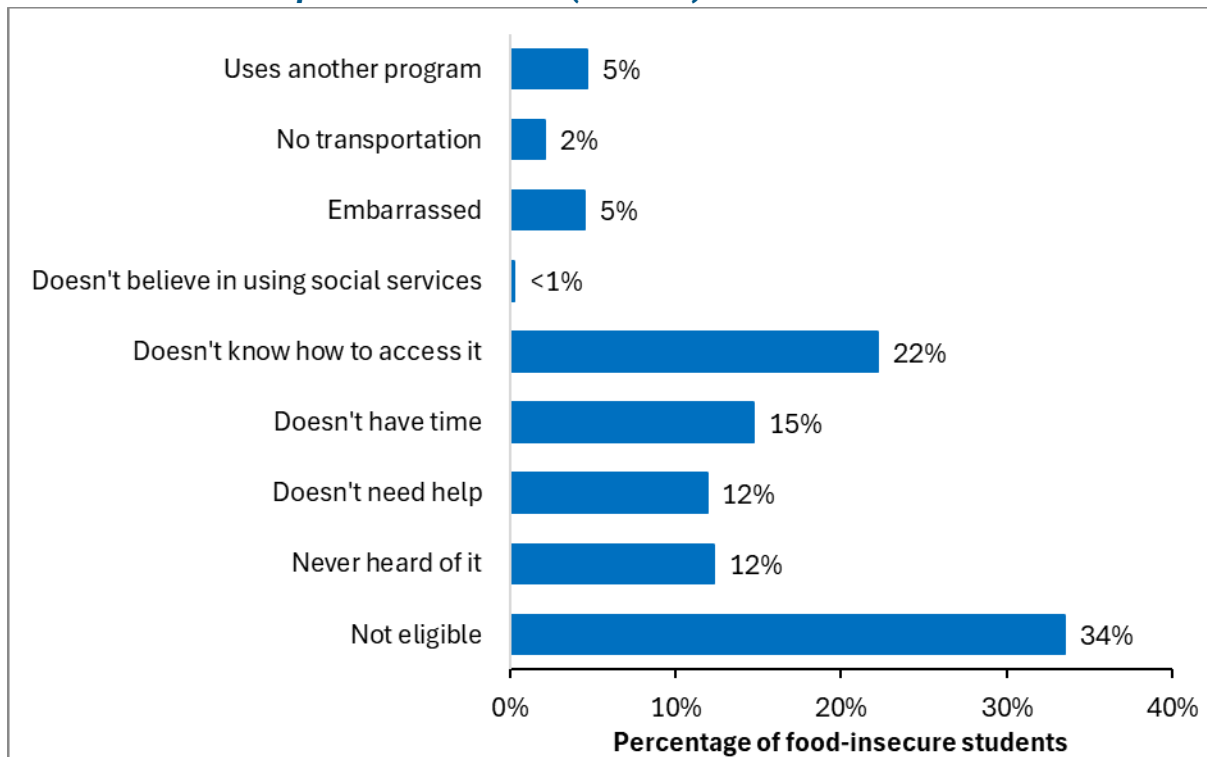


Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: p-value for chi-square test of differences <0.001

Among food-insecure students who had heard of their school’s CalFresh application assistance but never used it, a third reported that they believed they were ineligible, more than one-fifth reported that they did not know how to access it, and about 15% said they did not have time to use the resources (Exhibit 14).

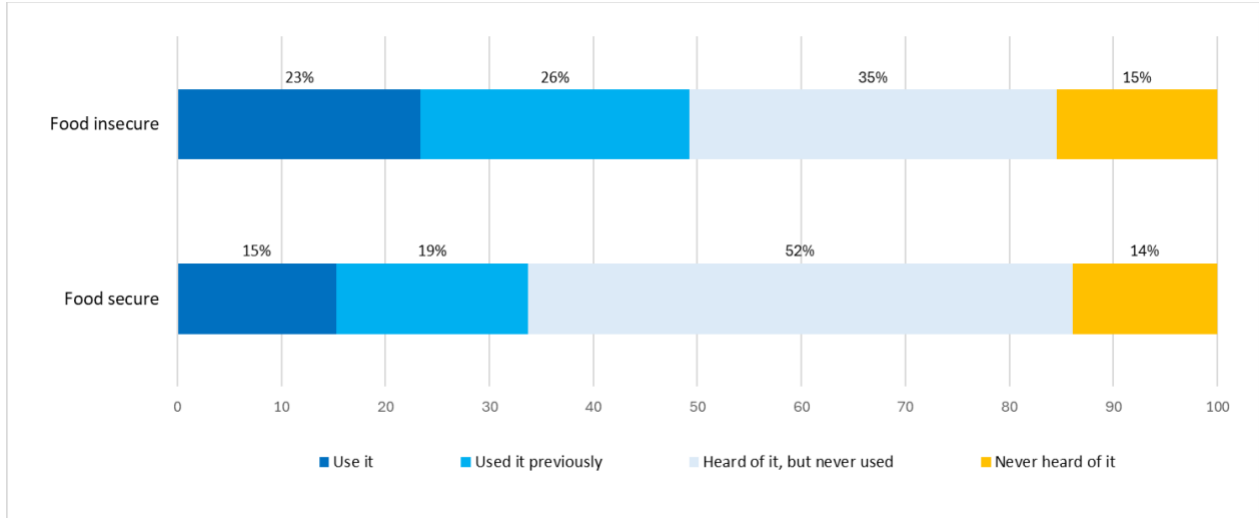
Exhibit 14 / Reasons Food-Insecure Students Aware of CalFresh Application Assistance on Campus Do Not Use It (n = 920)



Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Students experiencing food insecurity were more likely than food-secure students to have used their campus food pantry. Nearly half of food-insecure students reported using the food pantry currently or in the past, compared to one-third of food-secure students (Exhibit 15). The fact that one-third of food-secure students reported using their campus pantry highlights the importance of it for all students. About 15% of food-insecure students were not aware of the campus food pantry (Exhibit 15).

Exhibit 15 / Use and Awareness of Campus Food Pantry, by Food Insecurity Status

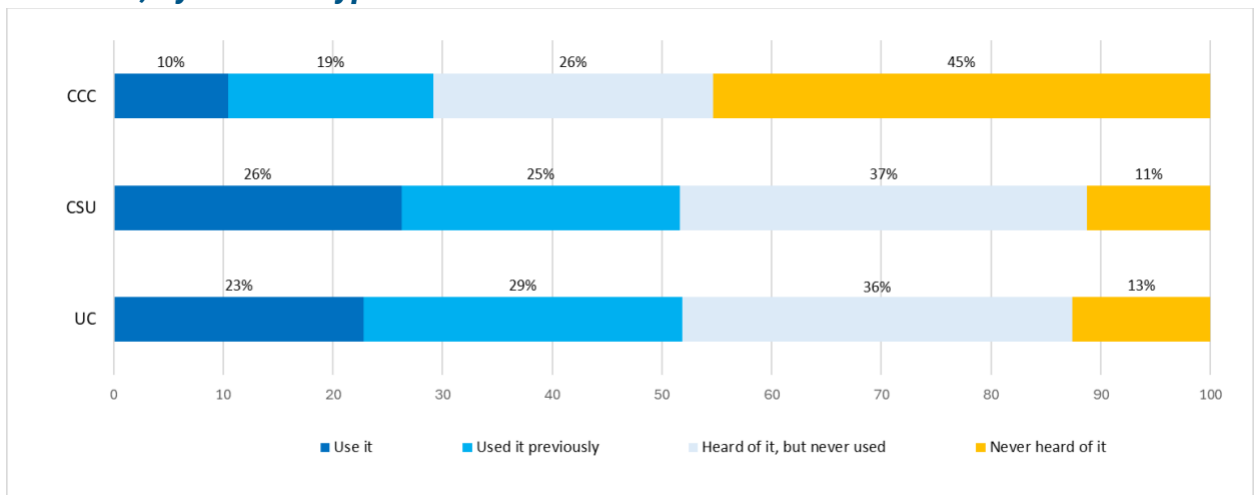


Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: *p*-value for chi-square test of differences <0.001

Among students experiencing food insecurity, significantly fewer students at the CCC than at the CSUs and UCs reported using their campus food pantry (Exhibit 16). About 45% of food-insecure students at the CCC were unaware the pantry existed, compared to about 12% of the CSU and UC food-insecure students (Exhibit 16). More than one-third of CSU and UC food-insecure students knew it existed but did not use it.

Exhibit 16 / Use and Awareness of Campus Food Pantry Among Food-Insecure Students, by School Type



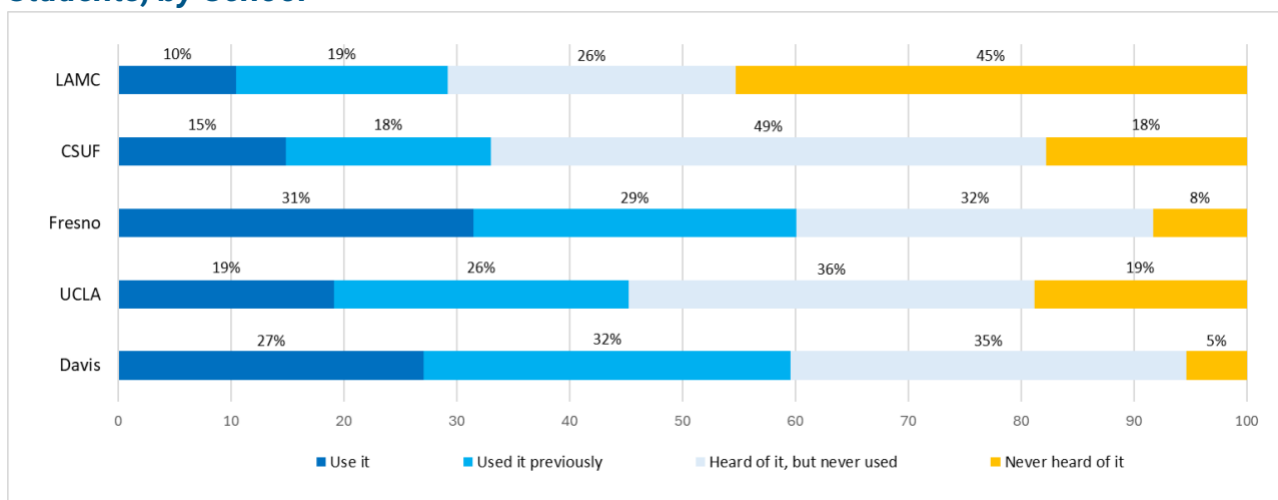
Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: *p*-value for chi-square test of differences <0.001

We found differences not only by school type, but also by school (Exhibit 17). LAMC had the lowest usage and highest rate of food-insecure students who were unaware of the campus resource. Among the Cal States, food-insecure students at CSUF were significantly less likely to report using the campus food pantry than food-insecure students at Fresno State. We saw similar differences among the UCs, with nearly 60% of UC Davis food-insecure students reporting having used their campus food pantry, compared to 45% of UCLA food-insecure students.

Awareness of the campus food pantry varied across schools. Among the CSUs, CSUF food-insecure students were significantly more likely to be unaware of their campus food pantry than their Fresno State counterparts (18% vs. 8%). Nearly 20% of UCLA food-insecure students were unaware of their pantry, compared to 5% of UC Davis students.

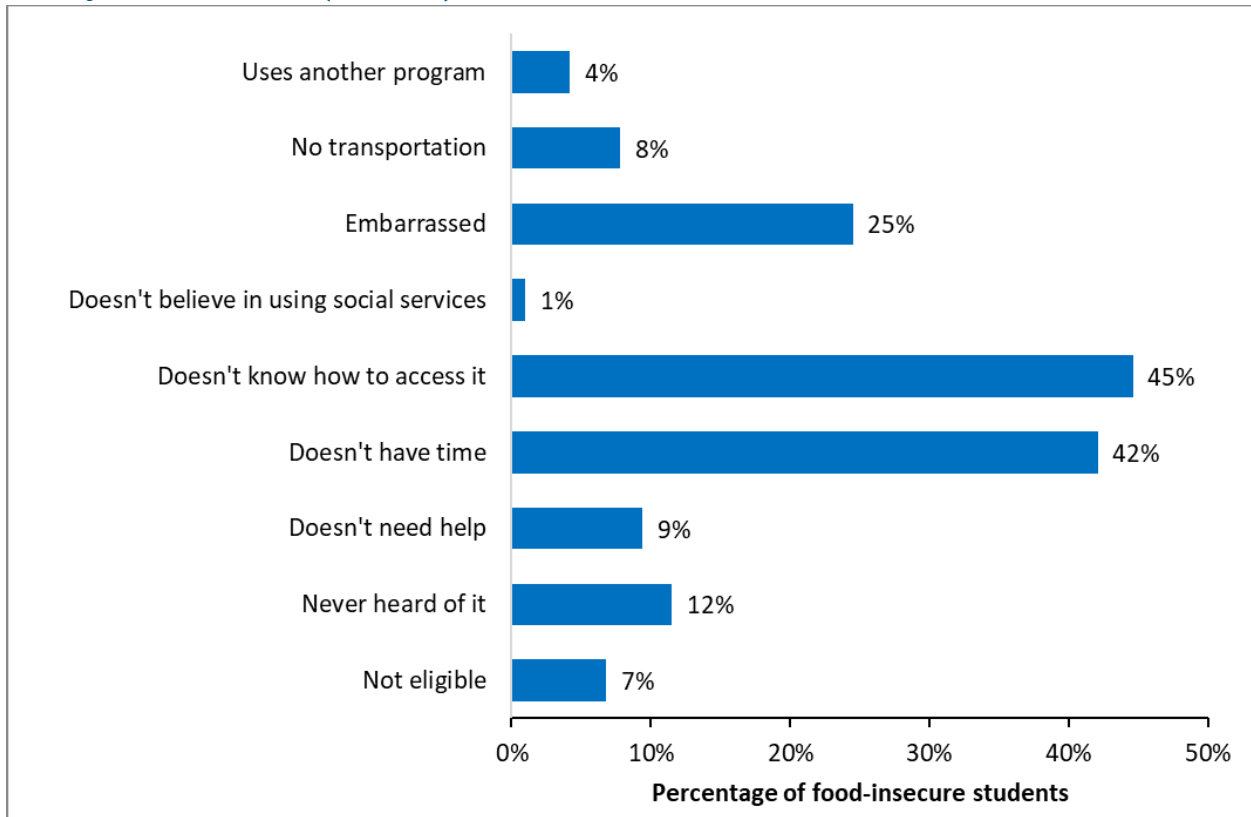
Exhibit 17 / Use and Awareness of Campus Food Pantry Among Food-Insecure Students, by School



Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs
 Note: p-value for chi-square test of differences <0.001

Among food-insecure students who had heard of their school’s campus food pantry, more than 40% reported not knowing how to access it, and the same percentage reported not having the time to access it. One-quarter of students reported feeling embarrassed (Exhibit 18).

Exhibit 18 / Reasons Food-Insecure Students Who Are Aware of Campus Food Pantry Do Not Use It (n = 616)

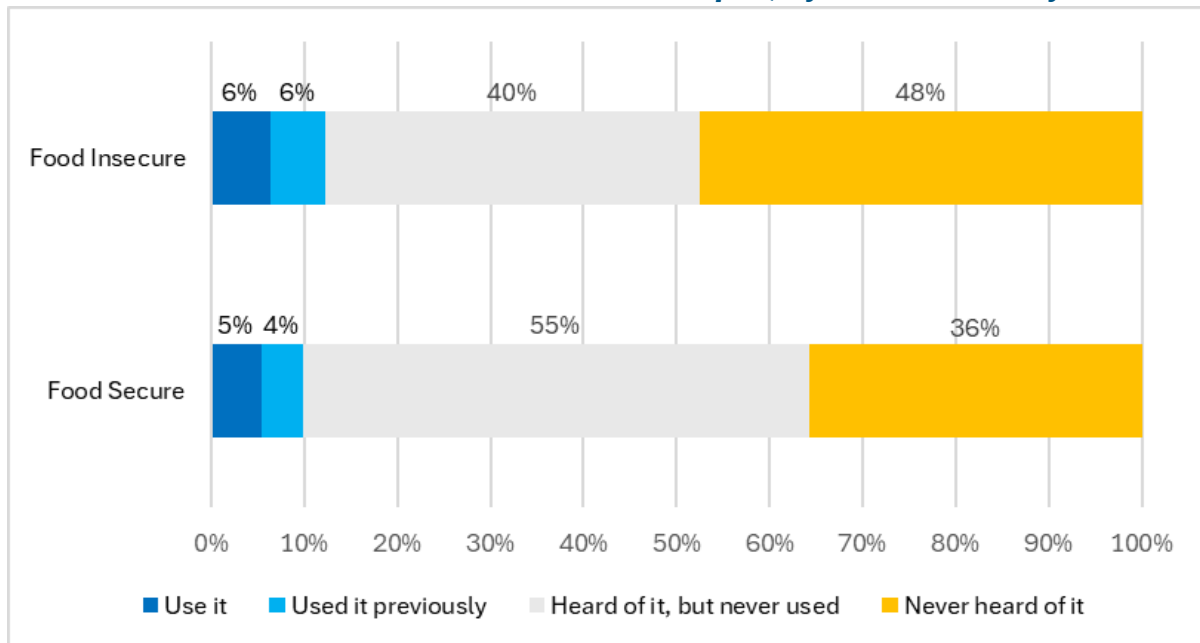


Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

EBT on Campus

Few students reported using EBT on their campus. Students who were food insecure were significantly more likely than food-secure students to not know that they were able to use EBT on their campus (48% vs. 36%) (Exhibit 19).

Exhibit 19 / Use and Awareness of EBT on Campus, by Food Insecurity Status

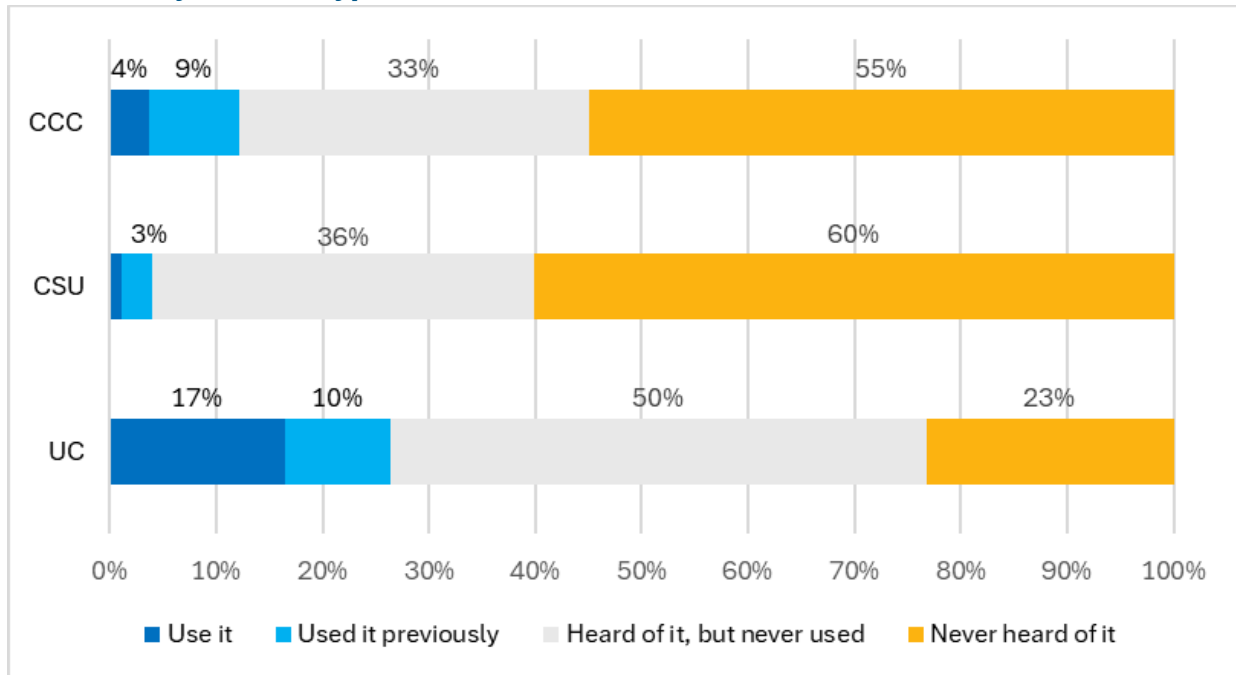


Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: p-value of chi-square test of differences <0.001

Among students experiencing food insecurity, significantly more students at the UCs than at the CSUs and CCC reported using EBT on their campus (Exhibit 20). More than one-quarter of UC food-insecure students reported using or having used EBT on their campus, compared to 13% of CCC students and 4% of CSU students. More than half of CCC and CSU food-insecure students did not know it was possible to use EBT on their campus, compared to nearly one-quarter of UC students.

Exhibit 20 / Use and Awareness of EBT on Campus Among Food-Insecure Students, by School Type

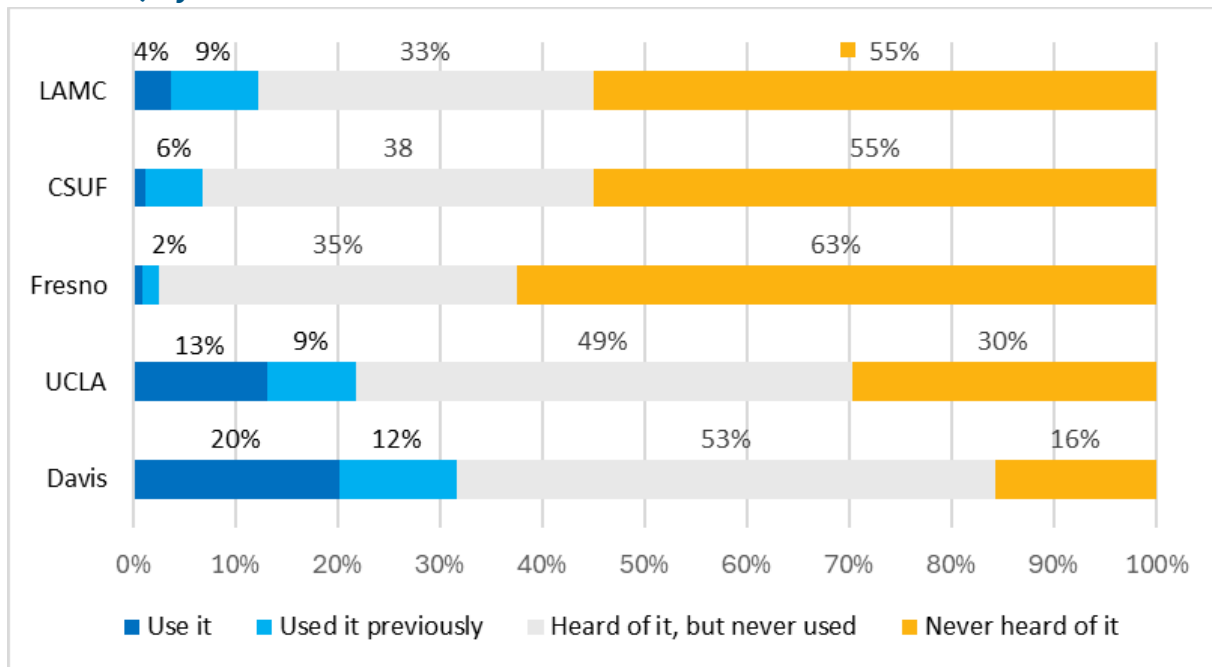


Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: p-value of chi-square test of differences <0.001

We found differences not only by school type, but also by school (Exhibit 21). Cal State Fresno had the lowest usage of EBT on campus, followed closely by CSUF. Fresno, CSUF, and LAMC also had the highest percentages of food-insecure students who did not know it was possible to use EBT on their campus. Among the UCs, more food-insecure students at UC Davis used or had used EBT on campus than food-insecure students at UCLA (32% vs. 22%). Nearly 30% of UCLA food-insecure students did not know they could use EBT on campus, compared to 16% of UC Davis students.

Exhibit 21 / Use and Awareness of EBT on Campus Among Food-Insecure Students, by School



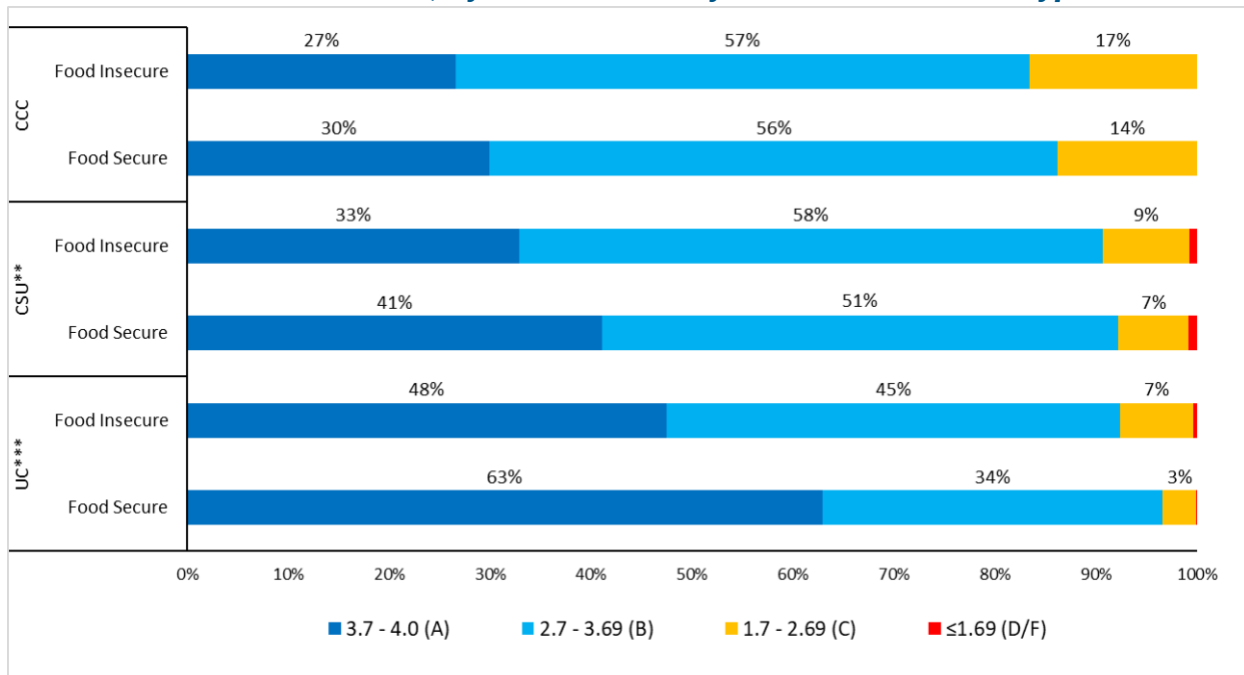
Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: *p*-value of chi-square test of differences <0.001

Academic Performance

Food insecurity can affect students' academic performance. Overall, 37% of students experiencing food insecurity had a cumulative GPA of 4.0 (A letter grade), compared to 51% of food-secure students (*p*-value <0.001) (data not shown). This relationship varies across school types (Exhibit 22). Among UC students, 63% of students who were food secure had a cumulative GPA of 4.0, compared to 48% of food-insecure students. Food-insecure students were also significantly more likely to have a 2.0 GPA (C letter grade). Among CSU students, 41% of food-secure students reported having a cumulative GPA of 4.0, compared to one-third of food-insecure students. Among CCC students, food insecurity was not significantly associated with cumulative GPA.

Exhibit 22 / Cumulative GPA, by Food Insecurity Status and School Type

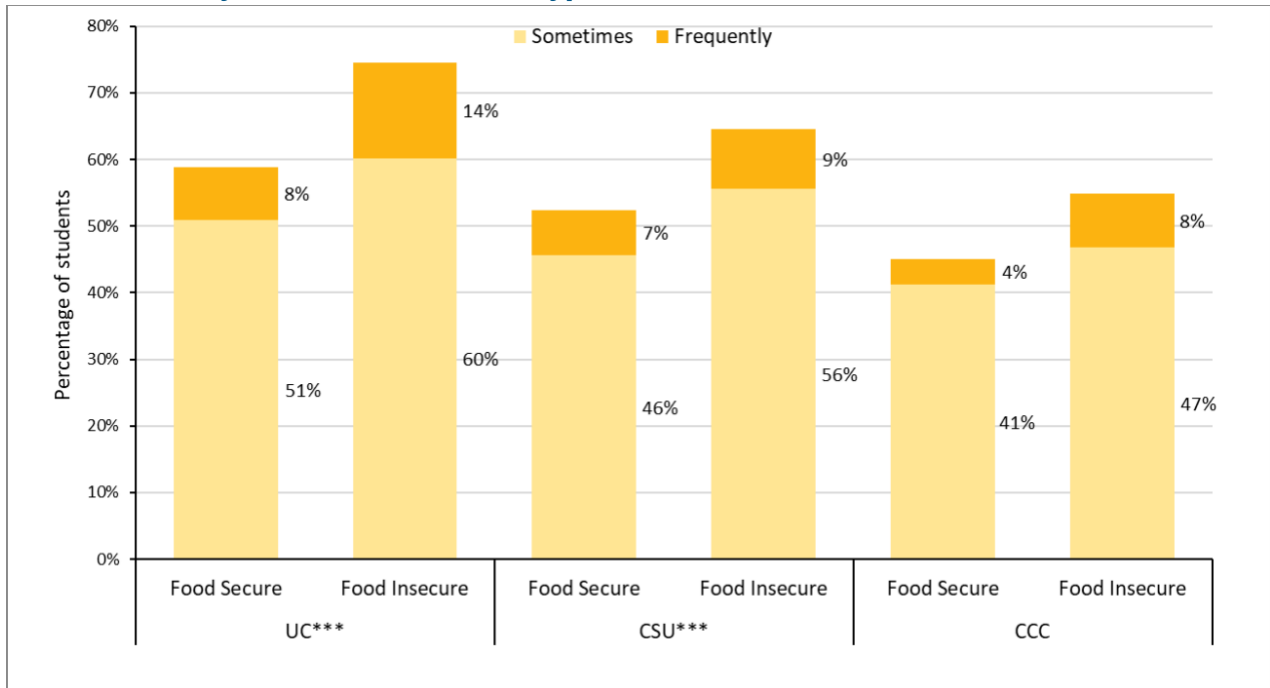


Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: p-value * <0.05 ; ** <0.01 ; *** <0.001

Since the beginning of their semester, students attending a CSU or a UC who were food insecure were significantly more likely to report neglecting their academic studies than their food-secure counterparts (Exhibit 23). Among CSU students, 65% of food-insecure students reported at least sometimes neglecting their academic studies, compared to 52% of their food-secure counterparts. Among UC students, nearly 15% of food-insecure students reported frequently neglecting their academic studies, compared to 8% of food-secure students.

Exhibit 23 / Frequency With Which Students Neglected Their Academic Studies, by Food Insecurity Status and School Type

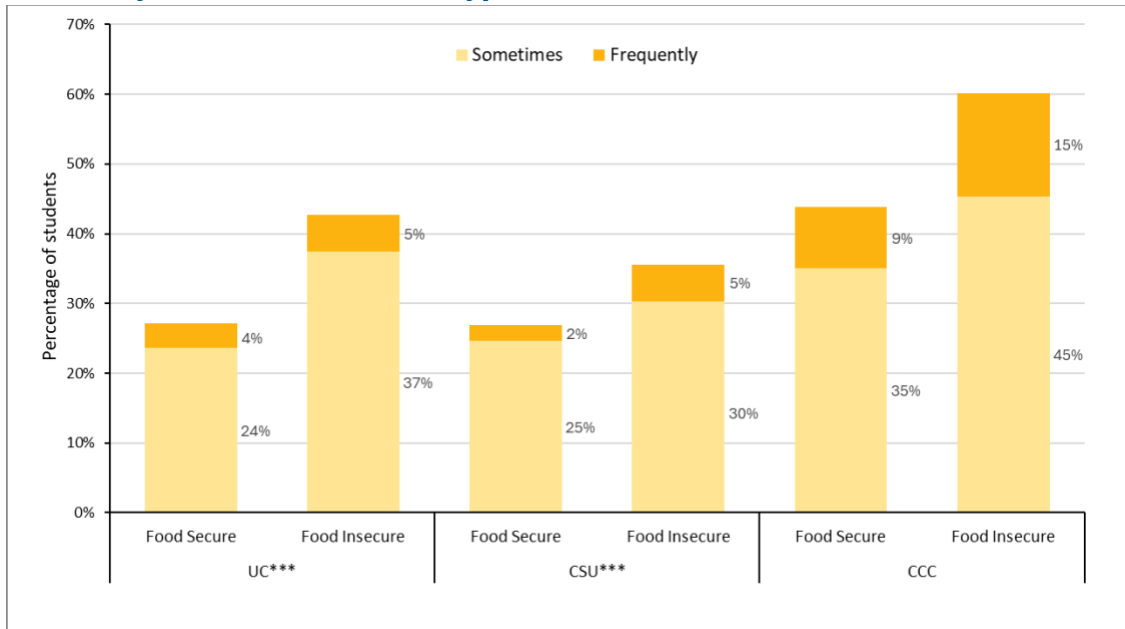


Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: p-value * <0.05 ; ** <0.01 ; *** <0.001

Since the beginning of their semester, students attending a CSU or a UC who were food insecure were significantly more likely than their food-secure counterparts to report reducing their class load (Exhibit 24). Among CSU students, 36% of food-insecure students reported at least sometimes reducing their class load, compared to 27% of their food-secure counterparts. Among UC students, nearly 43% of food-insecure students reported at least sometimes reducing their class load, compared to 27% of food-secure students. Among CCC students, 15% of food- insecure students reported frequently reducing their class load, compared to about 9% of food- secure students; however, this difference was not statistically significant.

Exhibit 24 / Frequency With Which Students Reduced Class Load, by Food Insecurity Status and School Type

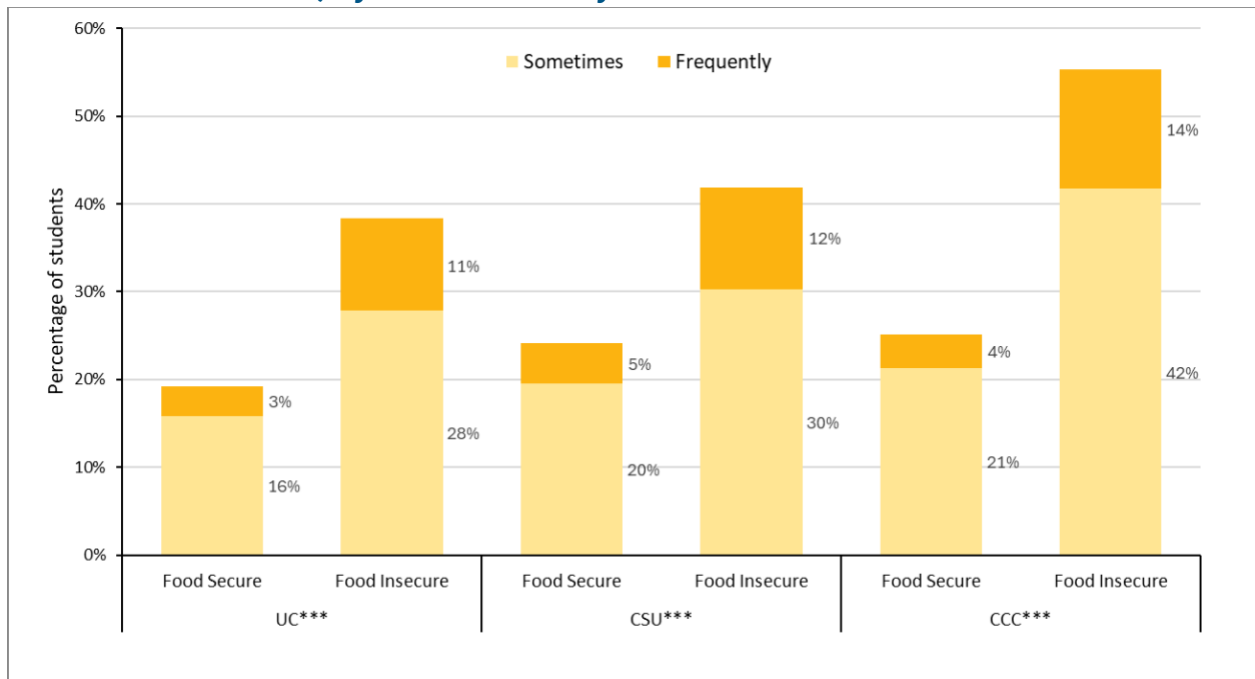


Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: p-value * <0.05 ; ** <0.01 ; *** <0.001

Since the beginning of their semester, students who were food insecure were significantly more likely to consider dropping out than their food-secure counterparts (Exhibit 25). Food-insecure UC students were three times more likely to frequently consider dropping out of school than their food-secure counterparts, and CCC students who were food insecure were 3.5 times more likely to frequently consider dropping out of school than their food-secure counterparts.

Exhibit 25 / Frequency With Which Students Considered Dropping Out Among the Different Institutions, by Food Insecurity Status



Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

Note: p-value * <0.05 ; ** <0.01 ; *** <0.001

Qualitative Findings

Perceptions of CalFresh

We asked student workers about their perceptions of CalFresh as a solution to food insecurity, and about their knowledge of the food assistance services provided by campus basic needs offices. Most felt that CalFresh was a key tool for the students who qualified, while other campus programs such as food pantries and meal-sharing programs were considered important for students who were not able to receive CalFresh. Students who received CalFresh benefits expressed great appreciation: “I know for a fact that without it I wouldn't be able to focus completely on my studies, which is how it should be. You know, like being able to focus on your education without worrying where your next meal's going to come from is a great blessing, and I think everyone should share that.”

Perspectives on Student Needs

We asked all participants what they perceived to be the most significant unmet need among students. Food was the top answer, followed by housing and general financial

assistance. We then asked what participants perceived as being the most serious implication for students with unmet basic needs, and the response was unanimous: persistence and matriculation. Participants reported that the negative impact of unmet basic needs starts with poor physical and mental health, which negatively affects academic performance, and ultimately can lead to students dropping out of school. They also noted that students would experience an increase in debt to afford tuition *and* living expenses.

Ability to Use EBT

Student participants shared mixed experiences in identifying locations to use Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT), both on and near campus. EBT is a system that allows CalFresh recipients to access their benefits using a debit card. CDSS has memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with the UC, CSU, and CCC systems to allow for qualifying campus outlets to accept EBT. However, there appear to be challenges to implementation. One study respondent who works with all campuses reported: “We surveyed a lot of campuses, and I think only about 12 to 15% of all schools accept EBT somewhere on their campus. And that's pretty bad, considering that they all can.”

Role of the Basic Needs Office

- **Promotion of CalFresh**

A common theme among all participants is the desire to “normalize” CalFresh on campuses and remove the stigma associated with participating in the public benefit. Many of the specific recommendations listed in the next section would contribute to this effort, such as making SNAP application a part of the financial aid process and having SNAP benefits widely accepted on campus. Further changes to messaging for the program would also be beneficial, according to respondents. Schools reported that their current messaging mainly focused on raising awareness of the availability of CalFresh benefits for qualifying students and reducing the stigma of participating in a public program. One school reported increased interest in student inquiries about CalFresh when it was promoted as a financial aid tool: “So just kind of changing the words a little bit has ... made people want to approach our table and say, like, hey, I can get financial aid for food, too.”

Some that already tried to rebrand the program as financial aid were seeing results: “That’s how we attract some students – if they have any questions about what our slogan means, basically, we’re able to provide that assistance. Just like the financial aid office provides them assistance with their tuition, we’re able to provide that assistance for their food and dietary needs.”

Participants also suggested that outreach for remote students would be helpful. One participant whose program predated the COVID pandemic and campus closures noted a

drop in their ability to get students to start applications: “As everyone moved online, we did see a very noticeable decrease in our ability to get applications for CalFresh.”

- **Assistance with the application process**

CalFresh is administered at the local level by each county’s welfare department. While colleges do not play a direct role in enrollment, they provide several services beyond raising awareness to support the application process. Campus basic needs staff are available to assist with aspects of the process, including prescreening for eligibility, preparation for the application process (including identifying all needed paperwork), and assisting with reapplication for students who report being denied. Additionally, some schools offer assistance to students in preparing for the required interview.

- **Student connection to the basic needs office**

Some institutions had a system in place to allow faculty and staff to refer students to basic needs services, while others relied only on self-referral. For the latter, building student awareness of the basic needs services is a significant goal for office activities. At most institutions, students learned about the basic needs office and CalFresh opportunity when visiting the campus food pantry, where workers had signage, handed out pamphlets, and promoted services via word of mouth. Some campuses also reported giving presentations in classes that qualified as LPIEs. Every institution participated in events with tables and promotional messaging (tabling), and some basic needs offices had the ability to send informational emails to the student body. Additionally, some used advertising, social media outreach, and workshops to promote CalFresh benefits.

Limitations of the Basic Needs Office

- **Institutional capacity (staffing)**

Study sites reported problems with both insufficient staffing and staff turnover. All but one of the six study sites reported that staffing was one of their greatest needs in being able to help all the students who sought assistance. The number of basic needs staff at each institution varied, as did their responsibilities. In our initial recruitment for study sites, one potential partner regrettably declined participation due to lack of time, as they were the sole staff member for the entire suite of basic needs services on their campus.

Staff noted limited staff capacity as a significant challenge: “I’m in a department of three, so sending out [personal] messaging to 42,000 students is going to be really hard for my office.”

At two of the sites, the person in charge of CalFresh programs changed in the first year of this study. Many offices employ student assistants, but graduations add to the challenge of staff turnover and loss of knowledge needed to assist students with the full spectrum of the CalFresh application process.

“I’m the full-time staff here, and then we have three part-time staff. I think that the staffing, having somebody in the coordinator role, would be really helpful just to manage all of the CalFresh projects, and then having a designated staff member like a specialist or somebody to really oversee student applications ... would be helpful. Right now, because we have such a small team, we’re doing a lot of outreach efforts to bring students in and to help students apply, but I think that guidance throughout the CalFresh application process, as well as how to use benefits and how to keep benefits – that piece would be helpful if we had a designated staff person really overseeing our CalFresh efforts.”

- **Measures of success**

We asked study participants whether their institution or office had detailed goals for meeting student needs. None did. Rather, any articulated goals were nebulous, such as “serve more students than we did last year.” As participants in the CHC program, institutions are asked to create a goal for the number of CalFresh applications filed by their students. However, there are multiple complications in tracking this data or evaluating its impact on addressing food insecurity. Students may learn about CalFresh on campus but may apply completely on their own. Further, CalFresh does not share data on individual student applications, so unless a student specifically reports back to the basic needs office, staff are not aware of the outcome.

Role and Value of the CHC

The Center for Healthy Communities (CHC) is contracted to provide grants, resources, and support to IHEs across California in the three systems (CCC, CSU, UC) to improve application assistance for CalFresh. CHC provides online resources, conducts training, facilitates the exchange of ideas and information among participants, and responds to direct inquiries from basic needs staff. Participation in the CHC program was not a requirement for inclusion in our study or a factor in recruitment, but each of the six study sites is a participant in the CHC program. Each site spoke highly of CHC services and resources. Several noted the benefit of expert advice in interpreting CalFresh rule changes, particularly for IHEs that do not have significant staff working on CalFresh. According to one site representative: “[It] becomes a bit challenging on my end to get proper information, because I don’t have 40 hours a week to just focus on CalFresh. In addition to that, I have to go out of my way to find more information, because our county doesn’t send out a lot of updates when they need to. Then, some of the information that we get from our contract partners ... just doesn’t apply to us. I’m always kind of having to read through stuff and figure out what applies, what doesn’t apply, go on the CDSS website and all these other websites to get more information so I could make sure I’m meeting the requirements, but also letting students know if there’s been any changes and letting my staff know if there’s been any changes as well.”

Staff appreciated CHC's program because it was tailored to college student populations: "Because with CalFresh work, when we do the training on CalFresh, the information is general information that applies to everyone, whether they're a college student or not. ... With each campus, the student populations are so different. So sometimes when we meet with a student, the [general] training that we learned doesn't really apply, because it doesn't meet that student's situation. A lot of it is kind of like we're learning as we go through supporting our students directly."

Guidance Requested by Basic Needs Staff

As noted, all study sites were participants in the CHC program, receiving guidance and peer-to-peer insights for improving their programs. Study participants reported they would appreciate having the following additional information or guidance:

- **Tools to assess student needs and eligibility**

Respondents shared their request for improved assessment tools to use in prescreening students for eligibility. They felt this would not only help their campus programs but would also impact the workload for county offices, as fewer ineligible students would apply: "So, yeah, arguably there are better ways to do an assessment, but this is what we're able to do now. If there's something more scientific or an academic way to do it that might increase the rigor, then we'd like to learn about that."

There is also a desire among staff to be able to measure food insecurity on their campuses: "So how is food insecurity assessed? How do you assess what are the descriptors? What are the criteria? What is the assessment tool? I mean, how do we do that? Can you create a template of an assessment that could be launched on our campus with the goal of assessing food insecurity among our students?"

- **Information or training to better provide CalFresh Interview assistance**

Several participants reported that students were anxious about the interview process and sought preparation assistance. However, unless they had been through the application process themselves, staff were not fully aware of all the information students should be prepared to provide. They desired training to help prepare students for the interview process.

"I don't know if it would be training, or just some other type of orientation for that interview process, you know what I mean? So, it's fairly simple when you go through the application. But it would be nice to have something structured where either a sample interview or the student might say *this*, and then you can answer like *this*."

- **Guidance on LPIEs**

CDSS manages the website that lists approved LPIEs, updated monthly, but study respondents see room for improvement. Some staff reported that the program titles do not always align exactly with what appears on the CDSS list of approved LPIEs. In

addition, county staff handling student CalFresh applications were not always aware of all qualifying LPIE programs, which impacts the eligibility requirements student applicants have to meet. One staff member noted that one issue “is the LPIE situation. How can we work a little bit more clearly with CDSS when we are navigating some challenges? Because we have a lot of eligible programs that we know internally meet the threshold, but it's hard to prove it. If you can't look on the website and find it, they're not going to prove it.”

Participants felt that improving clarity in the LPIE qualifying process would enable more campuses to add qualifying academic programs, thereby enabling more students to qualify: “I was just going to say the whole LPIE program situation is still confusing, though. It's confusing to campuses, and it's confusing to students. And I still think we have a lot of work to do to try and simplify that where we can.”

Campus staff sympathized with county workers and felt the LPIE website could be improved. “The approved LPIE list is reportedly lengthy and complicated to access – we've already had issues with counties denying exemptions that were on that list because maybe they didn't know where to access the list, they weren't sure how to navigate the list. It's just overall the list is really hard to navigate.”

- **Working with CDSS and county CalFresh offices**

Staff were looking for recommendations to improve the relationship with CDSS and county CalFresh offices. They believe better relationships between the county and the IHE would benefit both organizations.

“The other [desired guidance] is how to navigate better relationships with CDSS specifically for your county, and how to have a line of communication to the county to say these are the challenges our students are seeing.”

“And so, for them [the county] that means a lot, receiving a lot less applications from students who are not going to be eligible. But for us, that also means not referring students to a resource that they're not going to be eligible for.”

- **Developing messaging**

Staff felt a significant challenge connecting students with CalFresh was in a lack of awareness of CalFresh benefits and stigma associated with public programs. Many expressed a desire for messaging to help address this barrier.

“One of the challenges is really just connecting with students and letting them know the importance of CalFresh. Like, you know, there are different ways to do it, and so we're still trying things out and figuring things out. What's the best way to get that message across? Not just to get it in front of them, but also once they see it, so that they understand.”

Staff mentioned that in addition to messaging around applying for CalFresh, messaging on supporting reapplying for students who were previously denied would be helpful.

Changes in their financial circumstances and new LPIE approvals can lead to different outcomes.

“So, you know, we could always ask them to reapply, but I guess figuring out how we can kind of reinforce that a little bit better if they weren't eligible before. How can we encourage them to apply again?”

- **Skills for working with students**

Some staff also want to build skills for working with students. “I just feel like our team, even myself, can always use an extra educational session on how to talk to students and how to get them to open up to us, and be able to share with them what we know [and] what we have without making them feel like victims or like they're bothering us in any way.”

Another shared: “I think what needs to be improved and what would be more helpful is how to tackle case-by-case situations for different types of student populations. So for instance, I had a student [who] felt uncomfortable providing their personal information because they were gay. ... We need training and information about different types of student populations so campuses can be more supportive to our students, especially now with the type of society we're in and so many unfair rules and regulations taking place. It becomes a bit challenging for the staff who are directly assisting the students. So stuff like that could be improved.”

Characteristics of Successful Programs at IHEs

- **Support from institutional leadership**

Participants who had significant support from campus administration praised the importance of it; those who did not have such support lamented its absence. Most participants requested more staff and resources for the basic needs work. A few requested that the administration raise the profile of basic needs programs, promoting them alongside other student services such as campus health clinics or workout facilities. Participants also expressed a desire for the programs to be more visible on campus, in hopes that treating basic needs like other student services would break down negative associations with getting aid. One student participant noted that the basic needs center felt “hidden,” and said they had been on campus several terms before they were aware that the office existed.

- **Coordination with financial aid offices**

Another aspect of programs that varied greatly among the study sites was the degree to which the basic needs offices and the financial aid offices shared information or communicated with each other. Basic needs staff want data on which students meet the financial threshold for CalFresh qualification. In addition, they would like the information on CalFresh benefits to be included in correspondence with other financial aid information. Student participants felt this would be an effective outreach strategy,

since although many reported not using email for many activities, they would always read information pertaining to financial aid.

- **Messaging and promotional programs that reach students**

Participants found the following approaches to messaging and outreach to be effective:

- Normalizing benefits as being financial aid for food.
- Combination of in-person events, social media, and email. Both students and administrators reported that having in-person events was the most impactful outreach strategy. However, they had mixed results with email and social media outreach, and they felt a combination should be used in order to reach all student populations.
- Peer-to-peer outreach programs. Both administrators and student study participants noted that peer-to-peer interactions made discussions about food insecurity and CalFresh more comfortable and relatable.

- **Engagement with faculty and staff on campus**

Several participants noted that faculty and staff on campus have existing relationships with students and may be the first to notice when students might need help. One campus has established a specific system for staff referrals to basic needs programs, but this was not reported as common among campuses. Faculty could also facilitate exposure to basic needs programs during class time. This could be especially important for reaching students who participate in night classes and may not be on campus during the day when basic needs offices are open and/or conducting events on campus. In addition, department leaders can help with the LPIE application process and encourage their faculty and staff to be advocates for basic needs services.

- **Peer-to-peer programs**

Both students and administrators who participated in the focus groups agreed that students felt more comfortable interacting with other students. In addition, it is helpful to have both student workers in the office and members of student organizations to promote the program.

“So our peer-to-peer programs, I think, were much more successful just because as a student, you would connect more with another student because you think that they would have this collective understanding of how it is to, you know, maybe for the first time be seeking public benefits for help.”

“I think having an outward student-facing, peer-to-peer engagement helps make it a more accessible feeling to students who might otherwise be nervous talking to an administrator or a faculty member.”

Other characteristics of successful programs

Participants mentioned several other characteristics of effective campus programs:

- Adequate space and technology support (computers, tablets) to assist with the application process at events.

- Co-location of basic needs services.
- Connection/relationship with the county.
- Messaging and promotional materials that reach students.

Institution – County Relationship

The relationship between basic needs staff and county CalFresh staff was noted as a significant factor impacting accessibility of CalFresh for students – both positively and negatively.

• **Dedicated staff contact**

Study participants learned from their counterparts in schools around the state that schools had very disparate experiences with county CalFresh offices. Despite rules in place for each county to have a dedicated CalFresh staff for IHEs, the ability to connect with county offices varied considerably.

Those institutions that had a strong connection to a dedicated county staffer felt it improved outcomes, and those that lacked a close connection were frustrated with the situation. While county staff are not able to share information about specific student applications, participants felt that a strong relationship with county staff was helpful because basic needs staff had someone to call directly with questions and, with some counties, to be able to schedule an interview for a student. One basic needs office administrator with a strong county relationship shared the value of this relationship to their work. Another participant highlighted the variability across counties and the importance of improving procedures in county offices.

“The one that's super important is the connection and relationship with the basic needs office and the county. Just because for me, we have one to two county workers already assigned to our students. We also have a county liaison and their manager overall, and I feel like that has really worked for us. For example, our liaison will focus a lot on the policies. Just with the handbook coming out ... I really reach out to him to say, hey, I noticed this policy within the handbook. How are you interpreting it at the county? How can we interpret it to our students?”

“I think if you're trying to connect to a broken system, what are you doing? That's the breakdown at the county level – there's so much difference and disparity with how counties operationalize the policy.”

According to state rules, schools are supposed to have a designated county contact, but the experience reported by study participants varied. Some did not have a single point of contact whom they could call and discuss specific issues with, and some felt they were at times speaking to county staff who did not appear familiar with some program aspects that were specific to college applicants. Potential reasons for a lack of dedicated staff could be turnover or burden in counties serving a large number of IHEs

(such as Los Angeles), but that information was not collected in this study. The impact of a lack of dedicated staff, however, was lamented by study participants.

“That’s one of the struggles that we do have every day – just that we do get that information from students that their case manager isn’t up to date with the new exemptions and the new laws that are going into effect.”

There have been recent efforts to improve this situation.

“AB1326 [Arambula, 2020] established county liaisons for college campuses to work directly with, and to communicate with about, you know, if they’re having large events, they maybe should let the county know that there could be a hundred applications coming their way, or if there’s a trend in students being denied for a particular exemption ... they can kind of troubleshoot with the county. That’s really the goal of that county liaison. That list of county liaisons has been worked on over the last year and was just released yesterday. It’s [been] very hotly anticipated by our college campus partners. And I think that now that we’re going to have this list of clear leads on who to go to for things, that’s really going to expand those collaborations between college campuses and counties.”

Still, improving collaboration between campuses and counties is an area campus staff would like to see addressed.

“I think there’s a lot of progress to be made between the campuses and the counties, because the counties are really the gatekeepers in a way – not in a negative way at all. It’s their job to make sure that they are approving people who are eligible for benefits. That is their role. We’re just outreach; we’re here to educate and help with the process. But you know, especially since the pandemic, it’s been kind of hard for campuses and counties to partner. I would say overall, counties have been massively underpaid, understaffed, dealing with all of the public health emergency things, and dealing with a higher need for benefits than ever.”

- **Joint on-campus events**

Basic needs staff reported that having counties participate in on-campus events was extremely beneficial. For example, this often means being able to conduct the required interview right away, which has an added advantage of mitigating a problem of students not following through on their interview as a reason for denial of benefits. Respondents reported different experiences with the number of times throughout the year that the county came to campus and with whether the counties also conducted interviews on site. There are additional challenges for institutions that have students living in a different county from the school, as staff on campus are not able to sign up students who do not live within that county.

Challenges for Program Outreach and Connecting Students With CalFresh

Study participants believe that CalFresh access can have a significant impact on food insecurity, and therefore student outcomes. They are committed to doing what is within their purview to make the program a success, but they feel several obstacles inhibit their ability to help students.

- **County process**

First and foremost, study respondents pointed to the challenges of operating within the current system, which is controlled by the local county departments. As noted previously, experiences were mixed as to campus connection to the local CalFresh offices. Some institutions have dedicated contact(s) at the county office and praised having the ability to speak to someone with specific knowledge of student qualifications. For example, one institution reported that their county CalFresh representatives participated in on-campus events, which the staff believe significantly facilitated the enrollment process. Other schools experienced challenges in connecting with county offices.

One student respondent noted that the lack of a designated county liaison was a major frustration. “And I think, you know, the experience talking with the caseworker varies. I know I've had experiences where it's very simple and you know the interview is done quickly, but then there are others where the worker ... well, I'm thinking specifically of my last time renewing. My worker didn't really have experience with a student receiving CalFresh. So they had a lot of questions about, like, financial aid, and they just wanted me to submit a lot of additional paperwork that a previous caseworker didn't.”

- **Actionable data on student needs**

Having data on student needs is important for multiple reasons: to identify students who may be at risk for food insecurity, to measure the extent of the need on campus to scale programs, and to establish a baseline against which to measure success in programs designed to address needs. Participants in the study shared frustration over the lack of data to support their efforts on multiple fronts.

First, there is little information available on an institutional level. While students complete financial aid forms, this information is not shared with the basic needs offices or used to identify students who may qualify for CalFresh. Second, some institutions conduct student surveys that include questions assessing needs, but in some cases that information was not shared with the basic needs staff. Third, some basic needs centers have attempted to collect data on students who utilize their services, particularly an on-campus food pantry. However, this information was focused on what students request most in a food pantry, and the data are limited to responses from students using the service. Finally, some offices tried to learn from informal information

gleaned from student interactions, but again acknowledged that it was limited to the students who were already using services.

“So, we have over 40,000 students ... based on the 2018 initiative. {The} report says 46% of students are experiencing food insecurity. We are by no means meeting that [need]. So, I know just sort of anecdotally [that] we have more students that are probably eligible for CalFresh, but it's not something they have to report in any way, shape, or form. It's hard to gauge how many are actually accessing this benefit, might be aware of this benefit, or just don't know if they're even eligible at all.”

Staff lamented the lack of data to help them set goals and assess progress.

“I would say data in general can be challenging, just because the report explains that around 40% of students will be experiencing food insecurity or have experienced food insecurity at some point in their academic career. That data is relevant for that specific student population that filled out that survey and [did so] during that time, and data and students are constantly changing. And so we don't know if that number is changing. Essentially, our target is always moving, and we don't have data that readily tells us what our target is to understand if we're meeting that target.”

One respondent shared that the institution may ask about basic needs on a survey for incoming freshmen, but they weren't sure because such information was not provided to the basic needs office for their use.

“I believe right before they enter [the institution], or I think before every school year, there's a survey sent out, and I believe there's a question on it about basic needs and about if they have secure housing or secure food, but that's the only time I think it's ever really discussed.”

Respondents also want assistance in identifying students who may qualify for CalFresh benefits, and they questioned why there was not an ability to use financial aid applications to feed information to all basic needs programs, if not prepopulate the applications.

“The U.S. Department of Education has said you can use the Free Application for Federal Student Aid [FAFSA] for these other things, [so] why aren't you using them for other things? Why are you making students go to six different departments on your campus to tell them they're poor, when one person can help them, and ... they don't have to say it over and over again?”

- **Lack of data on student CalFresh applications and denials**

Basic needs staff would like to have information on which students are approved and which are not. A frustration echoed by all study respondents was the lack of transparent data from CalFresh on rejected applications. While composite data on reasons for rejection are available, including recently on the CalFresh Data Dashboard,¹⁰ staff would prefer to have the specific reasons for an individual applicant's rejection so they may

assist with reapplication, if warranted. The information could also help basic needs staff refine their screening process to identify eligible students.

Overall, participants expressed frustration and the belief that improving the institution-county connections would have a significant impact. “[School staff] can only get you to the door of the county, and the county is the only entity that can certify somebody and mail them an EBT card. And when we've got a participation rate across the board at only 70%, we've got broader issues in terms of an unhelpful CalFresh bureaucracy and enrollment system.”

- **Stigma and student perceptions of CalFresh**

In the survey, 8% of students reported that they would be embarrassed to use CalFresh. Study respondents were aware that students may feel a stigma about enrolling in a public program. Some also reported hearing students say that they didn't want to enroll because “there still is that stigma that students don't want to accept the help because they feel like they're not needy, they feel like they're taking resources away from somebody else, so they don't [apply].”

- **Immigration status**

While undocumented students, DACA students, and those on student visas do not qualify for CalFresh, some immigrants can qualify for CalFresh. Study participants noted that non-citizen students may not know that they qualify or may worry that applying for a public program could negatively impact citizenship applications for themselves or their families.

- **Institutional capacity (staffing)**

As previously noted, the number of staff dedicated to CalFresh and their workload varies by institution, which can pose challenges for retaining the institutional knowledge of successful strategies for all activities.

- **Changes in student eligibility**

Keeping up to date on the current rules governing CalFresh eligibility for students is a challenge for basic needs staff. Some participants shared that in county CalFresh offices without a specific institutional liaison, they encountered workers who were not always current on the regulations, and the campus staff would try to inform the county workers of the rules. This was mostly associated with the changes in qualifying LPIEs, which are approved on an ongoing basis and updated on the state website monthly.

Student circumstances can change with the school term, and this can impact eligibility for CalFresh and other programs. Staff are challenged to effectively communicate that students may consider reapplying depending on changes in their circumstances. One participant shared: “So I think sometimes it's these nuanced situations and trying to help students navigate like, you know, applying again or understanding their situation, so that way if they would like to apply again they're in a space that they can do so.”

Others echoed the sentiment: “Sometimes students just don't realize that maybe they were eligible for CalGrant A or B, and then suddenly they've exhausted that eligibility or their Pell eligibility. And some students really count on that, because they've been getting it every year and then suddenly it's not there or it's been reduced, or they've had a sudden change in their situation. They had to suddenly move, and now their costs went up and they have to do an income appeal, but they don't know how to do that.”

Sometimes, during the time in which a student is enrolled at an institution, they will experience changes in job status or living situation (e.g., no longer living with parents) that can impact whether they qualify for CalFresh. Staff need to remind students that these life events can impact status, even if they were denied in the past. “Your FAFSA is based on what your parents make. And a lot of students come in, and it's like, ‘Well, I'm not making that much. I'm the one who has to support myself.’ And then there are different factors that go into it. So, I feel like maybe [it would help] if they were to see their financial situations – for example, for rent, it's like, ‘Yeah, I can pay for it, but I'm making my last dollar stretch in order to be able to afford it.’”

- **Residency**

Because CalFresh applications are processed and approved by the county, it's possible to run up against the barrier of assisting students who do not live in the same county as the institution they attend. This could be particularly complicated for institutions that have campuses in multiple counties but have only established relationships with one county office. Additionally, some students do not have consistent housing, creating a further challenge to applying with a home address that identifies the county through which they should apply.

- **Time delays and timing of application**

Many students who shared their experiences in applying for CalFresh expressed frustration over not getting timely answers to questions. They also wished that the timeframe for applications to be submitted could be extended. At all campuses, basic needs staff noted being most busy with application assistance early in the fall term. Most also reported that this was the usual time for significant on-campus activities to promote the availability of CalFresh. However, some students run out of money later in the term, and only then consider applying.

The CalFresh application process calls for an interview to occur within 30 days of initial application. However, the process timeline can then be impacted if the application is incomplete and additional materials or verifications (such as LPIE confirmation) are needed, or if applications are started later in the term and timing is further complicated by final exams and holiday breaks. Several respondents shared that students often found scheduling an interview to be one of the biggest challenges and often caused further delays in the process. One reported hearing from students that scheduling an interview time can take three months, which can push students into a new term with new classes.

One student shared their frustrations: “You know, the whole process of contacting them [the county CalFresh office] – the wait times are very lengthy. And I have experienced that so many times when renewing my CalFresh. I remember trying to get my interview done before heading to class, and my wait time was like two hours, and they just kept pushing it, pushing it.”

- **Inexperience of some students**

Traditional college freshmen are 17–19 years of age and may not be aware of the existence of CalFresh or know that they can qualify on their own, away from their families. One student worker shared their own experience with starting college and ultimately needing assistance: “It has been really helpful, because at the beginning of my first year I was paying for my groceries, and it got really expensive and adding up and I was like, ‘Wow! I cannot believe I have to adult now, and this is just insane because these prices are so crazy.’ I’m spending this much money on food when I could be paying for my gas or could be doing something else with it. And it’s just kind of like a reality check that hits. When I got CalFresh, it was kind of like a weight taken off my shoulders because I’m like, OK, well, now I don’t need to worry about having grocery money or what I’m going to eat.”

- **Perceptions of college students as SNAP recipients**

Study participants emphasized the importance of changing perceptions of college students as SNAP recipients. Anecdotally, we were told about a Congressional hearing on the topic of SNAP expansion, and one of the members stated they did not want to be funding a college kid’s partying habit. One of our study respondents also advocated for the need to combat misconceptions about college students: “We know students are experiencing that [food insecurity], but I think society has this expectation of ‘You’re a college student, you’re supposed to be hustling and eat ramen.’”

Others echoed the sentiment. “I think if you talked to people 10, 20 years ago, you wouldn’t even have had that much support from groups that generally want to increase access to SNAP. They would say, ‘Well, I wouldn’t start with college students. They’re doing OK’—that kind of attitude. And that has changed a lot, I think, in the past 10 years, as people have really elevated and shone a Nourish California light on the lack of people being able to meet their basic needs, and the different face of who it is that’s going to college.”

Recommendations

As noted, all participants are eager to see the changes in CalFresh student eligibility contribute to reducing food insecurity on college campuses. In the interviews, we asked participants to share with us their recommendations for making the campus efforts more successful, and in the focus groups we asked for input on feasibility and prioritization of the recommendations. Finally, we shared the list with the study advisory board for validation of the findings and recommendations. This information was

synthesized into the following recommendations for institutions of higher education, policymakers, and SNAP program administrators.

For Institutions of Higher Education

- **Build strong working relationships with county SNAP offices.**

Work to establish mutually beneficial relationships between basic needs staff and CalFresh county workers. Make connections with all counties where students live, not just the county where the institution is located.

- **Improve messaging and visibility and normalize food benefits.**

All participants expressed the importance of “normalizing” CalFresh on campuses because this would help remove any stigma associated with participating in the program. They recommend discussing basic needs services in the same context as other campus offerings, such as health care, fitness centers, and student activities, or making SNAP application a part of the financial aid process and having SNAP benefits widely accepted on campus.

Some participants perceived success in promoting CalFresh as a part of financial aid availability, particularly during orientation. Further changes to messaging for the program would also be beneficial, according to respondents. “So just kind of changing the words a little bit has kind of made people want to approach our table and say, like, ‘Hey, I can get financial aid for food, too.’” Staff also recommend messaging that helps students identify the locations where EBT is accepted.

Additionally, staff recommended that all basic needs services be visible on campus, not hidden in hard-to-find locations. They saw benefits to co-locating services, but agreed that signage and promotional items should be widespread. Having knowledgeable faculty and staff speak about the programs was also seen as a helpful tool for normalizing the use of benefits as well as for increasing student awareness. Staff also called for ensuring that services are promoted and accessible for students who may not be on campus during the day. One student who worked in the office relayed that she did not even know that there was a basic needs center until she started working there.

Participants noted that there were two audiences for work on messaging. First, on campus, messaging would combat the stigma associated with being on a public program. Messaging is also needed for the policy and program leaders who can support successful campus programs to connect students with assistance.

Finally, messaging should improve students’ understanding of what it takes to qualify, including specifics on which courses qualified as LPIEs, and how to apply.

- **Display strong support from institutional leadership.**

College leaders can raise the visibility of the programs among staff and students. They should also promote cooperation among departments to improve processes needed to certify LPIEs, identify students who may qualify, and coordinate outreach efforts.

- **Build relationships between basic needs and financial aid offices.**

Staff would like to see improved information sharing with key offices such as financial aid and other basic needs services. Students who use one basic need service, such as transportation or housing, should be informed of or screened for potential participation in other programs like CalFresh. There is also an opportunity to improve student outreach with other information sent out from the financial aid office. One respondent felt that students were highly likely to open emails from a financial aid office, making it an excellent opportunity to communicate information about the availability of CalFresh.

Staff also hoped for an increase in information sharing from the financial aid office, which should already have some information on students who could potentially qualify for CalFresh. This information would be instrumental in helping the basic needs office be more efficient by increasing outreach to potentially eligible student populations.

- **Build and maintain staffing capacity.**

All respondents called for additional funding, particularly for staffing. Many offices were understaffed or only recently fully staffed; having sufficient staff, and maintaining them and their institutional knowledge, can play a major role in program success over time. Having enough staff is key for dealing with what is a complicated process, including having the capacity to provide individual assistance to clarify the application process to students. Retaining staff with institutional knowledge will also improve efficiency.

- **Utilize students in outreach efforts.**

Using peer-to-peer connections is particularly impactful in getting the message to students. This can also be helpful in normalizing receiving benefits as part of the college package. These connections can include both student workers in the basic needs office and students in campus organizations that partner with the office to promote the program.

- **Provide training to basic needs staff.**

Topics should include:

- Assisting with student interviews
- Improving the language for speaking with students in need
- Dealing with customized student circumstances
- Building a working relationship with the county office

- **Improve data available to basic needs staff.**

All participants called for better data from both the institution (student financial need) and the county (denials).

For Policymakers

The basic needs staff and student workers who participated in our study had recommendations that would likely require policy changes to SNAP rules, either federally or at the state level.

- **Facilitate identification and verification of student eligibility.**

Campuses and the CalFresh program could facilitate both the identification of potentially eligible students as well as the verification of their eligibility in several ways.

- 1) **Ask for consent to allow the sharing of students' financial aid information with basic needs offices.** Financial aid data would help basic needs staff better identify and provide outreach to students who may meet SNAP eligibility requirements. This would also allow basic needs staff to give students information on all federal and state programs they might qualify for, including CalFresh.
- 2) **Connect financial aid information directly to the CalFresh application system.** Offer students the option to allow the FAFSA to prepopulate the CalFresh application. In addition, the FAFSA could be used to identify other federal and state programs for which students are eligible.
- 3) **Link assistance programs so students can prequalify or partially qualify for programs with similar eligibility.** For example, a student receiving a Cal Grant could be notified that they likely qualify for SNAP, which has similar eligibility requirements. Or students who previously qualified for public assistance programs such as the free and reduced-price meal program could be identified as likely qualifying for other programs.

- **Expand CalFresh to cover more students.**

Many study participants recommend opening the program to all higher education students who meet the financial eligibility requirements, since attending a higher education institution increases employability. "You know, the EATS Act has been reintroduced in Congress, and, you know, federally, which would make attending an institution of higher education [in a] full-time capacity kind of meet the exemption for that student work rule. ... [It] ... would be a lot more simplified if students did not have to jump through the additional hoops that they have to jump through right now, like securing an exemption, providing the verification for that exemption."

Many participants recommended expanding the program to all income-eligible students regardless of immigration status. Undocumented and DACA students can only rely on the food pantries and campus meal assistance vouchers, since they are not eligible for CalFresh. There is also a desire to expand the program to cover international students.

One respondent shared: “We get a lot of international students trying to apply to CalFresh, especially because we have a lot of international students in our graduate programs. We advertise so much that they hear about the LPIEs and they will email us and they’ll be like, ‘I heard from my friend in Public Health 100 that we are eligible for CalFresh through the LPIEs, but I went on the website to apply and it said I can’t apply because I’m not a U.S. citizen.’”

- **Remove barriers to completing the interview requirement**

Both students and basic needs staff noted challenges around the interview requirement when applying for CalFresh. One study participant offered that the interview was the top barrier to students successfully enrolling in CalFresh and that there is a lot of concern about the students missing the appointment. “All you need to initiate an application ... is name, address, and signature. Don’t send someone a notice – especially a college student who is probably also working two jobs and doesn’t know where they’ll be next Wednesday all the time – saying ‘Hey, we need you to sit by your phone for six hours, and we’ll call you for your interview.’ That’s just not going to work.”

This respondent noted that not all counties have the same approach to interview scheduling and felt some had a better process: “Do it the way that a few counties do, which is you send them a notice saying, ‘Hey, call us any time for your interview. Here’s the number. If you don’t call us, we’ll call you at this time.’ Do it that way.”

Some participants suggested removing the interview requirement entirely. There was recognition that this is probably not an easy change, but that at least efforts should be made to improve the process.

“You mentioned eliminating the interview— that would be ideal. That’s going to be tough to do federally, but at least [make] sure that counties are implementing the best way possible to schedule those interviews, which is to let them be on demand, and don’t give people a six-hour window.”

For SNAP Program Administration

- **Support collaborative relationships between county CalFresh programs and academic institutions.**

Many study participants noted ample opportunity to improve the process for both application and recertifying if institutions and counties worked in partnership. Specific suggestions include:

- **Having dedicated county staff who are familiar with student-specific requirements**

Improved communication between the county offices and the institution would allow for the institution to intervene with students to ensure interviews and documentation adherence.

- **Data sharing**

Sharing information will help ensure that staff have the knowledge and data they need to help them better anticipate which students will qualify. This can streamline outreach efforts, improve the quality of applications, and potentially reduce the burden for CalFresh staff.

- **Streamline the renewal process.**

One recommendation is to extend the timeline for renewal. From one participant: “I would also add that if a FAFSA is good for one year, then for a student, possibly you would not need the verification at six months. Since we allow the FAFSA, as a federal program, to determine your need for a whole year, why would you need to reverify you were still not having any money halfway through when other federal programs allow it?”

- **Digitally modernize the process.**

Using modern technology for activities like signing and submitting paperwork and interview scheduling could facilitate the application process while addressing students’ concern that they do not have the time to apply for SNAP.

- **Increase transparency of application outcomes, particularly approvals and denials.**

Institutions would like to know when students are denied benefits. Currently, only aggregated data on approvals and denials of SNAP applications are available. This hinders the ability of basic needs staff to assist with appeals. Potential privacy concerns could be addressed by allowing students to opt in to share this information. Staff reported they were “able to work on a case-by-case basis for students who either got denied from CalFresh or got an allotment that they think that they didn't deserve, that they needed a larger allotment. They sit with them and help them through the appeal process. Usually, appeals are approved, but sometimes it takes a long time. So sometimes students have to wait two weeks to a month. That is two weeks to a month of not having access to food.

“I would love the county to share a little bit more about outcomes. I recognize there's privacy and there are issues around that, but hey, if they sign the little button that says, ‘I want to share with my school,’ because we have a referral link, they can include that information. I would love to get information on why a student was denied. What was the outcome? What amount of benefits? Did they submit an SAR7 eligibility status report to determine changes to benefits? If they didn't, I would love to have that data to kind of see what we could do, because if I see on that data return, ‘We're in Orange County, but I'm helping a lot of people from San Bernardino [County], L.A. County,’ what's going on? What's going on here? Or all the students that are saying that they have X eligibility are being denied. Why? Is that some sort of miscommunication, or are they missing documentation? What can I do to help better succeed in that way?”

Institutional staff know having this information would impact how they identify and work with students to make the program more successful. “So again, just to be able to identify trends, identify maybe gaps that I can fill. Can I do more targeted outreach? I'm seeing no people from our guardian scholars program applying, or how do I better work with our federal work-study office to share this messaging, etcetera. Or hey, county, anyone that's submitted only on X criteria is being denied – could you share what's happening here? Could you help me? Or why are students not turning in SAR7? Is it that you're not getting their documentation, are they not submitting the form? That would just be helpful, because I think we could then fill in those gaps, fill in that information, better communicate to students, do better outreach.”

Staff would like to have an impact beyond the number of applications submitted to the number of *approved* applications submitted, and they would like to be able to track any such impact. “But I think that the caveat to that is, we can submit applications all day long, but what we're really concerned about is not just the submission of an application. We're concerned about the approval of that application, which would then actually have an impact on that student's situation. So, you know, if we do 700 applications in a year, and only 100 are approved, that's still a huge gap. And why is that happening? I think that if we had that further data, we could explain why a little bit better.”

- **Improve assessments to identify eligible students.**

Empowering institutional staff with the knowledge and data to help them better anticipate the profile of a student who will qualify aids the staff in streamlining outreach efforts as well as in helping students submit better applications, potentially reducing the burden on CalFresh staff of reviewing incomplete or inappropriate applications.

- **Account for individual student circumstances.**

Many respondents noted that student populations were not homogenous and were increasingly nontraditional, but that the program did not have flexibility to meet the needs of all students. One said, “I'll speak very specifically to our campus, and I'm sure it's reflective of many other institutions. They're not a traditional student from 20, 30, 50 years ago. The challenges they're facing are much different. A lot of the students here have nuclear families that they live with and may be providing support to their family in the form of financial assistance. It may be with groceries. Or ... they have absolutely no family support. They're completely on their own, and even something as little as \$50 a month on CalFresh will go a long way.”

- **Provide institutional support.**

As noted, all the study sites were involved in the CHC program, and all sang its praises. They believe this program should be implemented in any other state that's considering similar expansion of the SNAP program. “For this work, it is so helpful to have an additional third-party organization, if you will, being the Center for Healthy Communities – interpreting, experiencing, working on things like just being that in-between. And so maybe my recommendation for other states is not to do it this way or do it that way, but

really recognize that sometimes this third-party organization is extremely helpful in being able to straddle what universities or higher education needs are with whatever their state or county requirements, policies, and pieces are.”

Study Limitations

As noted, all students who participated in the focus groups were CalFresh recipients, so they may be predisposed to positive opinions of the program and application process. While we asked whether or not they felt there was a stigma to participating in a public program, their participation may skew their perception.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several topics would benefit from additional research. Basic needs offices often operate under typical business hours, that is, weekdays during the day. The best ways to reach students who are not regularly on campus during weekday, daytime operating hours are unclear. What is the difference in outcomes? More research is also needed to understand effective approaches to improving the relationship between institutions of higher education and county offices as well as to creating strategies for streamlining the application process.

In addition, longitudinal research is needed to better understand longer-term impacts. For example, how does accessing food assistance programs impact completing college or future success? What are the implications for students concerned about access to food who apply for CalFresh and get denied?

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⁷ For additional information about the Center for Health Communities at Chico State, see these web sites: <https://chcchicostate.org/about/> and <https://calfreshoutreach.org/>

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