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Easing Food Insecurity Among College Students: CalFresh Recommendations for Campus Programs

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Introduction

Hunger and food insecurity are significantly higher among college students (44%) than among U.S. households (13%).¹ Not only does food insecurity affect physical and mental health, but it can also influence student achievement and graduation rates. Addressing food insecurity on campus can have a dramatic impact on the health and educational outcomes of students. The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), called CalFresh in California, is a primary means of addressing food insecurity.

We partnered with basic needs offices at six campuses – UCLA, Cal State Fullerton, UC Davis, Fresno State, Los Angeles Mission College, and Napa Valley College – to learn from those on the front lines about the characteristics of effective programs, challenges to implementation, and recommendations for building successful programs and promoting student use. The research team conducted interviews with staff and student workers of campus basic needs offices, surveyed current students at

1 in 2 (50%)

college students surveyed reported experiencing food insecurity, including **28%** who skipped meals because they couldn't afford food.

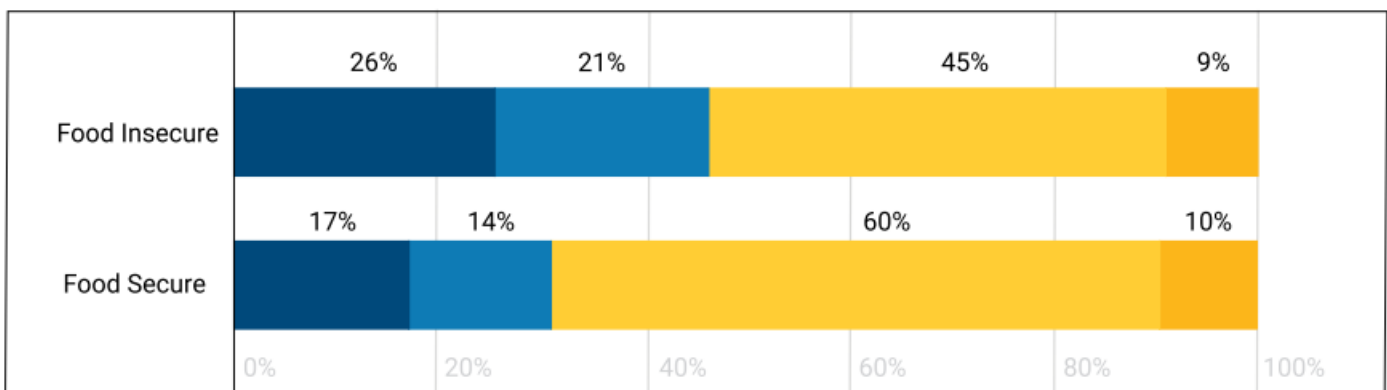
these campuses, and held focus groups with students and basic needs office staff.

Findings: High Rates of Food Insecurity Among California College Students

Overall, half (50%) of college students surveyed reported experiencing food insecurity, including 28% who skipped meals because they couldn't afford food (data not shown). Although students experiencing food insecurity were more likely than food-secure students to use CalFresh and to have heard of the program, nearly 45% of food-insecure students had never used CalFresh, and 9% had never heard of it (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1 / Use and Awareness of CalFresh Among College Students by Food Security Status

■ Use CalFresh ■ Used it previously ■ Heard of it but never used it ■ Never heard of it



Note: Totals are more than 100% because of rounding.

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



Among students experiencing food insecurity, half reported they did not use CalFresh because they believed they were ineligible, and 28% reported not knowing how to access the program. Other common reasons for not using CalFresh included not having time to access the program, feeling embarrassed, and not having heard of it (data not shown).

The [full report](#) – with study design, findings, and all recommendations for institutional programs, SNAP administrators, and policymakers – is available online.

Recommendations for Campus Programs

Our study participants made the following recommendations for campus leaders and staff to help address food insecurity among students in higher education:

- **Support and use peer-to-peer programs.** Involving student workers and student-led groups in promotional activities and application assistance promotes student comfort and engagement. This also aids in normalizing food assistance by reducing stigma.
- **Increase and stabilize staffing in basic needs offices.** Programs require sufficient staffing to adequately support students seeking assistance. Retaining staff with institutional knowledge of the rules and processes to support food-insecure students improves a program's capacity to effectively address student needs.

- **Foster strong support from campus leadership.** Campus leaders are well positioned to raise awareness of these programs among staff and students. They can also promote cooperation among departments to improve the processes for certifying programs to meet student exemption requirements for CalFresh, identify students who may qualify, and coordinate outreach efforts.
- **Promote basic needs services similarly to other student benefits.** Presenting basic needs services alongside amenities such as health centers, workout facilities, and student activity centers can increase awareness and help normalize these services.
- **Include qualifications in promotional messaging.** Eligible students are more likely to apply if they feel there is a chance they will be approved, and increased understanding of eligibility requirements could help improve the quality of applications.
- **Establish a strong and mutually beneficial partnership with county CalFresh offices.** These collaborations can increase an academic institution's capacity to help with student applications – for example, by providing reminders for students to follow through on interviews. CalFresh staff participation in on-campus events can also ease the application process.
- **Build relationships between basic needs and financial aid offices.** Increased information sharing between these key offices can significantly facilitate identification of and outreach to qualified students. Students who use one basic need service should be informed about or screened for potential participation in CalFresh, as well as other available social services. Including basic needs information along with notices from the financial aid office – which students are likely to read – can also improve outreach.
- **Improve data available to basic needs staff.** Better data from the campus administration can aid in the identification of food-insecure students and can help basic needs staff in conducting screenings and providing application assistance.

Endnote

- 1 Nazmi A, Martinez S, Byrd A, Robinson D, Bianco S, Maguire J, Crutchfield RM, Condrón K, Ritchie L. 2019. A Systematic Review of Food Insecurity Among U.S. Students in Higher Education. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* 14(5): 725–740. doi: 10.1080/19320248.2018.1484316

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