

January 2025

Easing Food Insecurity Among College Students: CalFresh Recommendations for Policymakers

AJ Scheitler, Susan Babey, Tabashir Nobari, Joelle Wolstein, Jarrod Erdman



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.

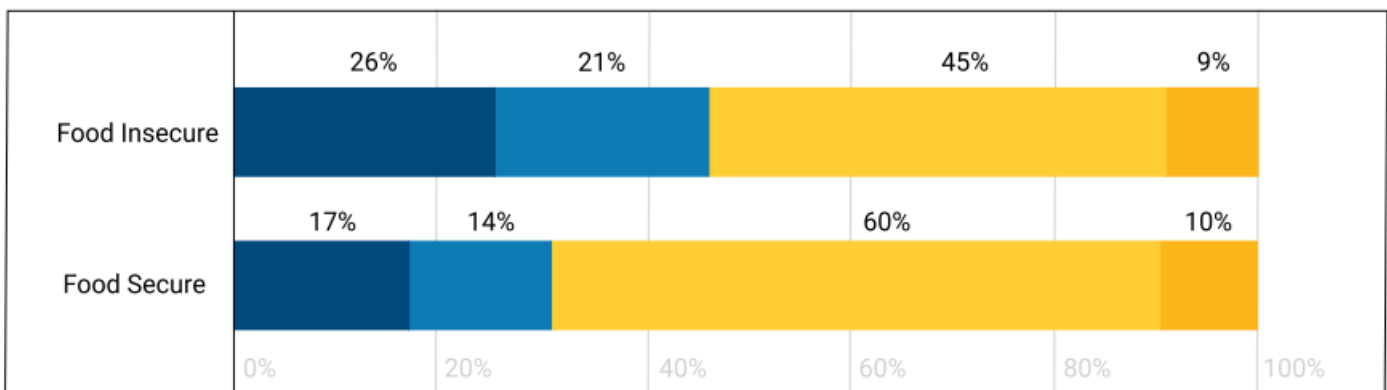
these campuses, and held focus groups with students and basic needs office staff.

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).

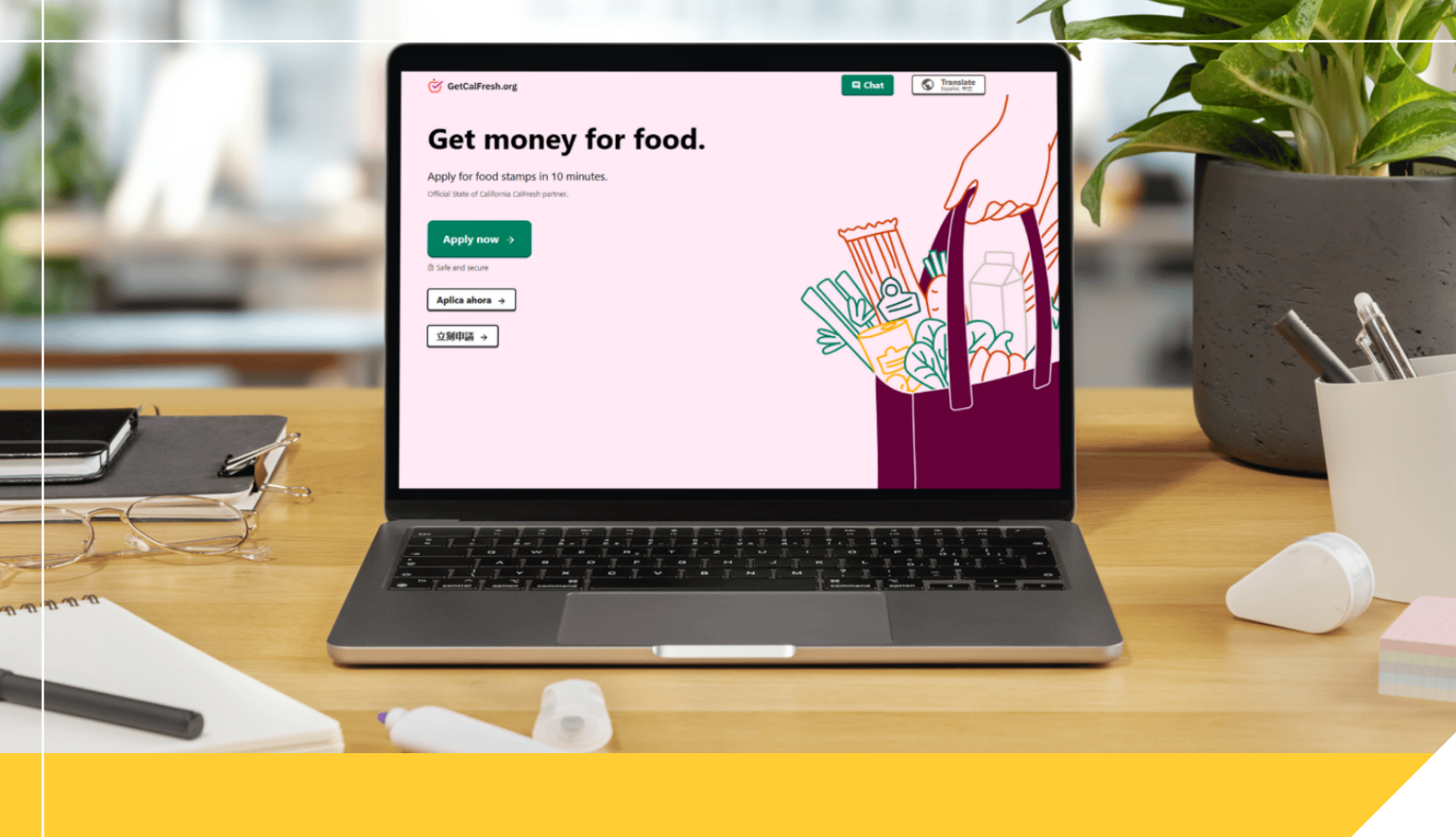
Exhibit 1 / Use and Awareness of CalFresh Among College Students by Food Security Status

■ 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 Policymakers

Our study participants made the following recommendations for policymakers to help address food insecurity among students in higher education:

- **Facilitate identification and verification of student eligibility for CalFresh.** Campuses and the CalFresh program could facilitate both the identification of potentially eligible students and verification of their eligibility in several ways.
 - » **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 extend 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.

- » **Connect financial aid information directly to the CalFresh application system.** Offer students the option to allow the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (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.
- » **Link assistance programs to allow students to prequalify or partially qualify for programs with similar eligibility requirements.** For example, a student receiving a Cal Grant could be notified that they likely qualify for SNAP, which has similar eligibility requirements. Also, 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 more students.** Many study participants recommend opening the program to all students in higher education who meet the financial eligibility requirements, since attending an institution of higher education increases employability. Also, many participants recommended expanding the program to all income-eligible students regardless of immigration status. Under current federal regulations, undocumented and DACA students are ineligible for CalFresh and can only utilize food pantries and campus meal assistance vouchers. California could expand access to such students through the California Food Assistance Program (CFAP). The state made similar changes when expanding access to food assistance for income-eligible older adults regardless of citizenship status.²
- **Provide external support and resources for campus basic needs programs.** California funds the Center for Healthy Communities to provide resources and support to schools for program development, rule interpretation, and identification of programs that meet student exemption requirements for CalFresh. Campus-based staff said the outside support is extremely beneficial and should be expanded in California and introduced in other states. One staff member said that other states could also benefit from such a third-party organization to straddle the divide between the needs of institutions of higher education and existing state or county requirements and policies.

Endnotes

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

2 California Immigrant Policy Center. 2024. Food4All Bill. <https://caimmigrant.org/what-we-do/policy/health-public-benefits/food4all-bill/>

ISSN 2691-7475

10960 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 1550
Los Angeles, California 90024
Phone: 310-794-0909
Fax: 310-794-2686
Email: chpr@ucla.edu
healthpolicy.ucla.edu

The UCLA Center for Health Policy Research
is part of the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health.

The analyses, interpretations, conclusions, and views
expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors
and do not necessarily represent the UCLA Center for
Health Policy Research, the Regents of the University
of California, or collaborating organizations or funders.

FS2025-2
Copyright © 2025 by the Regents
of the University of California.
All Rights Reserved.

Editor-in-Chief: Ninez A. Ponce, PhD, MPP



Read this
publication
online

