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Easing Food Insecurity Among College Students: CalFresh Recommendations for SNAP Administrators

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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

Food Insecure	26%	21%	45%	9%
Food Secure	17%	14%	60%	10%
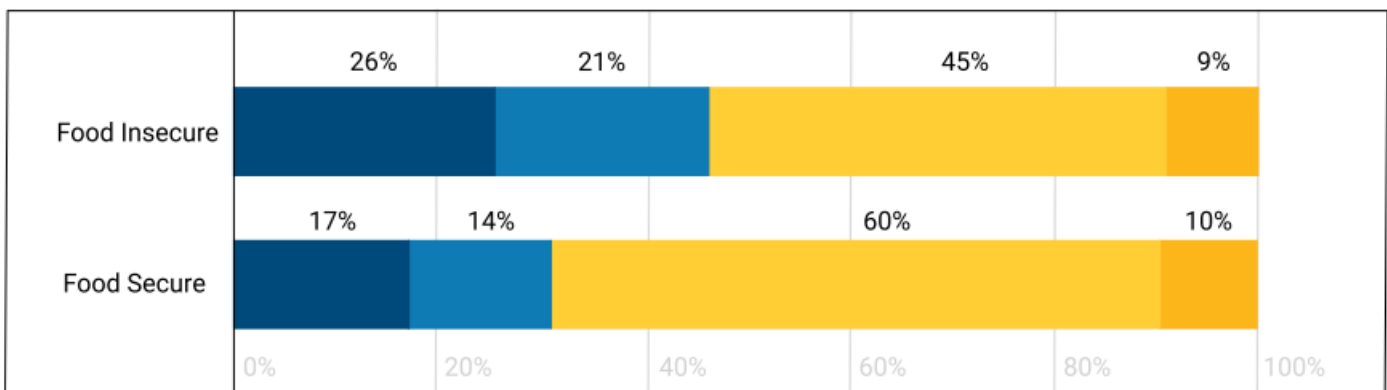
Note: Totals are more than 100% because of rounding.
Source: UCLA-CSUF Survey on Student Food Access and Assistance Programs

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 SNAP Administrators

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

- **Support collaborative relationships between county CalFresh programs and academic institutions.** Many study participants noted ample opportunity to improve the processes for applying and recertifying if institutions and counties worked in partnership. Specific suggestions include:

  » Dedicate SNAP program staff who are familiar with student-specific requirements.

  » Support on-campus events to answer questions and assist with applications.

  » Share information so staff will have the knowledge and data they need to better anticipate which students will qualify. This can streamline outreach efforts, improve the quality of applications submitted, and potentially reduce the burden for CalFresh staff.

- **Build relationships with institutions in neighboring counties.** Students must apply for CalFresh in their county of residence, which may be different from the county in which their campus is located. Because of this, students often require assistance from other county offices.

- **Digitally modernize the application process.** Using modern technology for activities like signing and submitting paperwork and scheduling interviews could help facilitate the process.

- **Increase transparency of application outcomes to applicants and institutional staff, particularly regarding reasons for application denials.** Currently, only aggregated data on approvals and denials of SNAP applications are available, hindering 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 that at present, they are "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, [and] they needed a larger allotment. 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."

- **Facilitate resources or training for campus staff to conduct student assessments.** Knowledgeable staff can help target students who are more likely to qualify, which can both reduce the number of applications filed and improve the quality of those that are submitted.

Endnote

1 Nazmi A, Martinez S, Byrd A, Robinson D, Bianco S, Maguire J, Crutchfield RM, Condron 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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