

Student Supports: The Role of Social Safety-Net Programs in College Student Success



Summary

Across California, many college students struggle to meet their basic needs while attending school. Because colleges and universities already work with students on financial aid, they are well-situated to help connect students to safety-net benefits. However, data limitations have historically been a large obstacle to assessing eligibility and then encouraging eligible students to apply and enroll.

To overcome these data limitations, the California Policy Lab (CPL) worked with the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC), the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), the University of California Office of the President (UCOP), the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), and the California Department of Education (CDE) to link data from these agencies and create the Student Supports database. To maintain student privacy, CPL developed a process to link individual-level data from multiple agencies without receiving personally identifiable information (PII), in which agencies first encrypt the PII using a hashing technique before transferring any data.

As part of this comprehensive research project, CPL first focused on how many eligible students receive CalFresh benefits, before turning to other safety-net and financial aid programs.

This cross-institution dataset will enable our team to:

- estimate CalFresh eligibility and take-up among the college student population in California,
- measure continuity in CalFresh participation and eligibility in the transition from K-12 to college,
- examine whether receiving safety-net benefits impacts outcomes like graduation, and
- better understand whether administrative data could be a resource for future outreach to increase the number of students receiving benefits.

Four project phases

Phase 1 - Landscape scan and data linkage

The Student Supports database was created in 2021 and a landscape scan to better understand common barriers to participation was completed in 2021, see [Addressing the barriers college students face when accessing CalFresh food benefits](#). CPL also conducted a landscape scan in 2022 to understand existing outreach efforts at colleges throughout the state.

Phase 2 - Estimate take-up

CPL produced descriptive estimates of CalFresh participation rates in 2022 - see [California Community College and University of California student participation in CalFresh food benefits](#) and will simulate eligibility measures for CalFresh, using income and other qualification requirements, to analyze students' take-up rates (expected in 2024). CPL will also study how the transition from high school to college relates to participation in and eligibility for CalFresh benefits (expected 2025).

Phase 3 - Estimate impact

CPL will examine the relationship between CalFresh participation and outcomes among college students, including persistence in college, progress toward a certificate or degree, academic achievement, and credential completion (expected in 2024).

Phase 4 - Evaluate promising outreach efforts

CPL will identify opportunities to evaluate promising or innovative CalFresh outreach efforts, and seek to support our partners' and other stakeholders' efforts to connect more eligible students to CalFresh using administrative data. See recent experiments where we tested various types of "nudges" to alert college students about their eligibility and encourage them to apply: [Outreach to California College Students Encouraged Them to Apply for CalFresh](#).

Data

The Student Supports Database currently includes the following data from Academic Year (AY) 2010-11 through 2021-22.

CDE: includes enrollment information, student demographics, test scores, course grades, and graduation outcome.

CDSS: includes CalFresh enrollment and issuance data. Through CDSS, we have also obtained data on CalFresh applications via [GetCalFresh.org](#) from 2019-2020.

CSAC: includes FAFSA data including student and parent income, and CalGrant application and payment data.

CCCCO: includes enrollment information, course data, student characteristics and program participation, and outcomes including number of credits earned, grade point average, and completion of a degree, credential or transfer to a four-year institution.

UCOP: includes enrollment information, major, student characteristics and more limited program participation, and outcomes including number of credits earned, grade point average, and degree completion.

Eligibility for CalFresh among college students

CalFresh eligibility rules for students are complex and generally require them to meet additional criteria relative to non-students, potentially dissuading eligible students from participating. Students must first meet the citizenship requirements and household income limits that apply to CalFresh applicants generally; once these requirements are met, students must qualify for one of a number of exemptions to be eligible to participate in the program. Examples of exemptions include receiving a Cal Grant A or B, working twenty or more hours a week, having a child under the age of twelve, participating in a campus program to increase employability, receiving CalWORKs, or planning to not enroll in school the following term. During the pandemic, exemptions were expanded to make accessing benefits easier. For more information on eligibility, see the diagram on page 7 in CPL's recent brief: [Addressing the barriers college students face when accessing CalFresh food benefits](#). For pandemic-era policy changes, see CPL's [previous research](#) with partners as part of outreach to inform students about the eligibility changes and to encourage them to apply for CalFresh.

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