

Item 10

(Information Item)

Update on Cal Fresh Report

SUMMARY:

In response to the growing student hunger crisis unfolding on college campuses throughout California and the nation, the California Student Aid Commission convened a workgroup last year to study why low-income college students have had limited success accessing CalFresh benefits and recommend policy solutions that increase access to these vital food resources. The Commission, in collaboration with WestEd and members of the workgroup, just released a new report titled *Proper Nutrition Equals College Success: Making CalFresh work for students*. The report includes several state and federal policy recommendations to streamline and open access to CalFresh benefits for college students.

RECOMMENDATION:

This is an information item; no action is needed.

BACKGROUND:

California's postsecondary students over the last decade have struggled more than ever to afford the multitude of expenses associated with pursuing a higher education. This has been particularly true for students from low-income backgrounds, first generation college-going students, and new immigrants. The real cost of college includes tuition and fees as well as non-tuition living expenses, such as housing and food.

The issue of food insecurity has become a persistent challenge across colleges and universities nationally. In California, the challenge is even more acute due to the higher cost of living associated with the state. The problem is reaching crisis proportions at campuses throughout California and the nation, sending higher education leaders and policy makers searching for ways to help address student hunger.

The problem has only worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic. Students have fallen victim to sudden changes in the economy and loss of jobs. A Commission [COVID-19 Survey](#) administered in May 2020 revealed that 7 out of 10 students lost some or all of their income. Since the pandemic hit, many college students have chosen to forego a college education because of its prohibitive costs and the need to work. According to one study, 34 percent of students know someone who has dropped out of college due to food insecurity during the pandemic.¹ College enrollment declines in the past year

¹ [Chegg research](#), Hunger and Covid-19: Food Insecurity Amongst College Students in 2020, November 2020.

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bear this out, especially at community colleges, the segment that enrolls the lowest income students.

The federal government offers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known as CalFresh in California, and is one of the largest anti-hunger programs in the world. This benefit also is available to college students struggling with hunger. However, students have great difficulty accessing these benefits because of numerous hurdles. Only a fraction of California students living in poverty apply for and receive CalFresh benefits. CalFresh benefits are entirely paid for by federal funds. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of California students living in poverty would likely be eligible for CalFresh benefits but do not apply, leaving millions of federal dollars on table that they could otherwise use to pay for food.

Last fall 2020, the California Student Aid Commission convened a statewide workgroup to examine how to increase college student access to CalFresh benefits. The workgroup was composed of broad cross-section of stakeholders from higher education, students California Department of Social Services, local country Health and Human Services Agencies, Legislative Staff, anti-poverty policy experts, researchers and CSAC Commissioners and staff. The workgroup took a student-centered design approach to understand how the student experiences the CalFresh county delivery system and process. This perspective offers a comprehensive look at the various chokepoints in the process that cause students to get lost in the system or give up because of onerous requirements, many of which only apply to college students.

The purpose of this report is to offer state and federal policymakers a set of actionable policy recommendations that help increase college student participation in the CalFresh program. The report especially focused on streamlining the system for students and creating expedited eligibility for students are already enrolled in other poverty programs. The recommendations propose short-term and long-term solutions and identify whether the recommended actions would be addressed at the state, federal, or administrative policy levels.

This work was made possible by a generous grant from the College Futures Foundation (CFF). CFF has been a leader in advocating for college affordability and examining ways to leverage public benefits and other funds to help students cover their full cost of attendance, including non-tuition costs, such as basic needs.

RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S):

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ATTACHMENT(S):

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