

BACKGROUND

In fall 2020, the California Student Aid Commission (Commission) convened a workgroup of higher education leaders, food advocates, students, and county/state agency administrators to examine ways to increase college student access to CalFresh (California's version of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP]). The [workgroup's final report](#) identified that a significant barrier to college students' access to CalFresh is their limited awareness of the program's existence and application process. Additionally, these students are already sharing a significant amount of data with federal and state agencies as they submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

As the total cost of attendance at colleges and universities continue to grow, ensuring that students of low-income backgrounds are provided with the information and resources necessary to meet their basic needs is of great importance. It is incumbent upon federal, state, and local agencies to coordinate efforts to not only inform students about their potential eligibility for the critical support available through programs like SNAP.

ISSUE

The Commission's 2019 [Student Expenses and Resources Survey](#), found that in any given month, 1 in 3 college students experience food insecurity. Additionally, a June 2020 [CalFresh Student Data Report](#) by the California Department of Social Services finds that of the 416,000-689,000 students likely eligible for CalFresh, only 127,360 are estimated to annually receive CalFresh, leaving up to 560,000 potentially eligible California students without this assistance to access nutritious food.

This large access gap in California is a result of many different barriers that students face throughout the application process. One of the key and foundational barriers is the structural *information gap* between students (especially first-year students) and government benefit programs that do not have an established communication structure. While recent guidance from the Department of Education made clear that institutions of higher education can notify students about their potential eligibility for SNAP based on financial aid application data, this still misses an opportunity to better leverage the access point that FAFSA can provide students into other forms of support.

RECOMMENDED SOLUTION

The Commission recommends that the FAFSA include an opt-in question where applicants can simply mark that they consent to having their information shared with local, state, and federal public agencies for purposes of receiving information or application assistance for benefit programs that they may be eligible for, including but not limited to SNAP.

In 2021, Compton College executed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) to allow for an exchange of data toward the goal of facilitating student enrollment into CalFresh. Compton College utilized its own dataset to identify students that appeared likely to qualify for CalFresh

based on the financial information provided in their FAFSA, then utilized a survey method to ask if they would consent to having their information shared with DPSS. In February 2022, Compton College sent the first data file to DPSS as part of this collaboration, providing information for approximately 500 consenting students. DPSS then contacted students and solicited the additional information necessary to generate an application for CalFresh, before sending back to Compton College data on which students had successfully been enrolled into CalFresh. This work was supported through the hiring of student services advisors to work directly on the initiative. Within the first few months of the data exchange, there was a 10% increase in the number of Compton College students that were enrolled in CalFresh. Compton College will utilize data on students enrolled in CalFresh to inform them about other benefits and help them re-certify their CalFresh eligibility. Compton College and LA DPSS staff meet quarterly to coordinate efforts. They initiated another data exchange in summer 2022.

While Compton College students have already benefitted from campus leadership that prioritized student basic needs and access to resources, a more systematic approach would enable county and state agencies to serve more students in this fashion. **By adding a single and straightforward opt-in question to the FAFSA, college students would be granted the opportunity to receive information and/or application assistance directly from agencies administering benefits that already exist and students are likely entitled to, but may not know about.** Consent provided by students via the FAFSA could also enable state agencies to enter into data sharing relationships with state or local human services agencies to avoid the need for multiple data connections between a county or state benefits administrator and each individual institution of higher education

Leveraging the FAFSA, which already collects much of students' income and demographic data commonly required for benefit programs, to serve as a gateway application to not just financial aid, but also to benefit programs like SNAP. This will help more students learn about opportunities to meet their basic needs and address the total cost of attendance beyond tuition and fees. Establishing an opt-in question like this would also promote government efficiency where application data from one source (the FAFSA) can be distributed to others for the same shared purpose of student success and support. As federal agencies seek to establish "no wrong door" policies for beneficiaries, utilizing the data from existing, widely utilized applications like the FAFSA is a common-sense first step.