

# FRESH IDEAS

## FOR CALFRESH: College Edition



**FOOD  
PANTRY  
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**STUDENT  
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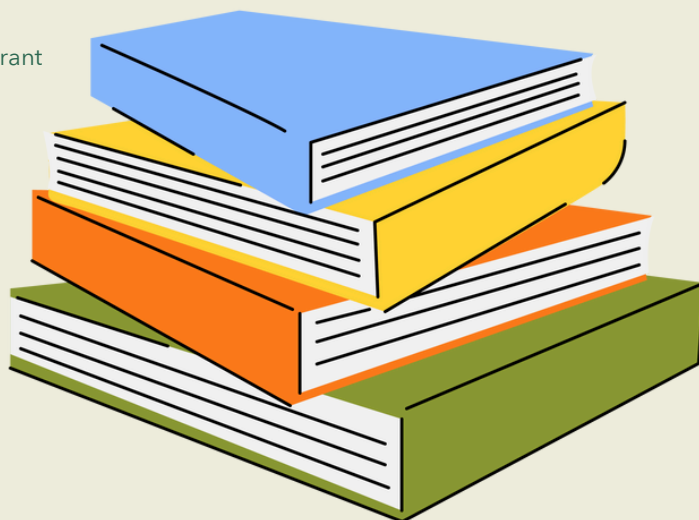
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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

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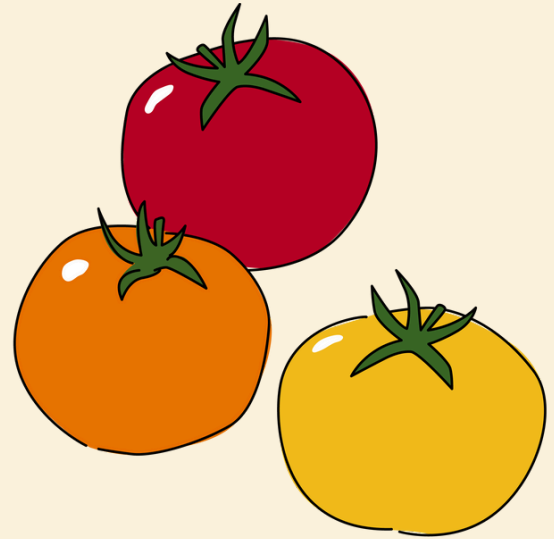
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## GRAPHIC DESIGN

### SOME STUDIO

\*A special thank you to all the students, staff, and faculty involved in this project. Your continued support and valuable input have been essential to making this work possible.\*

# Executive **SUMMARY**



**Food insecurity is a significant issue among college students, particularly those from low-income and immigrant backgrounds. CalFresh, California’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), provides monthly food benefits to low-income individuals and families to help them afford nutritious meals.**

While programs like CalFresh offer critical support, many eligible students face barriers to enrollment, such as a lack of awareness, concerns about eligibility, and the complexity of the application process.

Food insecurity poses a serious threat to students’ health, well-being, and academic success. Addressing it requires a coordinated, comprehensive response from colleges, policymakers, and community partners. **This report, “Fresh Ideas for CalFresh: College Edition,” builds on our original 2022 Fresh Ideas for CalFresh report and offers a set of policy recommendations aimed at expanding access to CalFresh, improving on-campus food resources, and breaking down the systemic barriers students face in seeking support.** Focused specifically on college students in Los Angeles, this edition highlights persistent enrollment challenges and gaps in access to nutritious food—and outlines actionable solutions to help close those gaps.

Despite the availability of CalFresh, many eligible college students are unaware of the program or struggle to navigate the application process. Students from immigrant backgrounds may also have concerns about their eligibility due to misconceptions about public charge rules, leading them to avoid seeking assistance. Furthermore, the complexity of the CalFresh application, marked by confusing paperwork and unclear instructions, discourages students from completing the process. These obstacles contribute to persistent food insecurity, which negatively impacts students' physical and mental health, as well as their academic performance.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (CONTINUED)

This report is based on a survey conducted with 346 students across 10 college campuses in Los Angeles. The survey results highlighted a widespread lack of awareness and understanding about CalFresh, as well as significant barriers to enrollment within this convenience sample. The data provides critical insights into the challenges students face in accessing food assistance programs, which further underscores the need for comprehensive solutions to address food insecurity on college campuses.

In addition to the survey, 34 students across 10 institutions were trained as CalFresh Champions. These students received training on the CalFresh program to become peer educators who could share information with their fellow students and help them navigate the application process. This peer-to-peer approach has proven to be effective in increasing awareness and participation in food assistance programs, as students are more likely to trust and engage with their peers.

**However, food insecurity does not affect all college students in the same way.** The structure, resources, and student demographics of different types of higher education institutions shape both the challenges students face and the best strategies for addressing them. Community colleges, private institutions, and public universities each have distinct student populations and institutional capacities, requiring tailored solutions to address food insecurity effectively.

### COMMUNITY COLLEGES

serve a large proportion of low-income, working, and non-traditional students, many of whom struggle with housing and food insecurity. Community colleges receive significantly less funding per student compared to public four-year institutions. These institutions often lack the same level of financial and programmatic resources as four-year universities, making on-campus food assistance programs and external partnerships critical.

### PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

are often assumed to have wealthier student bodies, but many students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds or on significant financial aid, face food insecurity. The high cost of tuition and living expenses can create significant financial strain, making food assistance programs just as necessary as they are in public institutions. However, stigma and a lack of institutional recognition of food insecurity can make it harder for students to access support.

### PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

generally have larger student populations with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. While these institutions often have more resources, the scale of need can be overwhelming. Expanding awareness, streamlining enrollment in food assistance programs, and improving coordination between student services and government agencies are key strategies for addressing food insecurity at public universities.

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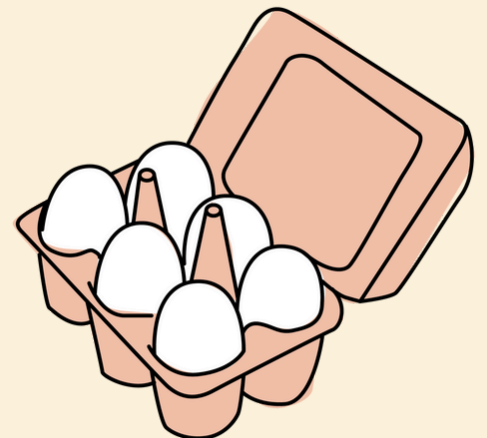
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# Letter from the **DIRECTOR** of Policy Coalitions

In March 2022, the Los Angeles Food Policy Council released Fresh Ideas for CalFresh, a report aimed at centering community perspectives in an effort to better understand barriers and opportunities to improve CalFresh enrollment and participation. In addition to revealing key themes pertaining to improvement, the report highlighted the need for increased targeted outreach to priority populations. College students were one of those groups. While Los Angeles County has historically struggled with enrolling all CalFresh eligible people into the program, political support from the LA County Board of Supervisors, systemic improvements within county departments and advocacy and outreach from CBOs, CalFresh enrollment amongst individuals who are food insecure has increased significantly.

Despite these overall gains, college students continue to experience concerning low enrollment among eligible students. Findings by the California Policy Lab estimate that only 26% of eligible community college students and 15% of eligible UC students participate in CalFresh. (CA Policy Lab, 2024). A recent statewide report by UCLA with data gathered from six college campuses revealed half of students surveyed reported experiencing food insecurity and over a quarter reported skipping meals ([Scheitler, 2025](#)). Our subsequent report: Fresh Ideas for CalFresh: College Edition, enabled us to explore food insecurity and CalFresh across ten different higher education institutions within Los Angeles. By collaborating with students across community colleges, as well as four year public and private universities we gained a deeper understanding of both the institutional and public policy successes and opportunities at play.

Historically, federal rules pertaining to determining college student eligibility for SNAP has left many students ineligible and unable to access this important safety net benefit unless they could demonstrate specific exemptions. During the COVID-19 pandemic Congress expanded exemptions so that students on Federal Work Study could qualify for benefits as well as those who reported zero family contributions on their FAFSA. These two exemptions were sunsetted in April 2023. Advocates continue to push for exemptions of this nature to become permanent.

Promising policy solutions are being proposed across the policy spectrum to improve SNAP/CalFresh accessibility for college students by addressing eligibility, enrollments and EBT retail outlets on college campuses. At the federal level we have seen legislation such as the past EATS Act (Gomez) and the current Closing the College Hunger Act (Hayes) proposed. The CA legislature is simultaneously exploring this issue through legislation such as through AB 2033(Reyes), SB 79 (Arambula), and SB 761(Ashby).

As we look ahead to continuing to address this priority issue as a way to ensure Good Food for college students, we hope the data gathered directly from students by students across higher education institutions in this report will generate opportunities to advocate for and implement multi-level interventions with targeted strategies to meet the needs of students and the various institutions serving them.

**Ana-Alicia Carr**  
**Director of Policy & Coalitions**

# INTRODUCTION

## Background of the Problem

Food insecurity in the Los Angeles region is a persistent challenge, affecting a diverse population across multiple age groups, races, ethnicities, genders, and educational backgrounds.

Los Angeles County is home to over 10 million residents, with nearly one in four experiencing some level of food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> Factors such as high housing costs, stagnant wages, and economic instability contribute to food insecurity, particularly among low-income households, immigrants, and communities of color.<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the issue, leading to a rise in food assistance needs.<sup>3</sup> While food banks, pantries, and nonprofit organizations play a crucial role in providing emergency food relief, systemic solutions like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known as CalFresh in California, offer long-term support to address food insecurity.<sup>4</sup>

CalFresh is designed to provide financial assistance to purchase groceries through the form of a debit card, improving the diets and overall well-being of low-income individuals and families.<sup>5</sup> Studies show that participation in SNAP significantly reduces food insecurity, improves health outcomes, and stimulates local economies by increasing spending at grocery stores and farmers' markets.<sup>6</sup>

According to the [A Food Policy Council's Fresh Ideas for CalFresh Report](#) published in 2022,

CalFresh has been instrumental in supporting food-insecure populations, particularly in communities with high poverty rates.<sup>7</sup> However, despite its benefits, not everyone who qualifies for CalFresh is enrolled in the program, leaving millions of dollars in potential food assistance unused.

One finding from the first LAFPC Fresh Ideas for CalFresh Report, indicated that an underserved group in CalFresh participation is college students.<sup>8</sup> While many students face financial hardship due to tuition, rent, and other expenses, they often struggle to access food assistance because of strict eligibility requirements and administrative barriers.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, misinformation, stigma, and lack of institutional support further deter students from applying. To improve access to CalFresh for college students, policymakers, universities, and advocacy organizations must work together to increase awareness and streamline the application process. Colleges can play a significant role by integrating CalFresh enrollment assistance into financial aid offices, student resource centers, and campus food pantries. Expanding exemptions for students who experience financial hardship, simplifying eligibility criteria, and improving outreach campaigns can also boost participation.

By making CalFresh more accessible to students and other underserved populations, Los Angeles can take a crucial step toward reducing food insecurity and ensuring that all residents have access to nutritious, affordable food.

For a detailed overview of trends in food insecurity and CalFresh participation in the region, refer to the [LA County Snapshot](#).

1 UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, California Health Interview Survey, 2011, 2015, 2017, 2023

2 de la Haye K, Saw HW, Miller S, Bruine de Bruin W, Wilson JP, Weber K, Frazzini A, Livings M, Babboni M, Kapteyn A. Ecological risk and protective factors for food insufficiency in Los Angeles County during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Public Health Nutr.* 2023 Oct;26(10):1944-1955. doi: 10.1017/S1368980023001337. Epub 2023 Jul 5. PMID: 37403467; PMCID: PMC10564600

3 [https://publicexchange.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/FoodInsecurityinLACounty\\_ResearchBrief\\_October2024\\_Final.pdf](https://publicexchange.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/FoodInsecurityinLACounty_ResearchBrief_October2024_Final.pdf)

4 <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition->

5 <https://dpss.lacounty.gov/en/food/calfresh.html>

6 <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-is-linked-with-improved-health-outcomes-and-lower-health-care-costs>

7 <https://www.goodfoodla.org/calfresh>

8 <https://www.goodfoodla.org/calfresh>

9 <https://capolicylab.org/news/new-report-finds-the-majority-of-california-college-students-who-are-eligible-for-calfresh-benefits-dont-participate/>



FOOD INSECURITY <sup>10</sup>	2013	2017	2020	2024
ALL HOUSEHOLDS (LA COUNTY)	30.6%	29.2%	26.8%	25.4%
HOUSEHOLDS LIVING AT 0-99% FPL	40.8%	41.1%	37.1%	52.8%
HOUSEHOLDS LIVING AT 100-199% FPL	28.7%	25.4%	25.9%	41.4%
HOUSEHOLDS LIVING AT 200-299% FPL	15.2%	13.7%	13.0%	27.5%
AGES 18-24	25.7%	21.8%	25.7%	38.0%
AGES 25-29	34.4%	32.5%	26.5%	36.2%
AGES 30-39	36.2%	29.7%	29.9%	29.1%
AGES 40-49	37.8%	36.1%	31.3%	25.9%
AGES 50-59	37.3%	36.9%	34.5%	26.9%
AGES 60-64	28.9%	30.0%	26.3%	21.6%
AGES 65+	12.9%	19.9%	26.3%	21.6%

CALFRESH PARTICIPATION				
LA COUNTY CALFRESH PARTICIPATION RATE AS COMPARED TO ALL CA COUNTIES	25.7%	21.8%	25.7%	38.0%
LA COUNTY CALFRESH PARTICIPATION RATE (ADJUSTED FOR SSI AND UNDOCUMENTED) <sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup>	52.1%	58.3%	69.0%	90.7%
LA COUNTY NUMBER OF CALFRESH PARTICIPANTS <sup>3</sup>	1,110,832	1,110,832	1,071,315	1,621,062



# PURPOSE of the Report

The Fresh Ideas for CalFresh: College Edition intends to address food insecurity among college students by increasing better understanding approaches to improving awareness, simplifying the application process, and boosting participation in the CalFresh program. Our first [Fresh Ideas for CalFresh report](#), published in 2022, explored CalFresh barriers, challenges, and recommendations for the general population. This report highlighted the key themes and priority of the population in need, which is college students. Despite being eligible for benefits, many college students do not enroll due to various barriers, including a lack of awareness about the program, misconceptions regarding eligibility requirements, and concerns about the complexity of the application process. The current project aimed to evaluate current CalFresh needs on campuses and to bridge this gap through targeted outreach, education, and peer-led engagement, ensuring that more students could access the critical food assistance resources necessary for their well-being and academic success. Many students are unaware of exemptions that could qualify them for benefits, such as participation in work-study programs, receiving federal or state-funded assistance, or being enrolled in specific employment training programs. The report underscored the importance of direct support in the enrollment process, noting that students often need assistance with navigating eligibility requirements, collecting necessary documentation, and understanding how CalFresh benefits can be used.



<sup>10</sup> UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, California Health Interview Survey, 2011, 2015, 2017, 2023

<sup>11</sup> California Department of Public Social Services, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2024

<sup>12</sup> Los Angeles Department of Public Social Services, 2012, 2015, 2019, 2024

<sup>13</sup> California Department of Public Social Services, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2024



## COMMENTARY

# Nourishing Minds:

## The Vital Role of CalFresh Benefits in Supporting College Students

BY DR. QUEENA HOANG, MICHELSON 20MM FOUNDATION WITH EXCERPTS FROM JAIME HANSEN, SWIPE OUT HUNGER



For college students, nutrition isn't just sustenance; it is necessary fuel for academic success and bodily well-being. Food insecurity, defined as limited or uncertain access to adequate food, plagues many college students. And yet, hunger in higher education is an expectation our country perpetuates. **While hungry college students are not a new topic, the problem has only increased in recent years due to rising food and housing costs, expenses that are only expected to continue increasing.** Stress over not knowing where their next meal will come from can lead to poor academic performance.

It can also cause increased mental health issues and the tough choice between food and a college degree. Without proper nutrition, students struggle to concentrate, retain information, and sustain the energy to succeed.

CalFresh, California's version of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), plays a crucial role in addressing food insecurity. It provides monthly electronic benefits to low-income households to purchase food. CalFresh benefits supplement a household budget, supporting students to buy fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and other essentials for a balanced diet. By easing grocery expenses, CalFresh enables students to focus on their studies instead of their next meal.

**California has worked to help more eligible students receive CalFresh, such as by funding Basic Needs Centers for sign-up.** However, efforts are hampered by a lack of understanding about eligibility and participation. One student in California had this to say about CalFresh access: I was very new to the area, had no car or transportation, and was never told what resources/ services were offered in the area.

In the last few years, California has provided funding for county human services agency liaisons to increase campus-county collaboration (Assembly Bill 1326). The state has also required colleges to provide information on CalFresh as part of their new student orientation (AB 543). Additionally, there is a mandate for a uniform template for colleges to use to notify students of their eligibility for CalFresh (SB 20). The state has also funded basic needs centers at community colleges (SB 129) and expanded the set of programs that count toward the "local programs to increase employability" exemption (AB 396), as the California Policy Labs reported.

Despite the benefits and efforts, many eligible students remain unaware of CalFresh or hesitant to apply due to the belief that others are more in need. A campus pantry staff member reflected on the notion of this internalized belief that a student should let others access resources above their own.

Another key achievement is the growing awareness among students about the (pantry's) existence and its role in providing essential resources. This increased awareness has translated into higher usage rates, indicating that more students are accessing the support they need. Additionally, the team has been successful in their efforts to destigmatize the use of their services. By fostering an environment of empathy and understanding, students feel comfortable seeking food assistance without fear of judgment.

**Higher education and community organizations can raise awareness, simplify the application process, and advocate for policies that expand eligibility.** Campus food pantries, nutrition workshops, and peer support programs can complement CalFresh benefits, creating a holistic approach to food insecurity.



## COMMENTARY

# Food for Thought:

## CalFresh Access Among California's College Students

BY KAMERON MIMS-JONES AND MICHELLE LEE, NOURISH CALIFORNIA



Access to CalFresh shaped our journeys through higher education in ways that went far beyond food. As former college students, we both experienced how this critical program made room for learning, stability, and growth—both in our lives and in the communities around us. Our stories are not unique. **Every year, hundreds of thousands of students across California face food insecurity while navigating the demands of school, work, and caregiving. CalFresh is one of the few public systems positioned to meet those needs—and when it works, it changes lives.**

As a former student parent, I know firsthand how access to CalFresh can shape what's possible. While enrolled at community college at West Los Angeles College, UC Berkeley, CalFresh was the thread that helped me build a future for both myself and my son. It wasn't just about food—it was about being able to place my child in safe, enriching care so I could attend classes across the L.A. Community College system. It allowed me to say yes to more learning opportunities, more flexibility, and ultimately, a clearer path toward economic stability. That kind of support doesn't just benefit the individual—it strengthens families, classrooms, and communities.

**CalFresh is more than just food access.** It let me worry less about what my next meal would look like, and instead let me prioritize my education for what it was—a time for new beginnings and a step towards a more expansive future. It's also a connector to other critical supports and a way for people & communities to find connection to one another. I first heard about CalFresh during my senior year of college, yet hesitated to apply because I didn't know what this program fully entailed.

Looking back now, after receiving CalFresh during graduate school, working with my school's basic needs team, and advocating to get my dietetic internship program included for CalFresh eligibility, I can see that CalFresh provided a path for me to join in on a collective effort to make a system work better for all of us.

Our journeys are personal, but they point to something systemic. **According to higher education segment basic needs reports, almost half of California college students report experiencing food insecurity.** Our friends at Chico State's Community for Healthy Communities (CHC) shared that since 2020, over 1.2 million student applications have been submitted on GetCalFresh.org, showing the incredible need for additional benefits to support students' food budgets. There has been significant work led by CHC and other partners to expand CalFresh eligibility for college students statewide, resulting in resources like the CalFresh Resource Hub which contributed to the approval of 13,000 Local Programs that Increase Employability (LPIEs).

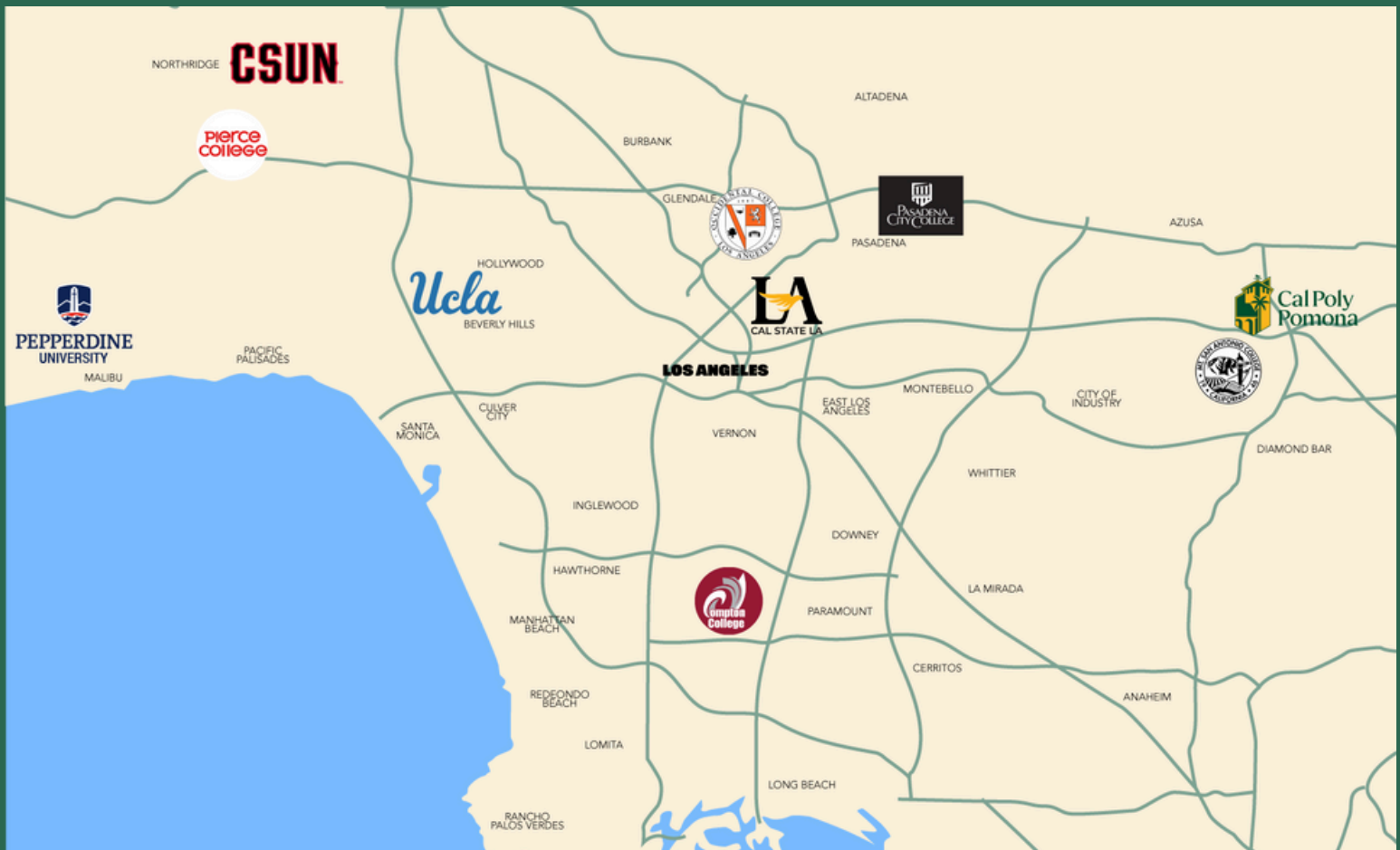
**Even with the recent actions to expand CalFresh student eligibility, the evidence is clear—CalFresh remains underutilized by college students.** Barriers such as a complicated application process and uncertainty about eligibility requirements can intimidate students and bar them from accessing much-needed food benefits. CalFresh is a critical public benefit that must continue to evolve with the needs of today's students. The changing face of higher education includes student parents, older students, part-time learners, and those balancing caregiving and work alongside their studies. Access to CalFresh reflects what happens when a system works with people, not against them—creating the conditions for health, education, and connection. Across campuses and community colleges, we see a diverse coalition of students, staff, and advocates organizing to reduce stigma, increase awareness, and create peer-driven solutions. CalFresh doesn't just feed students—it fuels community engagement and long-term investment in California's future. As California continues to invest in student well-being, we must ensure CalFresh access keeps pace with the changing realities of college life. This means simplifying the process, reducing stigma, and making sure students know they belong in the system, as well as following other recommendations shared by students and campus staff. Every eligible student who enrolls is a step toward a stronger, more equitable future. **We invite leaders, institutions, and advocates to keep pushing forward—because when students are nourished, so is California's promise.**

## METHODS

# How We Trained CalFresh College Champions and Gathered Input from Students Across 10 Universities

The Los Angeles Food Policy Council (LAFPC) collaborated with ten higher education institutions across three categories, community colleges, private institutions, and public institutions, to launch a peer-driven outreach model aimed at increasing CalFresh participation. This initiative leveraged the influence of student leaders and institutional support such as that offered through Basic Needs Centers to promote awareness and provide hands-on support for applicants.

The approach was designed to empower students to educate their peers, creating a ripple effect that would normalize food assistance as a critical resource rather than a last resort. By integrating CalFresh outreach into existing student services and campus food security programs, the project sought to evaluate sustainable, long-term strategies that could be replicated at other institutions across the state, ultimately contributing to broader efforts to combat food insecurity within higher education settings.



# CALFRESH COLLEGE CHAMPIONS:

## Student Trainers

The Fresh Ideas for CalFresh: College Edition Project project utilized a "train-the-trainer" model, in which student representatives were selected from each participating institution to lead outreach efforts on their respective campuses. This approach leveraged the power of peer engagement, recognizing that students are more likely to trust and respond to information provided by their peers rather than institutional sources alone.

Each institution identified two or four student leaders who demonstrated a strong interest in food security advocacy, public health, and community outreach. These student representatives played a crucial role in bridging the gap between CalFresh and eligible students by:

**"My favorite part about participating in this program was being able to reach out and engage with my campus community to help create awareness of food insecurity and CalFresh's program and benefits."**

(Kyra Murphy, Pepperdine University)



**CalFresh Champion:** Zaria Jackson  
Major: Business Management with an  
emphasis in Human Resources  
School: Cal State LA

## CONDUCTING OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

Hosting workshops, tabling events, and presentations to educate students about general CalFresh eligibility and the application process.

## PROVIDING ONE-ON-ONE APPLICATION SUPPORT

Assisting students in navigating the application, gathering required documents, and addressing common concerns or misconceptions.

## COLLECTING SURVEY RESPONSES:

Each affiliated campus was required to gather a minimum of 25 survey responses from their peers. These surveys provided valuable data on student experiences with food insecurity, barriers to CalFresh enrollment, and the effectiveness of outreach efforts.

## SHARING INFORMATION THROUGH MULTIPLE CHANNELS:

Utilizing social media, campus newsletters, student organizations, and direct peer conversations to increase awareness.



# BY EQUIPPING

## Student Leaders

with training, resources, and ongoing support, The Fresh Ideas for CalFresh: College Edition Project ensured that outreach efforts were student-driven, sustainable, and adapted to the unique needs of each campus community. This model also empowered student representatives to advocate for long-term institutional changes, such as integrating CalFresh enrollment assistance into financial aid offices or student wellness programs.

Through this targeted participant selection process, the project successfully engaged a diverse group of student leaders, creating a peer-led network dedicated to increasing food security awareness and access to CalFresh benefits across higher education institutions.



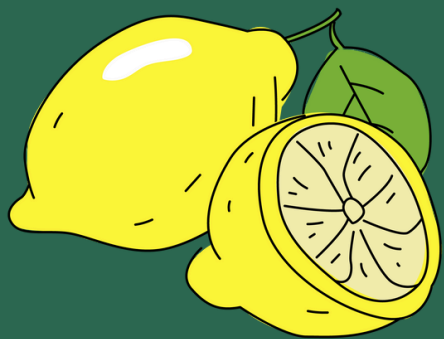
**CalFresh Champion:** Kyra Murphy  
Major: Nutritional Science  
School: Pepperdine

# SURVEY

The Fresh Ideas for CalFresh: College Edition Project utilized a convenience sampling method to explore student food insecurity and their engagement with CalFresh. The survey was distributed through a combination of in-person and virtual outreach events to maximize reach and participation. Questions focused on key areas such as the frequency and severity of food insecurity, students' familiarity with CalFresh eligibility criteria, and their past attempts to apply for benefits. The survey also collected data on the role of campus food security programs, such as food pantries and meal assistance, in addressing student needs. Additionally, open-ended questions allowed students to share personal experiences and suggestions for improving access to food assistance.



**CalFresh Champion:** Corina Iredale  
Major: Deaf Studies  
School: California State University, Northridge



# How We Developed The Recommendations and Resource Checklist

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Recommendations were developed by combining insights from the survey with existing best practices and successful strategies. Through the survey, we gained direct feedback from students about their challenges with food insecurity, which helped us understand their most urgent needs and concerns. This feedback, both qualitative and quantitative, was crucial in shaping the recommendations to ensure they truly reflect the realities students face.

We also looked at established literature and policy recommendations that have been effective in addressing food insecurity in higher education. This allowed us to align our recommendations with proven solutions, ensuring they are not only relevant to student's needs but also based on what has worked in similar contexts. By blending both the survey insights and proven strategies, we were able to create recommendations that are practical, realistic, and designed to make a meaningful impact on food insecurity among students.

## CHECKLIST FOR CAMPUS RESOURCES

The LAFPC team also created a campus checklist to serve as a complementary tool to the student survey. This allows for a systematic assessment of campus-based food assistance programs and institutional support mechanisms. It documented the presence and operational details of food pantries, meal voucher programs, emergency food aid, and other campus-based initiatives aimed at addressing food insecurity on campuses.

Additionally, it captured information on the availability and effectiveness of CalFresh enrollment support, including whether campuses had dedicated staff, peer navigators, or online resources to assist students with applications. The checklist also examined the level of involvement from campus leadership, student organizations, and external partners in promoting food security programs.



# TRAINING Overview

The Fresh Ideas for CalFresh: College Edition Project incorporates a Train-the-Trainer model, wherein staff from LAFPC provided comprehensive training to student leaders. This training aimed to equip student leaders with the necessary tools and knowledge to facilitate informed, peer-to-peer discussions to promote CalFresh benefits and to address prevalent misconceptions regarding the program.

## The training curriculum included the following key components:

### CalFresh Program Overview

A thorough understanding of the CalFresh program, including eligibility requirements and application processes.

### Barriers to Enrollment:

Identification of common barriers students face when attempting to access CalFresh benefits and strategies to overcome these barriers

### Myth-Busting

Addressing and correcting prevalent myths and misconceptions about the CalFresh program, including stigma surrounding its use.

### Campus Food Resources:

A review of campus food assistance resources, including food pantries, and how these services intersect with CalFresh outreach efforts.

### Peer Support

Techniques for engaging and supporting peers in accessing food assistance programs and resources.

To assess the effectiveness of the training, a pre-and post-training evaluation was administered via an anonymous Google Form survey. The evaluation was designed to measure changes in participants' knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to food insecurity and CalFresh enrollment. The evaluation focused on the following key outcomes:

### Knowledge

Improvements in participants' understanding of the CalFresh program, eligibility criteria, and available food assistance resources.

### Attitudes

Changes in perceptions regarding food insecurity and CalFresh, particularly with respect to the stigma surrounding the program.

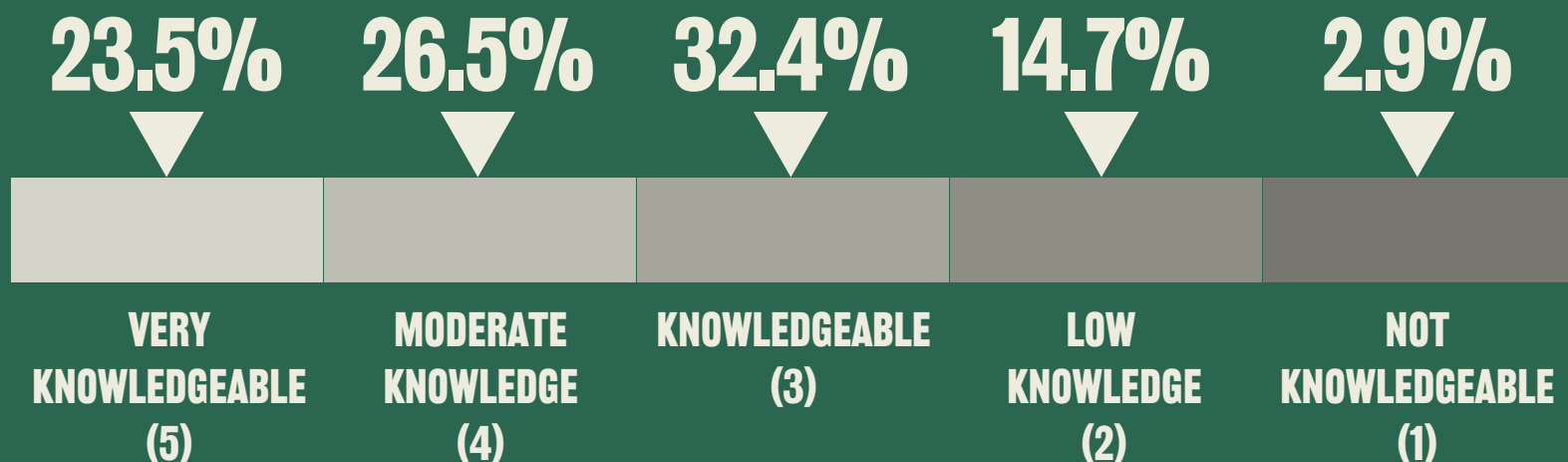
### Practice

Shifts in behavior regarding the promotion of CalFresh and other food assistance services among peers.

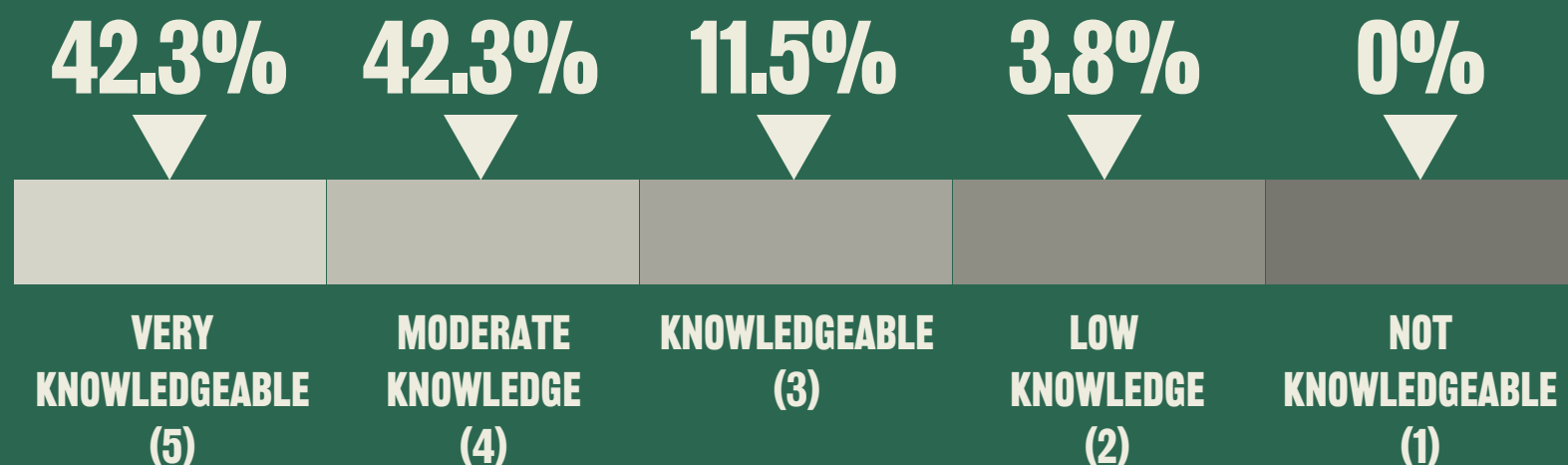
Some student trainees did not complete the post-evaluation survey which is the reason for the differences between pre-surveys and post-surveys.

# FINDINGS

**Train-the-Trainer Evaluation Results: Knowledge of Food Security Issues Affecting College Students. The pre-survey responses indicated:**



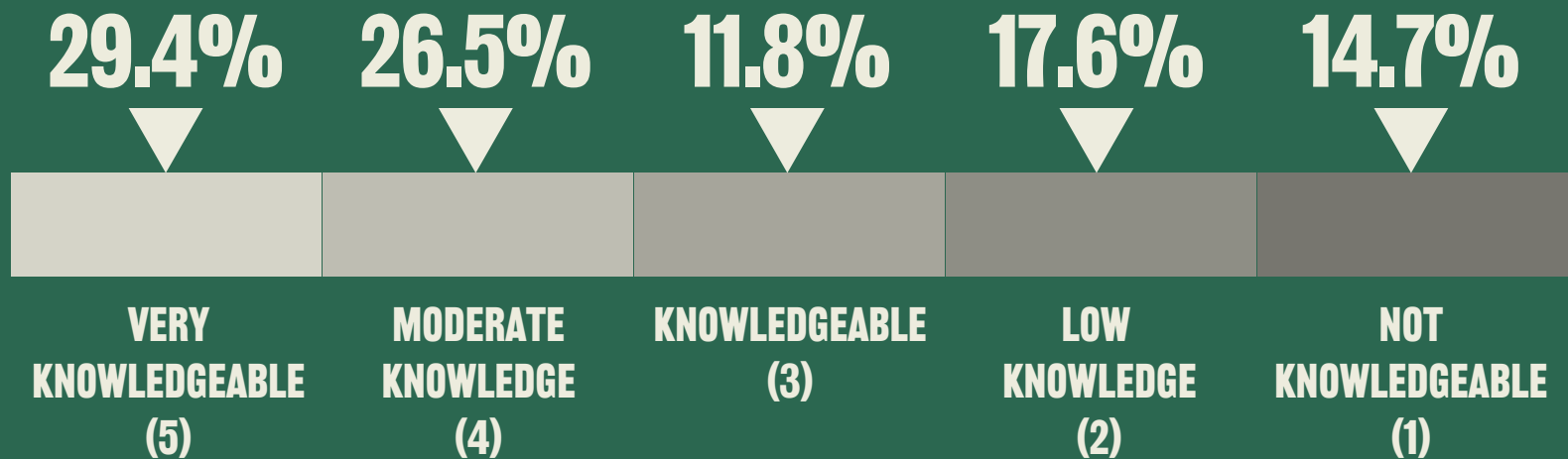
**In contrast, the post-survey showed an increase in the number of respondents who felt "very knowledgeable."**



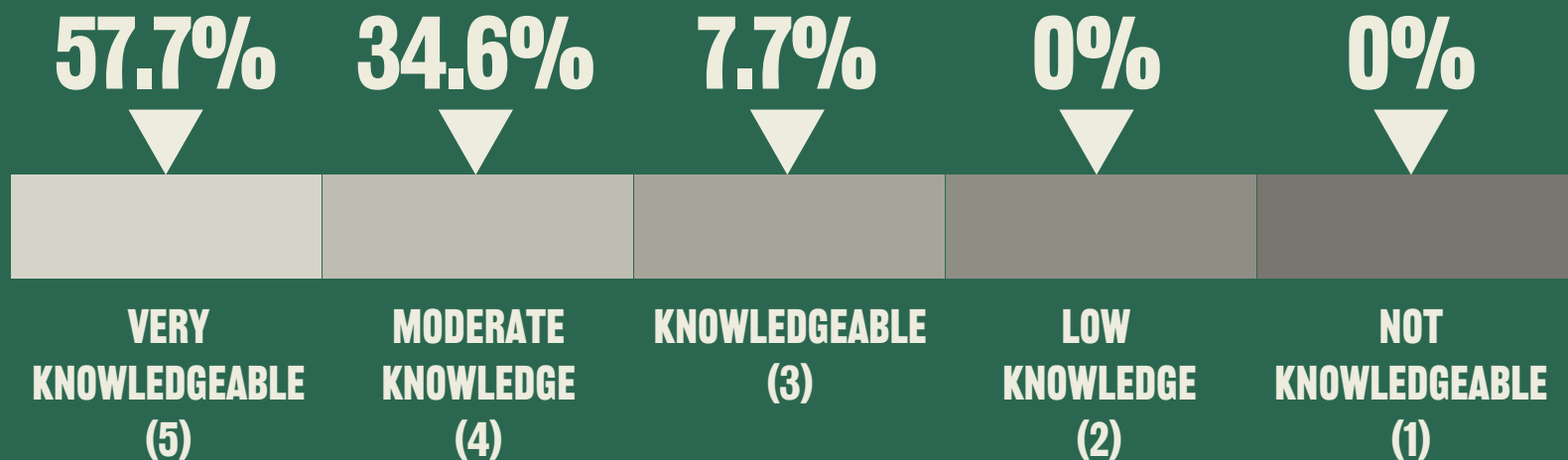
**This shift suggests that participants' understanding of food security issues affecting college students improved following the training.**

# KNOWLEDGE OF THE CALFRESH PROGRAM AND ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

In the pre-survey, the knowledge about the CalFresh program was relatively distributed



After the training, the post-survey results revealed an increase in knowledge about CalFresh



**This data reflects a significant improvement in respondents' understanding of the CalFresh program and its eligibility criteria, highlighting the effectiveness of the training in increasing participants' knowledge of this important resource.**

# STUDENT TRAINER VOICES

## Personal Connection and Empathy

"I am someone who has been food insecure and want to help my peers get connected to resources like CalFresh that can help them."

"I want to be able to help my fellow students who are food insecure to get the resources that they need, so they are not food insecure."

"Because I can relate and went through the food situation and CalFresh program."

"I work with the Basic Needs Program on my campus and I wanted to learn more about CalFresh because I see info about it so often but I don't really know what it is."



# STUDENT TRAINER VOICES

## Desire to Learn and Educate Others

"To gain a better understanding of my community and peers and provide support to the ones who are in need."

"Every college peer who I have talked to about getting EBT has shared frustration on how confusing it is, so this opportunity seemed like a great way to remedy that."

"I applied for CalFresh myself and currently receive benefits and want to help others receive the same."

"I was excited to know that this training would help me gain the ability to help other students learn more about CalFresh."

"To enhance my knowledge of the CalFresh program and its eligibility criteria for college students."

"To put it simply, I want to address a social problem on my campus, and this is an opportunity to do so - by learning about the problem first."

"I think educating students who don't know about CalFresh but can actually qualify is super important and would love to conduct research at my school."

"To enhance my knowledge on CalFresh, so that I am able to find different outlets for students that have unique cases, along with spreading the word in order to help decrease food insecurity."



# STUDENT TRAINER VOICES

## Advocacy and Support for Food Security

"To give people better information on applying for food assistance and knowing about healthy foods."

"Wanting to help individuals gain access to fresh and nutritious food!"

"I want to help my fellow students who are food insecure to get the resources that they need, so they are not food insecure."

"Giving back to the community who highly need the assistance to access food."





# STUDENT TRAINER VOICES



## Understanding and Addressing Systemic Issues

"To understand why people who qualify for CalFresh don't apply."

"Hearing about food as a barrier to feel good and be successful at school specifically with those who struggle with eating disorders or food-related issues."

"Since entering college, I have learned a lot about the challenges within the food system that create food insecurity."

"I am interested in contributing to the LA Food Policy Council and minimizing food insecurity while also learning about how this issue impacts students across institutions."

## Career and Academic Goals

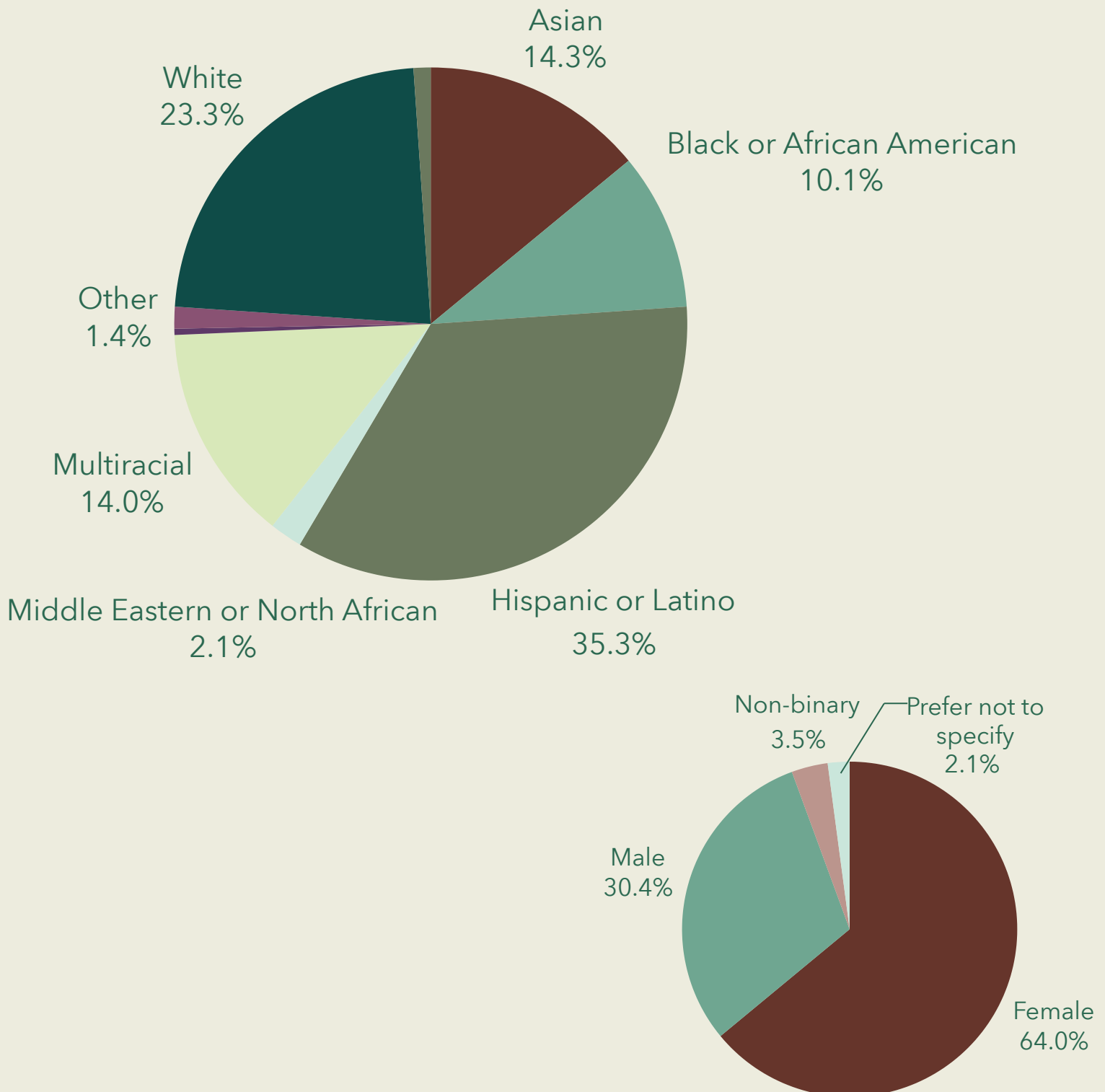
"To gain some research experience."

"I would like to refine my skills and gain knowledge to help improve food security at my school."

"I would like to get some research experience. I'm also interested in learning from others in the field about best practices for building resiliency and increasing access to food security."

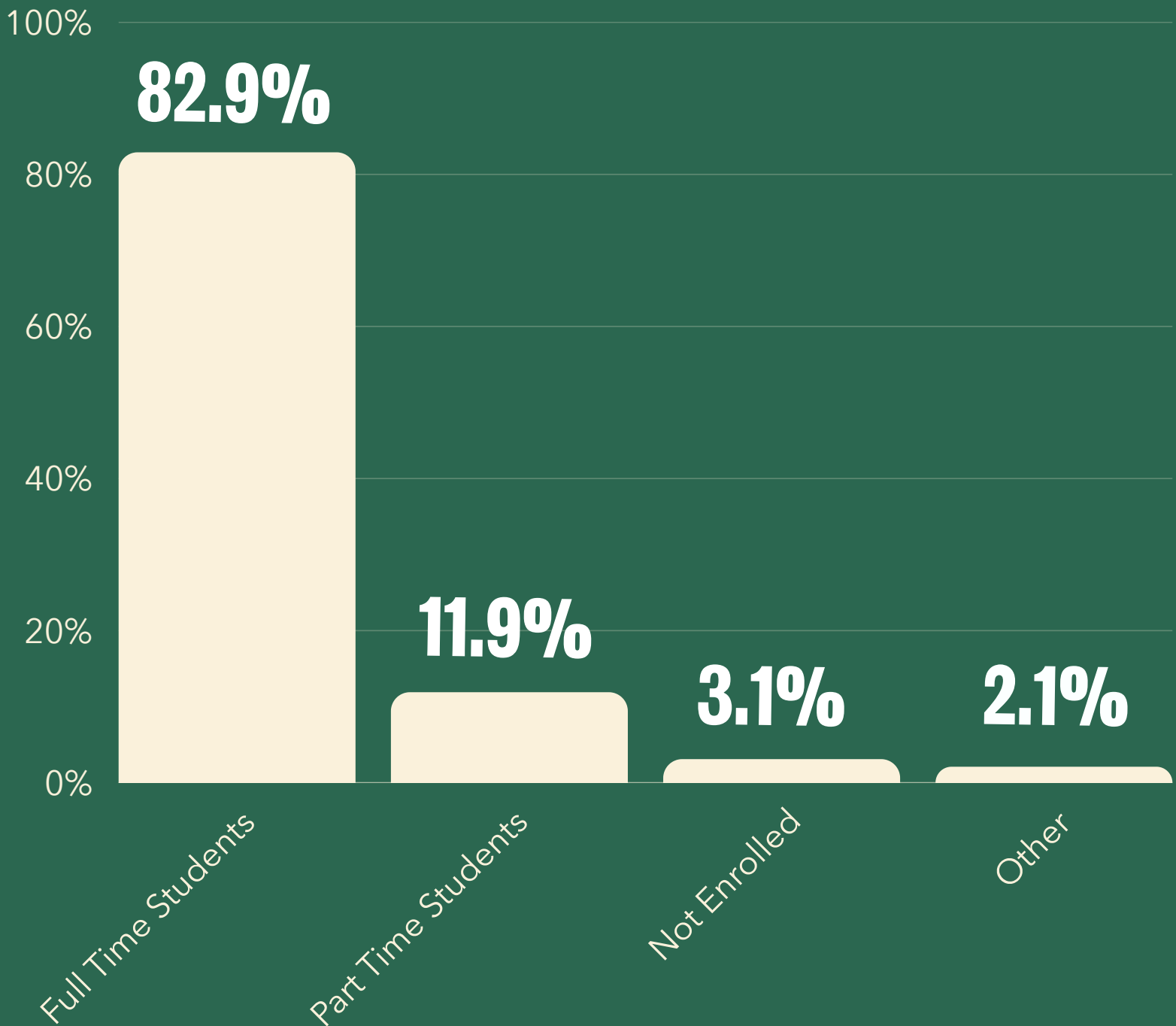
# DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 286 individuals completed the demographic section of the survey, representing students from 10 institutions, including community colleges, private institutions, and public universities.



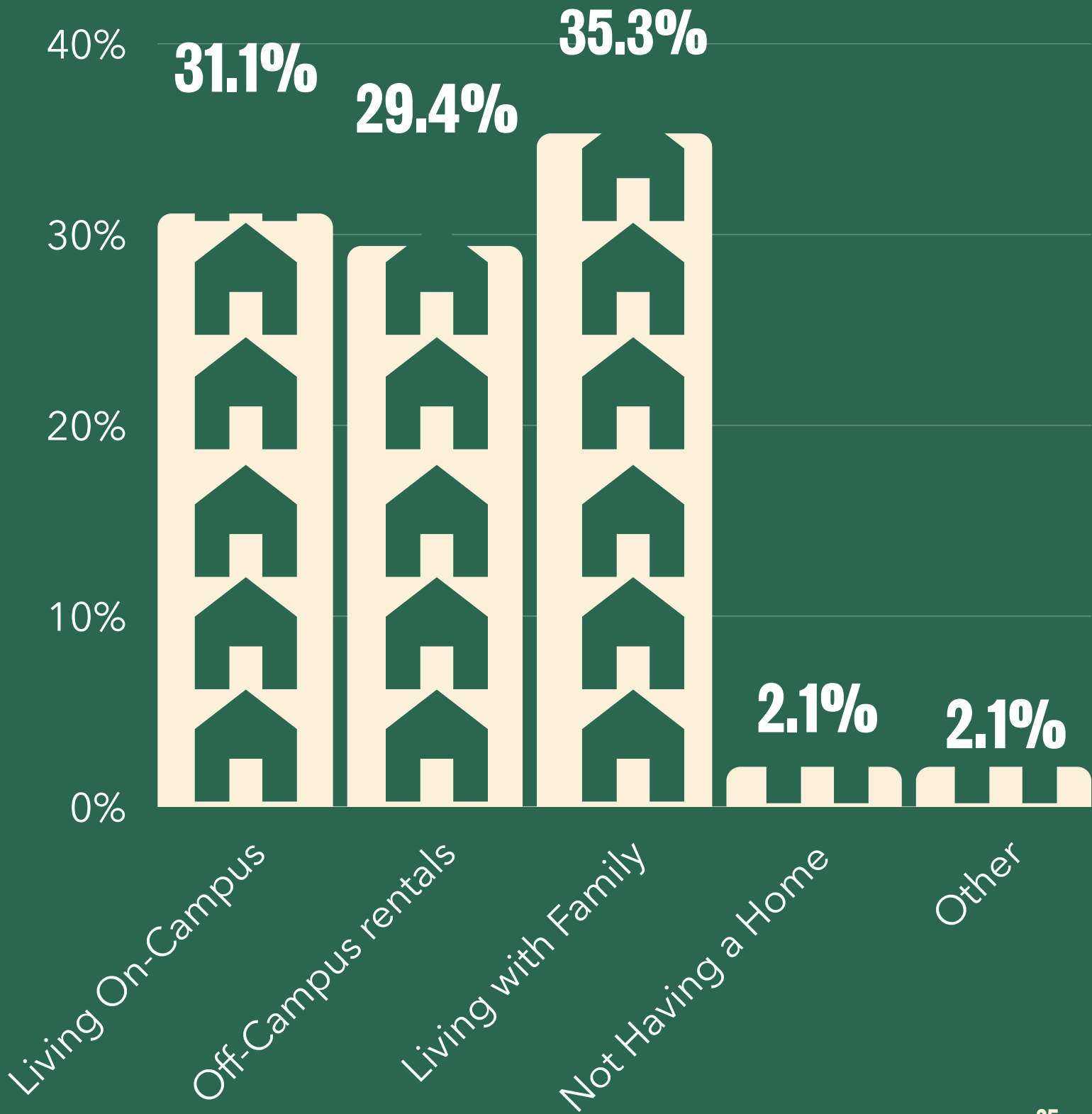
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53.1%



Identified as first-generation college students. Highlighting the significant presence of students navigating higher education without the guidance of parents or guardians with college experience.

46.9%



Remaining were not first-generation students.

## TABLE 2: FRESH IDEAS FOR CALFRESH DEMOGRAPHICS ACROSS 10 INSTITUTIONS (N=286)

In 2023, one college participated, while in 2024, nine out of ten colleges used a different survey. As a result, sample sizes range from 286 to 346.

Characteristic	Total Population (10 Institutions) n=286	Community College (3/4) n=104	Private Institution (2/2) n=53	Public Institution (4/4) n= 129
<u>Race</u>				
Asian	14.3% (41)	7.7% (8)	7.5% (4)	22.5% (29)
Black or African American	10.1% (29)	23.1% (24)	-----	3.9% (5)
Hispanic or Latino	35.3% (101)	41.3% (43)	7.5% (4)	41.9% (54)
Middle Eastern or North African	2.1% (6)	2.9% (3)	1.9% (1)	1.6% (2)
Multiracial	14.0% (40)	16.3% (17)	20.8% (11)	9.3% (12)
Native American or Indigenous	0.4% (1)	1.0% (1)	-----	-----
Other	1.4% (4)	2.9% (3)	-----	0.8% (1)
White	23.3% (61)	3.8% (4)	62.3% (33)	18.6% (24)
Prefer not to say	1.1% (3)	1.0% (1)	-----	1.8% (2)
<u>Gender</u>				
Female	64.0% (183)	41.3% (43)	88.7% (47)	72.1% (93)
Male	30.4% (87)	50.0% (52)	5.7% (3)	24.8% (32)
Non-binary	3.5% (10)	4.8% (5)	3.8% (2)	2.3% (3)
Prefer not to say	2.1% (6)	3.8% (4)	1.9% (1)	0.8% (1)
<u>Enrollment Status</u>				
Full-time student	82.9% (237)	63.5% (66)	98.1% (52)	92.2% (119)
Part-time student	11.9% (34)	27.9% (29)	1.9% (1)	3.1% (4)
Not currently enrolled	3.1% (9)	5.8% (6)	-----	2.3% (3)
Other	2.1% (6)	2.9% (3)	-----	2.3% (3)
<u>What is your current housing situation?</u>				
On-campus housing	31.1% (89)	3.1% (3)	67.9% (36)	38.8% (50)
Off-campus rental	29.4% (84)	24.5% (24)	30.2% (16)	32.6% (42)
Living with family	35.3% (101)	63.3% (62)	1.9% (1)	26.4% (34)
I do not have a home	2.1% (6)	6.1% (6)	-----	-----
Other	2.1% (6)	3.1% (3)	-----	2.3 (3)
<u>Are you a first-generation college student?</u>				
Yes	53.1% (152)	63.5% (66)	13.2% (7)	69.0% (79)
No	46.9% (134)	36.5% (38)	86.8% (46)	31.0% (50)



# Survey RESULTS

The results of the Fresh Ideas for CalFresh survey reveal some critical insights into food insecurity and the role that CalFresh plays in supporting students across different types of institutions. Across the 10 institutions, 60.8% of surveyed students reported experiencing food insecurity, with community colleges facing the rates at 66.4%. Public institutions were also impacted, with 65.1% of surveyed students reporting food insecurity. Private institutions reported the lowest rate at 39.6%, though these numbers still highlight the widespread need for support.

When it comes to CalFresh usage, 37.0% of surveyed students across all institutions use the benefits. There were notable differences between institution types, with public institutions showing the highest usage at 43.4%, followed by community colleges at 42.1%. Private institutions had a much lower usage rate of just 5.7%.

The survey also explored why students haven't applied for CalFresh benefits. Many surveyed students, 19.4%, felt they didn't qualify, while 3.2% found the application process too difficult. 13.6%, indicated they simply didn't need the benefits, and 11.3% didn't know how to apply.

Among those receiving CalFresh, 74.1% reported that the benefits were helpful in meeting their monthly food needs. Community college students who participated in our survey, in particular, found the program to be highly supportive, with 88.5% saying it helped. However, at private institutions, only 48.5% of students felt that CalFresh benefits met their food needs.

In terms of stress reduction, 51.7% of surveyed students said that CalFresh helped reduce their stress about affording food, with community college surveyed students again showing the greatest benefit at 71.2%. In contrast, only 22.6% of private institution students felt that CalFresh made a significant difference in easing their financial stress.

Finally, when asked how well their college addresses student food insecurity, 62.2% of students felt their college was doing a good or somewhat good job. Community colleges rated their institutions the highest, with 77.9% expressing satisfaction. On the other hand, private institution students were less satisfied, with 41.5% feeling their colleges were not effectively addressing food insecurity. These results underscore the critical need for expanded support and outreach to students facing food insecurity, particularly at private institutions where CalFresh utilization is lower. There's a clear opportunity to better connect students with the resources they need to thrive.

In 2023, one college participated, while in 2024, nine out of ten colleges used a different survey. As a result, sample sizes range from 286 to 346.



# TABLE 3: FRESH IDEAS FOR CALFRESH SURVEY RESULTS ACROSS 10 INSTITUTIONS

Characteristic	Total Population (10 Institutions)	Community College (4/4)	Private Institution (2/2)	Public Institution (4/4)
<u>Food Insecurity (Past 30 days)</u>	60.8% (174/286)	66.4% (69/104)	39.6% (21/53)	65.1% (84/129)
<u>Used CalFresh</u>	n=346	n=164	n=53	n=129
Yes	37.0% (128)	42.1% (69)	5.7% (3)	43.4% (56)
No	53.2% (184)	39.0% (64)	94.3% (50)	54.3% (70)
Prefer not to say	2.0% (7)	2.4% (4)	-----	2.3% (3)
No response	7.8% (27)	16.5% (27)	-----	-----
<u>Applied for CalFresh benefits</u>	n=346	n=164	n=53	n=129
Yes	36.1% (125)	42.7% (70)	3.8% (2)	41.1% (53)
No	-----	17.1% (28)	-----	-----
No, application seems difficult	3.2% (11)	1.2% (2)	7.5% (4)	3.9% (5)
No, I don't think I qualify	19.4% (67)	9.8% (16)	28.3% (15)	27.9% (36)
No, I don't need it	13.6% (47)	6.7% (11)	32.1% (17)	14.7% (19)
No, I don't know how to apply	11.3% (39)	4.9% (8)	28.3% (15)	12.4% (16)
No response	7.8% (27)	16.5% (27)	-----	-----
Prefer not to say	0.6% (2)	1.2% (2)	-----	-----
<u>Helpfulness of CalFresh benefits in meeting monthly food needs</u>	n=286	n=104	n=53	n=129
Helpful	74.1% (212)	88.5% (86)	48.5% (31)	69.0% (76)
Not helpful	25.9% (74)	11.5% (12)	41.5% (22)	31.0% (40)
<u>Impact of CalFresh on stress about affording food</u>	n=286	n=104	n=53	n=129
Yes, to some extent	51.7% (148)	71.2% (74)	22.6% (12)	48.1% (62)
No, or not much	6.6% (19)	9.6% (10)	3.8% (2)	5.4% (7)
Don't receive CalFresh benefits	41.6% (119)	19.2% (20)	73.6% (39)	46.4% (60)
<u>Perceived effectiveness of college in addressing student food insecurity</u>	n=286	n=104	n=53	n=129
Very well / Somewhat well	62.2% (178)	77.9% (81)	18.9% (10)	67.4% (87)
Neutral	22.0% (63)	15.4% (16)	39.6% (21)	20.2% (26)
Not at all / Not very well	15.7% (45)	6.7% (7)	41.5% (22)	12.4% (16)

FOOD INSECURITY WAS MEASURED USING THE 6-ITEM USDA FOOD SECURITY MODULE, WHICH CAPTURES EXPERIENCES OF LIMITED FOOD ACCESS DUE TO FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS AND CLASSIFIES INDIVIDUALS INTO SEVERITY LEVELS BASED ON THEIR RESPONSES.

## STUDENT VOICES

What changes or improvements would you recommend to make CalFresh more effective for college students?

## AWARENESS & OUTREACH

"I think the best improvement is educating everyone on this resource because a lot of people are unaware about it and how to even apply for it."

"Better communication—I feel like many students miss out on certain things because they're not fully informed."

"More awareness because I've never heard of CalFresh."

"I would like it to be more normalized! I moved here from Texas two years ago and didn't know what CalFresh was until about a month ago."

## ELIGIBILITY & ACCESSIBILITY

"Make it more available for all students."

"Make it fair for all people to qualify for CalFresh."

"Removing income restrictions for college students."

"If possible, extend for international students."

"Students should qualify regardless of living with someone and going by the total income in the household."

## STUDENT VOICES

What changes or improvements would you recommend to make CalFresh more effective for college students?

### APPLICATION PROCESS & COMMUNICATION

"Clarification of the application process and eligibility."

"Make it easier to know if you are eligible."

"Make the application shorter."

"Make it more apparent that the applying process is not as difficult as people may think and that most people can be eligible."

"Many students are concerned about whether they will ever need to pay back the money from CalFresh."

### WORKSHOPS & SUPPORT

"More workshops detailing how to navigate the website for easy access to information on CalFresh."

"Providing workshops with flexible schedules—as I have tried to attend some before but was unable to because of schedule conflicts."

"Have someone from CalFresh come to campus and host a workshop."

"Increase student-to-student workshops."

## STUDENT VOICES

What changes or improvements would you recommend to make CalFresh more effective for college students?

### CHECKLIST FOR CAMPUS RESOURCES

## FOOD OPTIONS & FINANCIAL SUPPORT

"More assistance in money to buy food that will last the entire month and not just two weeks, if that."

"Expand the amount of places you can get food from other than [limited campus locations]."

"More diverse options such as lactose-intolerant and gluten-free foods, more fruit, and more vegetables."

## ADDRESSING STIGMA & EQUITY

"I think looking deeper into who's applying would make CalFresh more effective for college students."

"Lessen stigma around applying for CalFresh and similar services."





## CASE STUDY

# Mt. SAC

RIGO ESTRADA, MSW, DIRECTOR, BASIC NEEDS RESOURCES

SAMANTHA MOREIRA, CALFRESH OUTREACH TECHNICAL SUPPORT, BASIC NEEDS RESOURCES



The Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC) Basic Needs Resources Center is a comprehensive, student-centered service that addresses food insecurity, housing instability, and other basic needs challenges that students may face. The center's mission is to provide trauma-informed, holistic services that prioritize the well-being and success of our students.

**Mt. SAC's CalFresh Outreach program aims to raise awareness about CalFresh eligibility and guide students through the application process.** Services offered include drop-in assistance, application help, eligibility prescreening, appeals assistance, and guidance with verifications and interview preparation. In addition, the center offers resources for students to navigate recertification, ensuring that they can continue receiving benefits as needed.

Our outreach efforts include a variety of engagement strategies such as drop-in services, tabling outside the Basic Needs Resources Center, Cooking Demos, and workshops in collaboration with other departments. These efforts are designed to make CalFresh information more accessible and to strengthen the campus community's awareness of available resources. By partnering with Chico State's Center for Healthy Communities (CHC), which provides valuable research-based nutrition and policy resources, Mt. SAC is able to maximize its outreach and ensure students receive the support they need.

Our Team is dedicated to creating community and bringing understanding and empowerment through sharing important informational updates, respectful conversations, smiles, and fun, peaceful activities. **We love what we do, and we do our best to grow our services to ensure our Mt.SAC community feels heard, seen, and supported.**

In addition to its direct impact on student health and well-being, CalFresh programming at Mt. SAC also supports the college's broader goals of equity and academic success. By providing access to these resources, we help ensure that all students have the opportunity to complete their educational goals, regardless of their financial circumstances. The success of this program relies on the collaboration of various departments and community partners, making it a crucial part of the larger network of support services that Mt. SAC offers it to its students. **The Basic Needs Resources Center is a crucial component in fostering a campus environment where all students, regardless of their financial situation, have the opportunity to thrive academically and personally.**



# Pepperdine

DR. LOAN KIM, PROFESSOR OF NUTRITIONAL SCIENCE, NATURAL SCIENCE DIVISION, SEAVER COLLEGE



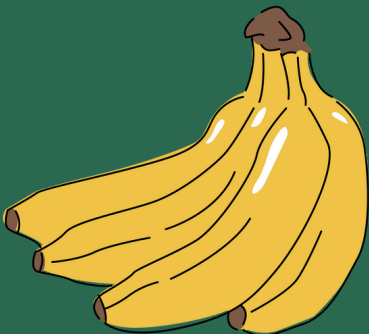
As part of the Fresh Ideas for CalFresh: College Edition initiative, a meaningful partnership was developed with Pepperdine University to expand awareness and engagement around food insecurity and CalFresh access. **This collaboration emerged through faculty leadership, Dr. Loan Kim, in the university's Nutritional Science program, which helped connect students with our project as part of a semester-long academic experience.**

Over the course of the semester, two students from the program worked remotely to support CalFresh outreach on campus. Their work involved a mix of research, peer engagement, and resource development.

As a first step, the students conducted a literature review and needs assessment focused on food and nutrition insecurity across college campuses in California. They explored demographic trends, relevant policies, and existing food access programs, and organized their findings to help inform future outreach and advocacy efforts. The students also played a key role in facilitating virtual CalFresh workshops for their peers at Pepperdine. These sessions were designed to increase awareness of CalFresh eligibility and application processes while creating a space to discuss food insecurity experiences. During the workshops, the students gathered survey responses and captured qualitative feedback to better understand the challenges students faced in accessing adequate nutrition.

In addition to outreach and research, the students compiled a resource guide highlighting food assistance options available on and near campus. This guide was intended to help students navigate local services and better understand what support is available to them. The

Pepperdine partnership represented one of several campus collaborations in this phase of the Fresh Ideas for CalFresh program. It demonstrated the value of faculty-student engagement in advancing nutrition equity and offered a deeper look at the unique needs of students at private university campuses. **The work completed helped lay the foundation for continued collaboration and innovation in addressing food insecurity through student-centered approaches.**





One of the most rewarding aspects of my job is leading CalFresh outreach, but it truly takes a village. At Cal State LA, the CalFresh Outreach Center (CFOC) is dedicated to dismantling the barriers to CalFresh access by offering student-centered, culturally responsive programming, building strong partnerships with local organizations and other college campuses, and ensuring students receive the support they need to thrive in higher education. **I**

**believe in the transformative power of the CalFresh program, yet I recognize the need for reform. I am committed to empowering the students I lead and support to be critically conscious of the food insecurity struggles within their communities.**

Our center is a physical space housed in the Office of the Dean of Students. It is staffed by four dedicated students who assist their peers in navigating the CalFresh application process, maintaining benefits, and accessing essential basic needs resources. These CalFresh Advocates hold paid part-time positions and are typically referred by the Bachelor of Social

Work program to fulfill their practicum requirement. As their field supervisor, I meet with them weekly or conduct observations to help them reflect on their experiences and connect their hands-on work to their classroom learning. **Recognizing the importance of reducing stigma around public assistance programs, we introduced a dual-role position, where one team member splits their time between CalFresh application assistance and social media content creation.**

CalFresh Advocates receive extensive training on how to assist, advocate, and advise students in navigating the CalFresh program. Our team is supported by the Center for Healthy Communities at California State University, Chico, our primary contractor for the CalFresh Outreach grant. During the 2023-24 academic year, we engaged with 417 unique students through 514 appointments and assisted 365 eligible students in submitting applications. Our commitment extends beyond application support since we provide case management by following up with students after submission. For those approved, we maintain ongoing communication to ensure they successfully retain their benefits. **Our CalFresh advocates have the skills and insight to interact with local county offices and advocate on behalf of students when they experience administrative barriers. Collaboration is at the heart of our work.** We partner with staff and students to coordinate our Basic Needs programs, including the Food Pantry, Technology Loans, Temporary Emergency Housing, and Basic Needs grants. Through these efforts, the Office of the Dean of Students awarded \$634,951 in grants to 420 students, assisted 57 students facing or at risk of housing insecurity, provided laptops to 1,356 students, and offered direct food support to 1,647 students across 9,366 visits during the 2023-2024 academic year.

# RECOMMENDATIONS



Food insecurity continues to be a significant and persistent challenge among college students, especially those from low-income, first-generation, and immigrant backgrounds. For many of these students, access to food is not just a matter of affordability but a critical factor in their overall well-being and academic success. The pressures of balancing coursework, work, and the rising cost of living exacerbate their vulnerability to food insecurity. Despite the availability of programs like CalFresh, which can provide vital nutrition assistance, a substantial number of eligible students still face considerable barriers to accessing these benefits.

One of the primary challenges is a lack of awareness about CalFresh and other assistance programs. Many students are unaware that they qualify for benefits, or they may not fully understand how to navigate the application process. This lack of information is compounded by concerns about eligibility, particularly among students from immigrant backgrounds who may be uncertain about how public charge rules or citizenship status affect their eligibility for food assistance. Additionally, the complexity and bureaucratic hurdles involved in the CalFresh application process, including cumbersome paperwork and confusing instructions, often deter students from completing the application or even starting it in the first place.

These barriers create a vicious cycle, where students who need food assistance the most are unable to access the support they deserve, putting their academic performance and health at risk. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond simply increasing awareness of CalFresh. It calls for comprehensive policy advocacy to streamline the application process, targeted institutional support to assist students with the application and enrollment process, and outreach efforts tailored to the specific needs of different student populations.

However, food insecurity does not affect all college students in the same way. The structure, resources, and student demographics of different types of higher education institutions shape both the challenges students face and the best strategies for addressing them. Community colleges, private institutions, and public universities each have distinct student populations and institutional capacities, requiring tailored solutions to effectively address food insecurity.





# RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED

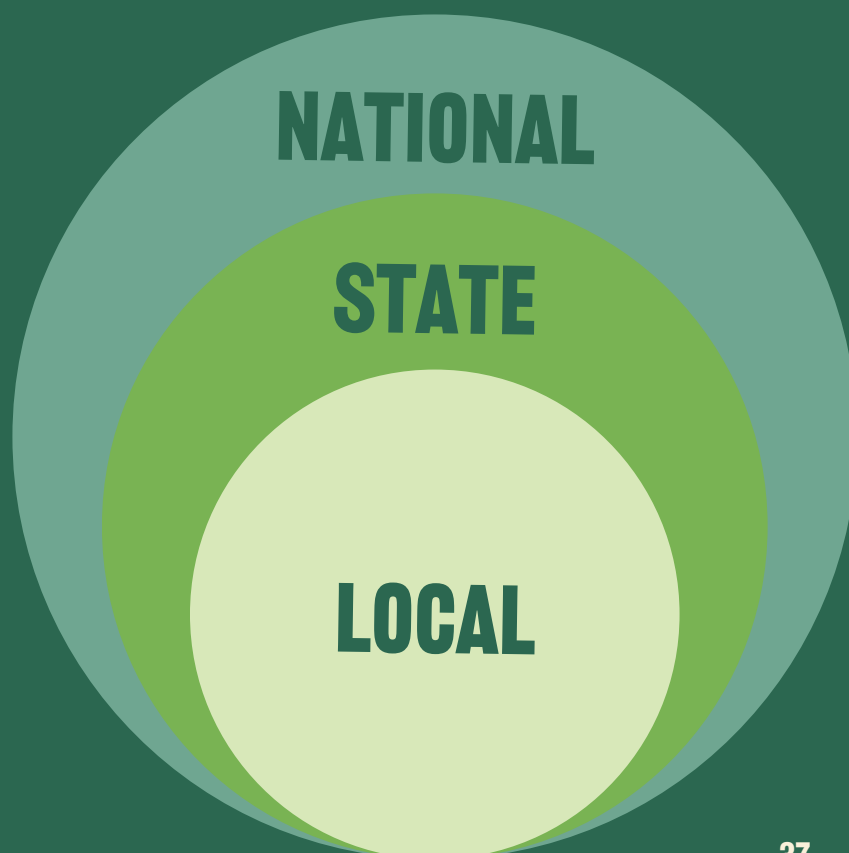
**Community Colleges** serve a large proportion of low-income, working, and non-traditional students, many of whom struggle with housing and food insecurity. To meet the scale of student need, these campuses must prioritize integrated support models that include CalFresh enrollment assistance, peer-to-peer outreach, and accessible food resources. Strengthening partnerships with local food banks, expanding culturally responsive services, and embedding basic needs support into existing student services, such as financial aid and counseling, are critical strategies for reducing food insecurity and supporting student success.

**Private Institutions** are often assumed to have wealthier student bodies, but many students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds or on significant financial aid, face food insecurity. The high cost of tuition and living expenses can create significant financial strain, making food assistance programs just as necessary as they are in public institutions. However, stigma and a lack of institutional recognition of food insecurity can make it harder for students to access support.

**Public universities** generally have larger student populations with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. While these institutions often have more resources, the scale of need can be overwhelming. Expanding awareness, streamlining enrollment in food assistance programs, and improving coordination between student services and government agencies are key strategies for addressing food insecurity at public universities.

## CALFRESH

Is a vital tool in reducing food insecurity among college students, but significant gaps remain in access, awareness, and enrollment support. Addressing these challenges requires action at multiple levels: local, state, regional, and national. The following recommendations offer a roadmap for strengthening CalFresh access and effectiveness across the higher education landscape.



# LOCAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Colleges and universities are on the frontlines of addressing student food insecurity. Strengthening institutional capacity, embedding CalFresh support into campus services, and elevating student voices are critical strategies to increase access.



## COMMUNITY COLLEGES: STRENGTHENING ON-THE-GROUND SUPPORT

Community colleges serve a high proportion of low-income, first-generation, and immigrant students, making robust CalFresh support essential. As the largest community college district in the region, Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) is uniquely positioned to lead by example in expanding food assistance access, while individual campuses have the flexibility to implement targeted, student-centered solutions.

To expand CalFresh enrollment, LACCD should adopt district-wide policies to integrate enrollment assistance into student service centers across all campuses. This should include dedicated staff providing year-round, one-on-one CalFresh support at every campus, ensuring consistency and accessibility. Each campus should designate CalFresh liaisons in financial aid or basic needs centers to offer direct, culturally competent assistance. To increase efficiency, LACCD could streamline enrollment by embedding CalFresh prompts into its student portal systems and class registration platforms, making it easier for students to learn about and access benefits during routine interactions. At the campus level, colleges should expand peer navigator programs, prioritizing students with lived experience of food insecurity.

Peer navigators can offer trusted, relatable support, share personal experiences, and reduce stigma around CalFresh enrollment. Individual colleges could enhance these programs by offering stipends, service-learning credits, or leadership development opportunities to encourage participation and build student capacity. Given the diversity of the student body, multilingual outreach is essential across both LACCD and individual campuses. Informational materials, workshops, and application support should be offered in multiple languages, including Spanish, Mandarin, Korean, and Tagalog, to reflect the most common languages spoken by students. LACCD should partner with legal aid services, immigrant advocacy organizations, and cultural resource centers to provide accurate, up-to-date information on eligibility for mixed-status families and dispel fears around public charge rules.





## LOCAL ACTION SPOTLIGHT: LACCD & LA COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOUNDATION

As the largest community college district in the region, LACCD has a unique opportunity to lead in addressing student food insecurity. The LA Community College Foundation can also play a critical role in resourcing basic needs programs. Building on the recommendations in this report, we encourage:

### We Encourage:

- LACCD to adopt a district-wide strategy to integrate CalFresh application support into financial aid and basic needs centers.
- The Foundation to invest in peer-led outreach and food assistance infrastructure, prioritizing high-need campuses.
- System-wide adoption of CalFresh enrollment training for faculty and staff to reduce stigma and improve referral pathways.

To increase visibility, LACCD should lead district-wide outreach campaigns during key periods, including enrollment and finals weeks, using campus-wide emails, text message reminders, and social media blasts. At the campus level, colleges should integrate CalFresh information into new student orientations, financial aid counseling, and advising sessions. Hosting frequent tabling events, classroom announcements, and CalFresh enrollment days would ensure consistent student engagement. To strengthen food access beyond CalFresh, colleges should expand campus food assistance programs by partnering with local food banks, farmers' markets, and grocery stores to provide students with fresh, affordable, and culturally relevant food options. Colleges could host mobile food pantry events, establish meal voucher programs, or create campus-based food recovery initiatives in collaboration with local food organizations. Additionally, LACCD should collaborate with the LA Community College Foundation to secure dedicated funding for food security initiatives. The Foundation could offer grants for peer-led outreach, infrastructure improvements, and pilot food assistance programs, providing campuses with the resources needed to scale their efforts. By implementing district-wide policies, expanding peer navigator models, and supporting individual campus-level solutions, LACCD and its colleges can work together to reduce food insecurity and create a sustainable, student-centered CalFresh support system.





# PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS:

## Unlocking Support Beyond Perception



While private colleges are often perceived as wealthy, many students still face significant financial hardship due to the high cost of attendance. Tuition, fees, and living expenses in these institutions often exceed the financial means of many students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, and students of color. As such, private colleges must take a more proactive approach to support their food-insecure students by expanding both infrastructure and available resources.

One critical step for private colleges is to establish dedicated CalFresh enrollment support centers within financial aid or student wellness offices. These centers would serve as a one-stop shop for students seeking assistance with applying for food assistance programs. With staff trained specifically to guide students through the eligibility determination process, these centers can ensure students receive tailored, one-on-one support. Many students may be unfamiliar with CalFresh or may feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the application process. These centers would help demystify the system, providing clarity and confidence for students navigating an unfamiliar process. By positioning these centers in highly trafficked areas like financial aid or wellness offices, colleges can make CalFresh assistance more visible and accessible, helping students connect with support when they need it most.

In addition to the direct enrollment support provided by these centers, outreach efforts should be comprehensive and inclusive. Given the diversity of the student body at private colleges, multilingual guidance is essential to ensure that all students can access the help they need. Information about CalFresh and food assistance programs should be available in multiple targeted languages, such as Spanish, Mandarin, and other languages commonly spoken by their unique student population. Additionally, public charge concerns often deter immigrant and undocumented students from applying for assistance. Private colleges should provide clear and accurate information about how CalFresh benefits will or will not affect their immigration status, dispelling misconceptions that may prevent students from seeking help. These efforts would ensure that the CalFresh enrollment process is inclusive of all students, regardless of their background.

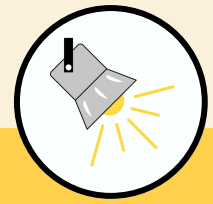
Expanding outreach and awareness is also crucial for encouraging participation in CalFresh and normalizing conversations about food security. Private colleges should integrate CalFresh information into various student-facing services such as financial aid counseling, mental health services, and student affairs programming.



Students who are seeking financial assistance or emotional support are often in the most vulnerable position to also need food security resources, so embedding CalFresh information in these existing services helps create a holistic support system for students. Furthermore, collaborating with student organizations, especially those led by first-generation or low-income students, can help reduce stigma and foster an environment where students feel comfortable discussing their food security needs. These student-led initiatives can amplify the message that food insecurity is a common challenge that is being actively addressed by the institution, making it more likely that students will seek help when they need it.

To further support food-insecure students, private colleges should invest in campus food assistance programs. While many public colleges have robust food pantry systems, private institutions may not have the same infrastructure in place. Therefore, private colleges should consider developing meal-sharing initiatives, where students can donate extra meals or credits to peers in need, and emergency food grants that provide immediate assistance to students facing urgent food insecurity. In addition to on-campus solutions, colleges should partner with local grocery stores, restaurants, or food banks to offer subsidized meals or grocery vouchers for students. By connecting students with the broader community and leveraging local resources, private colleges can provide students with more sustainable and diverse food options.

Moreover, private institutions can enhance their impact by building capacity through coalitions and philanthropy. Joining regional networks like the Basic Needs Consortium allows private colleges to share resources, participate in training opportunities, and receive policy updates related to food security. Collaborating with other institutions strengthens the ability of colleges to advocate for larger structural changes in the food security landscape. Additionally, private institutions should prioritize philanthropic partnerships to support food security efforts on campus. By engaging foundations and alumni as active champions of food access, private colleges can secure funding for campus initiatives and raise awareness about the importance of food security. Engaging alumni, particularly those who benefited from food assistance or are passionate about food justice, can create a strong support network that extends beyond the college years and into the broader community.



## BUILDING CAPACITY THROUGH COALITIONS & PHILANTHROPY

### Private Institutions: Unlocking Support Beyond Perception

Many private colleges lack the basic needs infrastructure of public institutions, but they also benefit from flexibility, private funding networks, and closer administrative decision-making.

#### We recommend:

- Campus leadership prioritize food insecurity as a core student wellness issue and designate a basic needs coordinator or food access liaison.
- Institutional advancement offices pursue philanthropic support for student emergency grants and food assistance programs.
- Participation in regional coalitions like the Basic Needs Consortium or CalFresh outreach networks to share resources, training, and policy updates.

**Call to Action:** Foundations and alumni relations teams at private institutions should be engaged as champions not just funders of equitable food access.

# PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

## Scaling with Infrastructure



California State Universities (CSU) and University of California (UC) campuses have made significant strides in addressing food insecurity, earning recognition as national leaders in basic needs programming. Despite these advancements, there remains considerable opportunity for growth and further support of food-insecure students. Public universities, particularly within the CSU and UC systems, should continue to build on their existing initiatives by ensuring dedicated funding for food security offices. These offices should be staffed with full-time employees who specialize in providing hands-on CalFresh enrollment support. Having staff with this expertise allows universities to offer personalized, one-on-one assistance to students who may otherwise struggle to navigate the process. These offices could also serve as centralized hubs for connecting students to broader social services, ensuring that students have access to the full range of support they need to succeed academically and personally.

Embedding CalFresh enrollment prompts within digital platforms like student portals or class

registration systems can help normalize the process and create an environment where students feel comfortable accessing food assistance. By making CalFresh information readily accessible in the systems students already use, public universities can remove barriers to enrollment and increase uptake. This seamless integration reduces the feeling of stigma and presents food security as an essential part of students' overall well-being. Public universities also have an opportunity to better support their diverse student populations, particularly students from immigrant backgrounds. Many students in the CSU and UC systems come from immigrant families, including international students and undocumented individuals. To address the unique needs of these students, universities should collaborate with immigrant resource centers to provide tailored guidance on alternative food assistance programs. These collaborations could involve offering workshops, providing multilingual resources, and ensuring that students have access to information that clears up any confusion about eligibility requirements, including concerns about the public charge rule.





## SCALING WITH SYSTEMS & STATE LEVERAGE

**Public institutions often have more infrastructure, but the scale of student need can outpace support.**

California's CSU and UC systems are already national leaders in basic needs programming.

### We recommend:

- Expanding CalFresh integration into digital platforms like student portals and class registration systems.
- Embedding food security goals into campus strategic plans and student equity frameworks.
- Using CSU/UC system coordination to advocate for statewide reforms, such as aligning CalFresh eligibility with FAFSA data to reduce redundant paperwork.

**Case in Point:** CSU Chico's Center for Healthy Communities offers a proven outreach model that could be expanded across more public campuses.

Multilingual workshops and culturally competent outreach are critical tools to ensure students feel empowered to access the support they need without fear of repercussions or misinformation. Another critical recommendation for public universities is to advocate for a simplified CalFresh application process that aligns more closely with students' financial aid applications. By streamlining the process and implementing automatic enrollment for students already receiving financial aid, public universities can reduce the administrative burden for students and increase participation in food assistance programs. Integrating CalFresh eligibility with FAFSA data could help eliminate redundant paperwork, making it easier for students to access resources without having to navigate multiple application processes. In addition to simplifying the enrollment process, universities should implement system-wide outreach campaigns to raise awareness about food assistance programs. Leveraging existing communication platforms, such as digital platforms, faculty, and student organizations, can help increase visibility for CalFresh and other food security resources. These campaigns should be designed to educate the campus community about the importance of food security, while also encouraging students to take action and apply for available resources. Faculty can play a critical role in promoting these programs, particularly in courses that serve first-generation and low-income students, helping to ensure that no student is left unaware of the resources available to them.

Finally, public universities should focus on scaling their peer ambassador programs across multiple departments and student groups. Peer ambassadors, especially those who are from similar backgrounds or who have first-hand experience with food insecurity, can help reduce the stigma surrounding food assistance. By empowering students to provide peer-to-peer support, universities can build trust within their communities and create a more inclusive environment where students feel comfortable seeking help without fear of judgment. These peer-led initiatives can be particularly impactful in reducing stigma and encouraging participation, as students are more likely to trust their peers when it comes to discussing sensitive issues like food insecurity.

# State & Regional **RECOMMENDATIONS**



To address food insecurity among college students, both state and regional policymakers must take proactive steps to create systemic solutions. These recommendations are designed to strengthen food security across California's higher education institutions.

At the state level, streamlining college students' access to CalFresh is crucial. Legislation such as SB 79 (Arambula), which expands exemptions and simplifies eligibility verification, is essential for improving CalFresh access. Policymakers should prioritize streamlining the application process and ensuring that students have an easier path to benefits, particularly through automatic or pre-enrollment systems that align with existing data from financial aid applications. Another key piece of legislation is SB 348 (Skinner), which promotes universal school meals and could significantly benefit college students by expanding food security initiatives to higher education. Implementing similar programs at the state level would allow California's public higher education institutions to offer universal access to meals, directly addressing food insecurity within the college setting.





Additionally, state reforms should include integrating CalFresh eligibility with FAFSA data, as proposed in AB 2810 (Arambula). This integration would streamline the process for students receiving financial aid and reduce redundant paperwork, making it easier for more students to access CalFresh benefits without additional administrative barriers. Further, bills such as AB 2153 (Arambula), which expands CalFresh benefits to include greater access to fresh produce, and SB 641 (Skinner), which enhances access to CalFresh for college students, should be supported. Expanding access to nutritious foods through these initiatives is critical for promoting the health and well-being of students.

At the regional level, collaboration between state agencies, local food banks, and higher education institutions is key to creating region-specific solutions to food insecurity. Regional partnerships can provide funding for food assistance programs, build awareness campaigns, and offer localized support such as mobile food pantries or regional food banks tailored to student needs. Local organizations and university networks should work together to offer targeted outreach to food-insecure students. This includes providing multilingual services, outreach through community organizations, and culturally relevant food assistance programs to ensure all students, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds, have access to vital resources. Furthermore, strengthening regional data sharing through California's food security coalitions, such as the Basic Needs Consortium, can help improve data collection and monitoring of food insecurity trends. This will allow for a more effective assessment of the impact of food assistance programs and help adjust strategies as needed. Regional collaborations with local businesses, grocery stores, and restaurants should also be encouraged to create affordable food options for students. Partnerships with these entities can provide discounted meals or groceries, helping alleviate the financial burden on students struggling to purchase food while attending school. Through coordinated state and regional efforts, food security for college students can be better supported, ensuring all students have access to the nutrition they need to succeed academically and thrive in their educational journeys.



## POLICY ALIGNMENT

### **SB 79 (Arambula)**

SB 79 seeks to streamline CalFresh access for college students by expanding exemptions and simplifying eligibility verification. This bill aims to remove barriers for students, making it easier for them to access benefits.

### **SB 348 (Skinner, 2023)**

SB 348 emphasizes universal school meals, which could potentially expand food security programs in higher education. While focused on K-12, its success may open opportunities for similar programs on college campuses.

### **CalFresh Restaurant Meals Program (2019)**

This program allows CalFresh recipients to use benefits at participating restaurants. Expanding it to student-friendly locations, like university dining halls, could provide students with convenient and nutritious meal options.

### **AB 1965 (Wicks) - CalFresh Preenrollment**

AB 1965 proposes preenrollment for CalFresh, allowing students to be registered for benefits automatically when applying for financial aid. This would reduce paperwork and streamline the enrollment process.

### **AB 2153 (Arambula) | Expanding Fruit & Vegetable EBT**

AB 2153 aims to boost CalFresh benefits by expanding the EBT program to increase access to fresh produce, enhancing the nutritional value of food available to students.

### **AB 274 (Bryan) | Income Exclusions for CalFresh Eligibility**

This bill seeks to increase the eligibility for CalFresh by excluding more forms of student income, making more students eligible for benefits.

### **AB 2810 (Arambula) | CalFresh and FAFSA Data**

AB 2810 seeks to align CalFresh eligibility with FAFSA data, simplifying the application process for students already receiving financial aid.

### **SB 641 (Skinner) | CalFresh for College Students Act**

SB 641 focuses on improving access to CalFresh for college students, addressing unique barriers faced by this population and supporting their enrollment in the program.

# National **RECOMMENDATIONS**

At the national level, broader reforms to SNAP policy are essential to improving access for college students and ensuring a more equitable food safety net. One of the most pressing changes needed is expanding SNAP eligibility criteria for students. Currently, the 20-hour work requirement imposes unnecessary barriers for many students, particularly those juggling rigorous academic schedules. Federal policy should eliminate this restriction, allowing more college students to qualify based on financial need alone. This would help alleviate the strain that financial hardship places on students, particularly those who work part-time or face other constraints that prevent them from meeting the existing work hours requirement.

In addition to expanding eligibility, simplifying the verification process would further enhance access. One approach would be to automatically qualify students who are receiving Pell Grants or federal work-study, reducing the administrative burden for both students and program administrators. Another critical reform involves establishing federal data-sharing agreements to streamline the enrollment process. By enabling SNAP programs to automatically verify income eligibility using FAFSA or other federal financial aid data, redundant paperwork could be eliminated, accelerating enrollment for students who have already been identified as low-income. This could significantly reduce delays in processing applications, helping students access food assistance more quickly. Federal investment in campus-based SNAP navigation programs is also crucial. The Enhance Access to SNAP Act (H



Expanding these programs through targeted grants would allow colleges to enhance peer outreach, provide enrollment support, and offer multilingual services that reflect the diverse student populations they serve. These programs have proven effective in raising awareness and increasing participation, particularly when peer navigators, students who share similar backgrounds, are involved in outreach efforts. In addition to campus-based support, national outreach campaigns are necessary to normalize the use of SNAP among college students and reduce stigma. Federal agencies should partner with higher education associations, student organizations, and advocacy groups to launch multilingual, culturally relevant public education campaigns that raise awareness of available resources and encourage students to apply for benefits.



Finally, federal nutrition policies must be re-evaluated to address the specific needs of college students. Expanding access to prepared meals or meal delivery services through SNAP would particularly benefit students who lack access to kitchen facilities or have irregular class schedules that make cooking difficult.

These policy changes would help ensure that more college students can meet their nutritional needs and focus on their studies without the added stress of food insecurity.

Policy Alignment: Several federal bills mirror the institutional recommendations outlined in this report.

## FOR EXAMPLE:



The SNAP College Student Eligibility Act (SB. 641) This bill seeks to eliminate the 20-hour per week work requirement for college students in order to qualify for SNAP benefits. It aims to make it easier for students, especially those balancing school and work, to access food assistance.

The College Student Hunger Act of 2021 (H.R. 5595) This bill aims to increase access to SNAP for college students by removing the work requirement for those who are Pell Grant recipients, as well as simplifying the eligibility process for students already receiving federal aid.

The Enhance Access to SNAP Act (H.R. 1919) This bill seeks to permanently expand SNAP eligibility to college students by eliminating the 20-hour per week work requirement for students to qualify for food assistance. It proposes that students attending institutions of higher education should be eligible for SNAP benefits without the need to meet work-study or employment requirements, ensuring that more students, particularly those at community colleges and students of color, have access to critical nutrition.



## STUDENT VOICES AS DRIVERS OF CHANGE

**Peer Advocacy is Policy Power** Student leaders aren't just program participants, they're policy influencers. By training and resourcing students to engage in campus change, we create feedback loops that drive both awareness and systems reform.

- Support stipended peer navigator models across all institution types.
- Include student input in CalFresh planning and funding decisions.
- Lift up student-led campaigns in legislative and administrative advocacy.

**"We know what's missing. We just need support to build it."**

- CalFresh Champion, LA County Campus

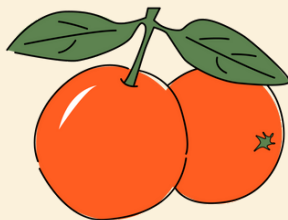


# CONCLUSION

Addressing food insecurity among college students is not just about increasing CalFresh enrollment; it is about transforming the broader food system to ensure equitable access to nutritious food for all. The recommendations outlined in this report provide a roadmap for institutions, policymakers, and advocates to create lasting change. By expanding on-campus CalFresh enrollment support, improving outreach to immigrant students, simplifying the application process, and strengthening food assistance programs, we can dismantle barriers that prevent students from accessing essential resources.

The LAFPC plays a crucial role in driving systemic change by bringing together stakeholders across sectors, centering the voices of those directly impacted by our food system, and advocating for policies that promote food justice. These recommendations align with the LAFPC's mission to build a more inclusive, resilient, and equitable food system, one that not only addresses immediate student needs but also contributes to broader efforts to reduce food insecurity across Los Angeles County.

This is a call to action for universities, policymakers, and local organizations to collaborate in strengthening food security for students and beyond. By integrating student food security into larger food system reforms, we can create sustainable solutions that ensure no student has to choose between their education and their next meal. The time to act is now. Ensuring access to food is not just a campus issue but a fundamental part of a just and thriving food system for all.





**THANK YOU**  
FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT OF  
**OUR WORK**

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## APPENDIX A: SOURCES

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