



Affordability, Food, and Housing
Access Taskforce Report:
**ADDRESSING FOOD
INSECURITY IN CALIFORNIA
COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

A p r i l 2 0 2 2

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COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEAGUE OF CALIFORNIA

A special thank you to Tom Burke, Colleen Ganley, Tammeil Gilkerson and the **Affordability, Food & Housing Access Taskforce** for their contributions to this publication. For more information about the Taskforce or questions regarding this publication, please contact League Staff at cclc@ccleague.org.

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Published April 2022

OVERVIEW

This report on food insecurity among California Community College students is the third in a series of issue briefs from the Community College League of California's **CEO Affordability, Food, and Housing Access Taskforce**. Students are food insecure when they have limited or uncertain access to nutritionally adequate and safe food. This report focuses on the causes, impacts, and solutions for food insecurity and provides resources to assist policymakers and colleges in addressing food insecurity among California's community college students.



THE PROBLEM

The California Association of Foodbanks estimates one in four Californians confront food insecurity, roughly 10 million individuals.¹ They further note that food insecurity rates were higher in Latinx and Black families with children. Given that students of color and parents are more likely to enroll at a community college than a four-year institution, it is not surprising that food insecurity is a significant problem for California's community college students. According to a 2019 **Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice's #RealCollege** survey of approximately 40,000 students at 57 California Community Colleges, 50 percent of students recently experienced food insecurity.²

In 2020, the **Hope Center** conducted additional studies within the San Diego³ and Los Angeles⁴ Community College Districts. These studies further affirmed the findings from the 2019 study, with student respondents

noting food insecurity within the 30 days preceding the survey at 43 percent and 40 percent, respectively. Using the US Department of Agriculture's 18-item scale, food security ranges from nutrition, the ability to afford and eat balanced meals, and not eating because there wasn't enough money for food. Results found that students in both surveys were most likely to worry about running out of food before buying more, with many cutting the size or skipping meals due to lack of money.

The crisis level of hunger on college campuses is further exposed in the **2020 documentary Hungry to Learn**, shedding light on the reality and severity of the campus hunger crisis through students' lived experiences navigating food and housing insecurities.

¹ <https://www.cafoodbanks.org/hunger-data/>

² <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/RealCollege-CCCCO-Report.pdf>

³ <https://hope4college.com/rc2021-sdccc/>

⁴ <https://hope4college.com/rc2021-laccd/>

CAUSES OF FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity is a multi-faceted issue that impacts college students at rates more significant than the overall averages. According to Freudenberg, Goldrick-Rab, and Poppendieck (2019), studies over the last decade have found that food insecurity among college students is substantially higher than the 12 percent rate for the entire US population, at upwards of 20 percent to more than 50 percent.⁵ Reasons for higher rates of food insecurity among college students include:

1. A growing population of low-income college students;
2. High college costs and insufficient financial aid;
3. More financial hardship among many low and moderate-income families;
4. A weak labor market for part-time workers;
5. Declining per capita college resources; and,
6. Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) policies that specifically exclude many college students from participation.⁶

Moreover, several studies note that certain students are predisposed to food insecurity, based on race, ethnicity, and generational access to college.⁷

Today, nearly 40 percent of undergraduates qualify as low-income, exacerbating the issue of food insecurity for almost 20 million college students. Many students who attended college prior to the 1990s were able to get a Pell grant and still cover the costs of going to college (including housing). Those opportunities disappeared as states shifted the support for higher education to other government priorities, essentially creating a tax on college students to pay for the general government. Freudenberg et al. (2019) note, "Today's public colleges have less money to put toward supporting students and providing affordable food and housing. State funding for higher

education has decreased by 25% per student over the last 30 years, and states have cut \$9 billion from higher education in the last 10 years alone. In public universities, budget cuts have led to significant reductions in student services".

Increased tuition is just one of several issues that too many students face. Feeding America, a coalition of food banks and food pantries, also highlights how the growing proportion of "non-traditional" versus "traditional" students on campuses has contributed to the college hunger crisis.

*"This includes students who are financially independent, enrolled part-time in school while working full-time, or did not receive a traditional high school diploma. Students aren't starting college right after high school, with the average age of college students being 26. The changing face of the average college student brings new challenges. 1 in 5 students is caring for a child and many as single parents. Between rising tuition costs, parenting, and working full-time, making ends meet can be tough."*⁸

Hunger can have lasting physical and mental effects on college students. These students frequently skip meals or go without food. Students facing hunger are more likely to report their overall health as being "poor" and struggle with depression.⁹ Further, food-insecure students were more likely than food-secure students to report a lower GPA (2.0–2.49) versus a higher GPA (3.5–4.0). Data suggest that food insecurity is an issue for a large percentage of community college students. Food insecurity may have adverse effects on student academic performance and is a factor to be considered by college administrators, faculty, and students.¹⁰

5 https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1302&context=sph_pubs

6 https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1302&context=sph_pubs

7 [https://www.jneb.org/article/S1499-4046\(16\)30128-2/fulltext](https://www.jneb.org/article/S1499-4046(16)30128-2/fulltext)

8 <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-blog/why-college-students-face-hunger>

9 <https://journalistsresource.org/environment/college-student-hunger-food-pantry/>

10 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10668926.2013.850758>

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY

At the [#RealCollegeCalifornia Basic Needs Summit](#) in February 2022, Natalia Trinh, Associated Student Government President at San Diego Mesa College and Student Trustee, shared her most pressing need is access to food. Hospitalized at one point, Natalia lost 16 pounds due to compounding issues balancing schooling, supporting her family, and her mental well-being.

"Probably one of the most pressing needs for me currently would be food. As you may have recalled, I lost a lot of weight. And part of the reason was the guilt I had from eating because sometimes the budgets were tight. When I started school last year, my father had a heart attack. Not only was that traumatizing, but the medical bills were really high. Not to mention how expensive medication is. And as a result, I felt really bad for eating because I wanted to save money. I even had a student in my class tell me to punch my stomach to make it quiet because it kept growling.

I eat less in hopes that we could save money, and though I have a job now, it's still not enough to feed myself because I also have to worry about my family, since my father was laid off and now, I'm the only person who works in our family of five. And I can't fathom looking at my six-year-old sister and not being able to provide anything for her. And so, that's my motivation to keep going.

This fall semester, I worked two additional jobs on top of my student government responsibilities and five college classes, which totals up to 20 units. And if you were to see my Sunday schedule. I used to work at CVS from 7 am to 1 pm, then I would run to Starbucks to work from 2 pm to closing. Before I knew that we had programs that I could utilize, I pretty much lived off Starbucks food to save money for my future as well as for my family.

Thanks to scholarships from the student affairs department and The Stand, I was able not to have to continue that. I stopped working at CVS and was able to focus more on my studies. We often think that food is something so easy to obtain and fine. However, when budgets are tight, people tend not to prioritize eating, which affects our performance because food is the fuel for the body. And so, being able to get these resources without being discriminated against and judged makes me relieved knowing that our school was able to look past how they could benefit financially from their service, but rather how they can push themselves to help our students in need."

Many college students facing hunger feel a stigma associated with receiving help. Colleges can implement intrusive and innovative programs to break the stigma and provide wide ranging support. One size does not fit all, and colleges will need to carefully examine the needs and resources in their community. Some programs range from a global approach to more personal approaches.

Since 2017 the California State Legislature has provided funds to support Hunger-Free Campus activities across the 115 California community colleges. As a result of this investment, over 100 colleges have food pantries, 55 colleges host basic needs centers, and 1,135 faculty and staff provide basic needs services, including support with public benefits access.

Some other promising practices identified by the Taskforce include:

IMPLEMENTING A ONE-STOP MODEL

This model places basic needs programs in a central location for better coordination and increased student access. Recent state funding provided colleges with support for this type of program. As a result, many colleges are already implementing basic needs centers.



For example, San Diego Mesa College instituted ["The Stand,"](#) a food pantry and clothing closet that assists students with no-cost food and clothing resources. Peer navigators, counselors, and staff provide students with a safe and secure environment to share their needs and receive support.

Other colleges like Santa Ana College are leveraging community support to institutionalize services. Thanks to a 1.2 million dollar donation from the Fainbarg and Chase families in August of 2021, Santa Ana College established the [Thrive Center](#), dedicated to supporting the healthy wellbeing of a diverse community of



learners. Staffed with student services coordinators, the Center helps students develop a strong foundation physically, mentally, and academically by providing access to basic needs such as food, clothing, career workshops, and shelter. In addition, the program addresses significant disparities in food and housing security to increase health and improve academic performance.

COORDINATING A FOOD RECOVERY PROGRAM

A Food Recovery Program connects students with on-campus food surplus resulting from food vendor donations and catered events. Colleges can

initiate a food alert system that allows students to opt-in to get text messages about surplus food available on-campus. At Orange Coast College (OCC), the faculty coordinator of the Food Service Management Program, Alexandra Yates, had a broader vision for helping end

student hunger and food waste on campus through curriculum and collaboration across all departments.

Founded in 2019, the **OCC Recovery Kitchen** helps students in food service management, culinary arts, baking and pastry, and nutrition programs gain experience working in a commercial high-volume kitchen, emphasizing proper handling and processing of recovered foods. Students learn the importance of reducing food waste by repurposing surplus edible food into nutritious, well-balanced meals. All the meals are distributed to OCC students and local families in need. The recovery kitchen collaborates with the on-campus pantry (Pirate's Cove), cafeteria

services, the college's culinary arts, nutrition and dietetics, and horticulture programs to recover food for the student body.

In 2020, OCC Recovery Kitchen was in the position to help students and community members experiencing food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic by producing and distributing 212,392 meals and recovering 609,541 pounds of surplus edible food that would otherwise go to landfills. Additionally, in 2021 the food service management program initiated a food waste program using a CityPod urban composter, with an annual capacity of 82 metric tons of food waste.

PARTNERING WITH COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Colleges can leverage resources already available in the community to address food access. Since 2018 Evergreen Valley College's (EVC) Food, Resources, and Education to Stop Hunger and Homelessness (F.R.E.S.H.) Program, has partnered with community-based organization New Seasons Market to leverage resources to address food access, equity, and education programs

on campus. As one of the nearest grocery stores to campus, the partnership spans five different areas:

1. **The Hunger Partner Program** centers on customer monetary donations collected at the register and in-store fundraisers. As a result of the collected monetary donations, the EVC Emergency Fund account receives quarterly payments that assist in providing emergency funds to students facing a financial crisis.
2. **The Neighbor Rewards Bag It Forward Program** helps support the sustainability of the campus food pantry. Each time a customer brings in a reusable bag, a 5-cent bag refund goes toward



the EVC F.R.E.S.H. Market Pantry as one of three community recipients.

3. The Food Recovery Program provides the EVC F.R.E.S.H. Market Pantry with food surplus resulting from food donations and catered events from New Seasons Market. Weekly food donations include milk, eggs, bread, cereal, beverages, and snack items, while food surplus from catered events includes sandwiches and hot meals. The EVC F.R.E.S.H. Market Pantry has received over 4,000lbs. of food.
4. EVC began its annual Turkey Giveaway in 2016, and in 2018 New Seasons Market graciously began donating 350 turkeys a year, helping to support over 1,400 EVC student families with food during the holiday season.
5. EVC students who show their student ID at checkout receive a 10% discount for their items. To better support students in need and those impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic, New Seasons Market donated fifty \$50 gift cards, fifty \$100 gift cards, and fifty \$250 gift cards to assist our most vulnerable students.



The multitude of ways that the partnership provides support allows for different student needs to be met. As a result, this four-year partnership has contributed to assisting over 3,440 EVC students and their families.

INCORPORATING SOLUTIONS FOR FIGHTING FOOD INSECURITY INTO ANY NEW STUDENT HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

The **2021 State Budget Act** included **\$2 billion in one-time/non-Prop 98 funding for student housing in the CCC, CSU, and UC**. This historic funding presents an opportunity for districts/colleges to address food insecurity by including dining facilities

and meal plans in project design and operations. In addition, colleges can create **meal swipe programs** so students who overestimate the number of meals they need can donate their surplus meals rather than letting them go to waste. Santa Monica College (SMC) has been very active in addressing SMC's students' food insecurity issues. In the fall of 2015, Associated Student Government passed a referendum to allocate a portion of student fees to fund free lunch vouchers worth \$5 each for students facing food insecurity as a **Swipe Out Hunger campus partner**. Before the pandemic, up to 200 students per semester received up to six \$5 vouchers each time they visited a counselor to use at the on-campus cafeteria.

PROMOTING STATE GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

Programs like **CalFresh**, known federally as the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**, provides monthly food benefits to low-income individuals and families. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) is responsible for administering the CalFresh program throughout the 58 counties across the state. CDSS has been very progressive in expanding college students' access to CalFresh benefits. In addition, many of the 115 colleges promote and support CalFresh enrollment as part of the food pantry and food giveaway events. For example, the Office of Student Life at Bakersfield College offers personalized **CalFresh assistance** from a dedicated staff member that helps students with the application process. However, there is still much work regarding the vast number of college students in California who are likely eligible to receive CalFresh but who are not currently receiving these benefits. If implemented, several policy recommendations could expand the number of students accessing public benefits, including CalFresh.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

The State of California's most recent budgets recognize food insecurity as a key issue and provide additional financial resources for the System's colleges to begin to address the need. However, given high levels of hunger and food insecurity, rising inflation, and lack of access to healthy and nutritious food, the Taskforce recommends solutions that expand resources and eliminate barriers to alleviate hunger among California's community college students.

- Expand legislative flexibility for the use of unrestricted funds to provide food resources to students. Current regulations view these funds as a gift of public funds, limiting the college's ability to support basic needs initiatives directly.
- Dedicate permanent and additional non-Proposition 98 funding towards addressing students' basic needs, including expanded support for Basic Needs Centers.
- Expand financial aid resources to support the total cost of attendance for students.
- Maximize student eligibility for CalFresh benefits, including exemptions based on increasing employability and enrollment in career education programs.
- Collect annual systemwide data on food insecurity using questions from USDA's Household Food Security Survey Module, which has been pre-tested and validated at institutions across California and the U.S.
- Facilitate K-16 intersegmental data-sharing related to the free and reduced lunch program to promote eligibility and expansion of subsidized college lunches.
- Maximize student awareness of eligibility for CalFresh and other public benefits using FAFSA data.
- Ensure that the newly implemented public benefits access portal, BenefitsCal, accommodates the needs of college students.
- Require that campus-based vendor contracts include access to Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) to increase student utilization of CalFresh benefits.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Established in the spring of 2018 by the Chief Executive Officers of the California Community Colleges (CEOCCC), the **Affordability, Food & Housing Access Taskforce** provides system-wide recommendations to address the prevalence of food and housing and lack of affordable access experienced by our students. The Taskforce aims to proactively engage in discussions and make recommendations for interventions and solutions based on research and input from leading scholars, practitioners, and students regarding housing and hunger challenges.

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The Affordability, Food & Housing Access Taskforce is supported by the **Community College League of California**. Special thanks to these individuals for their insights and support:

- **Larry Galizio**, President & CEO
- **Lisa Mealoy**, Chief Operating Officer
- **Andrew Martinez**, Director of Government Relations
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