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Trends in Community College Enrollment and CalFresh Eligibility During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**SAM AYERS, JENNIFER HOGG, JOHANNA LACOE, ALAN PEREZ, AND
JESSE ROTHSTEIN**

Executive Summary

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, the federal government responded by expanding the country's safety-net programs, including through stimulus payments. There were also significant federal policy changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the largest food assistance program in the United States. Benefit amounts were increased, and eligibility rules were changed to make more people eligible, including by temporarily broadening college student eligibility for SNAP.

Even before the pandemic, food insecurity among college students was alarmingly common; about half of California community college students reported being food insecure in 2018. SNAP — called CalFresh in California — has the potential to alleviate this problem, but as a previous CPL report shows, only about a quarter of eligible community college students receive CalFresh.

This policy brief describes how eligibility for CalFresh changed among community college students because of broader college enrollment changes during the height of the pandemic and due to temporary eligibility changes Congress made to SNAP.

Key Findings

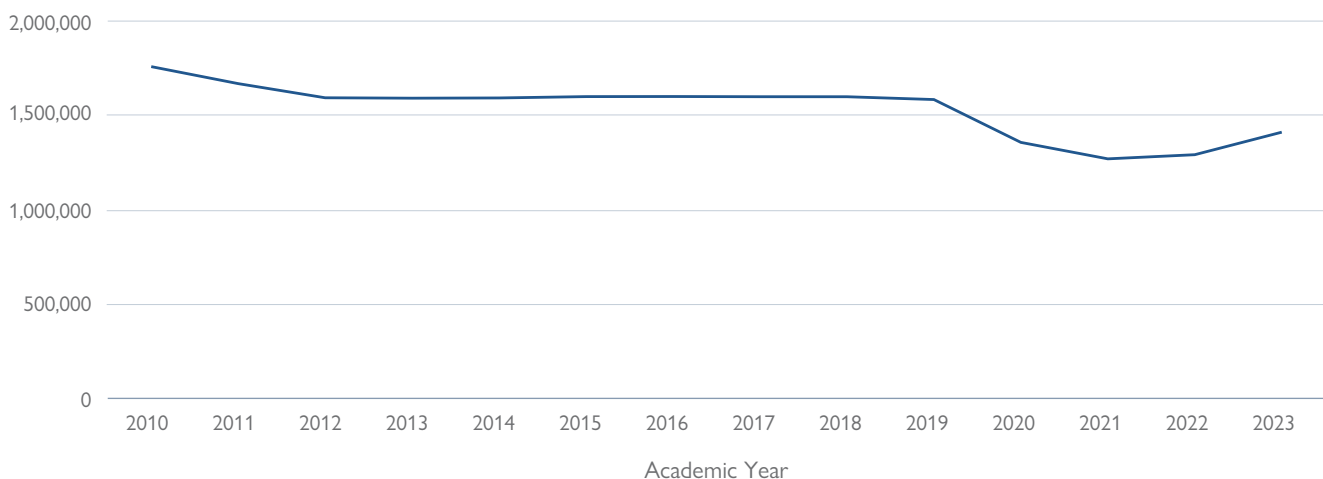
- California community college enrollment declined by nearly 20% (315,000 fewer students) in the first two years of the pandemic. Enrollment declines were particularly large in more urban regions (San Diego, Bay Area, and Greater Los Angeles) and appear to be driven more by students dropping out than by reduced new enrollments.
- Students with low incomes were more likely to leave the community college system or not enroll in the first place. This resulted in fewer students whose incomes were low enough to qualify for CalFresh.
- Among those students whose incomes were low enough to qualify, COVID-era policy changes loosened restrictions on college student access, which increased the share of community college students who were eligible for CalFresh.
- Community college students on average received an additional \$122 in CalFresh benefits every month due to COVID-era policy changes.

These findings suggest that pandemic-era SNAP changes were a valuable tool for providing financial support to vulnerable students. Policymakers should consider making pandemic eligibility policies permanent, because they appear to have promoted college affordability for low-income students while still preventing any higher income students from participating.

Enrollment in Community College Declined, and the Makeup of the Student Body Changed

Enrollment in the California community colleges — the largest system of higher education in the U.S. and the fourth largest in the world — declined significantly following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic ([Figure 1](#)). In Fall 2019, there were 1.57 million students enrolled. By Fall 2021, that dropped to 1.26 million, a 20% decline. Enrollment began to recover in Fall 2022 but is still below pre-pandemic levels.

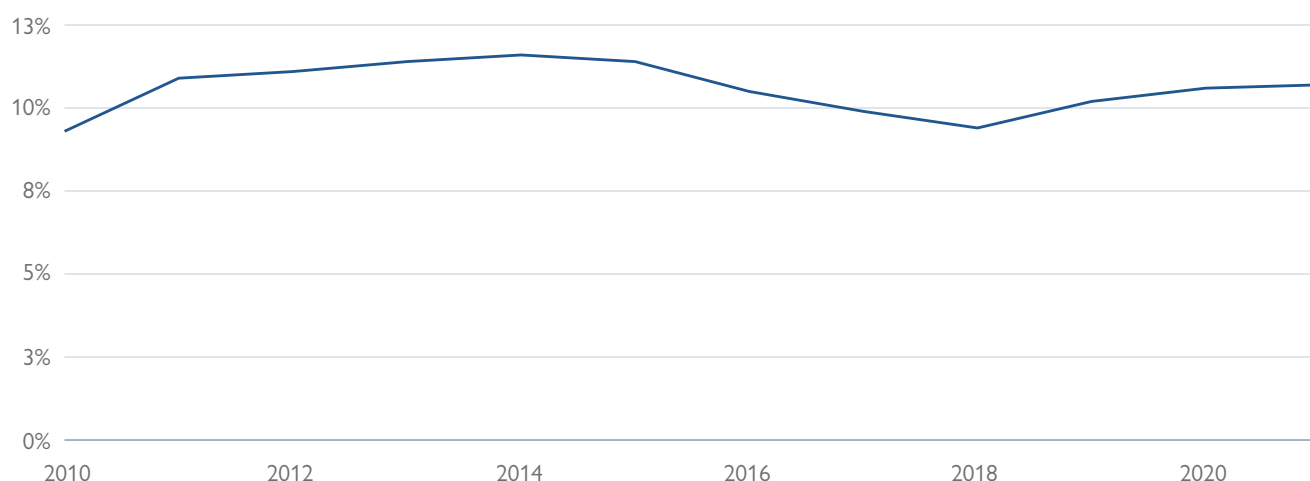
FIGURE 1. California Community College Fall Term Enrollment, 2010 to 2023



Source: Data provided to the California Policy Lab by California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. This count includes all unique individuals who appear in the CCCC enrollment data for a given term.

Amid these dramatic enrollment changes, CalFresh participation rates increased only modestly during the pandemic, from 10.2% in the 2019–2020 school year to 10.7% in the 2021–2022 school year ([Figure 2](#)).

FIGURE 2. CalFresh Participation Among California Community College Students



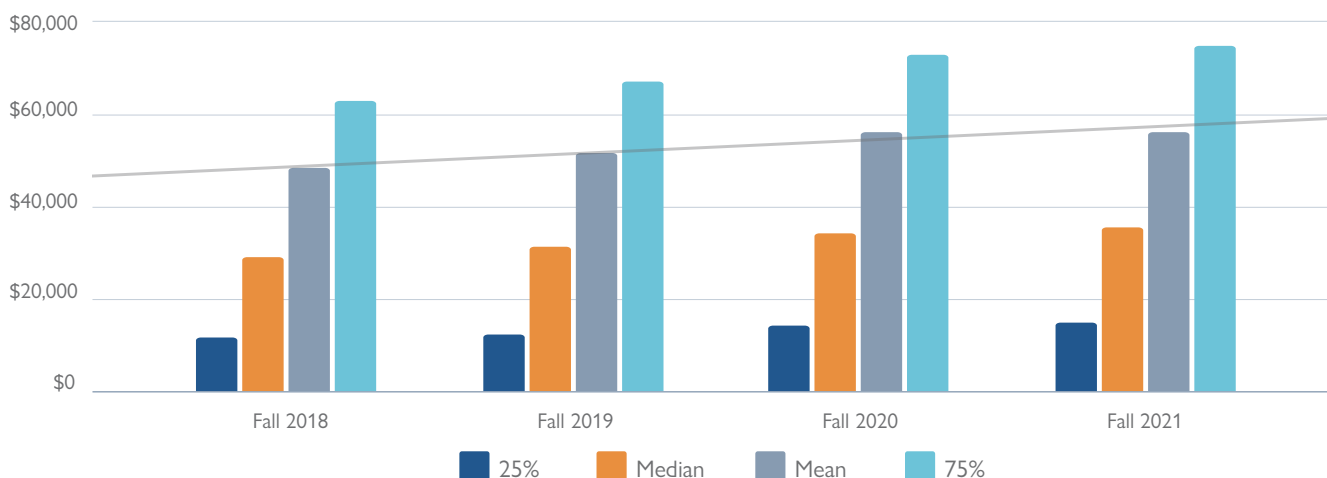
Source: Data provided to the California Policy Lab by California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and the California Department of Social Services.
Note: Students are identified as participating in CalFresh if they received CalFresh benefits during a term (quarter or semester, depending on the school) in which they were also enrolled in college.

However, there were also dramatic changes in the makeup of the student body during this same time, and these changes impacted who was eligible for CalFresh. The following sections detail enrollment changes by student subgroups,¹ followed by an analysis of the effect a changing population and policy changes had on CalFresh eligibility.

Income

Students who remained in the California community college system during the pandemic had higher incomes, on average, than before (Figure 3). The average income of students, as reported on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) rose from \$48,500 in Fall 2018 to \$56,300 in Fall 2021,² a 16% increase (a 6% increase in inflation-adjusted income). Students' living situations also changed modestly. Between 2018 and 2021, the share of students living with their parents increased by 2.3 percentage points, and students' average household size increased by 0.2 people.

FIGURE 3. Income Distribution of California Community College Students, Fall 2018–Fall 2021

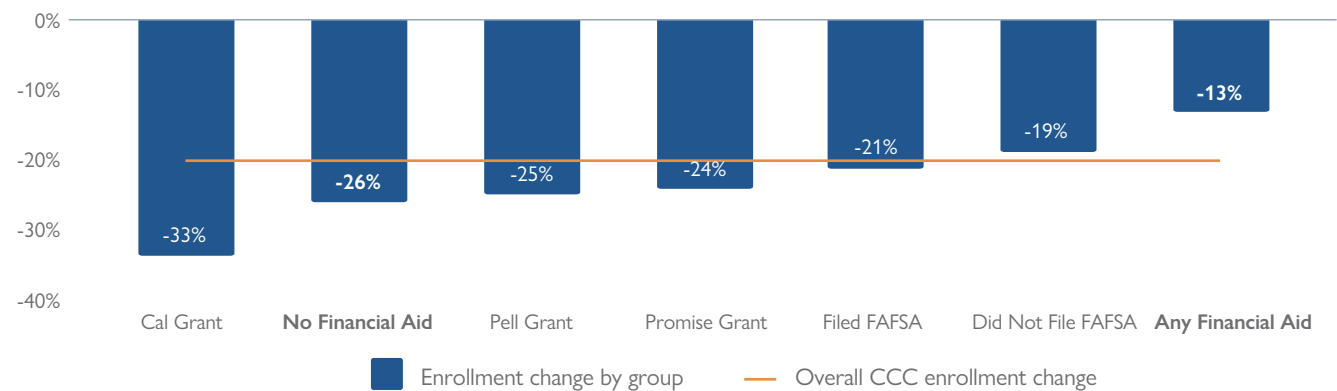


Source: FAFSA data via the California Student Aid Commission, matched to California Community College enrollment records.
Note: Income is the sum of student, spouse, and parent income if the student is listed as a dependent. If a student is not listed as a dependent, then income only includes student and spouse income.

Financial Aid Status

Consistent with the previous finding, enrollment declines were largest among students receiving grants given to students with low incomes, with a 33% enrollment decline for students receiving Cal Grants, a 25% enrollment decline for students receiving Pell Grants, and a 24% decline for students receiving a [Promise Grant](#) (Figure 4). However, we also see larger-than-average declines among those receiving no financial aid (-21%), though it is likely that some share of this group are students who may be eligible for financial aid but did not apply.

FIGURE 4: Decline in Enrollment Between Fall 2019 and Fall 2021, by Financial Aid Status

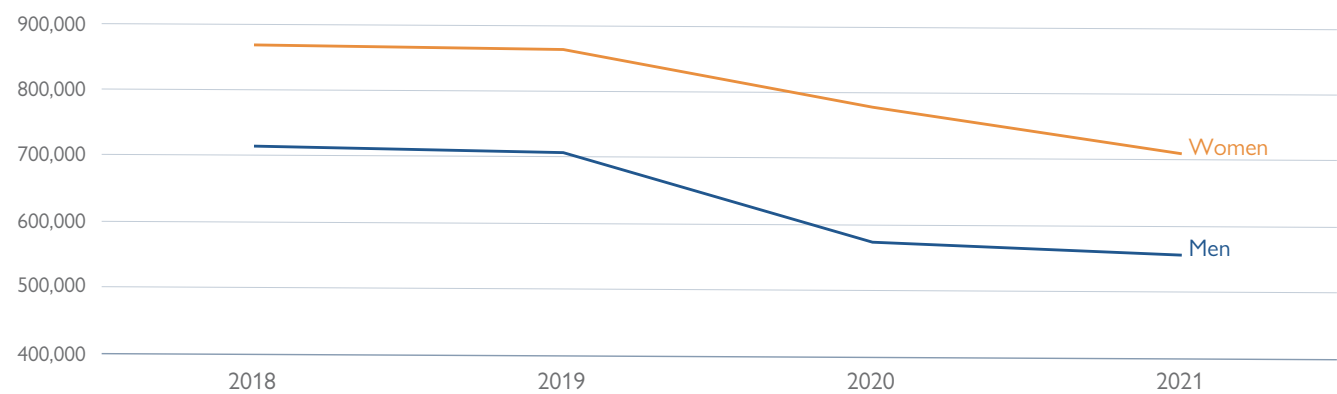


Source: Data provided to the California Policy Lab by California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and the California Student Aid Commission
Note: These categories do not represent discrete groups of students. There is significant overlap between students who receive a Pell Grant and Cal Grant, for example.

Gender

There were larger enrollment declines for men in the first year of the pandemic (-24% between Fall 2019 and 2020), whereas enrollment among women fell more modestly (-11%) (Figure 5). However, in the following year, enrollment among women continued to decline at a similar rate, whereas the enrollment loss among men decelerated, bringing the gender gap closer to its pre-pandemic levels.

FIGURE 5. California Community College Fall Term Enrollment, 2019 to 2021, by Gender



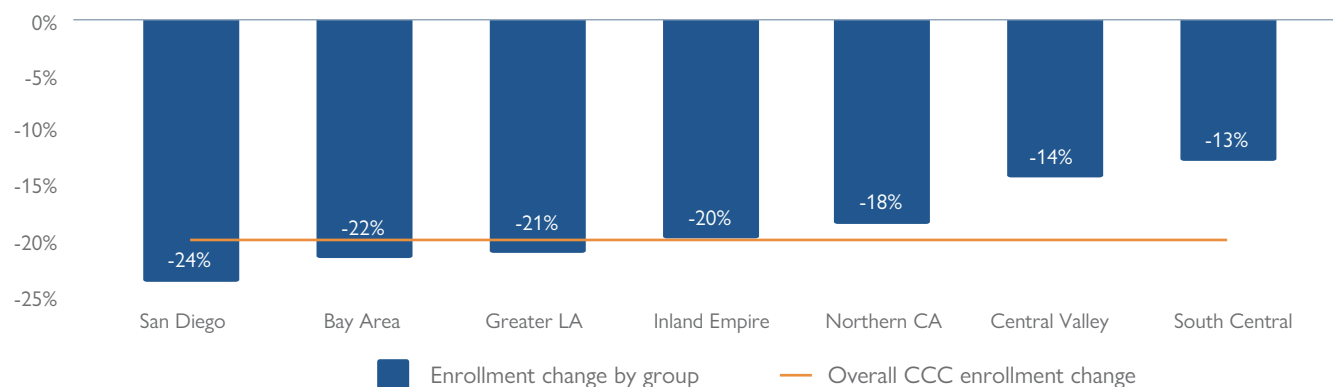
Source: Data provided to the California Policy Lab by California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

Fields of study that tend to draw more male students to community colleges, such as skilled trades (precision production, mechanic and repair technician, construction trades, etc.), experienced large drops in enrollment in the first year of the pandemic (-25.5% from Spring 2020 to Spring 2021), and smaller declines the following school year (-2.0%). Other popular majors that tend to have more female students, such as liberal arts and sciences, saw more steady declines across the first two years of the pandemic (-14.0% and -13.4%, respectively).³

Region

There were also significant regional differences in enrollment changes (Figure 6). San Diego, the Bay Area, and Greater Los Angeles had higher-than-average declines. Overall, across all campuses, there was a 20% decline during this time period.

FIGURE 6. Declines in California Community College Enrollment Between Fall 2019 and Fall 2021, by Region

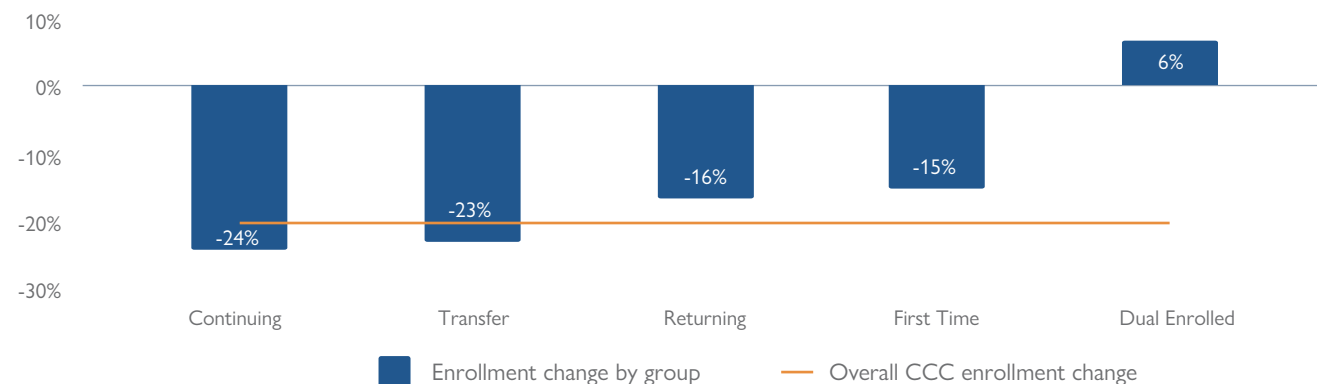


Source: Data provided to the California Policy Lab by California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

Enrollment Type

We observe larger enrollment declines among students who were already enrolled in college — either the same college (“continuing students”) or a different college (“transfer students”) — than those enrolling in college for the first time or returning after a break (Figure 7). In other words, the decline in enrollment was driven more by students dropping out of college, than by a decline in new enrollments (although there were declines in each of these categories). Notably, the number of dual enrollment students — those who take community college classes while still enrolled in high school — increased during the pandemic. These students’ overall share of enrollment in the California community colleges increased from 7% to 9%.⁴

FIGURE 7. Change in California Community College Enrollment Between Fall 2019 and Fall 2021, by Enrollment Type

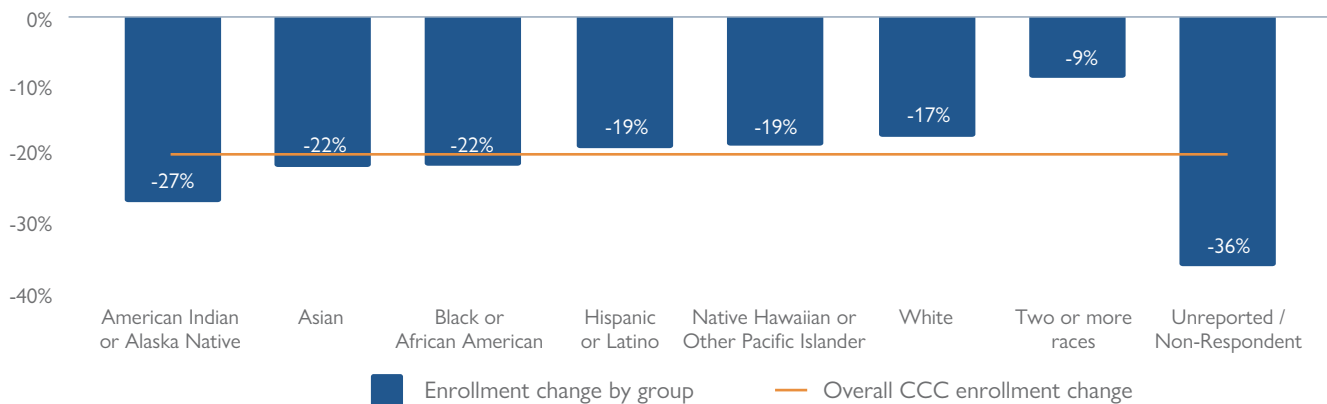


Source: Data provided to the California Policy Lab by California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

Race/Ethnicity

Enrollment declines also varied by student race/ethnicity. Declines were the largest for American Indian or Alaska Native (-27%) and Black and Asian (-22%) students, and relatively less severe among White students (-17%) and students with two or more racial/ethnic categories (-9%) (Figure 8).

FIGURE 8. Change in California Community College Enrollment Between Fall 2019 and Fall 2021, by Race/Ethnicity



Source: Data provided to the California Policy Lab by California Community College Chancellor's Office.

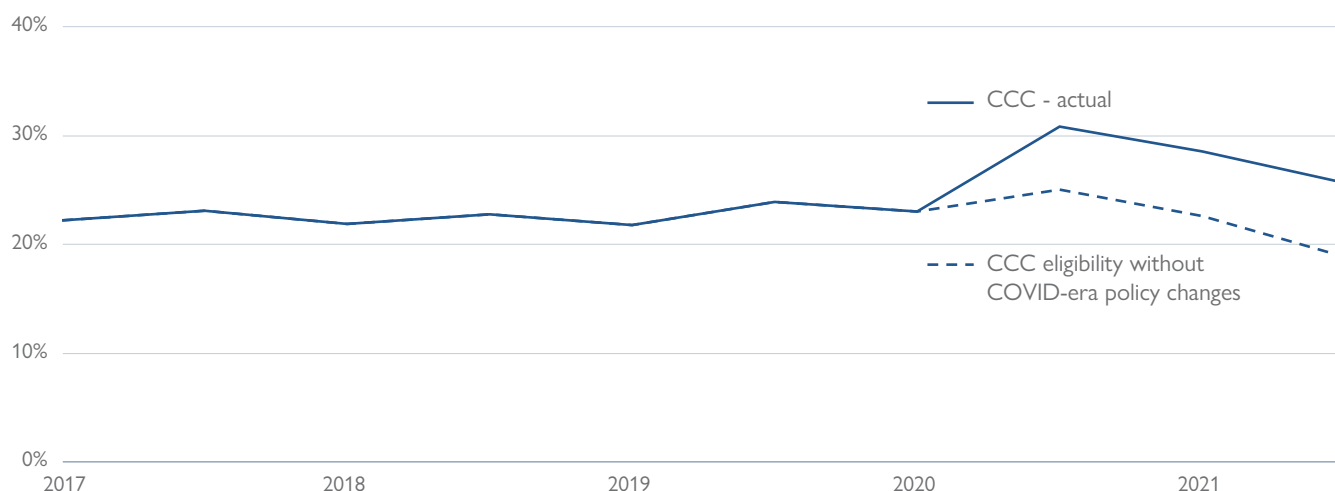
Policy Changes Made It Easier for Low-Income Students to Qualify for Food Benefits

A federal policy dating back to the 1980s makes it more difficult for college students to qualify for SNAP than the general population. The motivation for the so-called “Student Rule” is to prevent students who temporarily appear low-income, but who receive financial support from high-earning family members, from accessing public benefits. In addition to the standard income and citizenship requirements, college students must meet one of several “exemptions,” which could include working 20+ hours per week, being the parent of a young child, or receiving support from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Experts have suggested that these exemptions are not only confusing and challenging for students to meet, but also create administrative burden and are overbroad to accomplish the goal of keeping the program targeted to low-income students, all of which pushes potentially eligible students away.

During the pandemic, Congress temporarily added two new exemptions that made more students eligible. The first exemption was for students who reported \$0 Expected Family Contribution (EFC) on their FAFSA. The second exemption was for students who were eligible for state or federal work study.⁵ This meant that many students who were previously ineligible because they lacked an exemption were now eligible. In addition, the higher education segments and CSAC were able to easily identify which students had a \$0 EFC exemption and target outreach to newly eligible students.⁶ These communications included instructions on how to incorporate this exemption into their CalFresh application.

Figure 9 shows the impact this policy change had on increasing the share of California community college students who were eligible for CalFresh. We show both actual eligibility rates (solid line) and what the eligibility rates would have been absent these two exemptions (dashed line). This provides clear visual evidence that eligibility rose by between 6 and 7% during the pandemic due to these changes.⁷

FIGURE 9. Impact of COVID-Era Eligibility Changes on CalFresh Eligibility Rates Among California Community College Students, 2017–2021

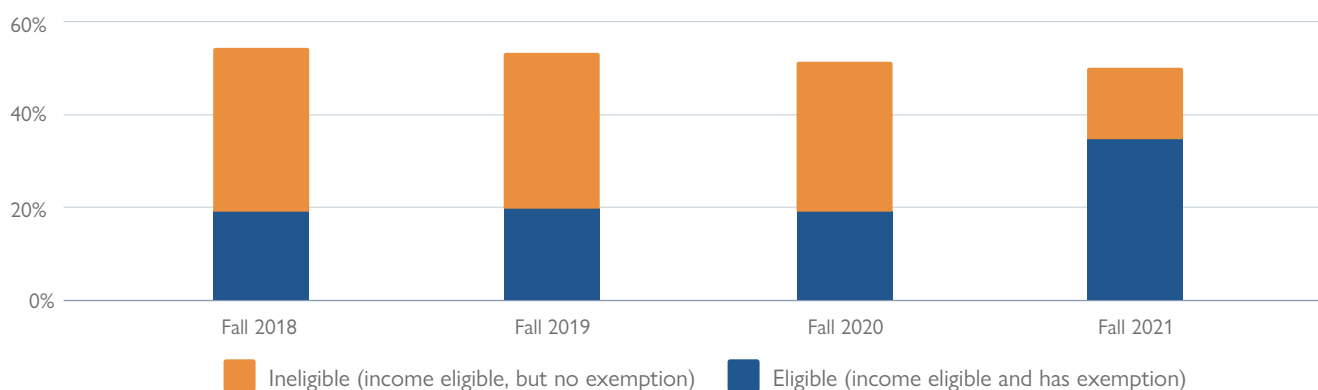


Source: Eligibility Estimates calculated by the California Policy Lab based on data provided by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and the California Student Aid Commission.

If the rules had not changed, the share of eligible students likely would have declined slightly because of the aforementioned increases in average income and household size. Students who live with their parents or other people are less likely to be eligible, because of their higher combined income.

Figure 10 underscores this point. Between Fall 2018 and Fall 2021, the share of students⁸ whose incomes were low enough to qualify decreased from 54% to 50% (orange and blue bars combined). However, among the subgroup of students who were income eligible, a much larger share now met an exemption, increasing from 35% in Fall 2018 to nearly 69% in Fall 2021.

FIGURE 10. Share of Income-Eligible, Full-Time California Community College Students Eligible for CalFresh, Fall 2018–Fall 2021



Source: Eligibility Estimates calculated by the California Policy Lab based on data provided by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and the California Student Aid Commission.

In other words, there were countervailing effects on CalFresh eligibility during the pandemic. California community college students during the pandemic were, on average, higher-income than those who attended prior to the pandemic, resulting in a lower share of students whose incomes were low enough to qualify for CalFresh. However, among those whose incomes were low enough to qualify for CalFresh, the pandemic-era policy changes meant more students could qualify for a student exemption and were ultimately eligible.⁹

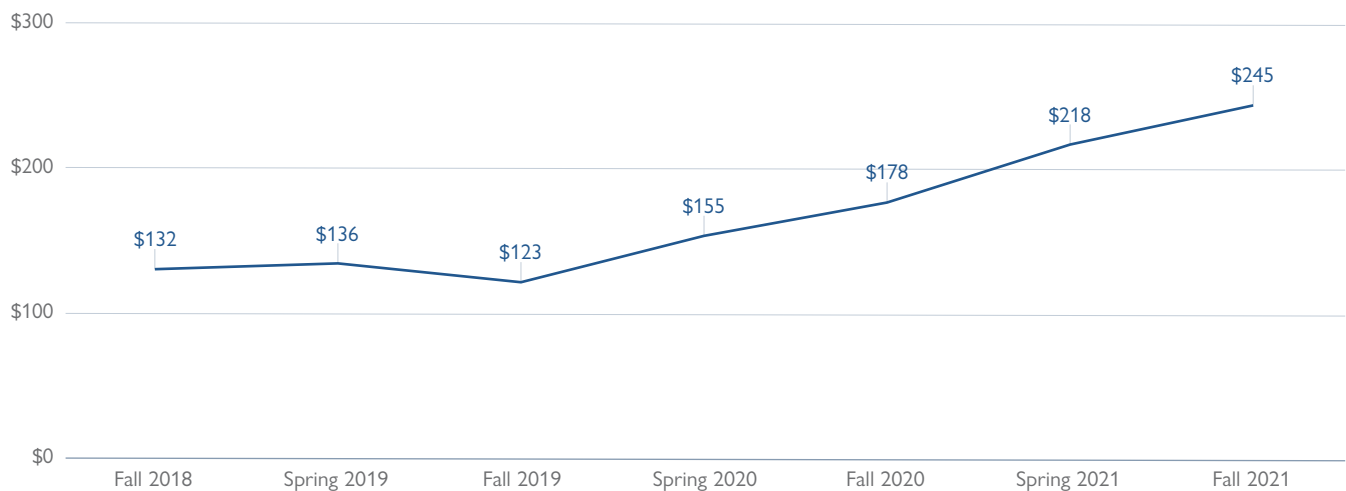
Participating Students' Benefits Increased by \$122 per Month

During the pandemic, Congress not only expanded SNAP eligibility, it also increased benefit amounts, called “emergency allotments.” CalFresh recipients began to receive the maximum benefit amount for their household size, even if they normally would have qualified for a smaller benefit amount. For an individual living alone, they would now receive \$192 in monthly benefits. This policy ran from Spring 2020 through February 2023.

Two additional federal policy changes temporarily increased CalFresh benefits. In April 2021, households that had not received at least a \$95 increase in benefits through the original emergency allotments policy began to receive additional emergency monthly allotments of at least \$95. The Consolidated Appropriations and American Rescue Plan Acts further increased all SNAP allotments by 15% from January through September 2021.

As a result, average monthly CalFresh allotments (benefit amounts) increased dramatically for California community college students (Figure 11). Between the last pre-pandemic term (Fall 2019) and Fall 2021, the average per capita monthly allotment nearly doubled, from \$123 to \$245 per month.

FIGURE 11. Average Monthly Per Capita CalFresh Benefits for California Community College Students, 2018–2021



Source: California Department of Social Services.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic effect on enrollment and student composition at California's community colleges. While overall participation in CalFresh remained relatively unchanged during this time, temporary policy changes made it much easier for California community college students with low incomes to qualify, and benefit amounts increased significantly. The steady participation levels partly reflect the higher income levels of California community college students during the pandemic, which led to fewer eligible students.

The temporary federal policy changes that helped many low-income college students afford food during the pandemic ended in Spring 2023. Our findings suggest that making these temporary exemptions permanent may be an effective strategy for increasing access to these supports while also targeting them to students who truly need them. These policies were effective at reaching the target population (low-income college students) and were more straightforward for students and administrators to understand than many of the current exemptions.

California community colleges can use CalFresh as a strategy to assist students with financial need, generally and during times of crisis. In future analysis, we plan to examine whether CalFresh has an impact on student retention and success, which could help mitigate enrollment declines such as those seen at the California community colleges during the pandemic.

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

- 1 The following subgroup analysis builds on analysis by others, notably [Linden et. al. \(2022\)](#) and [Bulman & Fairlie \(2022\)](#), to illustrate the unevenness of California community college enrollment declines by student group during the pandemic. In our analysis, enrollment includes all students with an enrollment record in the relevant term.
- 2 This reported income does not include pandemic-era stimulus payments.
- 3 Field of study data sourced by the National Student Clearinghouse: <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>
- 4 Student enrollment type definitions align with the California Community Colleges Management Information System Data Element Dictionary: <https://webdata.cccco.edu/ded/sb/sb15.pdf>.
- 5 Previously, the “work study exemption” required that students be actively working or looking for a work study job - but many of these jobs disappeared during the pandemic.
- 6 <https://capolicylab.org/outreach-to-california-college-students-encouraged-them-to-apply-for-calfresh/>
- 7 We estimate that the sudden increase in the share of students eligible for CalFresh contributed to a marginally lower take-up rate among CCC students than would have been the case absent the policy change (24.6% actual versus 25.4% counterfactual in Fall 2021). In other words, the share of students who were now eligible increased, but the share of those (newly) eligible students who enrolled (the take-up rate) was slightly lower than it had been previously. Taken together, the policy change appears to have had a net positive effect on participation rates, which increased slightly during the pandemic (from 10.2% to 10.7% between 2019–20 to 2021–22).
- 8 For the purposes of CalFresh eligibility, a college student is enrolled in college at least half-time and aged 18-49. Anyone who does not meet this definition does not need an exemption to qualify.
- 9 Prior to the pandemic, the most commonly-available exemptions for CCC students were Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) (13.6% of income-eligible FAFSA-filers), being in one's last term (12.3%) and Disability Services & Programs for Students (DSPS) (6.2%). The exemptions with the highest take-up were CalWORKs (94.7% participation among income-eligible), a parenting exemption (55.7%), and Work Study (40.9%). For a more complete breakdown of pre-pandemic exemption participation, see Table 4: <https://capolicylab.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/CalFresh-eligibility-and-participation-among-college-students.pdf>.