



**SB 961 – Student Food Access Act**

*Optimizing CalFresh Eligibility for Students in Need of Food Assistance.*

**SUMMARY**

SB 961 directs the California Student Aid Commission to add an “opt-in” option for students to receive notification about their potential CalFresh eligibility when submitting their Cal Grant application.

This bill also expands the programs of study that increase a student’s eligibility for CalFresh by including part-time students, postgraduate students, and students participating in programs that support foster youth, refugee, single-parent, and first-generation students.

**BACKGROUND**

California’s CalFresh program is the largest food assistance program in the nation, providing financial assistance to low-income students, families, and individuals. CalFresh plays a large role in supporting local economies and reducing poverty.<sup>1</sup>

Many college students are low-income, and struggle to meet basic needs, but especially accessing nutritious and affordable meals.<sup>2</sup> Currently, 50% of college students in California experience food insecurity.<sup>3</sup>

Several barriers make it difficult for students to access CalFresh benefits. In 2021, only a quarter of eligible California Community College students were actually receiving CalFresh benefits.<sup>4</sup> This rate was even lower for University of California students.<sup>5</sup>

Students can qualify for CalFresh in a variety of ways, one of which is through a student eligibility rule. One of the pathways under this rule is the Local Programs that Increases Employability (LPIE) initiative, which is a federal initiative that identifies programs in colleges designed to increase employability skills for students. To qualify for CalFresh through this program, a student must be enrolled in an LPIE at least half-time.

**THE PROBLEM**

Many students are unaware that they are eligible for CalFresh. Among students who were identified as food insecure and aware of CalFresh, over 50% did not apply because they thought they were ineligible as students, while another quarter did not apply because they did not know how.<sup>6</sup> This gap in knowledge further exacerbates food insecurity among college students. Providing students with a “warm-hand-off” to staff who can help determine eligibility improves access to essential food assistance.

Furthermore, California colleges lack a standardized process to submit their programs for LPIE status, which limits food access for students – despite being in degree programs that meet the standard.

**THE SOLUTION**

SB 961 requires the California Student Aid Commission to add an “opt-in” option for students to receive notification about their potential CalFresh eligibility through the state’s delivery grant system. By opting in, a student’s contact information will be shared with their campus’ county human services agency liaison who will assist with CalFresh eligibility and the application process.

Additionally, this bill expands the LPIE definition to include part-time students, master’s and doctoral students, and students participating in programs that support foster youth, refugee, single-parent, low-income, and first-generation students – ensuring that all students, no matter their background, have access to food and nutrition.

**SUPPORT**

- Alliance for a Better Community (Co-Sponsor)
- California Competes: Higher Education for a Strong Economy (Co-Sponsor)
- Center for Healthy Communities (Co-Sponsor)

<sup>1</sup> [Public Policy Institute of California \(PPIC\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Inside Higher Ed](#)

<sup>3</sup> [UCLA Center for Health Policy](#)

<sup>4</sup> [CA Student Aid Commission](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Ibid](#)

<sup>6</sup> [UCLA Center for Health Policy](#)

- Junior Leagues of California State Public Affairs Committee (Cal-SPAC) (Co-Sponsor)
- Michelson Center for Public Policy (Co-Sponsor)
- NextGen California (Co-Sponsor)
- Southern California College Attainment Network (Co-Sponsor)
- uAspire (Co-Sponsor)
- University of California Office of the President (Co-Sponsor)
- University of California Student Association (Co-Sponsor)
- Young Invincibles (Co-Sponsor)

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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