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## **Connecting Community College Students to SNAP Benefits: Lessons learned from a pilot outreach intervention in California**

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**Paula Umaña, Motunrayo Olaniyan, Sarah Magnelia, and Vanessa Coca**

Before the pandemic, millions of college students eligible for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) did not access the benefit.<sup>1</sup> This gap between eligibility for SNAP benefits and the use of those benefits is often a result of confusion around federal eligibility requirements.<sup>2</sup> Even when eligibility guidelines were temporarily changed to include new exemptions during the pandemic to make it easier for more students to access SNAP, many had no idea they were now eligible to receive benefits.<sup>3</sup> This has serious implications for students' lives as food insecurity can influence their well-being and academic success.

College staff around the country are working diligently to inform students of these changes and connect them to SNAP benefits. California in particular has made significant strides in expanding eligibility and access to public support programs to reduce basic needs insecurity among college students. For instance, colleges in California have used additional state funding to conduct outreach to students about SNAP benefits, known locally as CalFresh.<sup>4</sup> Yet, there remains a gap between students experiencing food insecurity and those using food supports like CalFresh. The pandemic has shown that traditional approaches to college outreach, such as the use of flyers, posters, and word-of-mouth, are no longer effective strategies when fewer students are on campus.

With support from the Michelson 20MM Foundation, The Hope Center partnered with Compton College to pilot a low-cost intervention that used text-based nudging to provide timely and relevant information about CalFresh.<sup>5</sup> During the fall of 2021, we identified 1,539 Compton College students who may be eligible for CalFresh. Approximately one-third of these students received empowering and stigma-reducing, or "attuned," text messages about CalFresh benefits. Another one-third received texts with basic information on how to sign-up for these benefits. A sub-sample of students was surveyed to assess their experiences with food insecurity, use of public and campus benefits, and impressions of the text messages.<sup>6</sup>

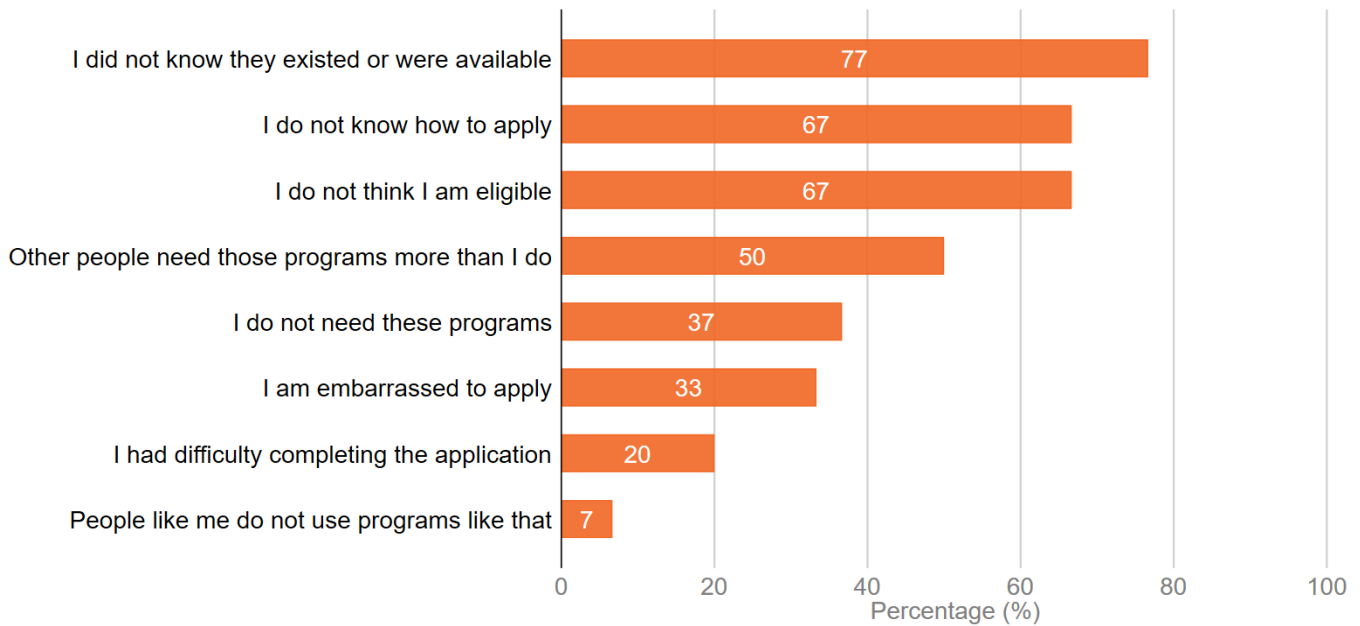
In this brief, we share lessons from the pilot intervention at Compton College. In addition, we review findings from focus groups with other community college students throughout California and meetings with community organizations that help connect students to SNAP benefits.<sup>7</sup> Practitioners should consider these lessons when conducting outreach to students about SNAP and similar benefits.

## Lessons Learned

**Lesson #1:** Although all students used at least one campus-based resource, some had trouble finding information about certain campus supports and felt hesitant to visit on-campus food pantries and other offices to ask for help.

In the pilot intervention at Compton College, we surveyed a subset of 49 study participants. All students surveyed used at least one campus-based resource such as emergency aid, wi-fi hotspots, counseling services, or meal vouchers.<sup>8</sup> About three in four students who used only one or two resources were unaware of the other supports (Figure 1). Two-thirds of the students did not know how to apply for these resources and half felt that others needed the supports more than they did.<sup>9</sup> Students from the focus groups expressed hesitance to reach out to college staff because of feelings of embarrassment and uncertainty about where to go for information they could trust. Students spoke about miscommunication or no communication about possible benefits available to them, confusing eligibility requirements, and missteps during the application process that caused delays in receipt of benefits.

**FIGURE 1 | REASONS WHY STUDENTS DID NOT USE CAMPUS-BASED RESOURCES**



Source | 2021 Compton College CalFresh Pilot Outreach Study - Survey

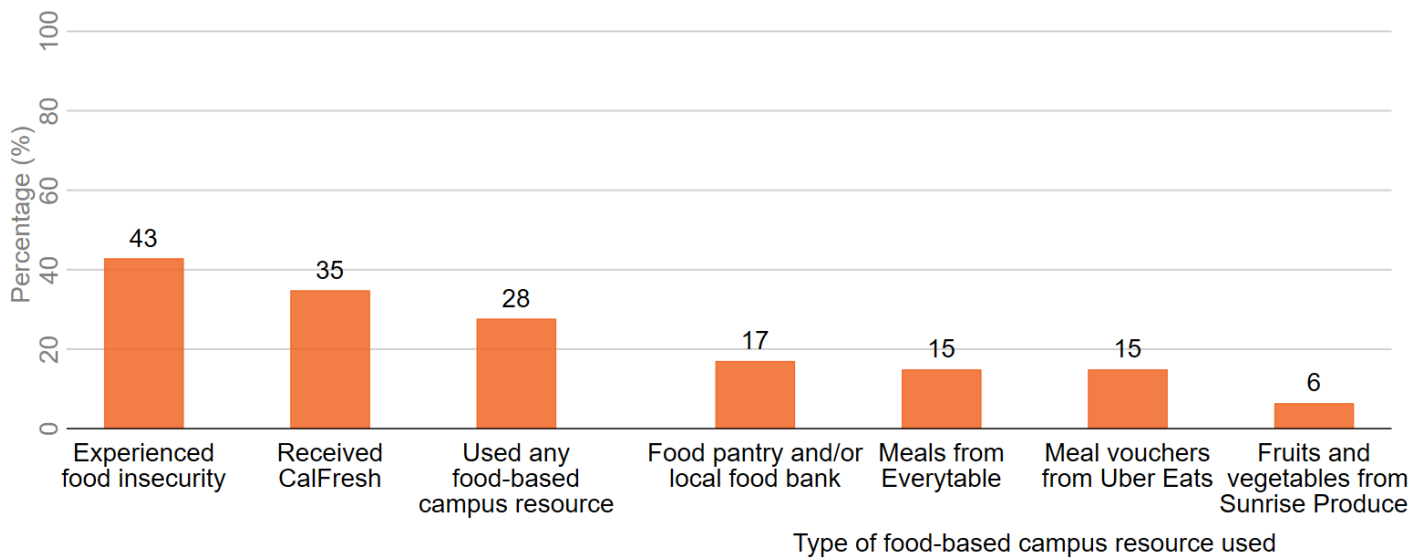
Notes | Students who used no more than two campus supports shared reasons why they did not use those supports (N = 30). Some students may have listed more than one reason why they did not use supports. For more details on the campus-based resources used, refer to the [web appendices](#).

These findings highlight the importance of using informative, attuned outreach strategies to connect students to knowledgeable and empathetic staff who can provide clarity and guidance throughout the application and recertification processes. Faculty and student affairs employees may benefit from additional training about how SNAP works, how to help students apply, and how this benefit impacts students' outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

**Lesson #2:** Colleges have minimal information to target their outreach.

For the pilot intervention, we used a few student background characteristics to determine who to target for outreach, such as whether students received federal and/or state grants. This information can only be used as a proxy for SNAP eligibility as it does not indicate whether the student experienced food insecurity or was eligible for CalFresh benefits. In fact, 43% of students who participated in the study experienced food insecurity (Figure 2). About one in three of these students were already receiving CalFresh benefits and 28% were using food-based campus resources.

**FIGURE 2 | PERCENT OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY, RECEIVING CALFRESH, OR USING A FOOD-BASED CAMPUS RESOURCE**



Source | 2021 Compton College CalFresh Pilot Outreach Study - Survey

Notes | Students shared whether they had ever heard of or used a variety of campus-based resources, not only food-based campus resources (N = 49). For more details on the other campus-based resources, refer to the [web appendices](#). Some students may have used multiple campus resources.

Better information systems could help colleges improve how they target their outreach efforts. States should take advantage of recent guidance from the U.S. Department of Education. It suggests using financial aid data to identify students who are likely income-eligible for federal benefits.<sup>11</sup> This data could serve as a valuable tool for reaching students most likely to qualify for and benefit from SNAP eligibility, among other basic needs supports.

**Lesson #3:** Students remember the text messages sent by their college.

Nearly 8 in 10 Compton College students who received text messaging remembered the texts (not shown, see web appendices). In addition, 62% of students who received a text felt supported by their college in comparison to 43% of students who did not receive a text (not shown, see [web appendices](#)). This finding suggests that text messages are an effective tool in increasing awareness about SNAP and other supports while also demonstrating care for students.

For many colleges, institutional capacity and limited staffing may be a barrier to effectively communicating with students. Colleges should identify and provide training to equip multiple core support staff across offices to administer text messaging outreach to students. Centralizing the outreach operations while sharing information across offices can ensure consistency of messaging to students and reduce text message fatigue.

*The texts I received from Compton made me feel...*

“**Good**, knowing that there is a place I can go if I needed help with food.”

“**Good** to see that Compton College is concerned about their students.”

“**Relieved** to know there is somewhere to go in case I need to apply [for CalFresh].”

“**Assured** that there are resources available.”

**Lesson #4:** The content and tone of text messages matter to students.

In the pilot intervention, we sent text messages to Compton College students four times over four weeks. One set of texts provided basic information on how to sign up for CalFresh benefits (i.e., info-only messages), while the other set of texts provided the same information but with framing that normalized the experience of needing additional resources (i.e., attuned messages; Figure 3). Students perceived the attuned messages as more empowering than the messages with basic information (not shown, see [web appendices](#)).

**FIGURE 3 | EXAMPLE OF TEXT MESSAGES**

**INFO ONLY vs ATTUNED**

Hey, this is Lauren with Compton College. If you need help paying for food, check out CalFresh. It is a state program that awards up to \$234 a month for groceries.

Hey, this is Lauren with Compton College. **We know money is tight for most students.** That's why we are connecting students to CalFresh, a state program that awards up to \$234 a month for groceries. Whatever your situation, **we want to help you focus on studying and make progress toward your goals.**



This finding suggests that the content and tone of messages sent to students are important. Practitioners should use caring messaging and target communication during times of elevated need such as the end of the month or before financial aid is disbursed.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, they should normalize talking about basic needs insecurity and the use of SNAP benefits as well as affirm the college's commitment to helping students obtain support without shame or judgment. Given that text messages are not effective after a certain length, balancing the right amount of content may require creativity.<sup>13</sup>

**Lesson #5:** Clear communication about SNAP policies is challenging.

Based on insight provided by state, community, and advocacy groups conducting outreach efforts in California, we learned that communication and implementation challenges within the complex CalFresh ecosystem create most, if not all, of the obstacles for the partners helping college students get access to the benefit. For instance, while policy guidance regarding changes to SNAP eligibility guidelines is regularly distributed at the federal and state level, ensuring that the information is disseminated through training at the county level promptly across regions can be difficult. This results in inconsistent and unclear communication to students regarding changes in SNAP eligibility. The support of advocates and well-informed staff at colleges is critical to helping students navigate how to access and maintain their benefits.

## Summary and Additional Recommendations

Reducing food insecurity among college students is a retention strategy.<sup>14</sup> Results from similar low-touch interventions have shown that nudging increases students' use of campus resources and their academic outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program presents no additional costs for colleges, and it allows college students to shop for food on an ongoing basis with dignity. By using outreach tools like text-based nudging, colleges can equip students with the proper information and resources to access SNAP and support their food security and success in college.

Student affairs staff, especially those in direct contact with students and responsible for managing non-academic support programs, can be game-changers by helping shift the perception of SNAP and advancing equity practices to close the SNAP gap. These practitioners are the catalysts of institutional transformation toward increasing student success and require support from their leaders to establish successful partnerships on and off campus that properly support and serve students.

Education leaders should consider implementing the following practices:

### Increase Awareness & Enhance Outreach

- Improve outreach messaging to students by:
  - Identifying key offices/staff to run targeted and personalized outreach about SNAP and other benefits at different points of the semester, especially before tuition payment due dates and toward the end of the month when bills become harder to pay.

- Considering which students should be targeted for outreach, how often they should be contacted, and offer an option for students to opt-out from receiving notifications.
  - Centering equity by ensuring that text message language is free from bias and that the messages resonate with all students. Avoid jargon and normalize the conversation about basic needs. For example, “Do you need help affording groceries this month?” is a more effective question than “Are you experiencing food insecurity?”
  - Reducing the requirements and administrative burden limiting staff’s ability to send personalized communication to students via text.
- Engage and train student leaders to promote SNAP awareness and support enrollment on-campus and virtually. Ask students to pay attention in case their peers need help. An example text-based nudge could include messaging such as, “Many students struggle to afford food. Got a friend short on grocery money? CalFresh can help.”
  - Collect and share data about the impact of outreach efforts on student SNAP enrollment and academic success.
  - Promote a culture of care, support faculty and staff to do this work, and engage your board to advance basic needs efforts as part of your institution’s strategic plan.

### **Build Institutional Capacity Through Collaboration**

- Take advantage of Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) dollars and state funding to conduct SNAP outreach and centralize basic needs supports.<sup>16</sup>
- Form an on-campus basic needs task force to increase the reach and impact of SNAP and align other basic needs supports efforts.<sup>17</sup>
- Partner with the county to break down communication barriers, share data to target outreach to students, and streamline/troubleshoot issues with students’ SNAP applications.

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## About The Hope Center

The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice is an action research center transforming higher education into a more effective, equitable, and impactful sector using a powerful combination of applied scientific research, technical assistance to colleges and universities, policy advising with state and federal governments, and strategic communications. We believe that students are humans first and that their basic needs are central conditions for learning. We are redefining what it means to be a student-ready college with a national movement centering #RealCollege students' basic needs.

To learn more about the report's authors, visit [hope4college.com/team/](https://hope4college.com/team/). For media inquiries, contact Editorial Director, Nicole Hacker, at [nicole.hacker@temple.edu](mailto:nicole.hacker@temple.edu).

## About the Michelson 20MM Foundation

Michelson 20MM is a private, nonprofit foundation seeking to accelerate progress towards a more just world through grantmaking, operating programs, and impact investing. Co-chaired and funded by Alya and Gary Michelson, Michelson 20MM is part of the Michelson Philanthropies network of foundations. Learn more at [www.20mm.org](https://www.20mm.org).



## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> SNAP is referred to as CalFresh in California. For use of SNAP among college students, see: U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2019, January). [Food insecurity: Better information could help eligible college students access federal food assistance benefits, GAO-19-95.](#)

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2018, September). [Public service loan forgiveness: Education needs to provide better information for the loan servicer and borrowers, GAO-18-547.](#)

<sup>3</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S., Coca, V., Kienzl, G., Welton, C. R., Dahl, S., & Magnelia, S. (2020). [#RealCollege during the pandemic: New evidence on basic needs insecurity and student well-being.](#) The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice; The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. (2021). [#RealCollege 2021: Basic needs insecurity during the ongoing pandemic.](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Cal. Educ. Code § 66027.8\(d\). \(2017\).](#)

<sup>5</sup> Nudges are messages that encourage students to engage in a certain behavior, such as using supports.

<sup>6</sup> “Attuned” outreach is a term coined by Shannon Brady and Greg Walton. For more on this approach, see: Goldrick-Rab, S., Baker-Smith, C., Bettinger, E., Walton, G., Brady, S., Gill, J., & Looker, E. (2022). [Connecting community college students to non-tuition supports during the COVID-19 pandemic.](#) The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

<sup>7</sup> Both focus groups and meetings occurred in June 2021.

<sup>8</sup> For more details on all the campus-based resources used, refer to the web appendices.

<sup>9</sup> This finding is consistent with information collected nationally. See: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Balzer Carr, B. & London, R. A. (2020). [Healthy, housed, and well-fed: Exploring basic needs support programming in the context of university student success.](#) AERA Open.

<sup>11</sup> Federal Student Aid. (2022, January). [Use of FAFSA data to administer federal programs,](#) GEN-22-02. U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>12</sup> Raphael, S. & Goldrick-Rab, S. (2020, March). [Beyond the food pantry: Social work case management.](#) The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

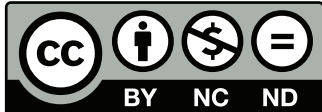
<sup>13</sup> For more examples of attuned text messages, see The Hope Center’s recent paper on a nudging intervention at Dallas College entitled, [Connecting community college students to non-tuition supports during the COVID-19 pandemic.](#)

<sup>14</sup> King, J., Umaña, P., Conroy, E., & Welton, C. (2021, February). [Beyond the food pantry: Recommendations for higher education institutions to implement federal guidance on SNAP expansion for college students during COVID-19.](#) The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

<sup>15</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S., Clark, K., Baker-Smith, C., & Witherspoon, C. (2021). [\*Supporting the whole community college student: The impact of nudging for basic needs security\*](#). The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

<sup>16</sup> Price, D., & Umaña, P. (2021, May). [\*Beyond the food pantry: One-stop center models: A guide to centralizing students' basic needs supports\*](#). The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

<sup>17</sup> Umaña, P., & Hacker, N. L. (n.d.). [\*Beyond the food pantry: How to form a campus basic needs task force\*](#). The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.



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