UC San Diego
CENTER FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH

UC San Diego
HERBERT WERTHEIM
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND
HUMAN LONGEVITY SCIENCE

TESTING STUDENT-DRIVEN SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE FOOD SECURITY

at University of California San Diego

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SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

In 2024, 51% of UC San Diego undergraduate students reported experiencing food insecurity. Students of color, first-generation college students, and low-income students disproportionately share the burden of food insecurity at rates of 59-64%. Despite the availability of California's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (CalFresh) and campus food assistance resources, only 21% of students were enrolled in CalFresh in 2024, and just 18% had used the Triton Food Pantry on campus, revealing a critical gap between need and use of existing safety net support. Students have historically been key agents of change in addressing conditions impacting their peers. With UC Essential Needs Research Program Grant support, we implemented and evaluated student-informed interventions aimed at increasing awareness and use of food assistance resources to reduce food insecurity among UC San Diego undergraduate students.

INTRODUCTION

A research team of students, staff, and faculty led a study in the 2024-2025 academic year to:

- Increase awareness and use of CalFresh
- Increase awareness and use of other campus food assistance resources
- Decrease student food insecurity

Prior student-led research on food insecurity generated intervention recommendations, which we subsequently implemented and evaluated through a collaborative effort involving students, staff, and faculty. Interventions included:

- A communications campaign to engage course instructors
- A communications campaign targeting students
- A student-led peer support network
- Expansion of local programs that increase employability (LPIE)

METHODOLOGY

- All instructors were provided with easy-to-integrate CalFresh information to share with students via course syllabi, class Canvas websites, and first-day-of-class slides.
- Student leaders and staff disseminated food assistance messages via social media, on-campus flyers, message boards, Canvas banners, and campus events.
- Student leaders developed and implemented a peer-to-peer student engagement model, with a train-the-trainer food advocacy curriculum.
- Student researchers identified academic programs without an LPIE designation and worked with the Hub Basic Needs Center (BNC) to register them making more students eligible for CalFresh.
- Impact was assessed through pre- and post-intervention student surveys (n=1,680 and n=1,352, respectively), San Diego County CalFresh enrollment data, BNC records, digital engagement analytics, and qualitative interviews and a focus group with staff and student workers.

SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS

- CalFresh awareness rose from 84% to 89%, applications rose from 29% to 43%, and enrollment nearly doubled, from 13% to 22%, corroborated by a 32% year-over-year rise in county-verified enrollment, worth an estimated $5.1 million in added grocery purchasing power among UC San Diego students.
- Awareness of campus food programs rose sharply (13% to 25–55%), and application assistance raised approval rates from 53% to over 80%.
- LPIE expansion secured new eligibility for 102 of 186 reviewed programs, extending the work exemption for CalFresh eligibility to over 16,000 additional students.
- Despite these gains, self-reported food security did not change significantly (61% to 64%), suggesting awareness and access alone are not sufficient– food insecurity is rooted in structural financial precarity.
- Qualitative interviews confirmed the interventions strengthened BNC's outreach and operations but also revealed structural gaps such as inconsistent or insufficient university funding for food programming, limited physical space for food assistance programs, no shared governance structure, and weak coordination across campus and student groups.

CONCLUSION

This work demonstrates that campus coordinated, student-driven interventions can substantially increase awareness and use of food assistance in under one year. Sustaining these gains and reducing food insecurity will require UC San Diego and the UC system to move beyond information campaigns and supplemental food assistance, and toward structural, long-term investment that will address the true holistic cost of learning and living in California as a UC student.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We offer 15 actionable recommendations to tackle food insecurity at UC San Diego, informed both by our study results and key collective learnings obtained through our campuswide relational work aimed at building a bigger collaborative campus entity where students, staff, and faculty can co-design and co-lead critical work at the intersection of food systems and health equity.

INTRODUCTION

At University of California San Diego, **51% of undergraduate students experienced low or very low food security in 2024.**

That means 1 in every 2 students went without adequate food (University of California, 2024). Students of color, first-generation college students, and low-income students disproportionately share the burden of food insecurity. At UC San Diego, 64% of Hispanic/Latinx students, 59% of African American/Black students, 64% of first-generation students, and 63% of students who received Pell Grants struggled with adequate access to food (University of California, 2024). This aligns with national food insecurity rates of 19-56% among college students (Loofbourrow & Scherr, 2023).

Food insecurity is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food, including low food security (reduced diet quality) and very low food security (disrupted eating and reduced intake). Overall, about 18.3 million Americans or 13.5% of households in the United States-- approximately 1 in 7 households, experience food insecurity (OoNorasak et al., 2022; USDA ERS, 2025). Food insecurity disproportionately affects college students at higher rates (Loofbourrow & Scherr, 2023).

> "For many students, **food is the first necessity** sacrificed in order to afford rent, tuition, and utilities."

The consequences of food insecurity among college students can be severe. A 2023 student-led survey of UC San Diego Public Health undergraduates revealed that students with very low food security were seven times more likely to have lower GPAs and more likely to report poor mental, physical, and dietary health (Binkin et al., 2023). Despite the availability of student food assistance resources and services on college campuses, students struggling with food may lack awareness or ability to access support. Additionally, food spending is often the first financial category a student may significantly cut back on to prioritize fixed costs such as rent, tuition, and utilities.

California public colleges are mandated to have Basic Needs Centers, which serve as a central location where essential needs (food, housing, hygiene, transportation, physical and mental health) services, resources, and staff are made available to students. Within the UC system, all 10 campuses have Basic Needs Centers with dedicated staff available to support students (UC Office of the President, 2026). At UC San Diego, the Triton Food Pantry opened for food distribution service in the 2014-2015 academic year. After two years of planning and fund development, the Hub Basic Needs Center (BNC) hired its first staff in 2017 and officially opened for all services in the 2017-2018 academic year. BNC now has nine full-time staff members and approximately 50 student assistants supporting the Triton Food Pantry, CalFresh assistance, and other basic needs services (UC San Diego, 2026).

CalFresh, California's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), provides monthly benefits to eligible people to purchase groceries and has been shown to increase food security, reduce poverty, and lower healthcare costs (Carlson & Llobrera, 2022). However, under federal rules, full-time college attendance can make students ineligible unless they meet at least one student exemption, such as working an average of 20 hours per week, participating in a state or federally funded work-study program, caring for a dependent, having a qualifying disability, or meeting criteria through programs such as CalWORKs or Local Programs that Increase Employability (LPIE). The California Department of

BNC Staff, Beatriz Chavez Vega & Food Recovery Network

Social Services (CDSS) defines an LPIE as an academic program operated by a state or local government (e.g. public institution of higher education such as community college districts, University of California, and California State University) that "assists [students] in gaining the skills, training, work, or experience that will increase the student's ability to obtain regular employment." (CDSS, 2024).

Students have historically been key agents of change in addressing food security for their peers. Within the UC system, several student-led initiatives focus on food recovery as a method to reduce food waste and increase access for food insecure students (Mochernak, 2026). UC San Diego has a student-led chapter of the Food Recovery Network, operating since 2016, to recover edible quality food on and off-campus from grocery stores, dining halls, and farmers' markets to supply the Triton Food Pantry for students. These student-led models are highly effective at empowering students and fostering community engagement; however, they are frequently limited in scale and continuity, relying on inconsistent resources like volunteer labor, or short-term grants (OoNorasak et al., 2022; Hagedorn-Hatfield et al., 2022). This dependence on unstable resources, compounded by structural challenges such as unclear policies, can undermine the sustainability and long-term impact of student-led efforts, highlighting the need for durable institutional partnerships with student groups (Hagedorn-Hatfield et al., 2022).

Despite its benefits, enrollment in CalFresh and other food assistance services remains low among eligible college students. Only 22% of CalFresh-eligible UC undergraduates received CalFresh benefits, often due to confusion over eligibility, stigma, and administrative complexity (California Policy Lab, 2024). This system-wide pattern was echoed locally. A 2023 student-led study at UC San Diego revealed a critical gap between awareness and enrollment: while 92% of students knew of CalFresh, only 21% were enrolled. Further, while 73% of the students who received application assistance from the BNC successfully enrolled in CalFresh, only 5% of students surveyed had used this assistance service. Similarly, 83% knew about the Triton Food Pantry, yet only 18% had used it Ultimately, student researchers recommended increasing awareness of CalFresh eligibility, improving outreach for campus food assistance programs, and increasing use of CalFresh assistance services from the BNC to better address food insecurity at UC San Diego (Binkin et al., 2023).

HALEY OKAMOTO

on Partnership, Community, and Capacity

As the Assistant Director of Food Security Programs, Haley Okamoto oversees a portfolio of essential programs, including CalFresh Outreach, Triton Food Pantry, and the Food Recovery Network. Haley is dedicated to building strong, collaborative relationships with both campus and community partners to deliver cohesive services and information that address UC San Diego students' basic needs. In her role, she is involved in the planning, coordination, implementation, and evaluation of food security programs, continuously seeking new initiatives to grow the food security portfolio. As a Kanaka Maoli/Indigenous scholar, Haley aims to bring a decolonial approach to addressing food security with a focus on food sovereignty. Haley brings lived experience from growing up in Hawai‘i to attending college in Oregon, which allows her to understand the importance of access to culturally relevant and sustainable food options.

“ [I would like to] continue down that route of getting more faculty on board to promote the services to their students. If a student trusts their advisor, their mentor, their supervisor, and they can talk to them about food security challenges that they're facing, then at least these supervisors and professors are well equipped to refer them to the Basic Needs Center on campus, making sure that they’re getting the information and the resources that they need.”

In 2024, UC San Diego student, staff, and faculty leaders from the Center for Community Health, Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health & Human Longevity Science, Urban Studies and Planning Department, and the Student Sustainability Collective convened 70 campus stakeholders to collaborate on critical issues situated at the intersection of food systems and health equity. During two workshops, the group conducted campus asset mapping, identified service and coordination gaps, and identified student nutrition security as its most urgent problem to collaboratively tackle (Mari et al., 2024). Nutrition security focuses on consistent access to affordable nourishing foods to promote wellbeing.

Co-leaders Elle Mari and Richard Garfein identified and secured funding from the Center for Economic Justice & Action at UC Santa Cruz, through it's Essential Needs Research Grant Program, to test food security solutions previously recommended by public health student researchers in 2023. This grant launched the first funded project of the unofficial but highly resourceful and relational, "UC San Diego Food systems x Health Equity Collaborative".

Hereafter, we describe the aims, interventions, methods, results, and recommendations from our 2024-2025 study: *Testing Student-Driven Solutions to Improve Food Security at UC San Diego.*

Our project aimed to impact three key outcome measures among UC San Diego undergraduate students:

1. **Increase awareness and use of CalFresh benefits.**
2. **Increase awareness and use of other food assistance resources on campus.**
3. **Decrease the proportion of students who report experiencing food insecurity.**

To address these aims, we implemented four interventions during the 2024–2025 academic year:

1 Course Instructor Communications Campaign

Engage UC San Diego course instructors to encourage and equip them with easy-to-integrate CalFresh information to share with students via their course syllabi, class Canvas websites, and first-day-of-class presentation slides.

2 Student Communications Campaign

Disseminate food assistance messages using a multimedia approach that included social media, on-campus flyers, and student-led campus events.

3 Peer Support Network

Develop and implement a peer-to-peer student engagement model, involving a train-the-trainer curriculum to equip student leaders as food security advocates and experts.

4 Local Programs that Increase Employability (LPIE) Expansion

Identify LPIE-eligible academic programs at UC San Diego and apply for LPIE designations to increase CalFresh eligibility for students.

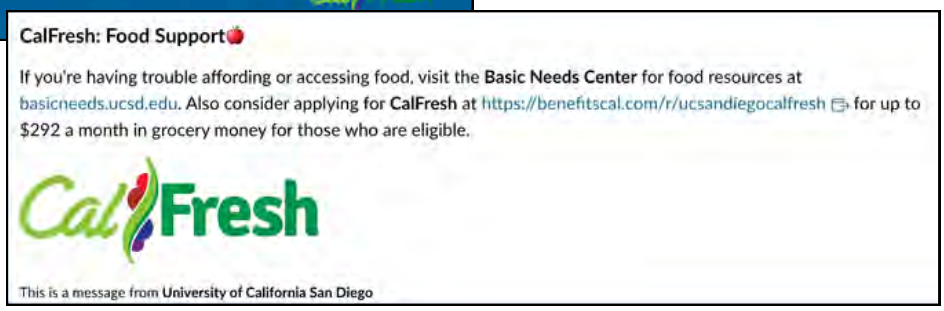
INTERVENTIONS

Course Instructor Communications Campaign

The campaign embedded CalFresh and basic needs information into the academic environment by activating faculty and instructional staff as trusted messengers. To achieve this, we requested and received support from the Strategic Communication and Engagement staff in the Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor (EVC) of Academic Affairs. Key messages were crafted and tested for students, faculty, and staff and focused on CalFresh eligibility, normalizing its use, highlighting application assistance, and framing food security and wellbeing within the context of academic success. Tactics included:

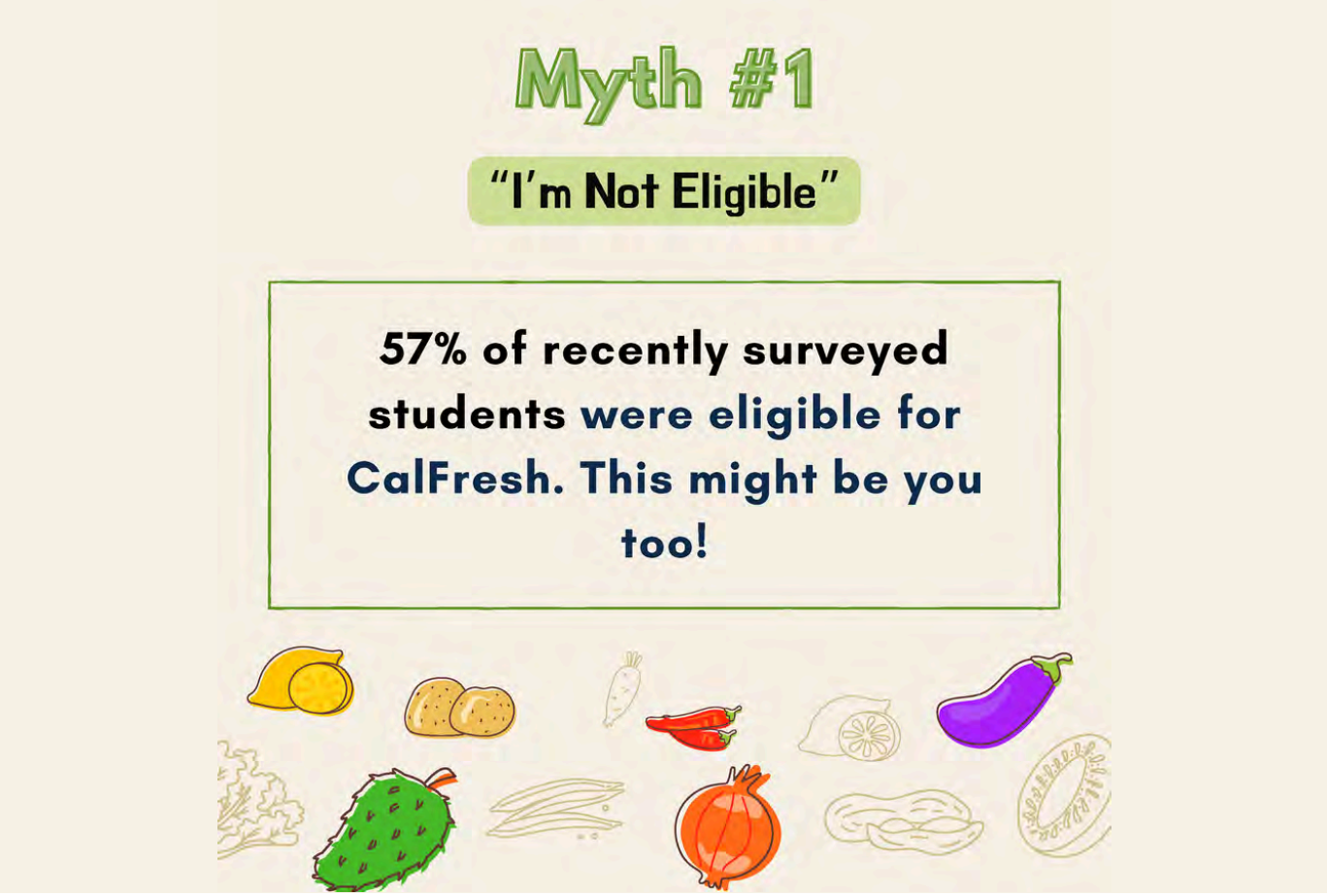
- Designing and distributing a ready-to-use slide for instructors to incorporate into first-day class presentations
- Crafting templated language for course syllabi
- Posting a banner message on the campus-wide Canvas learning management system during strategic times each academic quarter.

Instructors were encouraged to use these resources, with the help of targeted email reminders from the EVC and presentations from the study team.



Student Communications Campaign

A multi-channel communication strategy was designed to disseminate food security information directly to students. Student-created infographics and short-form videos were developed and shared on the BNC's social media and website. Content topics were directly informed by frequently asked questions from students engaging with the BNC. Effectiveness was measured through monthly social media interaction analytics. Tracking engagement metrics helped us identify meaningful and appealing content. This allowed us to refine social media strategy throughout the intervention period.



We also updated commonly used student resources to reflect a recent restructuring of the San Diego County CalFresh application system. We created two new, step-by-step videos on the CalFresh application process that were hosted on the BNC's website and YouTube channel. These videos provided up-to-date guidance on the application process and documentation requirements, serving as a guide for the BNC to share with students to prepare them to apply independently and successfully. In addition to digital outlets, we included CalFresh information in all student financial aid letters and designed flyers with updated CalFresh information that were distributed through campus events and posted in student resource centers.

Peer Support Network

We designed a campus peer support network to strengthen relationships among student-led organizations, aiming to build capacity for equity-driven food security efforts. Our methodology centered on coalition building and asset-based approaches, building on existing student organization strengths and networks. First, we mapped the landscape of student groups focused on food, health, sustainability, and governance. We then conducted targeted outreach to student organizations and resource centers that serve underrepresented students, including Latinx, Black, Indigenous, women and non-binary students. To build durable capacity, we employed a train-the-trainer model to educate resource center interns on CalFresh and campus food assistance resources, leveraging their social capital to expand trusted avenues for support. Student leaders developed a simple curriculum including: 1) CalFresh eligibility and application fact sheet; 2) campus food assistance fact sheet listing other campus food programs (e.g., Yes! Food, iTable, Dining Dollars Donation, etc.); and 3) presentation describing food insecurity prevalence at UC San Diego, explaining key food assistance resources available on campus, and suggesting opportunities for student groups to collaborate among themselves to address food security. We also facilitated a key partnership between the Student Food Co-Op and Student Gardens, designed to channel garden-grown produce into the Co-Op's meal distribution program.

Student Leaders Food Assistance Peer Training

Local Program that Increases Employability Expansion

To increase the number of students eligible for CalFresh via a Local Program that Increases Employability (LPIE) exemption, all undergraduate and graduate academic programs at UC San Diego that did not currently have an LPIE designation were reviewed by a graduate student researcher, using the CDSS Employment and Training criteria and guidance from BNC staff. Potentially eligible programs were identified, and the required submission materials were completed and sent to CDSS for evaluation and determination.

Note: As of June 1, 2026, all Associate and Bachelor's degree programs at California public colleges and universities are automatically considered LPIEs, therefore the review and approval process is now only necessary for graduate, certificate, and other professional programs without LPIE designation.

BEATRIZ CHAVEZ VEGA

on Funding Sustainability and Accountability

As the Food Security Programs Assistant, Beatriz manages and supervises the Triton Food Pantry and Food Recovery Network, along with other food security initiatives at UC San Diego. As a formerly undocumented student, Beatriz understands the challenges of accessibility in relation to student basic needs and advocates to destigmatize free resources. Beatriz's message to students is that you are a driver of change, you are all valued, and you deserve to have your basic rights met!

“ Something else that we see is that campus treats the food pantry as the end-all, be-all to address food insecurity. That's just not the case. We are a supplemental service, and we are being promoted sometimes by campus or by others as the solution… We are not funded, we are not operating like we can solve food security on this campus… We don't have that infrastructure funding from the university specifically. Yes, they've provided one-time funds that we have exhausted already, but there is no ongoing funding that we're receiving to be able to sustain these services.”

EVALUATION METHODS

Pre/Post Intervention Surveys

A repeated cross-sectional study design was used with surveys conducted before (Fall Quarter 2024) and after (Spring Quarter 2025) implementing food security interventions to evaluate their impacts on students. Surveys were administered online via Qualtrics and took participants approximately 10 minutes to complete. The questionnaires captured sociodemographics, awareness and use of CalFresh and other campus-available food assistance resources, and food security status. Food security was assessed using the USDA 6-item scale adapted to a 30-day referent period to capture recent experiences and align with the timing of intervention exposure.

Participants were recruited from purposively selected introductory and capstone courses from five academic units – Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health & Human Longevity Science, Jacobs School of Engineering, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Department of Cognitive Science, and the Environmental Systems Program within Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Courses and academic areas were selected to represent humanities and STEM majors.

Introductory courses primarily included first-year and transfer students who often live on campus, while capstone courses targeted third and fourth-year students who typically live off campus. This selection ensured representation across different housing and food access situations. Participants were recruited through in-class announcements from instructors, postings on course Canvas pages, and flyers posted in classrooms. Incentives included extra credit points offered to the entire class if at least 80% of the class participated in the survey and a drawing for a $100 Visa gift card.

Primary outcome measures included changes in awareness and use of food assistance resources, CalFresh application rates, and reductions in self-reported food insecurity.

Descriptive statistics characterized each sample, and Chi-squared tests were used to compare key indicators between the pre- and post-intervention surveys. All analyses were conducted using R, with statistical significance set at $p<0.05$.

Outcome measures: Campus food assistance awareness and use, CalFresh applications, and food insecurity.

Supplemental Evaluation Data Sources

CalFresh Enrollment

We obtained de-identified CalFresh enrollment reports from San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA)–CalFresh Food Program to capture the number of UC San Diego students enrolled. HHSA collects information on college enrollment on CalFresh applications to assess eligibility. This enabled us to obtain UC San Diego student CalFresh application and enrollment reports by month during the academic year and the year preceding the intervention. This served as an additional metric to assess intervention impact.

Campus Digital Marketing Analytics

Engagement with faculty-facing communications was tracked by the Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs Communication & Engagement team. Metrics from campus email notices and newsletters—including open rates, click-through rates, and downloads of resource materials—were analyzed to measure the reach and saturation of CalFresh information into the academic environment.

CalFresh Application Assistance Tracking

Given the intervention's focus on increasing CalFresh awareness and enrollment, we anticipated an increase in student requests for application assistance from the BNC. To further characterize the types of assistance requested and the students seeking support, we obtained de-identified administrative data from the BNC to supplement the evaluation of intervention outcomes.

Focus Group & In-depth Interviews

To understand stakeholder perceptions of campus food security efforts, we conducted one focus group and seven individual in-depth interviews with BNC staff, student workers, and food and sustainability organization student leaders at UC San Diego. All activities occurred after the interventions were implemented.

The purpose of the focus group was to understand student perspectives on organizational strengths, barriers, institutional support, and perceptions of the food security interventions implemented. A student facilitator led the discussion using a structured focus group guide. The discussion was audio recorded and transcribed using Zoom Transcripts, and initial themes were identified before coding.

We then conducted individual interviews with BNC staff and student CalFresh Outreach Assistants working within the BNC, who were recruited through contacting student and campus organizations, and through referrals from BNC staff and student workers. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded via a separate audio device, and transcribed using Zoom Transcripts. Staff participants were asked questions on the same topics explored during the focus group and specifically asked to evaluate the impact of our study's interventions. Student CalFresh Outreach Assistants were asked to describe their specific roles, responsibilities, and perceived effectiveness.

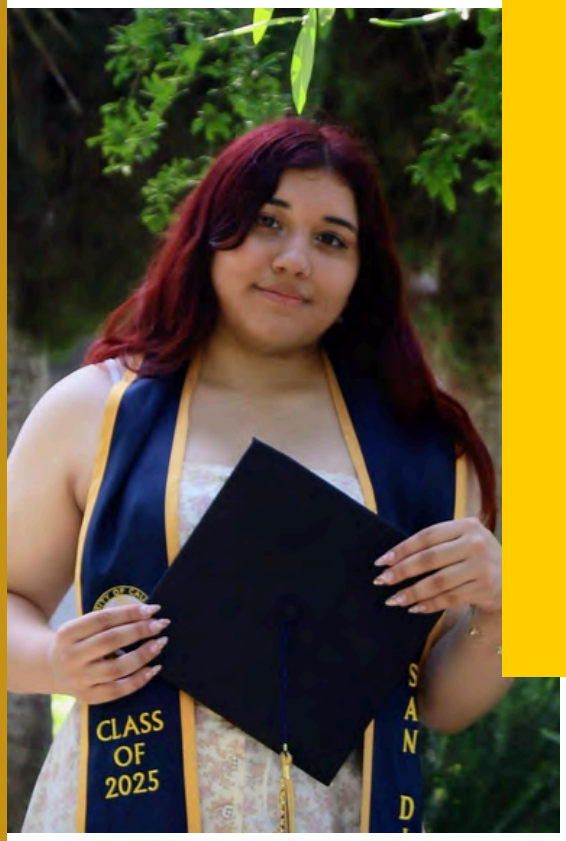
Across both data sources, we conducted thematic analysis using a constructivist, inductive approach with axial coding to identify patterns in how participants interpreted campus food security efforts based on their experiences (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Our findings identified three overarching themes with corresponding subthemes: 1) organizations' assets in addressing food security, 2) shared barriers to addressing food security, and 3) aspirations for synergistic campus food security partnerships. The full qualitative findings can be found in the appendix, led and written by student researcher, Rachel Handa.

Student Researcher & Outreach Lead, Rachel Handa

MICHELLE SORTO

on CalFresh Strengths and Stigmas

Michelle Sorto worked as a CalFresh Outreach Assistant Team Lead, supporting students in accessing food security through CalFresh and leading a team of Outreach Assistants at the Basic Needs Center. With a B.S. in Pharmacological Chemistry, she is passionate about helping students meet their basic needs so they can thrive in all aspects of their college journey. She strives to create a welcoming and supportive environment that helps students feel comfortable seeking assistance.



“ Since we were available in more resource centers, especially resource centers that have first-gen students [and] poorly underrepresented students, I think it is a lesson learned that food insecurity is more widespread than what a lot of people would assume. Cultural sensitivity really matters, [as well as] how we frame outreach. Especially with Raza [Resource Centro], we had a lot of students apply for CalFresh because we were just there for walk-in hours, and we also had virtual walk-in hours for it too.”

RESULTS

How did our interventions impact students?

Quantitative Survey

The baseline survey, administered in October 2024 to assess students' food security experiences prior to intervention implementation, achieved a response rate of 43% (n=1,680). Following implementation of the interventions from January through June 2025, the follow-up survey conducted in May 2025 achieved a response rate of 33% (n=1,352).

Participant Demographics

We compared key characteristics of participants between the surveys to identify potential confounders in our analysis of the intervention's impact because the serial cross-sectional study design did not ensure that the same students were interviewed during both surveys (Table 1). The proportion of first-generation students was higher during the pre-intervention survey (60% vs. 43%); however, no differences observed were statistically significant based on Chi-squared statistics. Race/ethnicity data was not collected in the baseline survey; however, the prevalence at follow-up was similar to that of the UC San Diego student body overall (University of California, 2025) and because no other variables differed, we assume the distribution of race/ethnicity was also similar across surveys.

New UCSD Student Food Security Coalition with UCSD Lanscape Sustainability Staff, Chris Johnson

Table 1: Participant Characteristics in the Pre- and Post-Intervention Surveys

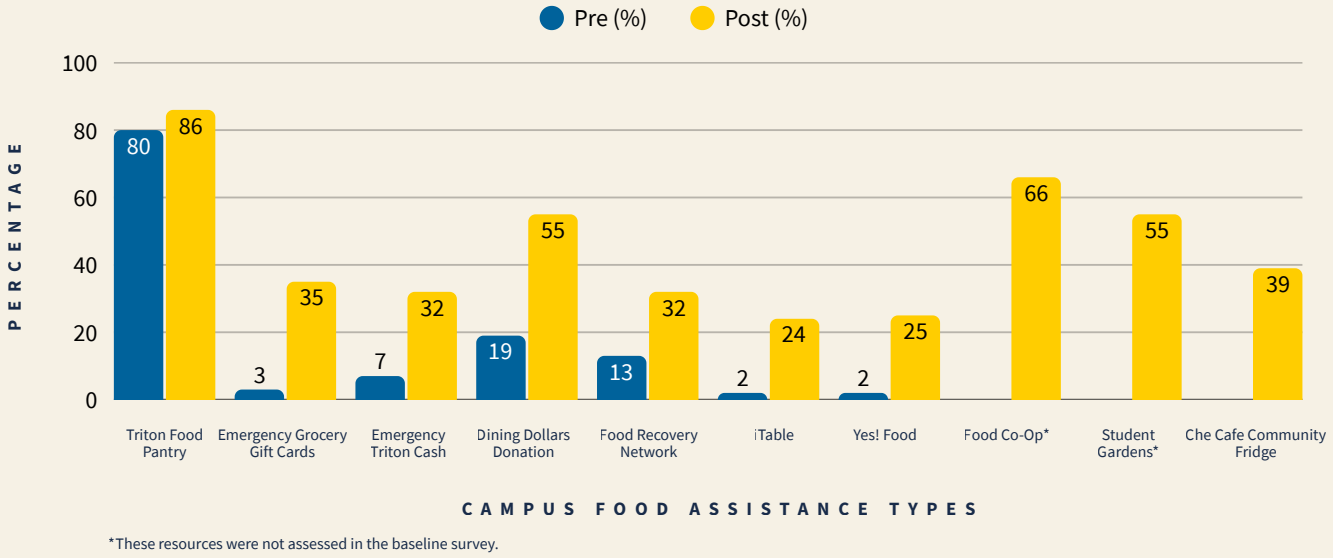
Characteristic	Pre- n(%)	Post- n(%)
Gender		
Female	993 (61%)	785 (63%)
Male	578 (35%)	412 (33%)
Non-Binary	33 (2%)	26 (2%)
Other/ Prefer not to say	27 (2%)	20 (2%)
First Generation Status		
First generation	954 (60%)	506 (43%)
Non-first-generation	626 (40%)	676 (57%)
Income Level		
High-income	157 (10%)	103 (8%)
Middle-income	940 (58%)	739 (60%)
Low-income	533 (61%)	397 (63%)
Transfer Student		
No	1314 (80%)	1075 (86%)
Yes	319 (20%)	170 (14%)
Residency Status		
In-State	1366 (84%)	1064 (86%)
Out-of-state	114 (7%)	97 (8%)
International or DACA	151 (9%)	83 (7%)
Year at UCSD		
Entering[1]	699 (65%)	529 (42%)
Continuing	922 (57%)	716 (58%)
Financial Aid		
Received financial aid	1048 (65%)	865 (70%)
I do not receive any financial aid	570 (35%)	365 (30%)
Race/ Ethnicity[2]		
Native American/Alaska Native	-	1 (0%)
Asian	-	529 (43%)
Black/African-American	-	19 (2%)
Latino	-	324 (26%)
Middle Eastern or North African	-	32 (3%)
White	-	162 (13%)
Multiracial	-	152 (12%)
Prefer not to say	-	26 (2%)
Living Situation		
Live on campus	982 (60%)	792 (64%)
Off campus[3]	650 (40%)	448 (36%)
Work Status		
On-campus job (work study)	84 (5%)	107 (9%)
On-campus job (not work study)	209 (12%)	163 (13%)
Off-campus job	279 (17%)	266 (22%)
Do not have a paid job[4]	1084 (65%)	734 (59%)

1 Entering students were defined as first year and new transfer students.
2 Data not available from pre-intervention survey.
3 Of those living off campus, 28% (347) lived with parents.
4 Of those who worked off-campus, 1.9% (24) were employed by a work-study job and 20% (242) worked a non-work-study job.

Awareness and Utilization of Resources

A statistically significant increase in awareness of all campus basic needs resources was observed following the intervention (Figure 1). Notable increases were observed for the Triton Food Pantry (80% to 86%), the Dining Dollars Donation Program (19% to 55%), the Food Recovery Network (13% to 32%), the Yes! Food Program (2.0% to 25%), and iTable (2% to 24%); all are safety net programs to help students in need obtain groceries.

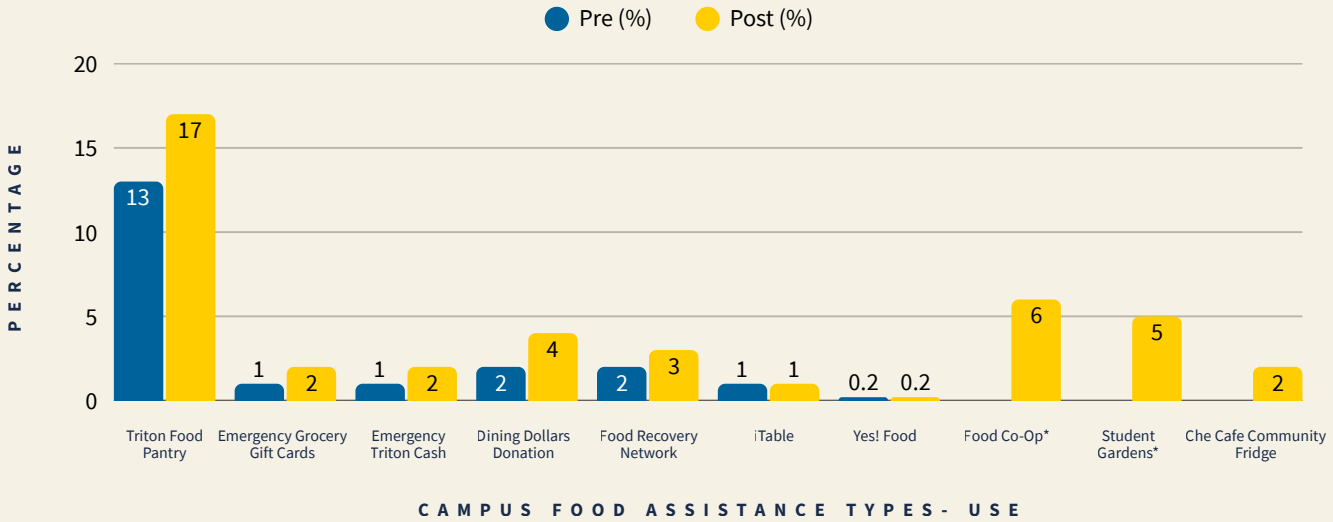
Figure 1: Change in Awareness of On-Campus Food Assistance Resources



*These resources were not assessed in the baseline survey.

Despite this elevated awareness, self-reported utilization of these resources showed only modest, though statistically significant, increases (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Change in Use of On-Campus Food Assistance Resources



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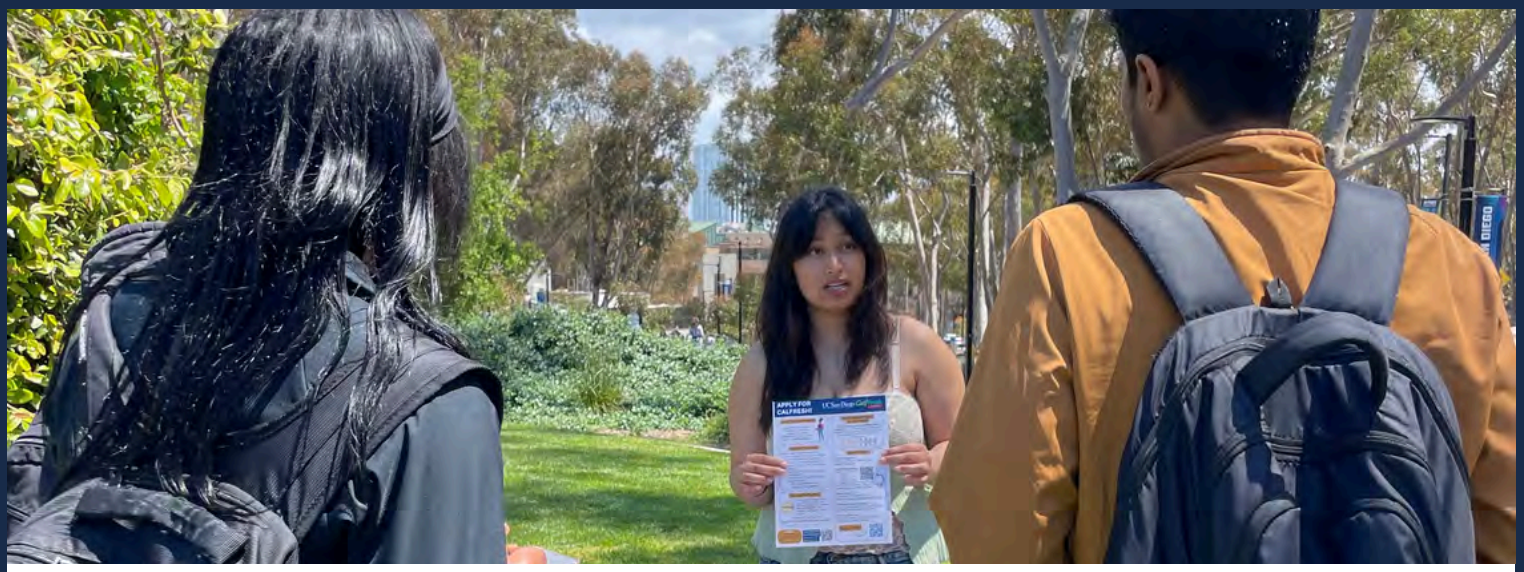


Student Researcher & Outreach Lead, Rachel Handa, Tabling at Student Resource Event

Information and Assistance Channels

Compared to the baseline survey, a statistically significant higher proportion of students reported hearing about CalFresh from every intervention-targeted source at follow-up (Figure 3). From pre to post intervention, more students heard about CalFresh from peers (27% to 60%); professors, course syllabi, or course Canvas pages (22% to 30%); and social media (22% to 27%).

Figure 3: Change in Sources of CalFresh Information

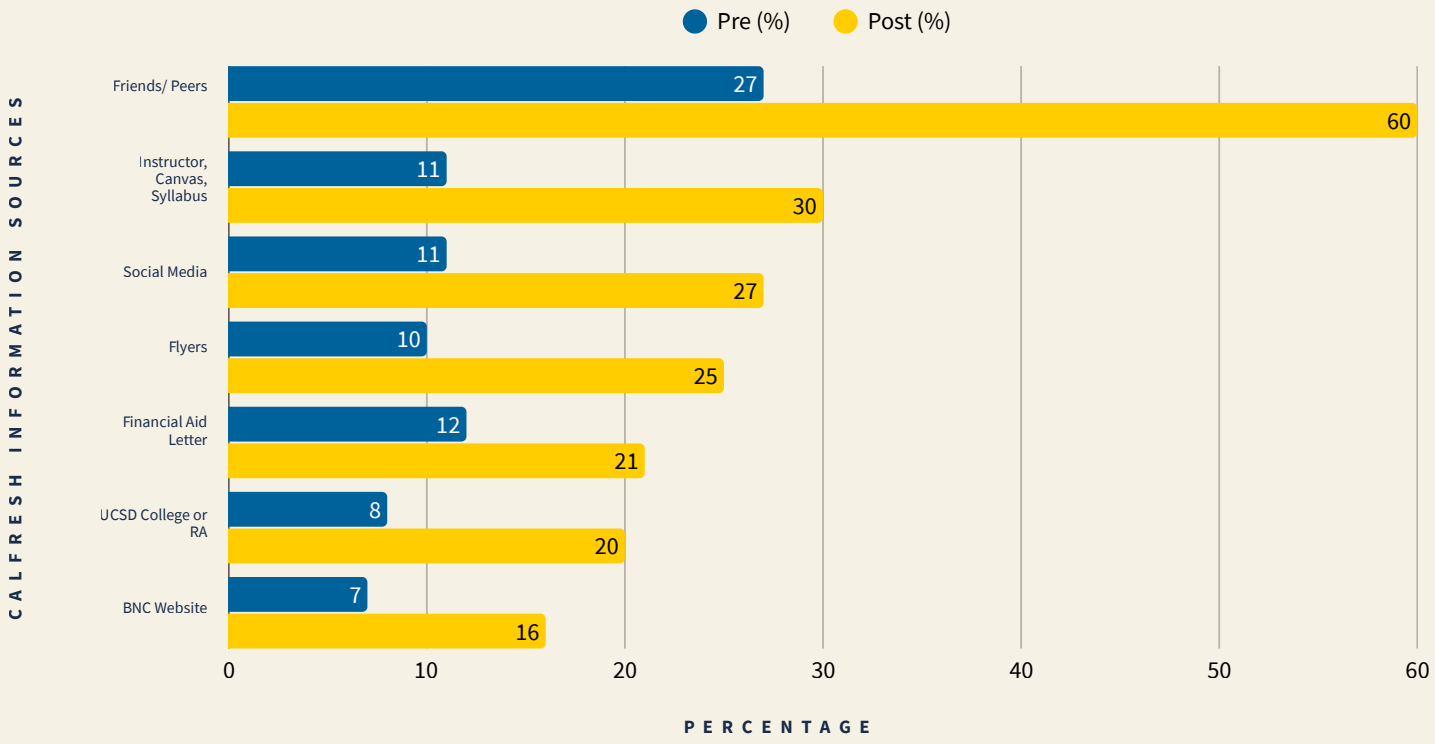
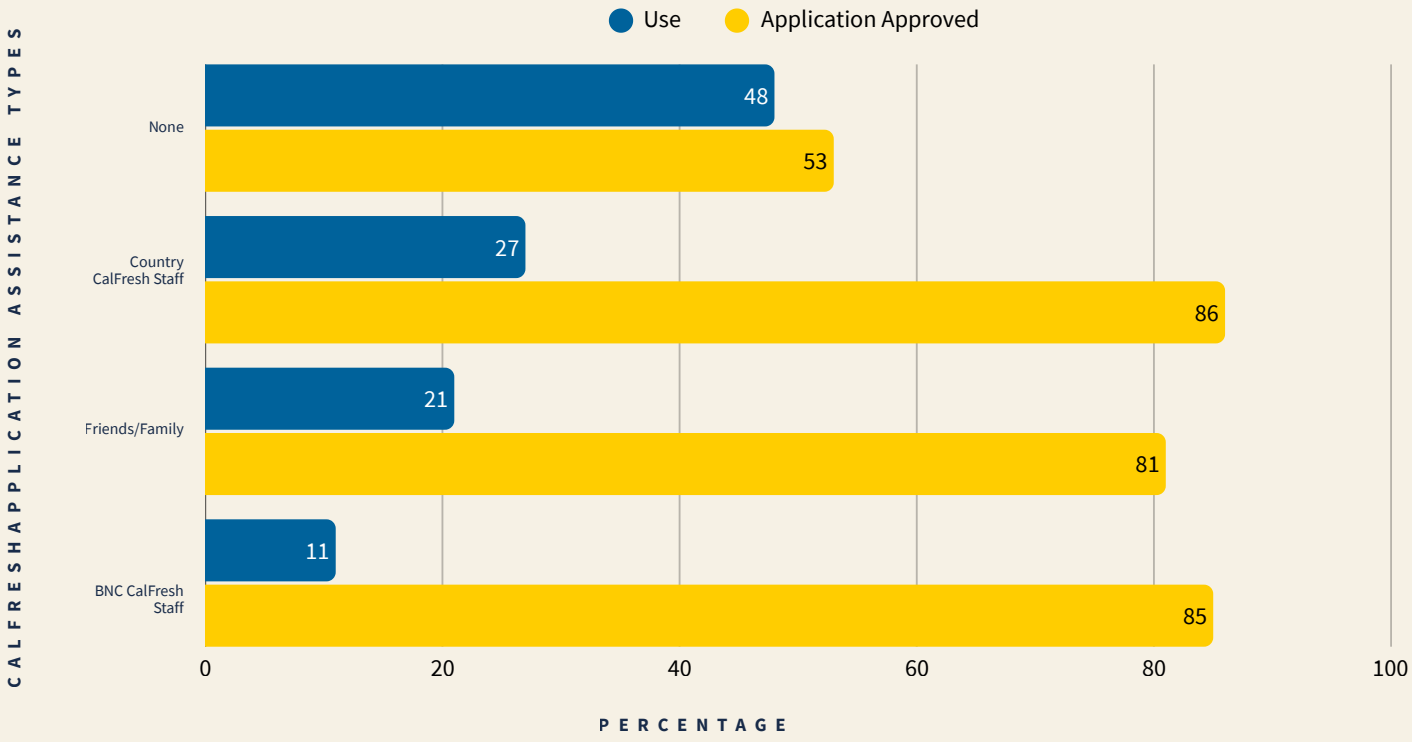


Figure 4: Rate of CalFresh Application Approval by Source of Application Assistance Used by Students – Post-Intervention Survey Results



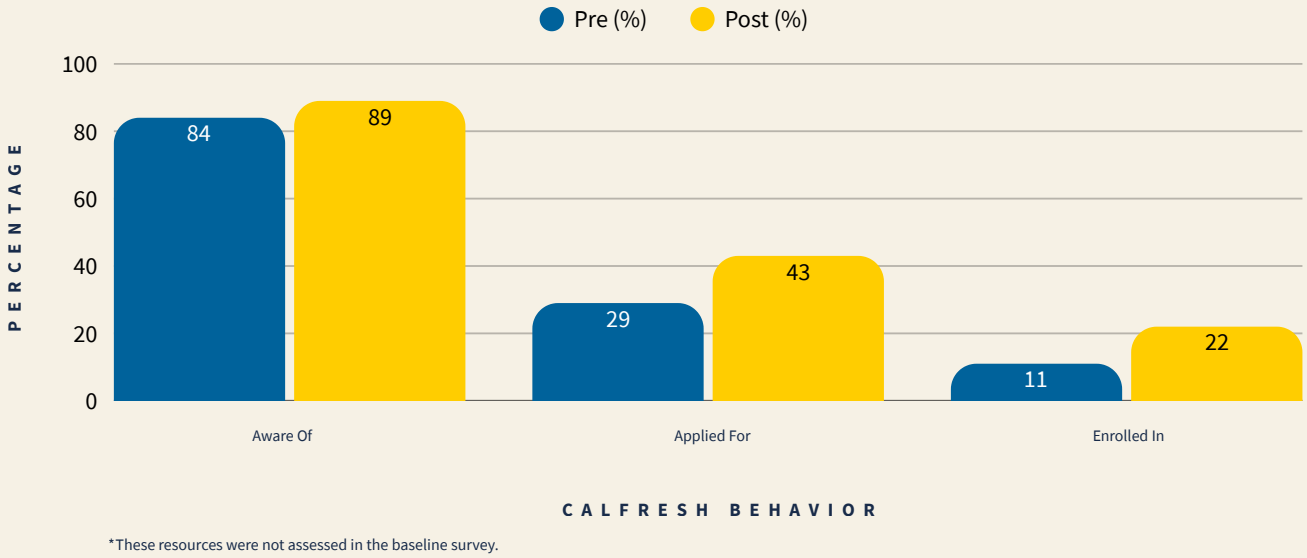
We found no significant change in the overall rate of students receiving application help from various sources (pre-intervention data not shown). However, the value of that assistance was clear: students who got help with their CalFresh application had a significantly higher approval rate (>80%) compared to those navigating it alone (53%). (Figure 4).

BNC Staff Haley Okamoto & Graduate Student Researcher, Mia Thomas

CalFresh Awareness, Application, and Enrollment

General awareness of CalFresh increased significantly from 84% to 89% (Figure 5). Crucially, this was accompanied by a significant shift in application behavior, with the proportion of students who had applied for benefits rising from 29% to 43%. Accordingly, enrollment in CalFresh benefits also increased from 13% to 22% (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Change in CalFresh Behavior



*These resources were not assessed in the baseline survey.

Food Security Prevalence

There was a small and not statistically significant decrease in self-reported food insecurity in the follow-up survey compared to the baseline survey (Figure 6). At baseline, 61% of students were food secure, 22% experienced low food security, and 17% experienced very low food security. At follow-up, these figures were 64%, 19%, and 17%, respectively.

Figure 6: Change in Food Security Levels

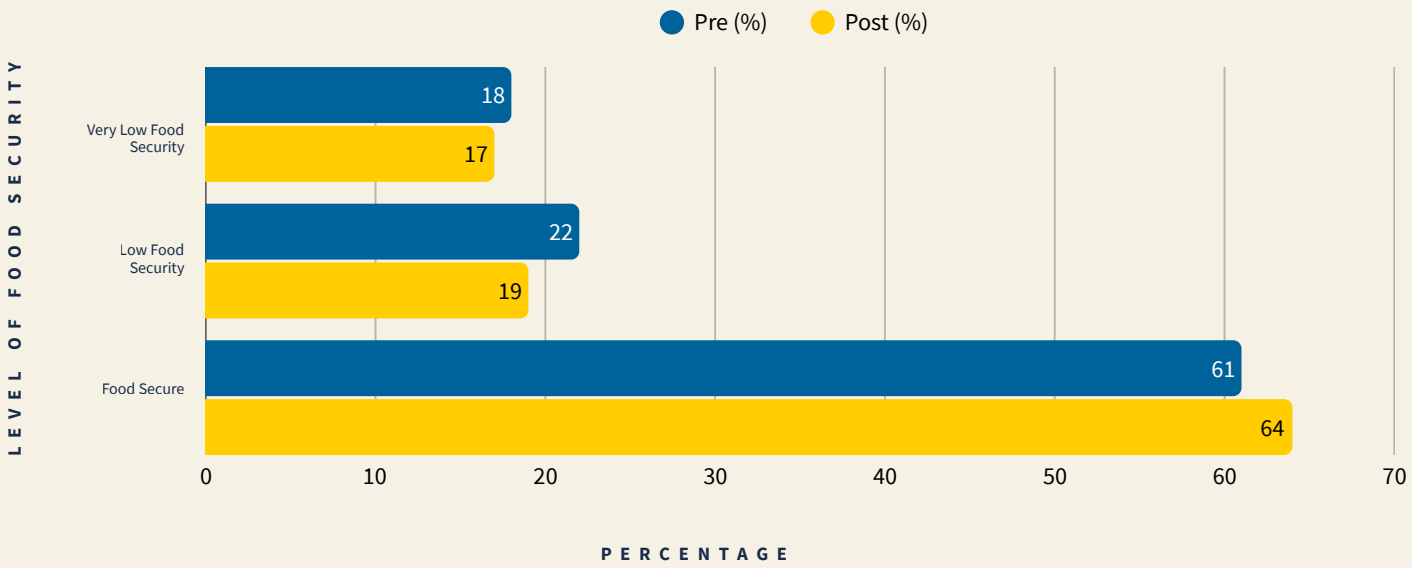
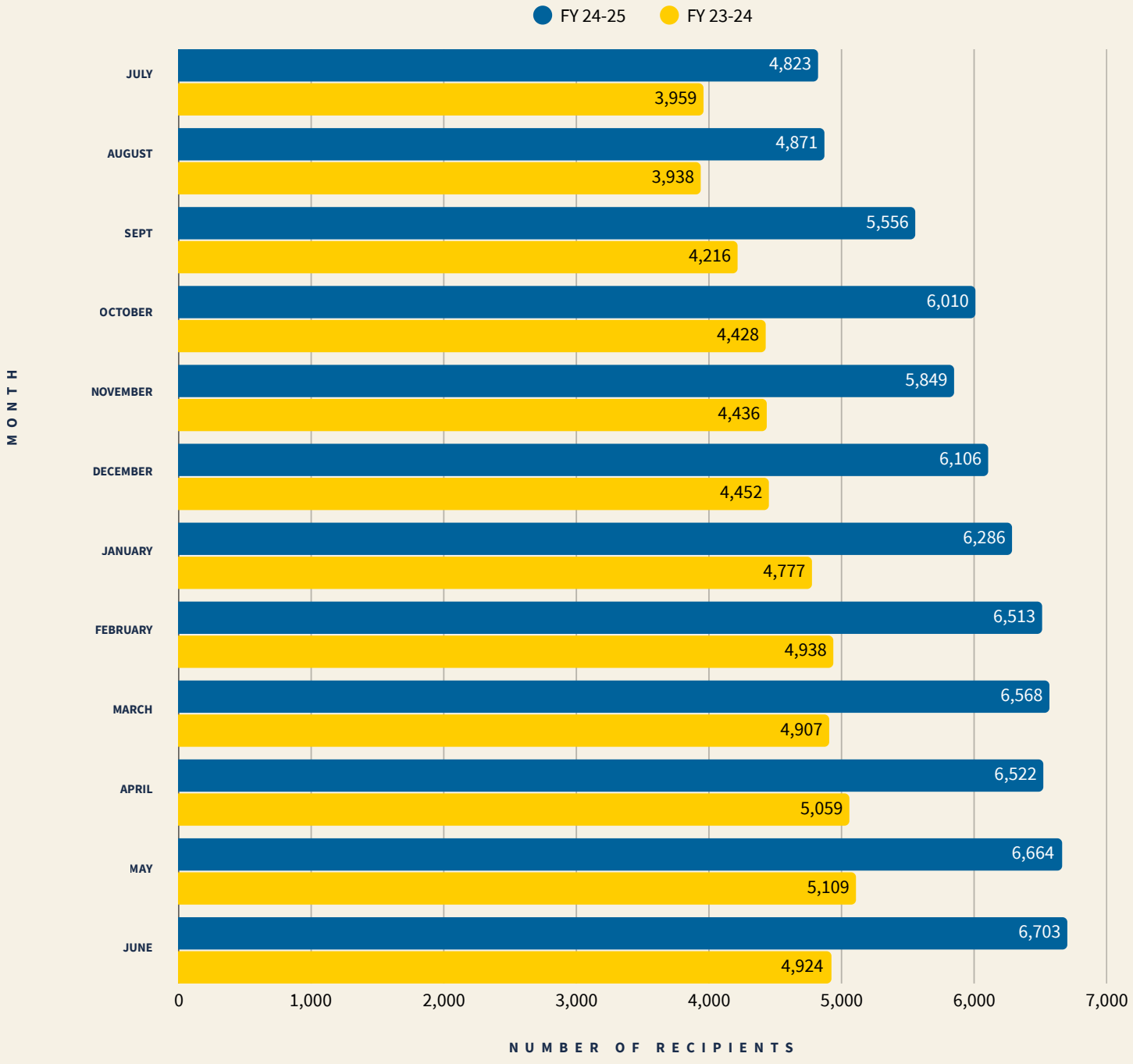


Figure 7: UC San Diego CalFresh Recipients, Fiscal Years 2023-2024 and 2024-2025



San Diego County CalFresh Enrollment

Data provided by San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) Self-Sufficiency Programs indicated a substantial increase in CalFresh participation among UC San Diego students, with 32% more recipients enrolled in the 2024-25 academic year compared to the 2023-24 year (Figure 7). Comparing the number of student-months of benefits received in January-June 2025 (39,256) to those received in January-June 2024 (29,714), and given that students on CalFresh reported receiving an average of $265 per month in benefits, we estimated that UC San Diego students had an additional $5.1M for groceries after the intervention began.

Basic Needs Center Appointment System

Planned analyses of BNC administrative data to assess changes in CalFresh assistance requests and characteristics of students requesting assistance were not feasible due to inconsistent data collection prior to intervention implementation, precluding reliable pre–post comparisons. Identification of this limitation led to a collaborative effort with the BNC to assess data gaps and implement enhancements to their client management system, including standardized data capture procedures. Although these data could not be used for the current evaluation, these system improvements represent an important outcome of the study and will enable more robust monitoring and evaluation of CalFresh assistance and related services in future efforts.

Graduate Student Researcher, Mia Thomas & BNC Staff Haley Okamoto

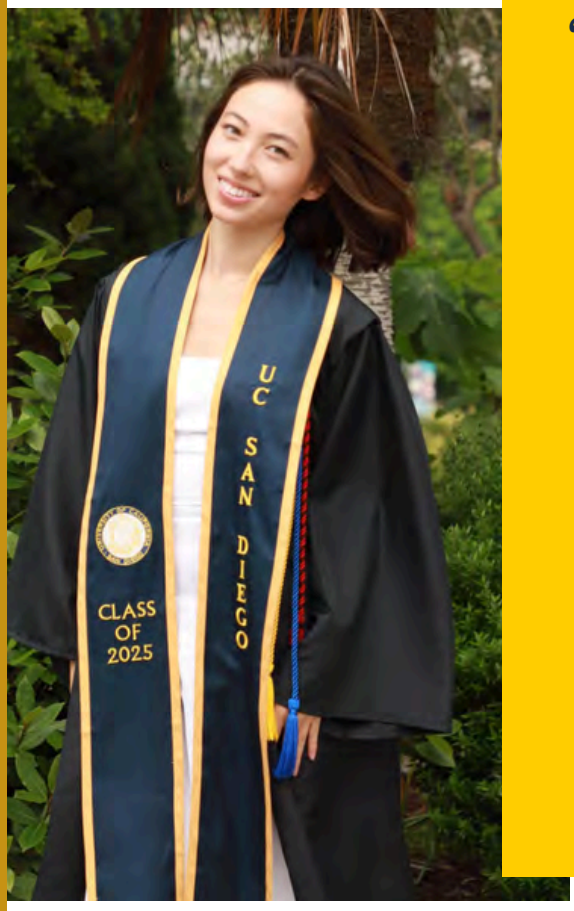
Focus Group & In-Depth Interviews

After implementation of interventions, we conducted one student focus group (n=5) and 7 in-depth qualitative interviews in May and June 2025 to evaluate campus food security efforts. We also interviewed BNC professional and student worker staff to help assess the effectiveness and impact of interventions. Qualitative analysis of the focus group and interviews revealed our interventions provided additional support that allowed BNC to expand their digital and non-digital outreach efforts, better manage student demand, upgrade their client management system, keep information up-to-date, and increase the overall accessibility of food security resources for students. Moreover, participants said having additional data collection capacity from the study helped identify gaps within campus food security that will inform future work. Gaps identified included: inconsistent and insufficient university funding to support food security services and activities, physical space, shared governance structure, and weak coordination among student and campus groups working to advance food security.

MIA JERPHAGNON

on Food Research and Outreach

Mia Jerphagnon worked as a CalFresh Outreach Assistant at the Hub Basic Needs Center for three years, graduating with a B.S. in Business Economics and a minor in Data Science. She used her passion for data and helping students to conduct grant-funded research investigating food insecurity and barriers to applying for and enrolling in CalFresh. She now works as a Project Coordinator at Quartic Solutions and is setting up the second wave of her research study at UC San Diego.



“ We need more capabilities in terms of reaching out to students… In an ideal world, the university would be better at directly contacting students who they know are eligible with the CalFresh resources… Departments need to directly email the students, ‘You are very likely to be eligible for CalFresh… you are very likely to be accepted, and you should really go to this resource.’ … that would free up so much of the time that we're doing outreach and instead, we can focus on what we do better, which is the actual application process. That’s where our team really shines, because we are so knowledgeable about the process. We just need to get students to come to us.”

INTERVENTION REACH

Instructor Communications Campaign

Quantitative Survey

A banner on the Canvas learning management system reached 39,526 students, representing 99% of the student body. Two campus-wide email notifications from the Executive Vice Chancellor encouraging CalFresh information integration in syllabi and class slides, including links to templated resources, reached 22,000 faculty, instructors, and academic staff. Additionally, CalFresh was featured in seven editions of the Academic Affairs newsletter, with 40 clicks to the CalFresh resource slide downloads link.

Broader campus awareness was captured through increased media coverage. Three articles in UC San Diego Today mentioned CalFresh resources during the intervention period, representing the first such coverage since 2020.

Public Health Professor & Co-Investigator, Dr. Nancy Binkin with Dr. Shira Abeles, Medical Director of Sustainability at UC San Diego Health

Student Communications Campaign

Instructional videos created for BNC website and YouTube demonstrated substantial reach, with 263 views for the CalFresh application guide and 102 views for the documentation guide. Instagram engagement from January – July 2025 posts averaged 1,302 monthly interactions, representing a 50% increase in engagement from 868 monthly interactions in the same period the previous year.

A total of 1,275 CalFresh and campus food assistance resource flyers and fact sheets were distributed at campus events and student resource centers from January – June 2025. These print materials were made available at five student resource centers and distributed through event partnerships, including the Student Center Fest with the Food Co-Op and the Eighth College Spring Town Hall. A student-led Sun God Lawn Fest food event engaged an additional 140 students and featured participation and resources from BNC and five student food-related organizations including: Student Sustainability Collective, Food Recovery Network, Food Co-Op, and Che Community Fridge. Campus food security was also cited in a January 2025 article in the student newspaper, The UCSD Guardian, its first coverage of the topic since 2023.

Peer Support Network

To build a student-led peer support network, we conducted a landscape mapping activity to identify 62 student organizations with interests in food, sustainability, health, and affinity-communities. Targeted outreach served 22 Latinx and Black-centered student organizations to promote CalFresh mini clinics. We also trained 41 student interns and student workers on food security resources across campus resource centers.

Graduate Student Researcher & Study Manager, Madison Rodriguez

Additionally, we sought to build student capacity to collectively address food security on campus by facilitating partnerships between student groups. For example, a new partnership between the Food Co-Op and Student Gardens resulted in a new system of garden-grown produce donations to the Food Co-Op to make affordable student meals.

Local Program that Increases Employability (LPIE) Expansion

A review of UC San Diego academic programs identified 186 that were potentially eligible (138 undergraduate, 48 graduate) for LPIE status. Following final submissions and review by CDSS, 102 programs (66 undergraduate, 18 graduate) were approved for LPIE status during the study period. Common reasons for program denial included courses or work experience components listed as optional rather than required. The newly approved programs expanded student eligibility for CalFresh. Student enrollment in academic programs with LPIE status increased by 16,124 undergraduates and 639 graduates (Table 2).

Table 2: UC San Diego LPIE Student Enrollment

	Students enrolled in LPIE programs	**Students enrolled in newly approved LPIE programs**	**Total students enrolled in LPIE programs**	**Total Student Population at UC San Diego** (as of Fall 2024)
	(Pre-Intervention)	**(Intra-Intervention)**	**(Post-Intervention)**	
Undergraduate	7,644 (22%)	16,124 (46%)	23,768 (68%)	34,955
Graduate & Professional	4,953 (63%)	639 (8%)	5,592 (71%)	9,872

We developed a comprehensive LPIE Submission Guide to support LPIE administration beyond our study's timeline (Appendix 2). The guide provides the review and submission workflow and templated communication materials on LPIE status to be disseminated to academic program administrators.

Note: As of June 1, 2026, all Associate and Bachelor's degree programs at California public colleges and universities are automatically considered LPIEs, therefore the review and approval process is now only necessary for graduate, certificate, and other professional programs without LPIE designation.

DISCUSSION

Food Security Requires Financial Security

Food or rent?

The findings from this campuswide effort tell a clear and important story: our interventions to increase awareness and enrollment in CalFresh were highly effective at raising awareness and changing behavior related to CalFresh and other campus food resources. We substantially expanded the reach of critical resource information across the campus environment, as evidenced by the significant increase in students who learned about CalFresh from targeted sources like peers, faculty, and social media. This translated into action, with more students applying for and receiving CalFresh benefits– a trend corroborated by a 32% increase in recipients from UC San Diego shown in county administrative data (Figure 7). We also observed a considerable rise in awareness of programs like Dining Dollars Donation and Yes! Food, further confirming our interventions effectively increased student knowledge on the wider campus safety net available for food support.

Despite critical gains in CalFresh enrollment and campus food resource awareness and utilization, this did not lead to a statistically significant reduction in the prevalence of food insecurity amongst our undergraduate survey sample. This may be due to the short intervention period. Interventions were concentrated over 6 months between October 2024 (baseline survey) and May 2025 (ollow-up survey) to maximize student reach within our study's timeline. This was likely too brief to observe the full impact of CalFresh benefits. A two-year study may offer enough time to understand how the observed increase in CalFresh enrollment can impact student financial health and ultimately food security status.

Further, we recognize awareness and resource access are critical first steps to address food insecurity. However, increased awareness and improved systems to access resources are insufficient on their own towards addressing the underlying economic pressures driving food insecurity among college students. Beyond food, the cost of housing, tuition, healthcare, and transportation make it challenging for low- and middle-income students to afford to live and learn in a high-cost city like San Diego. In the 2026-2027 academic year, undergraduate students who are California residents and intend to live on campus can expect to pay a sticker price of over $47,000 for tuition, fees, food, transportation, and housing. Non-California residents will pay over $86,000 (UCSD Financial Aid & Scholarships, 2026). One strategy to reduce financial burden for low-income students may be to coordinate enrollment in Medi-Cal, to allow students to waive UC SHIP costs, which is the UC student health insurance plan. This is estimated to increase a student's disposable cash by $1,804 with just a UC SHIP waiver or $3,982 with UC SHIP waiver combined with CalFresh enrollment in an academic year (Malagon et al., 2025).

Student-Led Efforts Work

Our series of food security interventions, grounded in recommendations from students and primarily led by students (with exception to the instructor communications campaign led by EVC staff), illuminated critical context on both somewhat easy wins and where more complex nuanced approaches involving students, staff, faculty, and administrators were required.

For example, with regard to easy wins, increasing LPIE eligibility was a surprising yet critically successful component of our study. Initially, we did not plan to include technical work on LPIE submission because we anticipated the administrative approval process would be too cumbersome to tackle during our short intervention period and somewhat tangential to our aims. However, our graduate student researcher further investigated the process and built a collaborative relationship with BNC staff to make it feasible on our timeline. BNC trained our graduate student researcher on how to identify academic programs that may be eligible based on CDSS LPIE criteria. She then completed the required LPIE submission document to submit programs for approval in periodic batches. Ultimately, over 16,000 undergraduate students became newly eligible to receive LPIE exemption to apply for CalFresh. It's important to note, these students must still meet all other income eligibility criteria but they're exempt from 20-hour per week work requirements. We plan to seek future San Diego County CalFresh datasets to understand if and how increased LPIE eligibility may affect CalFresh application and enrollment rates from UC San Diego students.

Creative social media engagement was another easy win for our study, with the leadership of a dedicated undergraduate student research assistant focused on creative content. Student-created social media content for BNC's Instagram and YouTube accounts were clever, timely, and significantly increased online reach. Posts on CalFresh eligibility mythbusting, how-to steps on CalFresh recertification, tips on grocery shopping on a budget, and cooking meals in a dorm room all spurred new and frequent social media interactions. Social media analytics revealed these higher engagement rates prompted students to take follow-up actions such as saving content for future reference, sharing it with peers, and commenting with questions. Social media content was saved in a portfolio with engagement rates noted per post and further developed into a calendared plan. This plan was shared with BNC for their student staff to continue and build upon. Our student researcher's creativity, paired with an authentic pulse on what's happening on campus and in pop culture, was an unparalleled asset to the success of our student communication campaign intervention.

Further, our student-led peer support network model did more than raise awareness. Our outreach lead, staffed by a thoughtful and social justice-minded undergraduate student research assistant, organized student groups who previously operated in silos, to create a stronger and more unified response to food insecurity on campus. Student organizations, namely those associated with food, sustainability, health, and social justice (historically operated independently) often duplicating efforts aimed at improving and enriching the lives of students. Our outreach lead facilitated partnerships, most notably between the Food Co-Op and the Student Gardens. This partnership increased the volume of meals served at the Food Co-Op and prevented waste of harvested garden crops. For reference, the Food Co-Op is the most affordable place on campus to purchase a healthy hot meal.

Student Gardeners on Campus

In April 2026, the Co-Op offered a menu of coconut lentil soup, chickpea curry with rice, chickpea noodle soup, pozole, and coconut curry with rice– each at a price of only $2.75 per scoop. Students make these meals and they are available to anyone on campus during Co-Op operating hours. There are 12 gardens of various sizes and levels of production across campus and each college within the university has its own. This model of collaboration—turning one group's surplus into another's resource—exemplifies the efficiency and resilience that becomes possible when student groups move from working in isolation to working as a coalition. The Food Co-Op, representatives from several student gardens, Student Sustainability Collective, and other student groups are now working together in a newly formed Student Food Security Coalition to continue collaborative efforts aimed at making food justice tangible at UC San Diego.

Advocacy & Coordination Between Student Leaders & Administration

Our peer support network model work, paired with key learnings from a focus group and interviews with student leaders, revealed a critical gap in coordination and a shared advocacy agenda between student leaders and administrators. For example, input from students suggests they perceive institutional resources are directed toward campus building expansion without sufficient resource capacity to meet current basic needs . They provided this case in point– a third Triton Food Pantry is slated to open in Fall 2026 in a new campus development that will house Marshall College. Associated Students, the undergraduate student government body, funds food costs, marketing, and student worker salaries to operate the Triton Food Pantry and Food Recovery Network. Student leaders, and notably also BNC staff, expressed concern that funding from Associated Students alone is insufficient to operate the third pantry location. In a follow-up discussion with Student Life leadership, advocates requested the university provide a separate and sustained funding stream to guarantee the new pantry can successfully operate with the same level of services needed for a growing student body. Strengthening coordination and advocacy efforts across campus amongst all stakeholders– students, staff, faculty, and university leadership, is key to driving sustained solutions that allow this generation and future generations the ability to afford a college education.

Collective Impact Approach

Members of the study team, as well as BNC and Housing, Dining, and Hospitality staff, were included in UC San Diego's Collective Impact Affordable Learning and Financial Support Working Group. This group aims to ensure all students have the resources they need to fully engage in learning and community and graduate into their next steps with no or limited debt. The collective efforts of this group illuminated communication and coordination gaps that could holistically better improve the financial health of students. One example included working together to update the language of campus student dining plans that inadvertently contributed to decreases CalFresh eligibility for students.

Director of Urban Food Equity at Center for Community Health & Co-Investigator, Elle Mari

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. First, we were unable to measure changes in the frequency of CalFresh assistance requests and student interactions with BNC because these data were not consistently collected prior to interventions. Second, while County HHSA data showed increased CalFresh enrollment among UC San Diego students following interventions, this figure likely undercounts the true number because the CalFresh application captures college name inconsistently. This can lead to misclassification of college affiliation. Thus, the change in CalFresh enrollment is reliable, but the point estimates of enrollment may be reduced. Third, it is difficult to assess the full impact of our peer-to-peer support and outreach activities with the quantitative survey data we collected because of the limited wording of questions and multiple choice answers. However, we observed a significant increase in survey respondents who said they heard about CalFresh from their friends and peers, which may indicate word-of-mouth interventions were effective in spreading awareness organically.

Fourth, the generalizability of our survey findings may be limited. Although the sample was representative of UC San Diego's undergraduate study body on key demographics, we recruited survey participants from a sample of academic departments. While these departments were selected to represent a mix of humanities and STEM majors, students in other departments may have different experiences with and awareness of food assistance resources. Lastly, the estimates of students gaining CalFresh eligibility through an LPIE expansion should be interpreted as approximations. The enrollment data, obtained from university academic program records, was aggregated at different levels (e.g., by department, concentration, or individual program), and not all newly designated programs had discrete enrollment figures available. In cases where only some programs within a department were approved during the study, the entire department's enrollment was counted in the post-intervention total. Therefore, these figures illustrate the scale of the initiative but are subject to fluctuation and should not be considered precise counts.

CONCLUSION

Public Health Professor & Co-Investigator, Dr. Richard Garfein

Graduate Student Researcher & Study Manager, Madison Rodriguez

This study demonstrates the positive impacts of collaborating directly with students on a coordinated systems-level approach to improve food security at UC San Diego. With the appropriate resource capacity and connectivity to faculty, staff, and peer groups across campus, students led the way to develop and test successful interventions that can be sustained at UC San Diego. Our research also underscores a critical lesson: while connecting students to food assistance resources is a necessary foundation to seek change, it is not a complete solution. Food insecurity is fundamentally an issue of financial instability, and addressing it requires moving beyond information campaigns to implement structural supports that directly alleviate economic hardship. The following recommendations were developed by our student research team and outline a path forward to create a more comprehensive, effective, and equitable systems approach for student food security at UC San Diego.

Hub BNC Director, Alicia Magallanes

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations to impact student food insecurity are informed by our research findings. Some recommendations also represent key collective learnings obtained through our campuswide relational work aimed at building a bigger collaborative campus entity where students, staff, and faculty can co-design and co-lead critical work at the intersection of food systems and health equity.

Table 3: Short-term (0-12 months) Recommendations

Recommendation	Lead	Action
Convene key stakeholders	Student Food Security Coalition, CCH, HWSPH	Organize biannual meetings with student leaders, BNC staff, and key administrators to align priorities and develop and track a shared action plan.
Targeted outreach to resource centers	BNC, Campus Resource Centers	BNC to expand partnerships with cultural resource centers to conduct tailored CalFresh outreach and mini-clinics.
Full rollout of basic needs client management system	BNC	Fully implement and integrate client management system (Advocate) to streamline BNC client tracking, case management, and service delivery.
Instructor/Faculty involvement initiative	Affordable Learning Workgroup, EVC	Partner with Affordable Learning Workgroup and EVC to provide instructors/faculty with templated language for syllabi and Canvas, including CalFresh information and other food assistance resources.
Targeted resource communications	EVC, Department Chairs, College Administrators, Teaching Assistants	Provide quarterly basic needs resource communication with student-facing personnel (instructors/faculty, TA's, advisors, other staff) via department meetings, newsletters, and email to share with students.
Community building for student leader groups	Student Food Organizations, Student Government, CCH	Facilitate ongoing meetings and events between student organizations, college council basic needs representatives, and other student government representatives to build stronger relationships and improve cross-collaboration, using a collective impact framework.
Peer ambassador training	Student Org Leaders, Student Government Reps, Resource Center Interns	Provide train-the-trainer workshops to student leaders, college council basic needs representatives, first-generation student representatives, resource center interns, and other student government representatives on food assistance resources, mutual aid, and advocacy pathways.

Table 4: Medium-term (1-3 years) Recommendations

Recommendation	Lead	Action
Basic needs student ambassadors	Student Life	Create more student ambassador positions, or positions that focus on food security, within other 'spheres' of campus beside student government and student food organizations (e.g., academic departments, resource centers, athletics).
Establish a dedicated food fund	Advancement	Secure additional funding to support peer educator positions, essential pantry operations, and other student food organizations' capacity on campus. Allowing students to support one another and earn income, while building capacity of BNC.
Food justice experiential learning pilot	HWSPH, CCH, USP	Launch a for-credit and/or paid experiential learning program in partnership with HWSPH, CCH, and USP where students gain practical experience working with BNC and off-campus organizations on food justice outreach, advocacy, operations, and research.
Formalize partnerships between student organizations and BNC	BNC, Student Organizations	Create formal collaborations between BNC and student organizations (e.g., Student Sustainability Collective, Student Gardens, Food Co-Op) to define roles and ensure sustainable collaboration on joint programming.
Triton Fresh 2.0	BNC, Student Life, UCOP	Design and fund a permanent assistance program to support students who are ineligible for CalFresh, building off of Triton Fresh but not duplicating Yes! Food or iTable.
Explore economic impact of safety-net programs applied cohesively for eligible students to maximize financial security	Affordable Learning Workgroup, Student Life	Investigate how UCSHIP waiver, combined with student Medi-Cal enrollment (with or without CalFresh enrollment depending on eligibility) can reduce financial burden for low-income students. Apply findings; example.

Table 5: Long-term (3+ years) Recommendations

Recommendation	Lead	Action
Develop an interdiscplinary food systems x health equity unit	CCH, HWSPH, USP	Establish a new interdisciplinary unit dedicated to food systems and health equity collaboration for research, curriculum development, mentorship, internship opportunities, community partnerships, and institutional policy. This connects back to campus stakeholder recommendations from convenings held in 2023-2025. These convenings uplifted student nutrition as a critical issue to collaboratively address and a desire to have a unified space to address food-related structural, societal challenges that affect health and wellbeing at multiple levels. UC Berkeley Food Institute (UC BFI) is an example of how to leverage university resources to shape an equitable food system.
Develop an undergraduate food justice academic minor	USP, CCH, HWSPH	Leverage existing courses and expertise to develop a new Food Justice minor curriculum. This builds on success of students who have structured and petitioned for their own food-focused academic concentrations and builds academic excellence in preparing the next generation of food systems leaders. Example from UC BFI.
What collective actions can prevent food insecurity for students who are most likely to experience it?	**Can you help?**	**Your ideas are welcome!**

Acronyms

BNC: Hub Basic Needs Center
CCH: Center for Community Health
EVC: Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Strategic Communications & Engagement
HWSPH: Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health & Human Longevity Science
USP: Urban Studies and Planning Department

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- Cognitive Science Department
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- County of San Diego HHSA Self-Sufficiency Services
- Financial Aid & Scholarship Office
- Food Recovery Network
- Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health & Human Longevity Science
- Hub Basic Needs Center
- HWSPH Workgroup on Student Food Security
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- School of Engineering
- Student Affairs & Campus Life
- Triton Food Pantry
- UCSD Student Food Co-Op
- UCSD Student Food Security Network
- UCSD Student Gardens
- UCSD Student Sustainability Collective
- Urban Studies & Planning Department
- Utilities & Sustainability

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Madison Rodriguez, MPH
Madison conducted this research as a MPH graduate student at UC San Diego and graduated in 2025. Madison served as study manager, conducted evaluative analyses, led efforts to disseminate our findings, and supported our undergraduate research team. Madison now works at UC Irvine.

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Rachel is a sociology and ethnic studies major at UC San Diego, and served as outreach lead and research assistant. Rachel also led qualitative methods and analyses. Rachel co-leads the UCSD Student Food Security Coalition, is a member of the Food Co-Op, and was awarded the UC Leading on Climate Fellowship in food and sustainable agriculture.

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Elle is the Director of Urban Food Equity at Center for Community Health at UC San Diego. She is a strategic leader and advocate in community-based food systems and mentor to students studying public health, climate science, and urban studies and planning. Elle served as Co-Investigator, campus community builder, and mentored student researchers.

Richard Garfein, PhD, MPH
Richard is a Professor in the Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health & Human Longevity Science at UC San Diego. He is an epidemiologist and public health innovator, dedicated to understanding the causes of disease and translating that knowledge into impactful solutions. Richard served as Co-Principal Investigator and mentored student researchers.

Parsa Naghshineh, MPH Candidate
Parsa conducted this research as a BSPH student at UC San Diego. He served as creative lead, developing content and strategy for social media engagement, presentations, flyers, and videos. Parsa is now pursuing an MPH at Columbia University in New York City.

Mia Thomas, MPH
Mia conducted this research as a MPH graduate student at UC San Diego and graduated in 2026. She led the LPIE intervention and worked alongside the Hub Basic Needs Center to help fully integrate a new client management system to assist in tracking case management of basic needs services. Mia now works at Feeding San Diego.

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Nancy is an Adjunct Professor in the Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health & Human Longevity Science. She served as Co-Investigator and supported graduate student researchers with methods development and quantitative analyses. Nancy teaches an Honors Practicum course for BSPH students that helped ground and substantiate the need for this study.

Blanca Meléndrez, MA
Blanca is Executive Director of Center for Community Health at UC San Diego and offers over two decades of leadership on community-engaged public health practice, promoting health equity. Blanca served as Co-Principal Investigator and provided critical insights on systems-level equity-driven approaches to address student food insecurity.

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APPENDIX

Transforming the Student Food Security Landscape: Student and Staff Reflections, Rachel Handa, 2026

Access here

This student-authored report is a companion piece to the full report, and goes deeper to explore our qualtative findings based on interviews and a focus group with staff and students involved in food security efforts at UC San Diego.

LPIE Submission Guide, Mia Thomas, 2026

Access here

This guide was developed to serve as a protocol to assist the Hub Basic Needs Center and other campus partners where applicable, in reviewing and submitting academic programs for review to the California Department of Social Services to meet eligibility as a Local Program to Increase Employability (LPIE). LPIE is an important factor in CalFresh (SNAP) eligibility for college students. As of June 1, 2026, all Associate and Bachelor's degree programs at California public colleges and universities are automatically considered LPIEs, therefore the review and approval process is now only necessary for graduate, certificate, and other professional programs without LPIE designation.

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at University of California San Diego

2026