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Reminder postcards and simpler emails encouraged more college students to apply for CalFresh

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SUMMARY

CalFresh benefits can help college students make ends meet while attending college, but not all eligible students apply. One contributing factor may be that students are not aware they are eligible. Therefore, outreach efforts informing them of their eligibility could help increase take-up rates. To test this, we designed and conducted two experiments that leveraged an expansion in CalFresh eligibility for students that went into effect in early 2021.

In response to the pandemic, Congress permitted a temporary expansion to college student eligibility for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), or CalFresh as it is known in California. The expansion went into effect in January 2021 and will last through the end of the federal public health emergency. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) partnered with The People Lab (TPL) and the California Policy Lab (CPL) on two randomized experiments to evaluate whether outreach about this policy change could increase the number of students who applied for and eventually enrolled in CalFresh. One experiment, conducted in February and March 2021, tested the impact of email outreach. The second, conducted in June 2021, tested the relative effectiveness of different messages and modes of communication on the same group of students who were newly eligible. This brief reports the results of the second experiment.

In a randomized experiment with 285,325 Californian college students, we found that the method of communication had a large impact on application rates: 2.9% of students who were only sent an email submitted an application for CalFresh compared to 4.9% of students who were sent an email and a postcard — a 69% increase. Simplifying the content of the communication also yielded a small increase in application rates, but other variations in message content had no meaningful effect. During the six weeks following outreach, 10,000 contacted students applied for CalFresh.

THE CHALLENGE

In 2021, California expanded eligibility for CalFresh to offset the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, enrolled college students who had previously filed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and had zero expected family contribution (EFC) or who qualified for work study became newly eligible for CalFresh under the expanded criteria,¹ so long as they met the program's citizenship and income requirements.² As of October 2021, qualifying students who applied for CalFresh could receive up to \$234 per month to spend on groceries.³

This eligibility expansion meant a substantial number of college students across the state may have become eligible for CalFresh for the first time. In Spring 2021, CSAC and CDSS conducted a statewide outreach campaign to inform students with zero EFC that they may be newly eligible for CalFresh benefits.

Individuals face numerous informational, logistical, and psychological barriers to accessing and participating in government programs like CalFresh, and understanding the [eligibility rules](#) for college students can be especially challenging. College students may lack awareness about their eligibility, especially given the pandemic-related eligibility expansion. They also must navigate particularly complicated eligibility criteria, as well as the stigma that is associated with participation.

Although the barriers to participation in programs like CalFresh are relatively well-documented, evidence on the efficacy of information-based interventions aimed at increasing take-up of benefit programs is mixed.^{4,5,6,7} This study tested the impact of communication method and message content on applications for CalFresh among a population of likely-eligible college students in California. We measured applications through [GetCalFresh.org](#), a simplified application portal for California's CalFresh program. Although a majority of CalFresh applicants apply through GetCalFresh.org, which is run by the nonprofit Code for America, individuals can also apply directly through their county social services agencies. Applications submitted through county agencies were not captured as part of this study.

INTERVENTION

In June 2021, The People Lab and CPL partnered with CDSS and CSAC to test the impact of varying the message content and the method of communications aimed at increasing take-up of CalFresh among likely eligible college students. Using data

from CSAC, a total of 285,325 college students across the state of California were identified as having zero EFC and/or eligible for work study, and were therefore considered likely to be eligible for CalFresh under the expanded criteria.⁸

In a field experiment, we randomly assigned each likely eligible college student to one of seven outreach conditions⁹:


1. **Original email:** Students received an informational email — the same email that was used in the first experiment — to encourage students to apply for CalFresh. The email was 305 words long.
2. **Simplified email:** Students received an email with the same information as the *Original* email, but with more concise language: The *Simplified* email included 194 words, compared to the 305 words in the *Original* email.
3. **Simplified email + postcard:** Students received the *Simplified* email, as well as a [postcard](#) that offered the same information and language as the email.
4. **De-stigmatizing email:** Students received an [email](#) that offered the same information as the *Simplified* email, but with additional language aiming to de-stigmatize participation in CalFresh by emphasizing that the pandemic hit many students hard and that CalFresh benefits exist to help during such times.
5. **De-stigmatizing email + postcard:** Students received the *De-stigmatizing* email, as well as a postcard that offered the same information and language as that email.
6. **Enough benefits email:** Students received an [email](#) that offered the same information as the *Simplified* email, but with additional language that aimed to counter a common perception among college students that CalFresh benefits are only for people who “really need them” by emphasizing that there are “enough” benefits to help all eligible students.
7. **Enough Benefits email + postcard:** Students received the *Enough Benefits* email, as well as a postcard that offered the same information and language as that email.

See [Figures 1 and 2](#) for examples of the outreach materials used. Six weeks after CDSS and CSAC sent the emails and the postcards, we compared how many students in each group had applied for CalFresh.

FIGURE 1. Original and Simplified emails

Condition 1: Original email

----- Forwarded message -----
From: **California Student Aid Commission** <studentsupport@csac.ca.gov>
Date: Tue, Jun 1, 2021 at 9:29 AM
Subject: You may be eligible for expanded CalFresh benefits for students
To:



Provide a copy of this entire letter to your County Social Services Provider as proof that you meet one of the temporary CalFresh eligibility requirements.

Dear

The California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) want to share an important update for the 2020-21 academic year. CalFresh student eligibility has been temporarily expanded to provide emergency relief due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on your application for college financial aid and zero dollar Expected Family Contribution (EFC) determination, you may be temporarily eligible for CalFresh food benefits without meeting the student work rule if you also meet the CalFresh income limits.

CalFresh can help you cover your food expenses while you are in college. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, **eligible Californians could get \$234 on their EBT card each month** to help pay for groceries, so we encourage you to apply to receive this valuable benefit.

To apply:

- Go to [Get CalFresh](#) to submit an application
- Upload a copy of this letter with your application as proof of your temporary eligibility for CalFresh
- To learn more about CalFresh, including income and eligibility requirements, go to [Department of Social Services CalFresh Program Requirements](#)

Please keep a copy of this letter as proof of your temporary eligibility for CalFresh.


Have questions related to the CalFresh or Cal Grant Programs?

- CalFresh - 1-877-847-3663 (FOOD)
- Cal Grant Student Support Center - 1-888-224-7268 (M-F 8:00 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.)

Attention County Social Services Provider: This letter confirms that the student listed above applied for federal and/or state college financial aid for the 2020-21 academic year and was determined to have a zero dollar Expected Family Contribution (EFC). This letter serves as verification of an exemption from the student eligibility rule.

Condition 2: Simplified email

----- Forwarded message -----
From: **California Student Aid Commission** <studentsupport@csac.ca.gov>
Date: Tue, Jun 1, 2021 at 9:31 AM
Subject: You may be eligible for expanded CalFresh benefits for students



Dear

You may be newly eligible to receive CalFresh food benefits! Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, student eligibility for CalFresh has been expanded. Now, college students like you can get an easy-to-use debit card with up to \$234 for groceries every month.

CalFresh can help you cover food expenses while you are in college. We encourage you to apply for this valuable benefit.

[Apply now for CalFresh](#)

When you apply, CalFresh has special requirements for college students, so make sure you check the box that says:

I filled out the FAFSA and have an expected family contribution (EFC) of \$0

To learn more about CalFresh call 1-877-847-3663 (FOOD) or visit www.getcalfresh.org/s/csac1

You are receiving this email because according to your FAFSA you have an expected family contribution (EFC) of \$0. This could mean you are eligible for CalFresh benefits under newly expanded eligibility criteria. You can check your EFC on your FAFSA by viewing your [Student Aid Report \(SAR\)](#).

PRIVACY STATEMENT: Cal Grant information for students who are 18 years of age or older, or who have attended a postsecondary institution, will only be released to parents or guardians with written authorization from the student.

FIGURE 2. De-stigmatizing and Enough Benefits postcards

De-stigmatizing postcard



College students like you may be eligible to get up to \$234 every month for groceries!

getcalfresh.org/s/help
1-877-847-3663 (FOOD)

You may be newly eligible to receive CalFresh food benefits!

The pandemic has hit many students hard. It's okay to need a little extra help. CalFresh exists to help during times like these.

Apply now at getcalfresh.org/s/help

You may be receiving this postcard because you have an expected family contribution (EFC) of \$0 on your FAFSA. This could mean you are eligible for CalFresh. If your EFC is \$0, make sure you check this box when you apply:

I filled out the FAFSA and have an expected family contribution (EFC) of \$0

You can check your EFC on your FAFSA by viewing your Student Aid Report (SAR) at studentaid.gov

OSP 21 151483

California Student Aid Commission
P.O. Box 419027
Rancho Cordova, CA 95741-9027

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SACRAMENTO CA
PERMIT NO 424

Enough Benefits postcard



College students like you may be eligible to get up to \$234 every month for groceries!

getcalfresh.org/s/school
1-877-847-3663 (FOOD)

You may be newly eligible to receive CalFresh food benefits!

CalFresh can help you succeed in school. All eligible students can apply. There are enough benefits to help everyone who is eligible.

Apply now at getcalfresh.org/s/school

You may be receiving this postcard because you have an expected family contribution (EFC) of \$0 on your FAFSA. This could mean you are eligible for CalFresh. If your EFC is \$0, make sure you check this box when you apply:

I filled out the FAFSA and have an expected family contribution (EFC) of \$0

You can check your EFC on your FAFSA by viewing your Student Aid Report (SAR) at studentaid.gov

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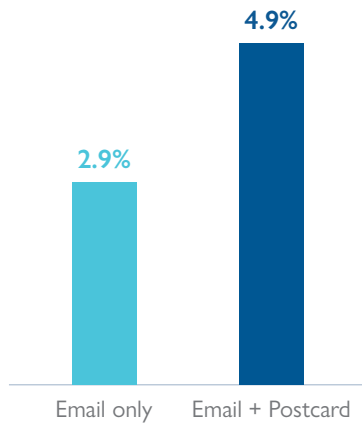
RESULTS

Impact of communication method

Students who were sent both an email and postcard — regardless of the message content — were nearly twice as likely to apply for CalFresh in the six weeks following outreach as students who were only sent an email. Among students who were only sent one of the treatment emails (i.e., not the *Original* email), 2.9% applied for CalFresh in

the six weeks following outreach. In comparison, 4.9% of students assigned to one of the three groups that received an email and a postcard applied for CalFresh in the six weeks following outreach — a 69% increase. This difference is statistically significant.

FIGURE 3. Impact of communication method on CalFresh applications, June 1–July 13, 2021



Impact of message content

Compared to the effect of communication method (email vs. postcard), the effect of variation in message content was relatively small. Among students who were only sent an email, simplifying the email language increased applications for CalFresh by approximately 6% (0.2 percentage points) relative

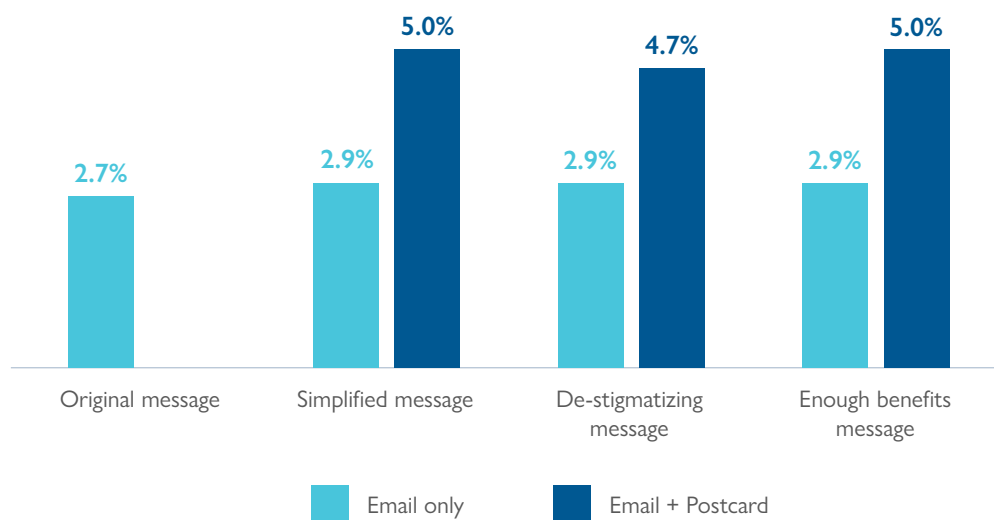
to the *Original* email. Of students who were sent the *Original* email, 2.7% applied for CalFresh in the subsequent six weeks, compared to 2.9% of students who were sent the simplified email. This difference is marginally significant ($p = .07$). This effect size is in line with what we would expect given the standard impact of light-touch behavioral interventions.¹⁰

Similarly, 2.9% of students who were sent either the *De-stigmatizing* email or the *Enough Benefits* email applied for CalFresh in the following six weeks. In other words, email language that aimed to de-stigmatize CalFresh participation and to reassure students that there were “enough” benefits did not yield a meaningful difference in application rates compared to the *Simplified* email.

Among students who were sent an email and a postcard, 4.7% of students who were sent the *De-stigmatizing* message applied for CalFresh, compared to 5% of students who were sent the *Enough Benefits* or the *Simplified* message. This difference, however, was not statistically significant.

Overall, these results suggest that simplifying the language used in outreach materials slightly increases program enrollment, but other content adjustments may not affect take-up behavior.

FIGURE 4. Impact of message content on CalFresh applications, June 1–July 13, 2021



CONCLUSION

This study offers evidence on the effect of communication method and outreach language on take-up of CalFresh, as measured by program applications. For public sector organizations conducting outreach campaigns about social safety-net programs, these findings suggest that combining mailed and digital communication is more effective at encouraging take-up than digital communication alone. These findings also suggest that simplifying message content may slightly increase the efficacy of information interventions on net, although varying the specific language used in the simplified message did not have an impact on program applications.

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More broadly, these findings contribute to a growing evidence base on the efficacy of behavioral information interventions. Future research should examine the impact of both communication method and message content on take-up of other government benefit programs.

It is important to note that light-touch notifications cannot help students fully overcome all of the hurdles they may face to enrolling in benefits, including understanding other eligibility requirements, completing the application, securing the proper paperwork, and once enrolled, meeting recertification requirements.^{11,12} A comprehensive approach to increasing access to and take-up of social safety-net benefits will require innovation at each of these stages.

THE PEOPLE LAB

The People Lab (TPL) aims to empower the public sector by producing cutting-edge research on the people in government and the communities they are called to serve. Using evidence from public management and insights from behavioral science, we study, design, and test strategies that can solve urgent public sector challenges in three core areas: strengthening the government workforce, improving government-resident interactions, and reimagining evidence-based policymaking.

THE CALIFORNIA POLICY LAB

The California Policy Lab (CPL) seeks to improve the lives of Californians by working with the government to generate evidence that transforms public policy and to help address California's most urgent issues, including homelessness, poverty, criminal justice reform, and education inequality. CPL facilitates close working partnerships between policymakers and researchers at the University of California to evaluate and improve public programs through empirical research and technical assistance.

This research publication reflects the views of the authors and not necessarily the views of our funders, our staff, our advisory board, the Regents of the University of California, the California Department of Social Services, or the California Student Aid Commission.

Endnotes

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