

JUST FOOD EPISODE 6

CalFresh on Campus: Breaking the Stigma of Food Insecurity

LAURA: Welcome to Just Food, a podcast about cultivating justice and health. This is a series is brought to you by the Berkeley Food Institute, at the University of California, Berkeley. I'm your host, Laura Klivans. And today, we're starting off by taking you to the heart of the Berkeley campus, where our reporter Graelyn Brashear recently spent some time asking students this question.

[SPROUL PLAZA SOUNDS COME UP]

GRAELYN: Hey guys, I'm a reporter working on a podcast for the Berkeley Food Institute. Can I talk to you for a second? It's about CalFresh. Do you guys know what CalFresh is?

Student 1: No, I don't. Never heard of it.

Graelyn: Do you know what CalFresh is?

Student 2: No.

Graelyn: Do you know what CalFresh is?

Student 3: Oh, is that where you, um, get food, like—no wait, that's the food pantry.

Student 4: I'm not sure what it is, either.

Student 5: No, I'm not sure.

[SPROUL PLAZA SOUNDS FADE]

LAURA: OK, so tell us. What is CalFresh?

Kim McCoy Wade: CalFresh is the way that you can get some help paying for your groceries.

GRAELYN: Kim McCoy Wade is the head honcho of CalFresh at the California Department of Social Services.

Kim McCoy Wade: It comes on an EBT card. It's about one hundred twenty five dollars a month. You can use it for grocery stores and farmer's markets.

LAURA: OK, like food stamps.

GRAELYN: Right, CalFresh is the state program that administers the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, which used to be called food stamps. If your income is below a certain threshold, you can sign up.

It's a really important program. It helps about four and a half million people get groceries every month in California. The state spent eight billion dollars in federal funds on it last year.

But, in California, the rate of enrollment is really pretty low. Less than 40 percent of people who qualify for CalFresh actually sign up. California lags behind the rest of the country on enrollment.

LAURA: Why is that?

GRAELYN: Well, that's a good question, and the answer is complicated. There are folks doing research on this, and they say a lot of people are misinformed—they don't realize they qualify, or they think they're going to have to pay the benefits back, or they're afraid it's going to affect their immigration status. And then there's also stigma around this—people don't want to ask for this help getting food, this basic need, or maybe they just think, "This is for people who are worse off than me."

LAURA: Right.

So here in California, advocates and state officials are trying to find ways to close this gap, and help people who are eligible sign up. They're tackling it in all kinds of ways—research to understand the issue, policy changes, and shifting people's attitudes about the food assistance.

And it turns out, one place where ALL those efforts are really working is at UC Berkeley.

And this is where Ruben comes in.

[MUSIC UP? SCENE SHIFT]

Ruben: My name is Ruben E. Canedo and my role at UC Berkeley is the Chair for the Basic Needs Committee.

TRACK: Ruben's committee is part of Cal's Educational Opportunity Program, a team of counselors whose whole job is helping disadvantaged students succeed at college: students who are low-income, from under-represented backgrounds, or are first-generation students.

Before he worked to help those students, Ruben was one of them, back when he was an undergrad at Cal. He comes from a Latino and indigenous background, and he worked his way through college, and he was really involved with the EOP while he was here.

A few years after graduation, he came back to work for the program as full-time staff in 2013. Early on, he was charged with doing some basic research on how they could help their students.

Ruben: So I just sat down with people, and one of the questions was, 'What are your largest barriers to success that you have the least amount of information and resources for?'

I thought they were going to talk about resources, and funding, and all that kind of stuff. And it was really consistent across all of those that people kept saying food. Students were saying that they weren't eating or they weren't eating enough. Staff were saying, 'Hey, I'm having to bring fruits and Clif bars. And now when I eat my lunch, I eat half of it, because I know a student at some point from lunchtime to the time that I end hasn't had a meal, so I'm going to give them half of my lunch.'

TRACK: This shocked him. It shocked a lot of people. This is a basic need, and Berkeley is a place famous for progressive politics and efforts to make college accessible. Why was this happening?

That's a question we could spend a long, long time answering. But Ruben and other experts say this is part of it: The cost of going to school is going up, and so is the cost of living here in the Bay Area. At the same time, more non-traditional students from more diverse backgrounds are going to college, and they're worried about taking on debt.

Ruben: So now you're having working class students, middle class students, that did not grow up food insecure are experiencing that for the first time and have no idea how to do what they need to do to take care of themselves.

TRACK: And it's surprisingly tough to combat this, Ruben said, because there's this cultural acceptance that students are going to suffer.

Ruben: There's almost this embrace or is just acceptance that when you're going to go through college, you're going to struggle with your basic needs. Like how many movies have we watched where they portray a student that's in college that is having to work multiple jobs and is falling asleep in class and is trying to save money and can barely make ends meet and is skipping meals? And is just kind of like, 'How's college going, you know, how are those PB & Js?'

Graelyn: Those ramen noodles.

Ruben: Or ramen noodles. You're like, it is just part of the conversation. It was so accepted.

TRACK: But Ruben said once the EOP folks started presenting their data on just how big a problem hunger was on campus, people started saying, 'We need to do something about this.'

Ruben: So when we found out that data that thirty nine percent of UC Berkeley students are food insecure and that 23 percent of graduate students are food insecure. And that amongst those students so many of them qualify for SNAP or CalFresh. We needed to go find now why aren't they on CalFresh?

TRACK: Yeah, CalFresh! Why aren't more students signing up for these benefits? Here's Kim McCoy Wade.

Kim McCoy Wade: So yes, there is in CalFresh an old and wildly unpopular rule that makes it harder for college students to really establish that they're low-income. It's kind of based on the old stereotype that maybe a college student looks like they have no income, but mom and dad are paying behind the scenes for room and board, or tuition, or books or all that.

TRACK: There were some exceptions, but the rule made it so that if you're a full-time student, you ALSO have to work 20 hours a week to qualify for CalFresh.

But what people on the ground knew was that a lot of college students today don't fit that stereotype. They're at school without support. A lot of them are working, even though they can't handle a full course load AND 20 hours a week on a job. And a lot of them are going hungry. If you're looking to take down barriers that stop people from getting federal food assistance, Ruben said, well, this was one.

So, he said people at Berkeley and elsewhere around the state got to work advocating for NEW rules. And over the last few years, they got them.

First, in 2014, came AB 1930, which said, 'OK, new exception: If you qualify for work-study, the federal program that helps students with financial needs get part-time jobs in college, then you automatically qualify for CalFresh.

In 2016 came AB 1747, which required a lot of college campus food vendors to accept the EBT cards CalFresh recipients use.

And it was students who led the way.

LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE AUDIO: Luis Ramirez from Sacramento City College Student Senate, we strongly support this bill. Courtney Cooper, Student Trustee of Foothill Community College and former foster youth, I strongly support this bill. Alex Galliano, student at Shasta College, strongly support this bill....

[SOUND OF AB 1747 HEARING COMES UP]

...like these California college students, who came to Sacramento in 2016 to speak up for one of these bills.

[MUSIC UP UNDER STUDENT VOICES, VOICES FADE OUT]

TRACK: At Berkeley, this has changed the landscape. Nine thousand students on campus now qualify for CalFresh. That's over a third of the student body who could be getting up to \$190 a month for groceries.

But there are way fewer than nine thousand Berkeley students who actually sign up for CalFresh benefits. All those other barriers that keep people off food assistance apply here, too—people don't know about it, they think they don't qualify, or they think other people need it more than them.

But here's the good news: Ruben and his colleagues found out a college campus is the perfect place to apply a whole slew of tools being developed to break down those barriers. Berkeley is something of a laboratory for finding out what works.

One tool: Clinics, where students can just walk into an office on campus and have staff help them sign up if they are eligible. At Berkeley, Ruben and his colleagues hold these clinics once a week.

Ruben: We're seeing our numbers drastically increase from being able to account in your hand and your fingers and toes how many people we are registering for CalFresh to now we're having 35 to 40 every clinic.

TRACK: And the state has rolled out an app.

Kim McCoy Wade: Seven minutes on your phone you can start your CalFresh application online...

TRACK: And there's something else going on at Berkeley, something that's a little more subtle: Getting rid of the stigma around food assistance.

[SOUNDS OF CAL FOOD PANTRY COME UP]

This is the UC Berkeley Food Pantry, down in the basement of the MLK Student Center. It opened in 2014, and it's run by students. There are bright murals on the walls of farms and food delivery trucks, shelves stocked with organic pasta and coolers filled with fresh produce. Undergrad Mina Wu volunteers here, and she's showing me around.

Mina: There the juices, apple juice—those go really fast. And the Clif Bars, those go really fast, too.

Ruben says the community built around the food pantry shows that there doesn't have to be stigma associated with getting help to fill your fridge. And college students are leading the way. There's a generational change happening, he said. Young people who are coming to school and facing hunger, they're seeing food assistance as just another tool that's available to them.

Ruben: In the same way that tutoring is a tool for success, so is a food pantry. So are our classes. So is the food assistance program. Everything.

TRACK: And it seems to be working. Remember those students we heard from earlier, in Sproul Plaza?

Graelyn: Do you know what CalFresh is?

Student 2: No.

TRACK: In every group of students I talked to, at least one person qualified for work study. And every one of them said this, with no hesitation.

Graelyn: So that means you qualify for CalFresh. Would you want to sign up for it?

Student 1: Yeah, of course!

Student 2: Yeah, of course.

Student 3: Yeah, if I qualify.

Student 4: Sounds like a lot of lunches! [laughter]

TRACK: Everybody involved in bringing CalFresh to people who need it says there's more work to do. But what's happening at Berkeley is giving a lot of people hope, especially when it comes to reducing stigma. It doesn't surprise Ruben. And he thinks if the culture can change at college, it'll start changing everywhere else.

Ruben: This generation is a really powerful generation that loves collectivism and sharing. You know this is the generation that created social networks for a reason. Right.

I come from an indigenous background my mom was from Chihuahua and she's indigenous. And we have a word and it's in English you would pronounce it like korima. And korima, it means 'Help me today, so I may help you tomorrow better.' So that's what we do.