

Free City College Annual Report

2020-2021



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Introduction

2020-2021 marked the fourth year of the Free City program – a joint effort of the City and County of San Francisco (the City) and City College of San Francisco (City College) to offer residents a tuition-free college education, regardless of income, age, or academic standing. **Nearly 20,000 students benefitted from Free City, comprising 70% of City College’s credit students in 2020-2021.**

The program launched in 2017 with multiple goals:

- Improve higher education access for all San Franciscans by reducing financial barriers.
- Support pathways to college credentials (while breaking the school to prison pipeline).
- Cover tuition and reduce student debt – with an eye toward helping individuals from low-income households stay in school.
- Leverage the strength of the community college system and stabilize declining enrollments.

Since Free City’s inception, City College and the City have expressed an increased interest in leveraging the program to (a) strengthen economic mobility for low-income families and communities of color through pursuit of postsecondary credentials, and (b) support institutional efforts to increase completion among students experiencing opportunity gaps at the college.¹ As a first step, the college aligned the Free City effort with its Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) Plan², operationalized through a common reporting structure, and has articulated a desire to further position the program to advance these priorities.

Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has upset higher education broadly and City College’s enrollments specifically over the past two years. Students – particularly students from historically marginalized groups – are experiencing increased financial insecurity, intensified family caretaking responsibilities, a strong labor market, and questions about the value proposition of pursuing postsecondary credentials. At the same time, the state has broadened financial assistance and basic needs support for students. Combined, these shifts have implications for Free City’s original intentions as well as for its future design and implementation.

¹ Student groups that are unjustifiably experiencing lower outcomes compared to the total student population.

² The California Community Colleges launched the SEA Program in 2018 to support the systemwide goal of eliminating achievement gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations. To receive SEA funds, colleges are required to produce an equity plan that identifies disparities among student groups for specific success indicators and establishing goals and measures for eradicating these inequities. Find more information here: <https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Chancellors-Office/Divisions/Educational-Services-and-Support/Student-Service/What-we-do/Student-Equity>.

Reader's Guide

It is in this context that City College offers the Free City Oversight Committee this latest annual update on the program. Building on last year's more extensive trend analysis and recommendations, this report provides a snapshot of Free City student enrollment; characteristics, including their use of financial aid; and academic outcomes during the 2020-2021 school year. It concludes with potential next steps for program administration and operations in the near term.

This report seeks to support the Oversight Committee's decision-making about the program and how to further position it to revitalize enrollments and increase more equitable college access and outcomes among key community groups. It additionally complements The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges' recent assessment of Free City impact on student equity since 2017 and related recommendations, also submitted to City College and the Oversight Committee in fall 2022.

Free City Program Impact 2020-2021

Key Highlights

- City College enrollments continued to decline in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic impacts, raising urgent questions about how to best leverage Free City (alongside other supports) to encourage student enrollment and retention.
- Student participation in Free City has held relatively steady since the program's inception. In 2020-2021, 70% of the college's credit students took advantage of the benefit at some point in the year (compared to the roughly 75% who are eligible). However, student use of the program is considerably lower when looking at Free City participation by term, revealing an opportunity to increase students' use of the benefit.
- Half of City College credit students received a Free City tuition waiver; a far smaller percentage received an additional cash grant through the program, which students secure based on financial need as determined through completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).
- While a high percentage of older adults continued to take advantage of Free City in 2020-2021, an increased percentage of younger students (24 years and younger) participated in the program compared to prior years.
- Asian student participation in Free City reached 80% – by far the greatest participation rate compared to other racial/ethnic groups. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders were least likely to receive Free City support, followed closely by Black/African American and Filipino students. Overall, Free City participants are still less likely to be part of City College's student equity groups.
- FAFSA completion – both for Free City participants and City College students overall – remains at roughly 30%.
- The proportion of students attempting full-time enrollment (at least 24 units annually) since Free City launched has remained relatively unchanged. At the same time, Free City students attempted more units than their non-program peers and completed their courses at similar rates. These findings continue to counter original concerns that students may be inclined to drop their classes in the absence of a financial commitment.
- Free City participants earned 75% certificates and degrees granted in 2020-2021 – the highest proportion since the program's inception. At the same time, as in prior years, Free City participants who were also members of a student equity group received awards at lower rates.

Student Enrollment

City College continued to experience overall enrollment declines in the fourth year of the program, likely due to COVID-19 impacts (see Figure 1). While this enrollment drop mirrors national trends, it continues to underscore an important opportunity to strategize how to amplify Free City to San Franciscans who have not yet enrolled while also articulating the value proposition of entering City College programs that can lead to family-sustaining employment. Similarly, it also signals an opportunity to ensure current students are aware of the tuition benefit and know how to “package” it with other available financial supports to support their retention.

In 2020-2021, 19,587 San Franciscans benefited from a tuition-free college education through Free City – 70% of City College’s overall student population who took courses for credit. This proportion generally aligns to the prior two academic years. Roughly 75% of City College’s credit students are San Francisco residents, revealing a 5% gap in participation among those who are eligible.

Annual Headcount

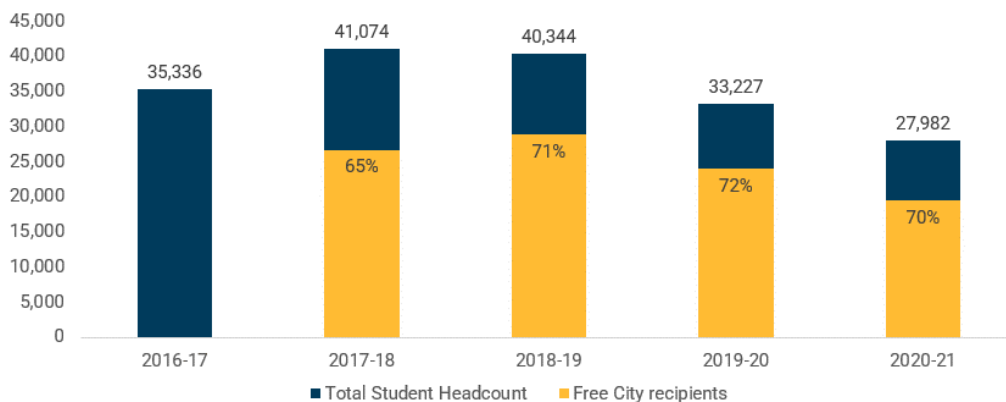


Figure 1. Proportion of Credit Students (Unduplicated) Participating in Free City Annually, 2016-2017 through 2020-2021

At the same time, looking at students’ use of Free City by term shows significantly lower participation rates compared to the proportion eligible (see Figure 2). For example, just over 58% of credit students received Free City support in fall 2020 – a gap of nearly 17% percentage points between those who *could* receive program benefits and those who *did*. This more nuanced examination of participation rates underscores the opportunity to ensure that every eligible student is aware of and takes advantage of the program each term (see further information on how students apply for benefits in the next section).

Term Headcount

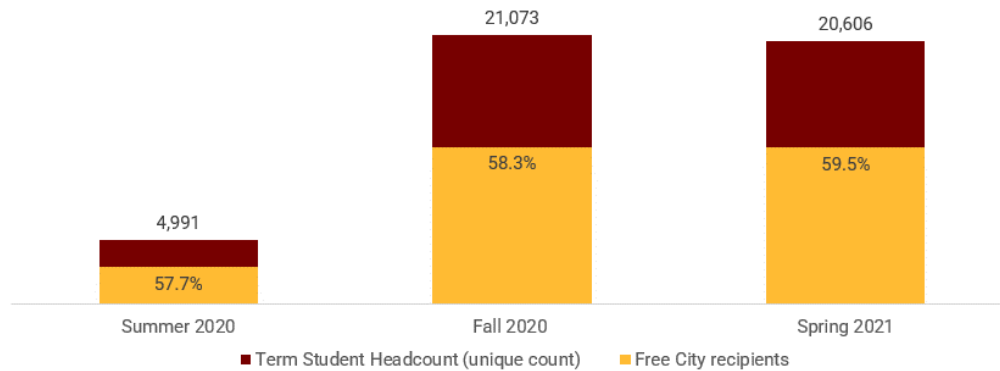


Figure 2. Proportion of Credit Students (Unduplicated) Participating in Free City by Term, 2020-2021

TYPE OF FREE CITY SUPPORT RECEIVED

Students are eligible for Free City benefits based on confirmation of a San Francisco address and qualification for in-state tuition (given California residency or non-resident exemption).³ Students must apply for Free City when registering each semester, completing a brief application in the online student portal. City College awards program benefits as follows:

- Students receive a tuition waiver in the amount of \$46/unit (paid for by the City's allocation to the Free City program); they do not receive any cash assistance. These students represented 50% of the credit student population in 2020-2021.
- In addition to receiving a tuition waiver, students who complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and meet eligibility requirements for demonstrated financial need can also secure a \$46 cash grant for *each* unit they take. Eligible students must complete a separate application to access a Free City cash grant each semester. These students represented just 9% of the credit population in 2020-2021.
- Depending on when a student completes the FAFSA and is deemed eligible for aid⁴, they can receive a Free City tuition waiver only during some terms and a tuition waiver plus a

³ Find more information at <https://www.ccsf.edu/paying-college/free-city>.

⁴ While the academic year follows a summer, fall, spring calendar, the financial aid year follows a fall, spring, summer schedule. For example, summer 2020 enrollments would be counted as part of the 2020-2021 academic year; however, students receiving financial aid during that same term would be counted in the 2019-2020 data.

cash grant during other terms in the same academic year. These students represented 11% of the credit population in 2020-2021.

As Figure 3 shows, when breaking out the overall student headcount for 2020-2021 by the proportion receiving these different types of Free City benefits...

- **City College students were most likely to receive a Free City enrollment fee waiver.**
- **The next largest proportion of credit students received no Free City benefits – either because they did not complete an application or were not eligible given residency outside of San Francisco.**
- **City College students were least likely to receive a Free City cash grant at some point in the academic year.**

These findings compare similarly to prior program years.

Type of Free City support

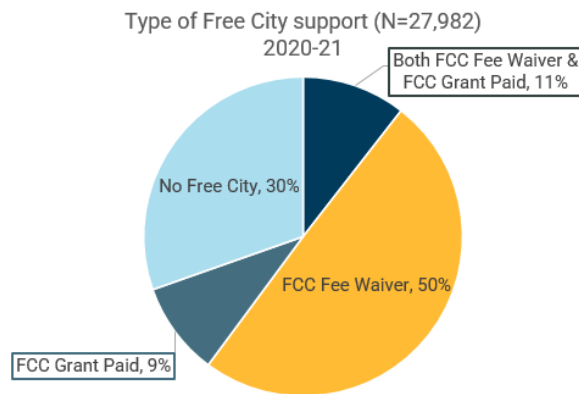


Figure 3. Proportion of Credit Students (Unduplicated) Receiving Free City Tuition Waiver, Free City Grant, Both Free City Waiver and Grant, or No Free City Benefits, 2020-2021

Student Characteristics

City College experienced no major shifts in student demographics compared to recent years. When disaggregating Free City students' age, race/ethnicity, and zip code, we find the following for the reporting period.

AGE

When we look at the proportion of City College students in each age group who participated in Free City in 2020-2021...

- **Students in the middle of the age distribution (25 – 60 years) were less likely to receive Free City support, despite making up the largest proportion of credit students overall.**
- **Students on either end (24 years and younger or 60 years and older) were more likely to receive Free City benefits.**
- **While making up the smallest percentage of the credit student population, those 70+ were most likely to be Free City recipients compared to all other all groups (78%)**

At the same time, the variation between groups flattened out to some extent compared to prior years, with an increased proportion of younger students receiving Free City benefits and slightly decreased percentage of older students participating. These findings indicate an area to continue monitoring and comparing to the college’s overall age distribution in the future (see Figure 4).

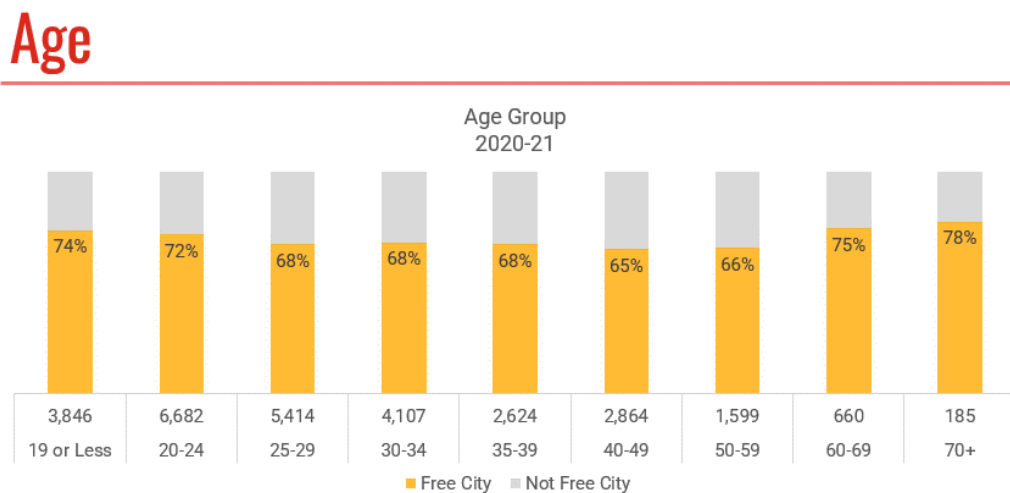


Figure 4. Proportion of Students Participating in Free City by Age Group

GENDER

When looking at the gender identity of Free City participants...

- **Those who identify as female were most likely to participate in the program; this trend aligns with participation in other support programs.**
- **Students who identified as male or non-binary and students whose gender was unknown participated at practically the same rates.** This finding aligns with the college’s priority focus on increasing male participation in support programs.

As Figure 5 shows, the lower percentage of students who identify with a gender other than female who are also Free City participants may signal an opportunity to increase awareness of and use of the program among men and non-binary students.

Gender

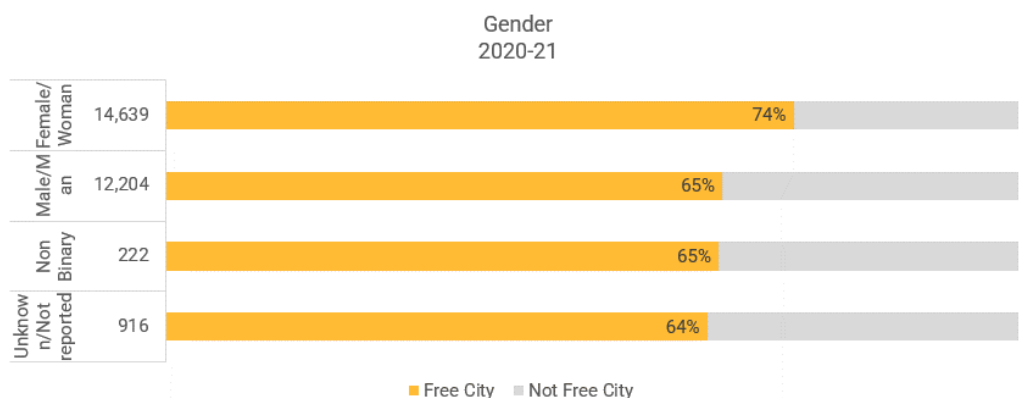


Figure 5. Proportion of Each Gender Participating in Free City

RACE/ETHNICITY

When looking at the proportion of each racial/ethnic group who participated in Free City...

- **Asian students were by far most likely to receive Free City benefits, followed by White and Latino/a/x students;** generally speaking, Asian, Latino/a/x, and White students make up the largest proportion of the overall credit student population.
- **Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders were least likely to receive Free City support, followed closely by Black/African American and Filipino students – notably, these students represent equity populations.**

These findings align with those articulated in the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges' (The RP Group) *City College of San Francisco Free City Equity Impact Report 2022*, where Black/African American students and Pacific Islander students were underrepresented among Free City participants.

Of note, Asian and American Indian or Alaskan Natives each showed a 4% increase in the percentage participating in Free City (80% and 65% respectively) over the prior reporting period, again pointing to an area for future monitoring (see Figure 6).

Race/ethnicity

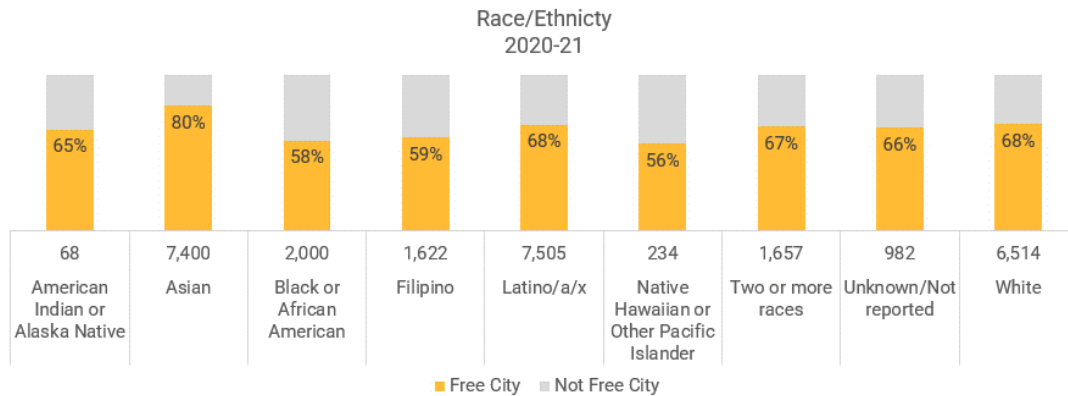


Figure 6. Proportion of Students Participating in Free City by Race/Ethnicity

Further, Free City recipients are still less likely to be members of City College’s equity groups (see Figure 7). A greater proportion of students who do *not* identify with one of the college’s equity groups have consistently received Free City benefits since the program’s inception compared to those in an equity group. Again, as highlighted in prior reports, Free City has not appreciably contributed to moving the needle on student equity when it comes to CCSF access.

Equity/not equity students

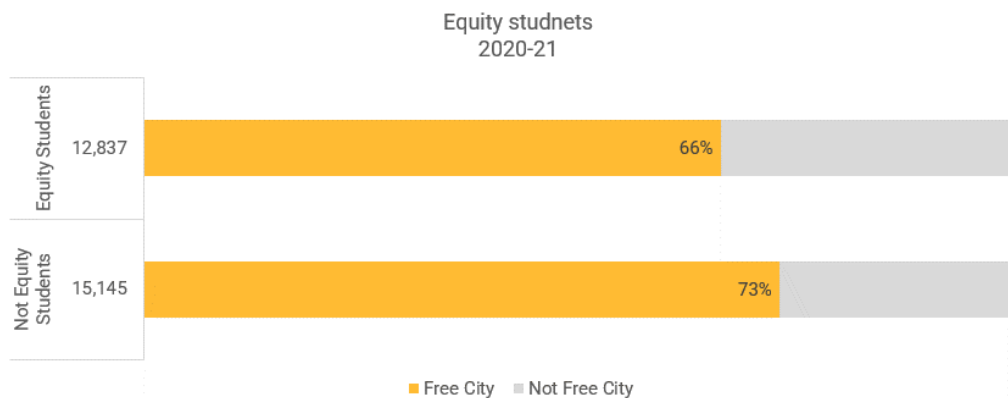


Figure 7. Proportion of Equity Group Students Participating in Free City Compared to Non-Equity Group Students

ZIP CODE

As in past years, the greatest share of students come from the 94112 zip code, where Ocean campus is located, followed by strong representation from the Inner Mission/Bernal Heights, Sunset, Visitacion Valley/Sunnyside, and Bayview/Hunters Point neighborhoods (see Figure 8).

Given that the neighborhoods from which the college draws its students have remained stable over time, it appears that **Free City has not notably impacted enrollment from any one area of San Francisco.**

Top Zip Codes of Free City Students

San Francisco zip/Neighborhood	% of Free City Students in the zip code
94112 - Ingleside/Excelsior/Crocker-Amazon	14%
94110 - Inner Mission/Bernal Heights	8%
94122 - Sunset	7%
94134 - Visitacion Valley/Sunnydale	7%
94124 - Bayview/Hunters Point	6%
94116 - Parkside/Forest Hill	6%
94121 - Outer Richmond	5%
94132 - Lake Merced/Stonestown	4%
94109 - Polk Gulch/Russian Hill/Nob Hill	4%
94103 - South of Market	3%
94118 - Inner Richmond	3%
94117 - Haight-Ashbury/Cole Valley	3%
94102 - Hayes Valley/Tenderloin/North of Market	3%
94114 - Castro/Noe Valley	3%

Note: Remaining zip codes have less than 3% each

Figure 8. Proportion of Free City Participants by San Francisco Zip Code, 2020-2021

Student Financial Aid

In 2020-2021, Free City participants submitted a FAFSA and received federal Pell and California College Promise grants at similar rates compared to the overall credit population (see Figure 9). That said, completion of the FAFSA among all City College's credit students relatively low at roughly 30%.⁵ While both students and the institution benefit when more students complete the FAFSA, the data suggests that City College has not yet found a way to leverage the Free City program to encourage increased rates of submission.

⁵ Numbers updated from prior reports to more accurately reflect the financial aid year (based on a fall, spring, summer term schedule), which differs slightly from the academic year (based on a summer, fall, spring term schedule).

Financial Aid Data

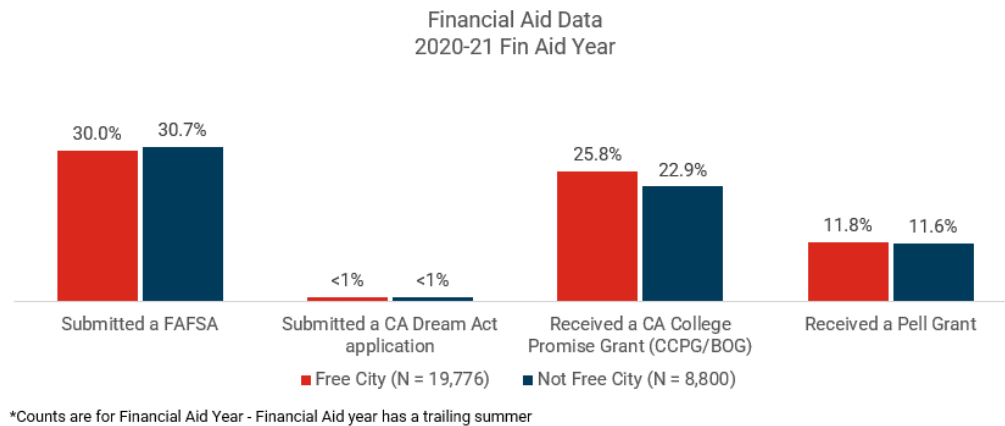


Figure 9. Proportion of Free City Participants Submitting a FAFSA and Receiving Financial Aid Compared to Non-Free City Students, 2020-2021 (Financial Aid Year: Fall 2020, Spring 2021, Summer 2021)

Persistently low rates of FAFSA submission and federal and state grant awards have reverberating impacts for students and City College alike. Students are unable to access and maximize multiple financial benefits when they forego the FAFSA, including through Free City. Given students’ expressed concerns about financial barriers to enrollment and persistence, it is imperative to determine how to help students secure all available aid – both through Free City and otherwise.

Moreover, the college misses out on optimizing key state and federal funding streams for students supports, which are determined based on students whose FAFSA demonstrates financial need. The college also leaves supplemental allocation dollars on the table, awarded under the CCC’s Student Centered Funding Formula, and based on the number of students receiving federal Pell and state College Promise grants. Given the institution’s ongoing budget challenges and fiscal constraints, it only seems logical for the City College to determine how to strengthen students’ FAFSA submission to address these financial barriers and leverage these fiscal opportunities.

Student Academic Outcomes

UNITS ATTEMPTED AND EARNED

Each year, City College students typically enroll in less than 12 units – a trend that has held relatively consistent from the time both before and after Free City’s launch. When looking at the unit load Free City students attempted in 2020-2021...

- **Most program participants took less than 30 units over the course of the academic year (see Figure 10).**
- **Free City students attempted more units than those who did not participate in the program (see Figure 11).**

As in past years, the availability of Free City did not appear to significantly change the proportion of students enrolling full time in 2020-2021. Determining how to market Free City alongside the value proposition for full-time attendance, as well as helping students maximize all available aid in tandem with the program, may encourage more program participants to increase the number of units they take each term.

Unit Load

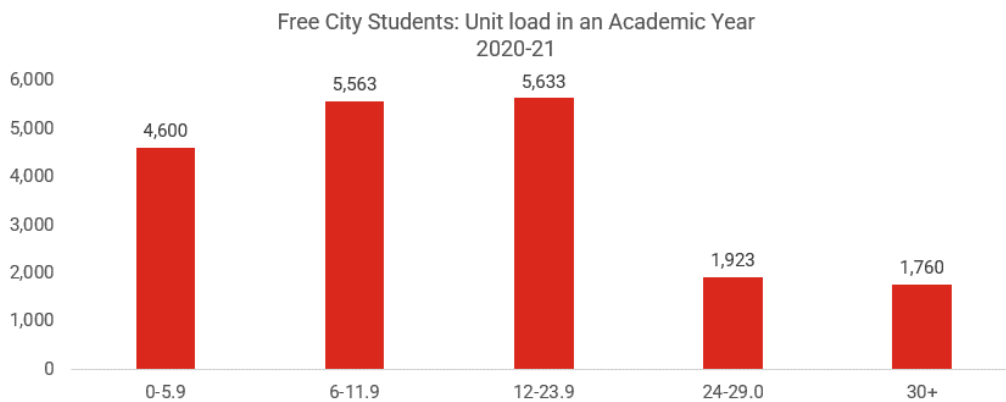


Figure 10. Annual Attempted Unit Load of Free City Participants

When looking at the proportion of units earned, Free City students and students who did not participate in the program completed and passed their courses at similar rates. This finding is significant given early concerns that students would take advantage of the free tuition to enroll in courses but not have enough “skin in the game” take their studies seriously.

Average Units Earned

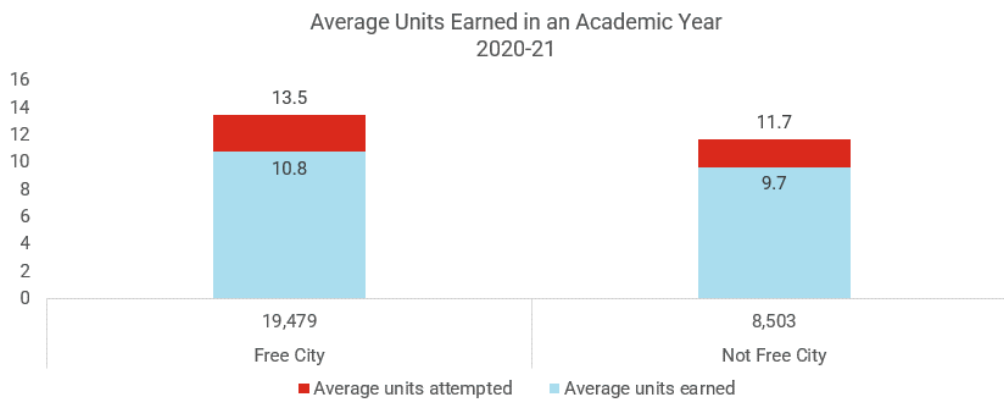


Figure 11. Average Units Earned in the Academic Year by Free City Participants Compared to Non-Free City Students

COMPLETION OF COLLEGE CREDENTIALS

In 2020-2021, City College awarded far fewer awards than in the period leading up to the pandemic. At the same time, we see positive results when looking at these awards with a Free City lens (see Figure 12).

- **Free City participants earned 75% certificates and degrees granted ($n = 3,287$);** these completions align with program participation.
- **This figure represents the highest proportion since Free City's inception and a significantly higher percentage than recent years (i.e., 53% in 2019-2022).**

Again, these findings counter original concerns about Free City deterring students from staying and completing their goals.

Awards

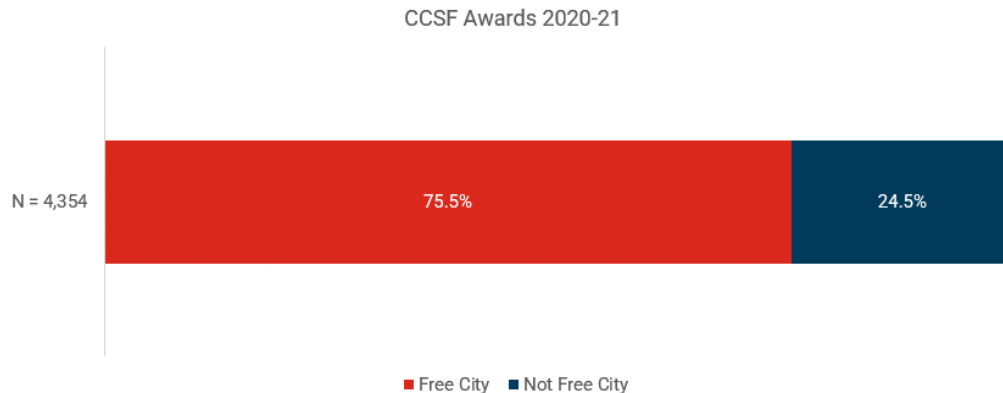


Figure 12. Proportion of Awards Earned by Free City Participants

When looking at the intersection of Free City, student equity, and completion...

- **Non-equity group students received roughly 55% of the total awards granted by City College.**
- **Students who identified with equity groups earned about 45% of the total awards.**
- **The proportion of award recipients in each group who participated in Free City was slightly less for equity group versus non-equity group students (~72% vs 78% respectively) (see Figure 13).**

As was found in the RP Group's 2022 research, Free City has not yet contributed to closing equity gaps when it comes to completions. Doing so will require the college to intentionally position the program in a way that is designed to encourage completion for students in equity groups.

Awards by Equity Group



Figure 13. Proportion of Awards Earned by Equity Group Students Participating in Free City Compared to Non-Equity Group Students

Next Steps

A look at Free City participation in 2020-2021 indicates that four years into the program, most City College students positively benefitted from this effort. Now, the college is eager to work with the Oversight Committee to deepen the program's impact on enrollment and leverage it to help increase equitable outcomes for Free City participants. Acting on the recommendations that have consistently surfaced in the last few years of more focused examination of the program have the potential to achieve this result (see *Free City Annual Report 2019-2020* and *City College of San Francisco Free City Equity Impact Report 2022*).

These areas of opportunity include:

- **Positioning the program as part of a broader effort to increase access, retention, completion, and advancement outcomes for student equity groups** – centering equity in Free City's design and implementation in a highly intentional way
- **Articulating specific program metrics to monitor success** and engage in continuous improvement of Free City design and implementation
- **Marketing Free City as part of a clear value proposition for City College attendance to rejuvenate enrollment**, with a focus on communities experiencing income inequality
- **Increasing Free City uptake** – particularly among students experiencing opportunity gaps at the college – and removing barriers to application
- **Strengthening FAFSA completion** to ensure more students with financial need benefit from Free City tuition waivers *and* cash grants, as well as access all available assistance
- **Packaging Free City along with other financial and basic needs supports and programming** so students can stay in school and complete credentials – again with a focus on disproportionately impacted student groups

In addition, City College suggests...

- **Determining ways to use the Free City investment to address students' financial need beyond tuition**, such as using excess funds to eliminate balances for key student groups
- **Establishing a regular schedule for reporting**, sharing annual updates on the program in spring of the following year (e.g., submit 2021-2022 report in spring 2023)
- **Identifying further areas of inquiry** into the Free City student experience that can inform future data collection, program improvement, and evaluation
- **Continuing the relationship with The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges** to support identification of equity goals and metrics in the context of the Free City program

Clearly, these recommendations have implications for how Free City is administered and operated, and consideration of changes to the student experience, program staffing, and

business processes may be in order. Specifically, dedicated personnel is a hallmark of other college promise initiatives across the country, and the MOU between the college and the City does allow for program staffing. Investing in Free City in this way may allow for more focused improvements and activation of the above opportunities.

City College looks forward to working with the Oversight Committee accordingly to determine how to move forward with the next phase of Free City development. We are grateful for the City's continued investment and collaboration in strengthen outcomes for students, the college, and the entire community.