

Free City College Annual Report

2021-2022



Table of Contents

Introduction..... 3

Free City Program Impact 2021-2022 4

 Key Highlights 4

 Student Enrollment..... 5

 Student Characteristics..... 8

 Student Financial Aid 12

 Student Academic Outcomes 14

Next Steps..... 16

Introduction

2021-2022 marked the fifth year of Free City program implementation. A joint effort of the City and County of San Francisco (the City) and City College of San Francisco (City College), this initiative offers residents a tuition-free college education, regardless of income, age, or academic standing (see sidebar).

In the years since the program's launch, nearly 114,000¹ students have benefited from Free City. And in 2021-2022, two thirds of City College's credit students received free tuition.

No doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused tremendous disruption to higher education, which has direct implications for Free City. More students – both current and prospective – are confronting financial hardship and struggling to make postsecondary education a reality. Some are questioning the value proposition of college altogether. State and national evidence indicates that historically marginalized groups are most impacted. Like other institutions across the country, City College has experienced an unprecedented enrollment decline and is grappling with the best way to deliver educational programming and support services given the current environment.

As a result, the intentions of Free City remain relevant now more than ever: (a) facilitating economic mobility for low-income families and communities of color through pursuit of postsecondary credentials, and (b) supporting institutional efforts to increase completion among students experiencing opportunity gaps at the college.² The 2021-2022 data has important implications as the Free City Oversight Committee considers ways to further center equity in the program's design and delivery to achieve these goals.

FREE CITY PROGRAM 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.

Reader's Guide

It is in this context that City College shares the Free City Oversight Committee this latest annual update on the program. This report provides a snapshot of overall student enrollment and use of Free City; student characteristics, including their financial aid status; and student course-taking during 2021-2022. It concludes with potential next steps for program planning and operations in the near term. This report seeks to support the Oversight Committee's current efforts to further position the program to revitalize enrollments and increase more equitable college access and outcomes among key community groups.

¹ May include some duplicated students; count total from each year.

² Student groups that are unjustifiably experiencing lower outcomes compared to the total student population.

Free City Program Impact 2021-2022

Key Highlights

In 2021-2022...

- **Students' use of the Free City program dropped, along with a continued decline in CCSF's enrollment.** Two thirds of the credit student population leveraged Free City benefits in 2021-2022, despite a growing base of evidence that financial concerns are a major barrier to students' enrollment and retention. Roughly three-quarters are eligible.
- **No change occurred in the proportion of students accessing Free City cash grants.** Most students participating in the program continued to receive a tuition waiver only.
- **Fewer students from younger age groups utilized the program** while a greater proportion of older students took advantage of Free City benefits compared to the prior year.
- **Along with the overall drop in Free City use, the proportion of key equity populations participating in Free City also declined;** fewer Black/African American, Latina/o/x, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaskan Native students participated in Free City compared to the prior year.
- **While the proportion of students submitting a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) remained relatively unchanged, the percentage of students receiving a Federal Pell Grant more than doubled.** While not surprising given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' financial stability, this finding points to a disconcerting rise in the percentage of students experiencing extreme economic hardship.

Still further, it points to additional questions about the process for accessing Free City cash grants. A higher proportion of students are receiving California College Promise Grant (CCPG) fee waivers as well as Federal Pell Grants than are receiving Free City cash grants, which indicates more students may be eligible for cash grants through the program than are tapping these resources.

- **Course-taking data indicates that students' participation in Free City relates to some positive college-going behaviors.** As in past years, students receiving Free City benefits enroll mostly part time but take more units than their peers who do not participate in the program. Further, they pass their courses at similar rates.

Student Enrollment

City College has experienced a decline in enrollment over the past five years, with more pronounced year-over-year decreases since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 1). **In 2021-2022, 25,846 students enrolled in credit courses at CCSF**, the lowest number since the launch of Free City. While this pandemic-era trend aligned with other community colleges across the country during the reporting period, it calls into question what San Francisco residents know and understand about the unique opportunity to attend the college tuition-free.

Nearly 17,320 students participated in Free City at some point in 2021-2022 – 67% of City College’s overall credit student population for the academic year. This proportion was lower than in recent academic years and was the lowest since the first year of the program in 2017-2018. Roughly 75% of City College’s credit students are San Francisco residents, which means that over the course of the year, 8% fewer students participated than were eligible.

Annual Headcount

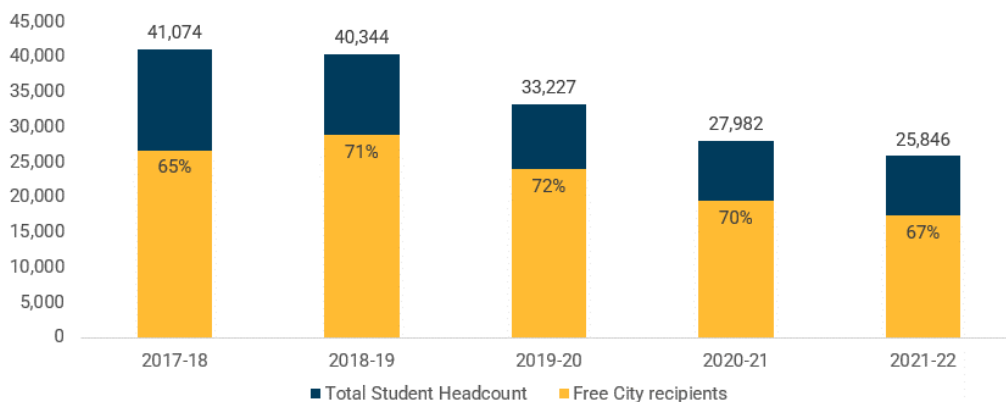


Figure 1. Proportion of Credit Students (Unduplicated) Participating in Free City Annually, 2017-2018 through 2021-2022

Looking at students’ use of Free City by term shows even lower participation rates compared to the proportion eligible (see Figure 2). Roughly 57% of credit students received Free City support in fall 2021 – a gap of nearly 18% percentage points between those who *could* receive program benefits and those who *did*.

Positively, the proportion of credit students applying for the program rebounded somewhat in spring 2022 to 63%. At the same time, these **term-by-term participation rates continue to highlight the opportunity to ensure that every eligible student is aware of and takes advantage of the program each term.**

Term Headcount

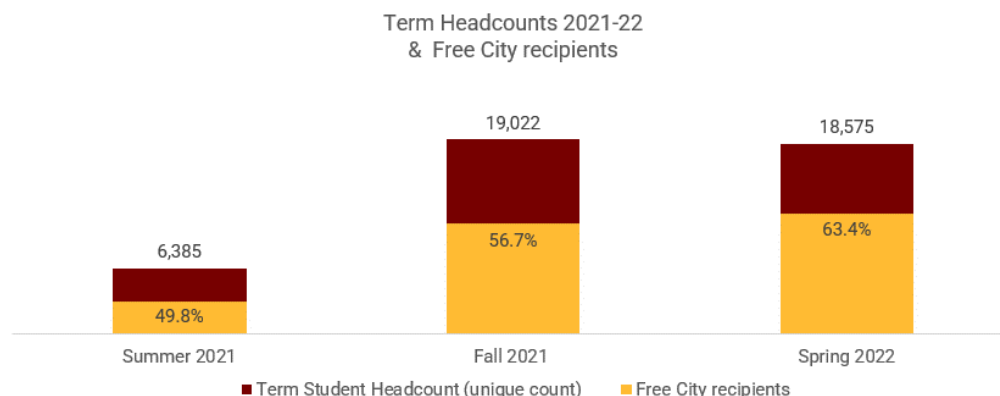


Figure 2. Proportion of Credit Students (Unduplicated) Participating in Free City by Term, 2021-2022

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. The largest proportion of the credit student population fell into this category in 2021-2022.
- In addition to receiving a tuition waiver, students who have demonstrated financial need based on their application for the California College Promise Grant (CCPG) 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, and are strongly encouraged to complete the FAFSA in order to access all resources for which they are available.

Because the academic year and financial aid year do have a direct overlap⁴, it is possible for students to receive (a) a tuition waiver only during one term, AND (b) a tuition waiver plus a cash grant during another term.

As Figure 3 shows, when breaking out the overall credit student headcount for 2021-2022 by the proportion receiving these different types of Free City benefits...

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

⁴ Financial aid year is based on a fall, spring, summer term schedule, which differs slightly from the academic year (based on a summer, fall, spring term schedule).

- **About one half of City College’s credit students received a Free City tuition waiver.**
- **One third received no Free City benefits** – either because they did not complete an application or were not eligible given residency outside of San Francisco.
- **Less than one fifth received a Free City cash grant** at some point in the academic year.

These findings are similar to prior program years.

Type of Free City Support

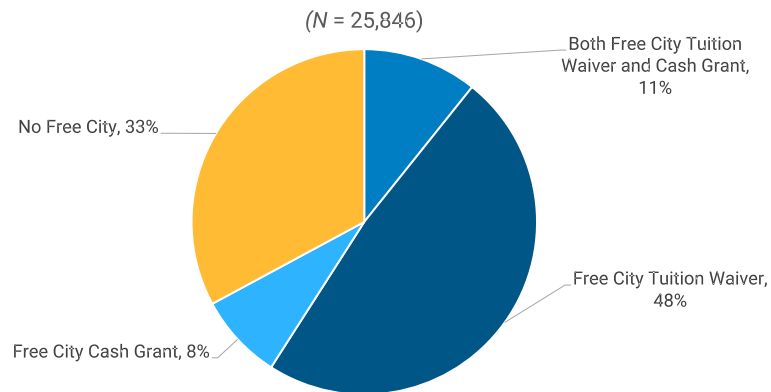


Figure 3. Proportion of Credit Students (Unduplicated) Receiving Free City Tuition Waiver, Free City Grant, Both Free City Waiver and Grant, or No Free City Benefits, 2021-2022

Student Characteristics

City College student demographics remained relatively stable in 2021-2022. At the same time, we did observe some shifts in participant age and race/ethnicity when disaggregating by student characteristics compared to the prior year.

AGE

When disaggregating 2021-2022 program participation by age (see Figure 4)...

- **City College's oldest student groups (60–69 and 70+) were most likely to apply** for free tuition by far (77% and 82% respectively).
- **Students in the middle of the age distribution (25–59 years) were least likely to receive Free City support**, despite making up the largest proportion of credit students overall.
- **The proportion of older student groups tapping Free City benefits increased while the percentage of younger students accessing the program decreased** compared to the prior year. For example, participation among students aged 70+ grew by 4 percentage points but dropped by 4 percentage points among those ≤ 19 years.

While students at either end of the age distribution are persistently more likely to participate in Free City than those in the middle, the variation between groups flattened out a bit in 2020-2021. That said, differences returned in 2021-2022, particularly given increases in the proportion of older student groups taking advantage of the program.

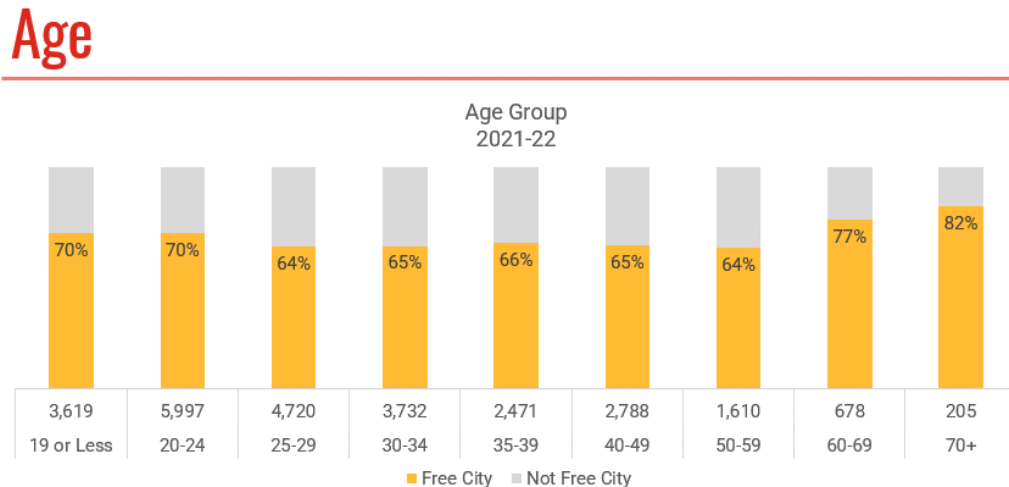


Figure 4. Proportion of Students Participating in Free City by Age Group

GENDER

When disaggregating 2021-2022 program participation by gender (see Figure 5)...

- **Students who identified as female continued to participate at the highest rate while those who identified as male were least likely to receive free tuition.** This finding generally aligns with participation by these gender groups in other City College support programs.
- **Free City use among both women and men dropped somewhat over the prior year** (likely a reflection of the overall drop in participation); 71% of women participated in 2021-2022 vs 74% in 2020-2021, and 62% of men participated compared to 65% the prior year.
- **Participation among non-binary students remained relatively unchanged.**

At the same time, the persistently lower percentage of students who identified with a gender other than female and who participated in Free City points to a continued opportunity to raise program awareness and use among these gender groups.

Gender

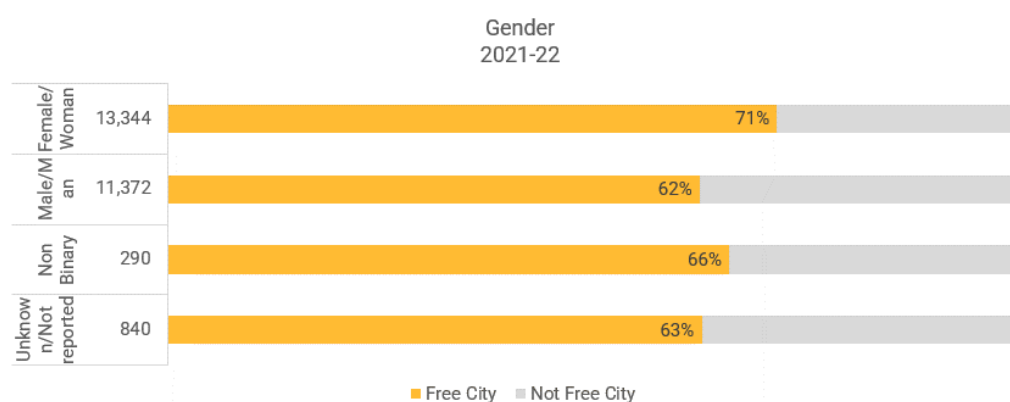


Figure 5. Proportion of Each Gender Participating in Free City

RACE/ETHNICITY

When disaggregating 2021-2022 program participation by race/ethnicity (see Figure 6)...

- **Free City use declined among all racial/ethnic groups except among Asian students,** whose participation held steady compared to the prior year.
- **Asian students were still mostly likely to use Free City by a considerable margin (15-16 percentage points),** compared to groups with the next highest participation rate: White and Latina/o/x students and students who identify with two or more races.

- Students who identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Black or African American, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander – all equity populations identified by City College – not only experienced some of the lowest rates of participation but also the most significant drops in Free City use compared to 2020-2021 (5-6 percentage points).

Race/ethnicity

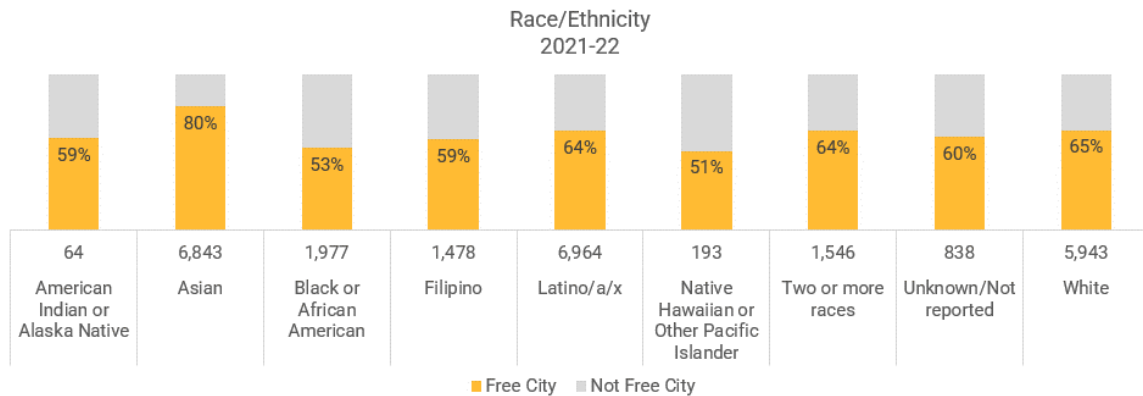


Figure 6. Proportion of Students Participating in Free City by Race/Ethnicity

While participation declined for both equity and non-equity groups, **equity students continued to participate in Free City at lower rates than non-equity students (see Figure 7)**. This trend has persisted since the launch of the program and is troubling given the explicit interest in leveraging Free City to increase equitable access and retention. At the same time, it is not surprising given that there has not yet been an intentional strategy developed for explicitly centering equity in the program. These findings reinforce the important equity planning work City College and the Oversight Committee intend to undertake in 2023.

Equity/not equity students

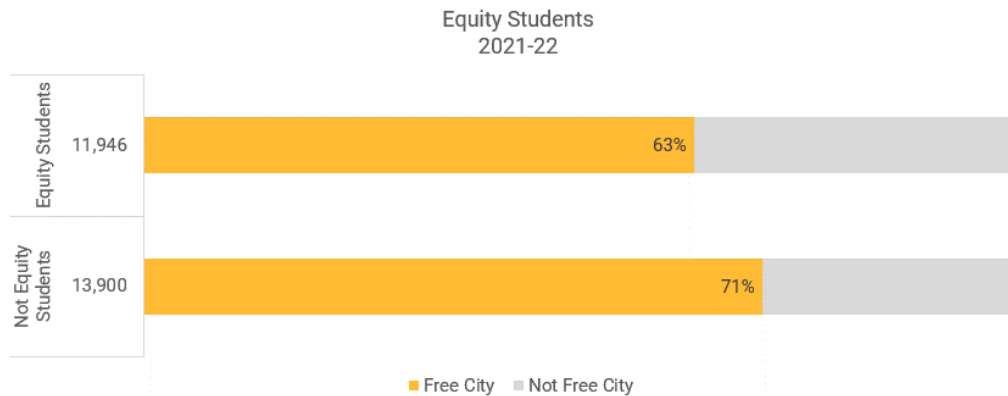


Figure 7. Proportion of Equity Group Students Participating in Free City Compared to Non-Equity Group Students

ZIP CODE

As Figure 8 shows, the greatest share of Free City participants lived in the 94112 zip code where Ocean campus is located, followed by strong representation from the Inner Mission/Bernal Heights, Bayview/Hunters Point, Sunset, and Visitacion Valley/Sunnydale neighborhoods. These data remained relatively unchanged from prior years since the launch of Free City. This trend indicates that **Free City has not specifically impacted the enrollment of students from any one part 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	15%
94110 - Inner Mission/Bernal Heights	8%
94124 - Bayview/Hunters Point	7%
94122 - Sunset	7%
94134 - Visitacion Valley/Sunnydale	7%
94116 - Parkside/Forest Hill	6%
94121 - Outer Richmond	5%
94132 - Lake Merced/Stonestown	4%
94103 - South of Market	4%
94109 - Polk Gulch/Russian Hill/Nob Hill	4%
94118 - Inner Richmond	3%
94102 - Hayes Valley/Tenderloin/North of Market	3%
94117 - Haight-Ashbury/Cole Valley	3%
94115 - Western Addition/Japantown/Pacific Heights	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, 2021-2022

Student Financial Aid

Completion of the FAFSA for both Free City participants and non-Free City students remained relatively low at around 30% for the year.⁵ At the same time, **the percentage of students receiving a Federal Pell Grant more than doubled in 2021-2022 compared to the prior reporting period, regardless of their Free City status.** Around 25% of credit students who completed a FAFSA received this type of aid during the reporting period versus less than 12% in 2020-2021 (see Figure 9).

Financial Aid Data

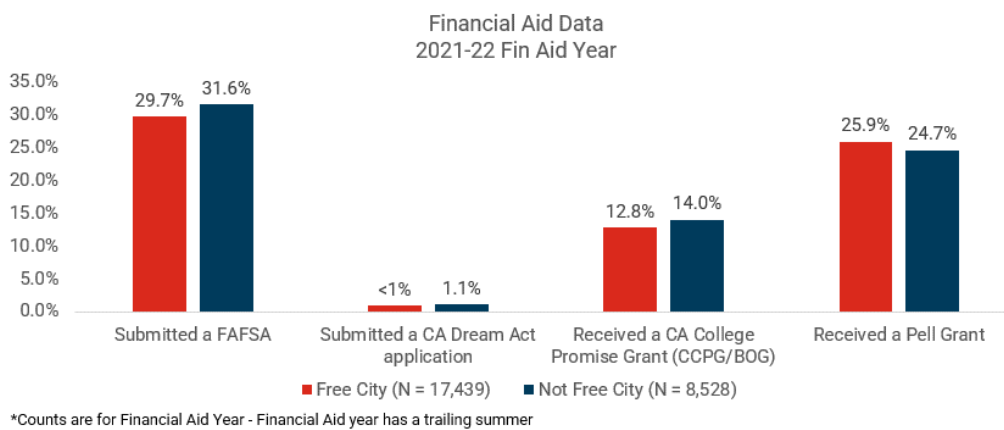


Figure 9. Proportion of Free City Participants Submitting a FAFSA and Receiving Financial Aid Compared to Non-Free City Students, 2021-2022 (Financial Aid Year: Fall 2021, Spring 2022, Summer 2022)

City College’s low enrollment combined with a robust body of evidence on financial barriers as a primary deterrent to students’ postsecondary education creates a new level of urgency to think differently about encouraging students’ FAFSA completion.

It is not surprising that more students qualified for a Pell Grant given the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on students’ financial stability during the reporting period. At the same time, this finding seems particularly concerning given that this source of aid is specifically for undergraduate students with “exceptional” financial need.⁶ Further, it calls into question the financial concerns that roughly 70% of the student body might have but that remain unaddressed due to their lack of FAFSA submission.

Still further, these findings also point to potential challenges with the process for accessing Free City cash grants. Given that the proportion of credit students receiving Federal Pell Grants

⁵ As a reminder, financial aid year is based on a fall, spring, summer term schedule (rather than the summer, fall, spring term schedule of the academic year).

⁶ Find more information on the Federal Pell Grant program at <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/grants/pell>.

increased, those eligible for Free City cash grants also presumably increased. Yet, the percentage of students receiving this Free City benefit did not change over the prior year. **These findings provide further evidence that students with significant financial hardship are missing out on critical resources to support their education – Free City and otherwise.**

A growing evidence base reinforces that FAFSA completion supports college going, and models exist for linking FAFSA submission to college promise programs. For example, Tennessee has generated some of the highest FAFSA submission rates among high school seniors in part by offering free community college tuition.⁷ Beginning in 2022-2023, California will begin requiring FAFSA completion for any student to graduate from high school.⁸ At the same time, City College serves a significant population of students who are returning adults and whose needs differ from that of a recent high school graduate. Given the large proportion of “nontraditional” students attending the college, finding ways to increase their FAFSA completion and access to all forms of financial assistance – traditional aid, private resources, and public benefits – also seems paramount.⁹

And, as discussed recent annual reports, a persistently low rate of FAFSA submission impacts students and City College alike. Like its students, City College also fails to tap important financial opportunities that are determined by the proportion of students enrolled at the institution whose FAFSA demonstrates financial need. Supplemental allocation dollars – awarded under the California Community Colleges’ Student Centered Funding Formula and based on the number of students receiving Federal Pell and state California College Promise Grants – go underutilized too. Given ongoing budgetary constraints, it is logical that City College would strengthen students’ FAFSA submission to address these financial barriers and leverage these fiscal opportunities.

⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/civiction/2018/08/01/how-tennessee-is-proving-fafsa-completion-leads-to-a-college-going-culture/?sh=4c4256666598>

⁸ <https://www.csac.ca.gov/post/ab-469-fafsacadaa-completion-requirement-and-opt-out-form>

⁹ <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/bolstering-non-trad-students-formatted-paper-final.pdf>

Student Academic Outcomes

UNITS ATTEMPTED AND EARNED

When looking at students' unit load in 2021-2022 (Figure 10)¹⁰ ...

- **Free City participants generally enrolled part time like most City College students;** the vast majority took less than 24 units over the course of the year.
- **Yet, they attempted more units as part-time students than those who did not participate in the program.** For example, roughly 56% of students who received free tuition took between 6 and 24 units versus 47% of those who did not.
- **On the other hand, slightly fewer program participants attempted a full-time load (12+ units) during at least one term, compared to those who did not take part in Free City (30.7% vs 34.6% respectively).**

As in past years, the availability of free tuition did not appear to significantly change students' decision-making about full-time enrollment in 2021-2022. Creating systems to (a) better understand the array of financial barriers impacting a student's course-taking, and (b) connect them to all financial resources they are eligible for – Free City included – may help students see full-time enrollment as more financially attainable.

Unit Load

- 18.9% of Free City students attempted 24+ units in 2021-22
- 30.7% of Free City students attempted 12+ units in at least one term in 2021-22

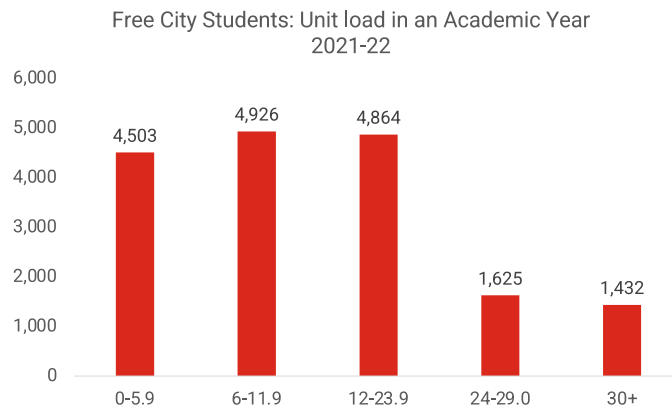


Figure 10. Annual Attempted Unit Load of Free City Participants

¹⁰ Recent annual reports have included award completion metrics; however, due to the timing of the 2021-2022 report, complete data were not available and were therefore omitted for this summary.

When looking at the proportion of units earned, Free City participants passed their courses at similar rates as their non-Free City peers, continuing to reinforce that the college’s free tuition does not dissuade course completion (Figure 11).

Average Units Earned

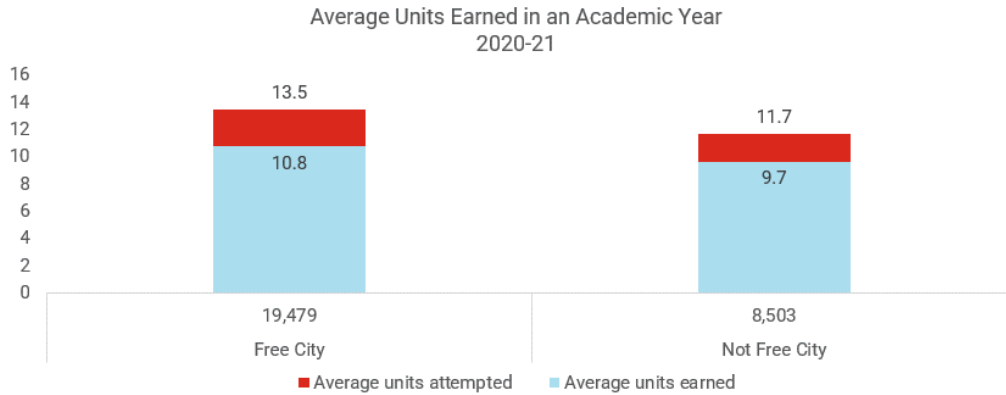


Figure 11. Average Units Earned in the Academic Year by Free City Participants Compared to Non-Free City Students

Next Steps

Trends in Free City participation in 2021-2022 indicate that the program is at an important juncture. The City has made a laudable investment in improving access to postsecondary education for San Franciscans, and a majority of City College's credit students routinely benefit from this effort. Moreover, annual data and initial findings from The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges' (The RP Group) equity impact study conducted in 2022 indicate that Free City participants take more units and enroll in more terms than those who do not take part in the program.

At the same time, simply stated, Free City is not yet contributing meaningfully to stabilizing enrollment, and it is not yet designed and implemented as an equity program. No doubt, tuition is only one aspect of the calculus students must make when deciding to enroll for the first time, continue their studies, or return after a break from higher ed. And while the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on equitable college enrollment, persistence, and completion cannot be ignored, other evidence points to multiple opportunities to leverage the Free City program to improve these metrics and outcomes.

Data indicate that students are not taking full advantage of the program, whether it be accessing these benefits each term or regularly tapping both the tuition waivers and cash grants for which might be eligible. Still further, priority student groups called out in the college's Student Equity and Achievement Plan (SEAP) are not receiving Free City benefits at the same rates as their peers who do not identify as part of an equity population. All the while, recent data suggests that students are experiencing more – not less – economic hardship.

The Oversight Committee is already responding in significant ways to the success and learning generated by the program's first five years. It has pledged to further align the program with the SEAP, and the effort to set equity-related goals with the support of The RP Group in 2023 is an important next step. This 2021-2022 data continue to point to other opportunities for centering students' experiences in program design and delivery and better operationalizing the commitment to equitable access and retention in all aspects of Free City. By doing so, any student who wishes to enroll will have the confidence that college is indeed financially attainable.

Possibilities include the following.

Institutional Approach to Student Financial Stability: to begin making the case for a more comprehensive collegewide approach to addressing students' financial insecurity as an equitable access, retention, and completion strategy, consider...

- Using the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement's [Student Financial Stability Scale of Adoption](#) to assess the institution's progress with addressing students' financial stability at scale and establishing priorities for advancing these efforts

- Conducting focus groups to understand financial barriers impacting students' retention and their awareness of resources and supports to cover college costs and meet their basic needs at the institution, including how Free City works
- Facilitating conversations/focus groups with college personnel to explore their perception of students' financial stability issues and how they impact their retention and completion, their awareness of resources and supports to help students cover college costs and meet their basic needs at the institution, and their specific understanding of the Free City program and how it works

Community Awareness of Free City: to encourage college enrollment, consider...

- Establishing a marketing campaign to raise broad public awareness of both free tuition AND the possibility of cash grants for those who are income eligible
- Developing intentional partnerships in key communities and with community- and faith-based organizations that represent equity groups to share information about the program

Student Participation in Free City: to increase student participation in Free City, consider...

- Interrogating the Free City tuition waiver application process, understanding the mechanics of how students enroll in the program, and identifying and removing barriers that prevent students from applying
- Specifically exploring the Free City cash grant application process and obstacles to and opportunities for increasing eligible students' access to these benefits

FAFSA Completion: to ensure students and the college are both leveraging all available financial resources to make college financially attainable, consider...

- Making the case with college personnel about the positive impact of FAFSA completion and the merits of encouraging students' submission
- Mapping existing effective practices for supporting students' FAFSA submission at the college
- Developing information campaigns to help students understand resources available to support their FAFSA submission, with a focus on nontraditional students, priority equity populations, and students who have participated in the past but are no longer accessing these benefits

Program Staffing: to ensure that the next five years of Free City build on the learning of the first, consider...

- Establishing dedicated personnel who can help advance goals and objectives set by the Oversight Committee and support coherence (for students and the college) between Free City and other financial stability efforts on campus

City College appreciates the ongoing collaboration with the Oversight Committee and looks forward to collectively advancing the Free City program and deepening its impact. We are grateful for the City's continued investment and partnership in strengthening equitable access and retention outcomes for students, supporting the college's sustainability, and fostering the wellbeing of the entire community.