

Free City College Annual Report

2022-2023



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Introduction

The Free City program turned six in 2022-2023. 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).

There is much to celebrate when it comes to this initiative. **In 2022-2023, nearly 17,000 San Franciscans took credit courses for free.** Overall program participation stabilized after declines experienced during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic. And, term-by-term participation strengthened, indicating students better understand the need to apply for these supports each semester they enroll.

This year's report also highlights continued opportunities to improve the program in service of its broad aspirations: (a) facilitating economic mobility for low-income families and communities of color through pursuit of postsecondary credentials, and (b) supporting institutional efforts to increase access and completion among students experiencing opportunity gaps at the college.¹ For example, students' use of the Free City cash grant option remained static and continues to comprise a small proportion of participants. Use of the program among high-priority student equity groups also continues to lag their peers.

Combined, these trends and other data called out in this year's report highlight the importance of the goals the Free City Oversight Committee and the college jointly articulated in summer 2023. These goals seek to maximize program impact and support City College's overall Student Achievement and Equity Plan efforts; they include:

- Increase use of Free City, particularly among key equity populations
- Reduce students' financial burden
- Expand students' use of other financial supports
- Foster Free City participants' financial literacy

Reader's Guide

This year's annual report can inform current efforts to operationalize these goals and develop related strategies and immediate next steps for realizing City College and the Oversight

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.

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

Committee's collective aspirations. It provides an overall of student enrollment and use of Free City. It also includes additional information on participant characteristics, including their financial aid status; and participant course-taking during 2022-2023. It includes high-level considerations for additional areas of inquiry and possible next steps for monitoring program impact throughout.

Note: this report will be the last of its kind. Future updates on Free City participation and impact will likely evolve and include different metrics related to the program's new equity-centered goals and action plan.

Free City Program Impact 2022-2023

Key Highlights

In 2022-2023...

- **Students' use of the Free City program held steady, along with CCSF's overall enrollment.** Over two thirds of the credit student population received these benefits, compared to roughly 72% who are eligible. Additionally, term-by-term participation better aligned to annual rates of Free City use, suggesting that students may better understand the need to apply for these resources each semester they enroll.
- **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. At the same time, more students were eligible for cash grants than used these resources in 2022-2023, indicating students continue to leave important resources on the table that could support their persistence.
- **Despite making up a significant proportion of the City College credit student body, male students, students aged 25-50, and equity populations continue to have lower rates of Free City participation.** Further mining the intersection student characteristics and use of Free City and targeting specific populations with information on the program offers an area of opportunity moving forward.
- **The proportion of students who submitted a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and received a Pell Grant was close to half. Further students' receipt of the California College Promise Grant (CCPG) more than doubled** compared to the prior year. These data indicate that many City College students continue to contend with financial instability.

At the same time, FAFSA submission remained relatively unchanged for Free City students and non-participants alike. With finances topping students' list of reasons not to attend college and institutional funding tied to students' use of these programs, these findings underscore a core area of opportunity for City College to think differently about how they are structuring FAFSA and CCPG completion into the standard student experiences, and for all student groups.

- **Course-taking data continue to indicate that Free City participation associates with some positive college-going behaviors.** Students receiving Free City benefits enrolled mostly part time but took more units on average and passed at a higher rate than their peers who do not participate in the program. At the same time, fewer students attempted a full-time load in one term or across the academic year in 2022-2023, and the average unit load trended downward somewhat, findings worth future monitoring.

Student Enrollment

In 2022-2023, just over 25,000 students enrolled in City College (Figure 1). Since the launch of Free City, the institution has generally experienced enrollment declines, the steepest being in the years immediately following the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, enrollments held relatively steady between this year and the last.

Approximately 17,000 students participated in Free City at some point in 2022-2023 – 68% of City College’s overall credit student population for the academic year. While a lower proportion than in the program’s early years, overall participation again remained relatively stable compared the last reporting period.

Annual Headcount

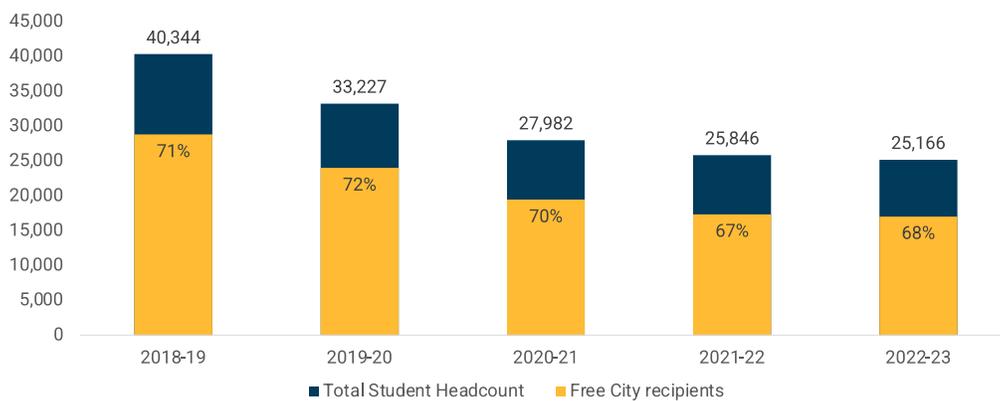


Figure 1. Proportion of Credit Students (Unduplicated) Participating in Free City Annually, 2018-2019 through 2022-2023

Students are eligible for the Free City program based on confirmation of a San Francisco address and qualification for in-state tuition (given California residency or non-resident exemption).² For the first time in 2022-2023, we specifically broke out the credit student population by San Francisco residency and participation in the program (Figure 2).

In 2022-2023, 72% of City College’s credit students were San Francisco residents. Positively, 90% of those students took advantage of the Free City program at some point in the year. At the same time, 10% did not receive benefits for which they are eligible. It is also worth noting that nearly one-quarter of City College’s credit students did not have San Francisco residency, making them ineligible for program participation.

² Find more information at <https://www.ccsf.edu/paying-college/free-city>.

SF Resident



Figure 2. Proportion of Credit Students (Unduplicated) Participating in Free City by San Francisco Residency, 2022-2023

While data analysis in recent years revealed notably lower term-by-term participation rates compared to the proportion eligible, **students' use of Free City each term generally aligned to annual overall participation rate in 2022-2023 (Figure 3)**. These data may indicate an increase in students' awareness about the need to apply for Free City each term they enroll at the college.

Term Headcount

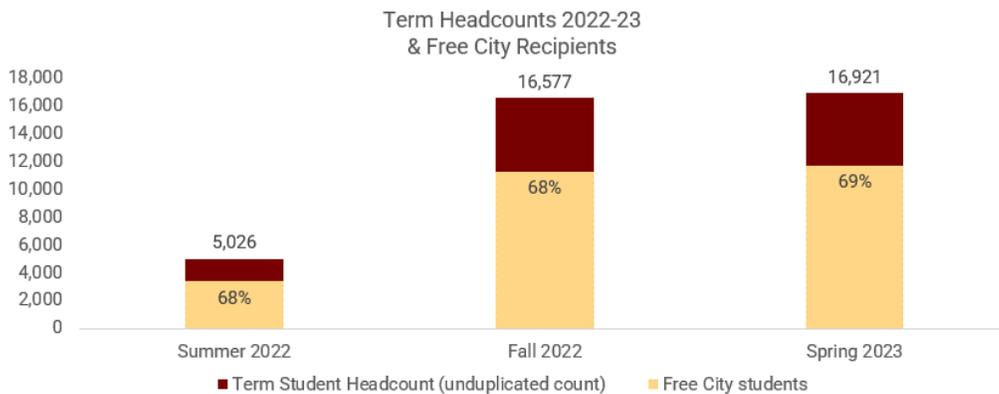


Figure 3. Proportion of Credit Students (Unduplicated) Participating in Free City by Term, 2021-2022

TYPE OF FREE CITY SUPPORT RECEIVED

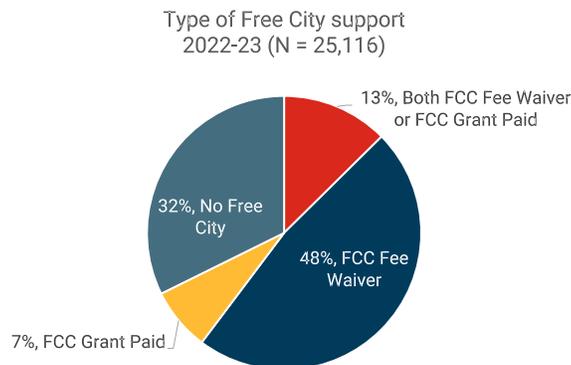
The types of Free City benefits accessed by credit students remained relatively unchanged compared to recent years. Students apply for Free City when registering each semester via a brief application submitted in the online student portal. City College awards benefits as follows.

- Eligible 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 – about one half – received a Free City tuition waiver in 2022-2023.**
- 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. **One fifth also received a Free City cash grant at some point in the academic year.** Note: 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.

Eligible students must complete a separate application to access a Free City cash grant each semester and are strongly encouraged to complete the FAFSA to access all resources for which they are available.

Reflective of the participation data above, one third received no Free City benefits – either because they did not apply or were not eligible given residency requirements (Figure 4).

Type of Free City support



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).

Figure 4. Proportion of Credit Students (Unduplicated) Receiving Free City Tuition Waiver, Free City Grant, Both Free City Waiver and Grant, or No Free City Benefits, 2022-2023

Student Characteristics

As with City College students overall, Free City participant demographics remained relatively stable in 2022-2023.

AGE

When disaggregating 2022-2023 program participation by age (Figure 5)...

- **Student participation in Free City by age group remained relatively unchanged.**
- **Free City participation was highest among the oldest groups, followed by the youngest students.** More than three-quarters of the small population of credit students aged 60+ tapped these benefits; 70% of students 24 years and younger took part in the program.
- **Students in the middle of the age distribution (25–59 years) continued to be less likely to receive Free City support,** despite making up the largest proportion of credit students.

Free City Participation by Age

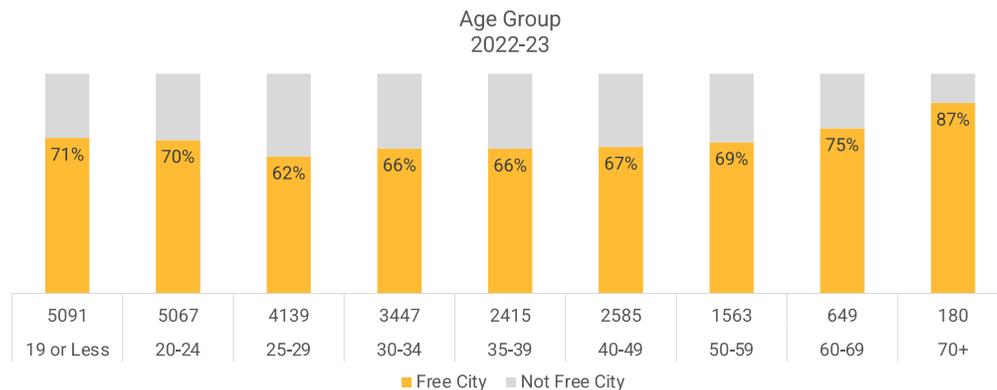


Figure 5. Proportion of Students Participating in Free City by Age Group, 2022-2023

GENDER

When disaggregating 2022-2023 program participation by gender (Figure 6)...

- **Students who identified as female continued to have highest participation rate (72%),** in line with the overall proportion of eligible credit students.
- **Those who identified as male remained least likely to receive free tuition (63%).** This finding generally parallels participation by this gender group in other City College support programs. Yet, the persistence of this finding remains troubling, particularly

given more global concerns with the declining participation in higher education among men (Causey et al, 2023).ⁱ

This finding raises questions about how to specifically raise awareness of Free City benefits as an enrollment selling point for prospective and returning male students.

- **Participation among non-binary students increased slightly.**

Gender

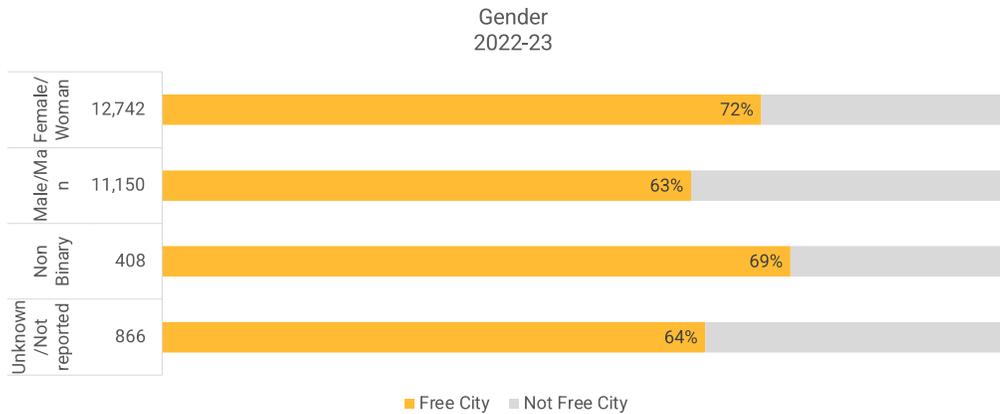


Figure 6. Proportion of Each Gender Participating in Free City, 2022-2023

RACE/ETHNICITY

When disaggregating 2022-2023 program participation by race/ethnicity (Figure 7)...

- **Asian students remained mostly likely to use Free City by a considerable margin;** 81% of this student group received program benefits compared to groups with the next highest participation rate: Latina/o/x students (66%) and students who identify with two or more races (66%).
- **The proportion of Black or African American, Latina/o/x, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students participating in the program increased nominally over the prior year.**
- **Students who identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Black or African American, Filipino, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander continued to experience the lowest rates of participation among all racial/ethnic groups.**

Race/ethnicity

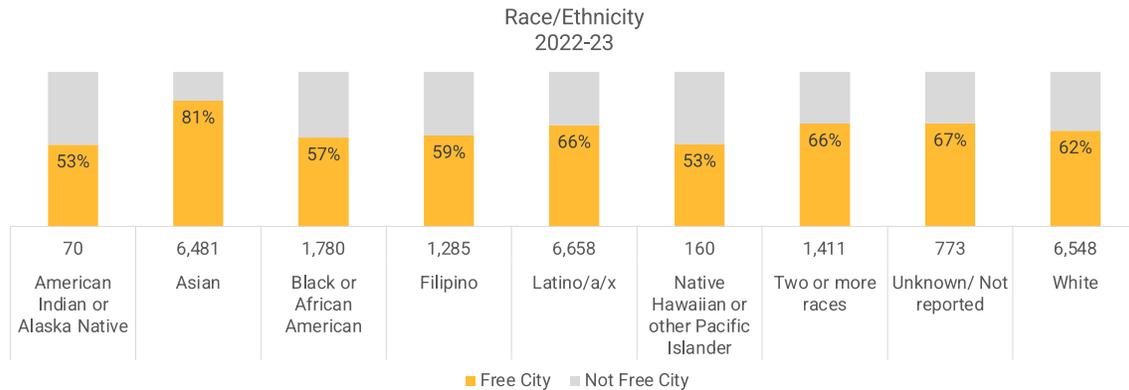


Figure 7. Proportion of Students Participating in Free City by Race/Ethnicity, 2022-2023

Equity students overall continued to participate in Free City at lower rates than non-equity students (Figure 8). These student populations are groups experiencing disproportionately lower academic outcomes at City College, called out in the institution’s Student Equity and Achievement Plan³:

- American Indian or Alaskan Native students
- Black or African American students
- Filipino students
- Latina/o/x students
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Foster youth
- Students with disabilities
- Students experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity
- Students who identify as LGBTQIA+
- Justice impacted students

These student groups may be among the most likely to benefit from the financial support provided by the program. Nationally, these groups experience high incidence of financial distress that impacts their academic outcomes.^{ii,iii} These findings reinforce the importance of the equity planning work City College and the Oversight Committee began in 2023.

It is also worth noting that a larger proportion of City College students who reside outside of San Francisco are equity students, which makes them ineligible for the program and may contribute to this gap in Free City use. These findings call out a potential area for future investigation – specifically looking at the intersection of student residency, demographics, and Free City use – and point to possibilities for specific outreach regarding the program’s availability.

³ Find more information on City College’s Student Equity and Achievement Program at <https://www.ccsf.edu/about-ccsf/administration/student-affairs/student-equity>.

Equity/not equity students

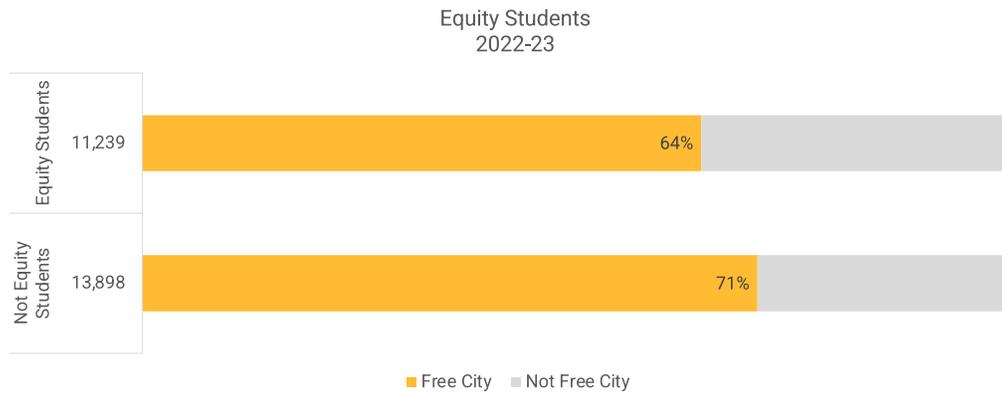


Figure 8. Proportion of Equity Group Students Participating in Free City Compared to Non-Equity Group Students, 2022-2023

ZIP CODE

Student participation by zip code remained relatively stable in 2022-2023, and Free City does not seem to have shifted student enrollments from different neighborhoods to date. 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 (Figure 9).

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	9%
94122 - Sunset	7%
94124 - Bayview/Hunters Point	7%
94134 - Visitacion Valley/Sunnydale	7%
94116 - Parkside/Forest Hill	5%
94103 - South of Market	4%
94121 - Outer Richmond	4%
94109 - Polk Gulch/Russian Hill/Nob Hill	4%
94132 - Lake Merced/Stonestown	4%
94102 - Hayes Valley/Tenderloin/North of Market	4%

Note: Remaining zip codes have less than 3% each

Figure 9. Proportion of Free City Participants by San Francisco Zip Code, 2022-2023

Student Financial Aid

FAFSA completion for Free City participants increased nominally in 2022-2023 compared to recent years (Figure 11).⁵ At the same time, the **proportion of those who submitted a FAFSA and received a Federal Pell Grant remained high at nearly half**. Additionally, **receipt of a California College Promise Grant ticked up for Free City participants to nearly 30%** in 2022-2023, up more than 16 percentage points compared to the prior year.

Financial Aid Data

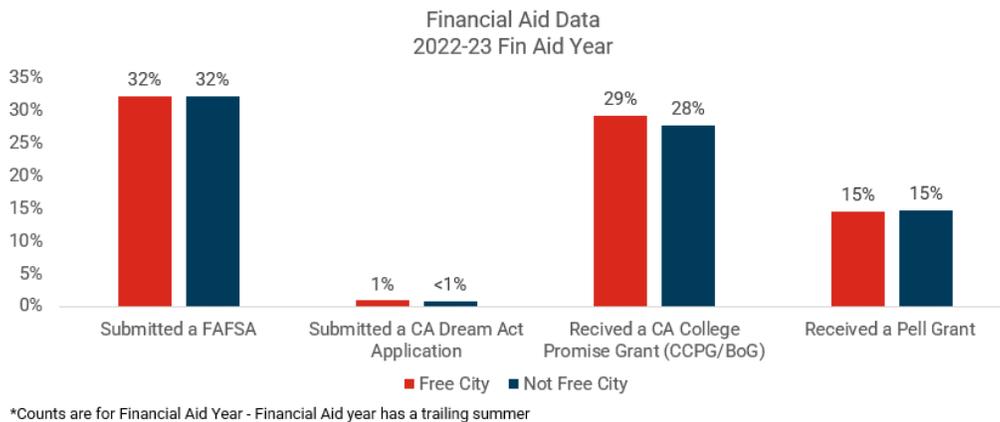


Figure 11. Proportion of Free City Participants Submitting a FAFSA and Receiving Financial Aid Compared to Non-Free City Students, 2022-2023 (Financial Aid Year: Fall 2022, Spring 2023, Summer 2023)

Clearly, these data indicate that financial instability remains high among a significant proportion of City College students. **They also indicated there is a persistent need to increase students' overall awareness of why it is important to complete the FAFSA, how financial aid works, and what resources are available – Free City and otherwise – to offset the costs associated with college attendance.**

Tuition assistance available through Free City is helpful, yet it may not be enough for students with significant financial need. Students who do not apply for Federal Student Aid remain unaware of the full array of benefits for which they are eligible and deserving, including educational and basic needs benefits. Still further, students are leaving cash grants available through Free City on the table; as a reminder, students who receive a CCPG are also eligible for this additional benefit, and less than 20% of credit students received those resources in 2022-2023.

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).

And yet, it is now well documented that financial considerations are a top obstacle to students' enrollment in college, and that historically underrepresented students, students who are caregivers, and working adults are most likely to struggle with this issue. Certainly this reality contributes to the opportunity gaps called out in the college's equity plan.

City College also loses out on important funding streams that are based on the proportion of Pell eligible students and CCPG recipients enrolled at the college, including supplemental allocation dollars awarded under the California Community Colleges' Student Centered Funding Formula. Given persistent budget challenges, it seems imperative that City College strengthen FAFSA submissions to address students' financial barriers, leverage these fiscal opportunities, and ultimately boost enrollment and retention.

Student Academic Outcomes

UNITS ATTEMPTED AND EARNED

When looking at students' unit load in 2022-2023 (Figure 12)...

- **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.
- **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 (27% vs 32% respectively).**

Unit Load

- 15% of Free City students attempted 24+ units in 2022-23
- 27% of Free City students attempted 12+ units in at least one term in 2022-23

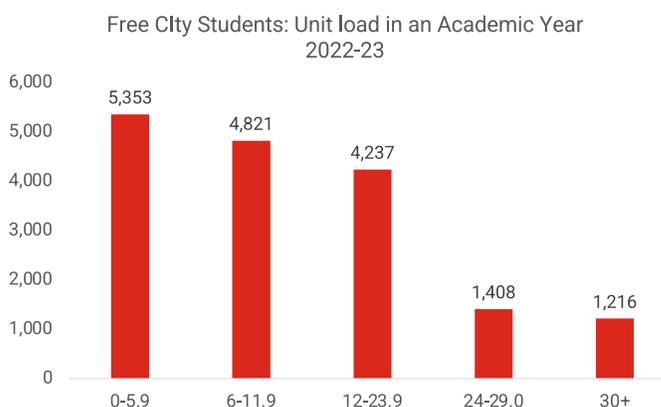


Figure 12. Annual Attempted Unit Load of Free City Participants

The availability of free tuition did not appear to significantly change students’ decision-making about full-time enrollment in 2022-2023. Further, Free City students’ unit load trended downward somewhat this year. Compared to the prior reporting period, a smaller proportion attempted a full-time load in one semester (12+ units) or over the course of the year (24+ units) (~ 4 percentage points each). Not only do these data shed light on the intersection between students’ use of Free City and their educational experience at the college, they also have budgetary implications for the program, which is partially based on full-time student enrollments.

As in past years, Free City participants passed their courses at similar rates as their non-Free City peers, indicating that use of this benefit is benign when it comes to course completion (Figure 13).

Average Units Earned

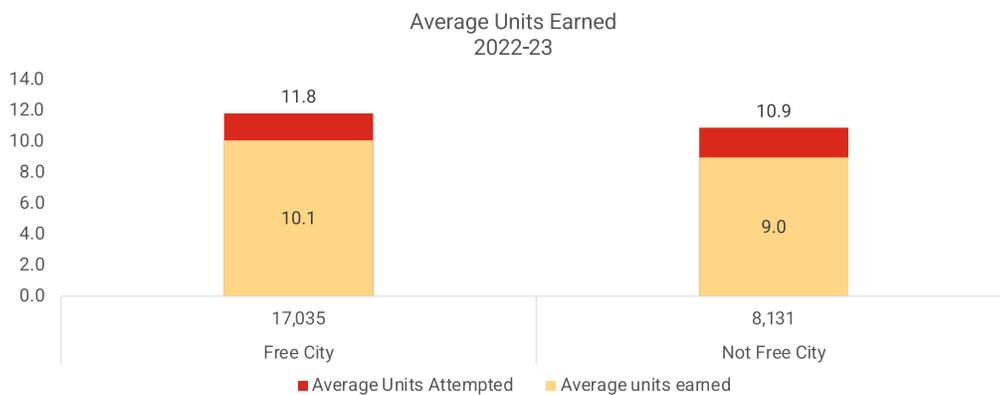


Figure 13. Average Units Earned in the Academic Year by Free City Participants Compared to Non-Free City Students

Conclusion

This annual report of Free City program participation and impact reinforces the equity planning work City College and the Oversight Committee are currently pursuing. The findings regarding students' overall use of the program indicate there are continued opportunities to increase participation, so any eligible student not only receives a tuition waiver but also secures a cash grant to offset costs associated with college attendance. Disaggregated data on program use by student characteristic – including residency, age, gender, and identification with one or more equity group – also offer a compass for further investigation into strategic ways to increase participation among priority populations called out in the college's Student Equity and Achievement Plan.

Additionally, the proportion of Free City students receiving assistance through state and federal grant programs designed for those with exceptional financial need indicates that finances remain a significant concern for a remarkable number. Tuition remission alone may not be enough to strengthen their enrollment, persistence, and course taking. At the same time, FAFSA submission rates were relatively unchanged, which means students who may be experiencing economic disadvantage remain unaware of the resources and supports for which they are eligible. Still further, students' use of the Free City cash grant option was stagnant. These trends mean that key priorities called out in the Free City equity planning – including reducing students' financial burden, expanding students' use of financial supports, and fostering their financial literacy – remain more important than ever.

As City College and the Oversight committee solidify an equity-focused workplan for Free City in the 2023-2024 program year, we will work to identify new areas of inquiry and a discrete set of metrics that align with this effort. The next annual report will establish a baseline for this data, which will serve as a foundation for determining impact in the years that follow.

City College looks forward to our continued collaboration with the Oversight Committee on these efforts. We are grateful for the City's 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.

ⁱ Causey, J., Cohen, J., Lee, S., Ryu, M., & Shapiro, D. (2023). *Current term enrollment estimates expanded edition: Fall 2022*. Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>

ⁱⁱ Chaplot, P., & Karandjeff, K. (2021). *Student financial stability demystified*. <http://ncii-improve.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NCII-SFS-Demystified-10192021.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., Webster, J., and Ashton, B. (2023). *Student financial wellness survey report: Fall 2022 semester results*. Trellis Company. https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SFWS-Aggregate-Report_FALL-2022.pdf

