

College Students and SNAP Utilization

TX RPC Project Legislative Rapid Response Request

December 14, 2022

Student Demographics^[1]

Most of today's college and other post-secondary students, about 71%, are considered "non-traditional" students. They may be financially independent from their parents, work full time, be enrolled in college courses, and care for a child or other family member, or do not have a traditional high school diploma. The average age of college enrollment is 21, but 26 is the average age for all college students. More than one in five (22%) college students reported being parents or caring for a child dependent, with 14% stating they are single parents.

Food Insecurity Impacts Education^[1-3]

According to a 2020 survey, more than a fifth of research university students (22%) reported food insecurity. Students who are under 21 are less likely to report food insecurity, but students over 30 are more likely to be hungry. Despite these high rates of food insecurity, even before COVID-19, while more than one in six (18%) college students were eligible, only 3% of college students were receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

In a 2016 study:

- Nearly a third (32%) of food insecure students believed hunger impacted their education
- More than half (55%) reported that hunger kept them from buying textbooks
- A quarter (25%) of students who reported food insecurity also reported dropping a class
- More than half (53%) of students reported missing class in 2016 due to hunger

The Policy Landscape^[4]

In December 2020, the US House passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA). This act carved out an exception for higher education students enrolled at more than half time, who were previously ineligible to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits if they met certain criteria: They must be eligible for Federal Work-Study and have an expected family contribution of \$0. This exception will be in effect through the end of the declared COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE), which is currently set to end on October 13, 2022, though it has been extended multiple times.

Summary of Search Results^[5-8]

Based on a preliminary search for legislation related to college students and SNAP, the TX RPC project team identified four states that have proposed or passed relevant legislation. Three states (Louisiana, Connecticut, and California) enacted laws related to this issue. One state (West Virginia) had Senate and House companion bills that appear to have stalled in committee.

It is important to note that no states have made the exception permanent because the rules about SNAP eligibility and college enrollment are set at the federal level and cannot be expanded at the state level.

Common Themes in College Food Insecurity Legislation ^[5-8]

- All four proposed bills (Louisiana, Connecticut, California, and West Virginia) call for some sort of survey or data-gathering function to assess the scale of the problem on college campuses. However, the specific information requested and schools required to conduct these surveys differ by legislation. Some aim to identify specific students needing food assistance, while others aim to get an idea of the issue's prevalence on the campuses that the bill affects.
- Three bills (LA, WV, CA) require campuses to offer direct support to students in accessing basic needs services, including food, housing, childcare, and utilities.
- Two bills (LA, WV) require campuses to establish on-site food pantries to serve food-insecure studies.

Highlights from Specific Legislation

- The Louisiana law, which had bipartisan sponsorship, created a Hunger-Free Campus certification for which universities could apply. This certification would allow universities to receive grant funding to support student food security. Obtaining and maintaining this certification required participating schools to facilitate meal-plan sharing and donation systems, facilitate student access to essential services, and mandate a needs survey every three years.
- The Connecticut law codified eligibility for SNAP benefits, including students who had been approved for federal work-study. It explicitly allowed students to enroll in SNAP before they were hired for a specific work-study position.
- The California law specifically targeted community colleges, rather than traditional universities, and allocated funding to create a position to serve their student's basic needs.
- The West Virginia bill, while not passed, had the unique feature of requiring notification of students receiving financial aid of potential SNAP benefit eligibility.

State and Federal Policy Opportunities ^[9]

Federal-Level

Under current federal law, college enrollment prevents SNAP eligibility unless very specific household or need criteria are met. Removing this rule would allow more students to qualify for SNAP.

Enrolling in university, community college, and other educational institutions does not qualify as “training” or “work” for SNAP eligibility. Changing this definition could increase enrollment.

Federal Work-Study funding is currently insufficient to meet students' employment and compensation needs. Increasing this funding would allow more students to qualify under current SNAP rules.

State-Level

Allow community college enrollment to count as employment and training requirements for SNAP, made permissible by the Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act of 2006.

Increase state funding for work-study to allow more students to be eligible under current rules. Designate staff to help students enroll in SNAP.

Community Solutions [1]

While policy changes are necessary to address this issue in the long-term, many colleges and communities around the country are working together to help people at the local level:

California

In Santa Clara & San Mateo Counties, Second Harvest food bank supported 11 campus food banks and managed two mobile distribution systems.

The Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano organized a college pantry collaborative across two counties to discuss models, best practices, and partnership opportunities.

The San Francisco & Marin Food Bank tapped Code for America to develop a mobile app to facilitate applications to SNAP.

Oregon

The Oregon Food Bank worked to help draft legislation that would expand the number of work-study positions, which was a requirement for SNAP eligibility.

Nevada

The Food Bank of Northern Nevada formed a partnership with the State of Nevada that allowed the food bank to assist people with their SNAP applications and conduct initial interviews, reducing barriers to applicants.

Indiana

The ACE Campus Pantry and Food Finders worked with student organizations across Purdue University and the surrounding community to develop distribution sites, infrastructure, and referrals for students experiencing food insecurity.

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