Modernizing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to Improve Self-Sufficiency

Ensuring federal public benefit programs support evidence-based pathways that lead to employability is a common-sense, bipartisan strategy. Research shows that every level of education beyond high school achieved is correlated with improved social, economic, and health outcomes, including higher earnings, lower unemployment and poverty rates, and improved education outcomes for children. Workers with a postsecondary education also gain access to more jobs with livable wages, employer-provided health and retirement benefits and use public benefits less.

Postsecondary credentials will continue to be essential for the economy. The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS) predicts that entry-level jobs that require more education will grow faster than average. In response, states are marshalling federal and state resources, including public benefits, to improve college attainment and These state efforts are thwarted by SNAP’s eligibility rules that prevent millions of people from accessing postsecondary education to improve their economic mobility and self-sufficiency.

In reauthorizing the U.S. Farm Bill, Congress has an opportunity to modernize the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to better align federal investments to support long-term self-sufficiency for participants. We recommend the following legislative changes to the bill:

- Including programs at institutions of higher education under the definition of “Employment and Training Programs” (Section 6(d)(4)); and
- Simplifying student eligibility by allowing enrollment in an institution of higher education to satisfy student eligibility if all other requirements have been met (Section 6(d)(2)(c) and/or Section 6(e)).

Restrictions on education in SNAP are counter to the program’s goals and stated goals of policymakers to improve employability and self-sufficiency. We must recognize that postsecondary credentials are workforce development and align program eligibility rules accordingly. Removing the federal barriers on education in SNAP aligns and maximizes government spending across higher education and public benefits, reflects evidence-based approaches and the needs of the economy, and better supports the long-term self-sufficiency of recipients.

Improving Access to Education for SNAP Participants: Everyone who applies for SNAP must meet stringent income, citizenship, and household criteria to receive benefits. SNAP recipients are also subject to work

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3 Center for Poverty and Inequality Research. UC Davis. “How does level of education relate to poverty?”. https://bit.ly/3H2Ka3u
requirements, unless they qualify for an exemption. To meet the work requirement participants can count work, searching for work, participation in an employment and training program, and even unpaid work or volunteering. However, enrollment in a college class does not count. The exclusion of education directly contradicts the voluminous body of research about the benefits of education beyond high school, undermining SNAP’s ability to improve self-sufficiency.

Given the role that education beyond high school currently plays in our economy it is counterproductive to mandate that SNAP recipients participate in activities that include unpaid work, but exclude education. There are almost 14 million adult SNAP recipients in the United States that have a high school diploma but no degree. Among this group, 4.6 million SNAP recipients have attempted college but have not completed a degree, demonstrating their interest in pursuing a postsecondary credential that has been delayed or disrupted. By excluding education beyond high school as a qualifying activity, the SNAP program has unintentionally become a deterrent to pursuing skills and credentials that improve employability and result in less reliance on government programs.

**Improving Access to SNAP for Enrolled Students:** Students must meet the same rigorous income, citizenship, and household criteria as anyone applying for SNAP. Students attending school less than half-time can qualify but could be subjected to SNAP’s work requirements, which exclude education as a countable activity. Students enrolled in college at least half time are exempt from the work requirement but are not eligible for SNAP unless they meet a specific student exemption criterion. The net effect of these policies is that far too few students with need receive crucial food assistance, harming student persistence and completion.

Since the implementation of the SNAP college student restrictions in the 1970s, the student demographic and needs of the economy have experienced a seismic shift. Students with lower incomes now enroll in college at rates higher than their middle-income peers. Over fifty percent of undergraduate students who enrolled in academic years 2011-2012 and 2015-2016 had incomes below 200% of the poverty line. Students with low incomes face higher levels of basic needs insecurity which is correlated with less successful postsecondary outcomes, increased anxiety, depression, and poorer health. Only about 60 percent of all students who enroll in college graduate within six years, with significant disparities in outcomes for students of color. The challenge today’s students face and the nation’s increased demand for postsecondary credentials require a modernization of SNAP to better support educational completion for students with low incomes. The reauthorization of the U.S. Farm Bill provides the opportunity to make an overdue investment that will pay off for families and the economy for decades to come.

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