Removing SNAP’s Restrictions on Education Beyond High School Better Supports Economic Growth & Security

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) is our nation’s most important anti-hunger program, providing a broad range of benefits to program participants and the economy. The SNAP program is highly effective as an economic stabilizer during economic downturns and includes an economic multiplier effect. It is estimated that each dollar of SNAP spent in a community can generate up to $1.50 of economic activity.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS) predicts that jobs requiring more education for entry will grow faster than average. SNAP policies that restrict education undermine strategic federal and state investments in higher education and workforce development, stymying economic growth.

SNAP program policies restrict people receiving food assistance to low-wage work or even volunteering over enrollment in a credential or degree program. Everyone who applies for SNAP must meet stringent income, citizenship, and household criteria to receive benefits. SNAP recipients are also subject to work requirements, unless they qualify for an exemption. SNAP has different eligibility rules depending on enrollment intensity in an institution of higher education.

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<th>Enrolled less than half-time</th>
<th>Enrolled half-time or more</th>
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SNAP participants enrolled less than half-time are subject to SNAP’s work requirements unless they qualify for an exemption. To meet the work requirement, participants can count work, search for work, participate in an employment and training program, and even do unpaid work or volunteering, however, enrollment in a college class does not count.

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. Research shows that these criteria are confusing for administering agencies, students, and higher education institutions, and could be contributing to almost 60% of potentially eligible students not receiving SNAP.
Education plays a vital role in a thriving and competitive 21st-century economy. As a result, almost every state in the U.S. has set a postsecondary attainment goal to increase the number of people with a postsecondary credential. The current national attainment rate is 53.7%, but state attainment rates range from 72.4% in the District of Columbia to 43.9% in Nevada. Only a few states are meeting, or close to meeting, their goal.

Because SNAP reduces the cost of food for people with low incomes, and more people with low incomes are pursuing postsecondary education, SNAP can support access and completion of credentials or degrees by addressing the most common barrier to education: the cost. Many states, as well as the federal government, have rightly ramped up efforts to improve the alignment of SNAP with education beyond high school in recognition of the challenges they face in meeting their attainment goal and the return on investment if they do.

Every level of postsecondary education achieved is correlated with improved social, economic, and health outcomes, including higher earnings, lower unemployment and poverty rates, as well as improved education outcomes for children. Similarly, workers with a postsecondary education gain access to the majority of jobs with livable wages, employer-provided healthcare, and retirement benefits. People with college credentials use public benefits less, which saves on government spending on programs, and earn more, which increases tax revenue.

Given the demand from employers and state efforts to create a skilled workforce, keeping the current SNAP restrictions on education will only hamper economic growth and competitiveness. Fortunately, Congress has the opportunity now to remove the restrictions on education beyond high school to maximize government spending across education and public benefits, improve the economic security of families, and reflect the needs of employers and the economy.

TICAS recommends that programs at institutions of higher education are included under the definition of “Employment and Training Programs” and simplifying enrolled student eligibility by allowing enrollment in an institution of higher education to satisfy eligibility if all other requirements have been met. Read our recommendations for the Farm Bill here: https://ticas.org/anti-poverty/ticas-farm-bill-recommendations/

Endnotes:

4 TICAS calculation of SNAP recipients by reported highest level of education completed ages 18 and over from U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), Detailed Program Receipt: Table 4. https://bit.ly/3YJ7d4d
9 TICAS calculation of SNAP recipients by reported highest level of education completed ages 18 and over from U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP).
10 Parker, K. November 2021. “What’s behind the growing gap between men and women in college completion?”. https://pewrsr.ch/3Q84eT
13 TICAS calculation of SNAP recipients by reported highest level of education completed ages 18 and over from U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), Detailed Program Receipt: Table 4. https://bit.ly/3YJ7d4d