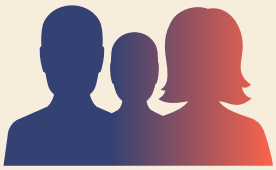
THE INSTITUTE FOR COLLEGE ACCESS & SUCCESS

Montana: How SNAP Could Better Support State Educational Attainment Efforts

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.[1] 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.[2]

The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS) predicts that jobs requiring more education for entry will grow faster than average.[3] SNAP policies that restrict education undermine strategic federal and state investments in higher education and workforce development, stymying economic growth.



In 2020, over 14 million SNAP participants ages 18+ had a high school diploma but no college degree.[4]

Education beyond high school is one of the most effective pathways to improving employability and increasing earnings for people with low incomes. **It is critical that SNAP participants are able to access education to improve their long-term financial stability.**

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.[5] SNAP has different eligibility rules depending on enrollment intensity in an institution of higher education.

Enrolled *less* than half-time

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.**

Enrolled half-time or *more*

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.[6]**

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.[7] 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.[8] Only a few states are meeting, or close to meeting, their goal.

In Montana, we estimate that a lower proportion of SNAP participants have completed an Associate's degree or higher than non-SNAP participants:[9]

SNAP Participants	Non-SNAP Participants
15%	45%

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. [10] Many states, as well as the federal government, have rightly ramped up efforts to improve the alignment of SNAP with education beyond high school[11] in recognition of the challenges they face in meeting their attainment goal and the return on investment if they do.[12]

Montana's educational attainment rate is 53.1%. Modernizing SNAP to remove barriers to education beyond high school better supports Montana's attainment goal of 61% of residents with a postsecondary credential by 2025.[13]

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.[14] Similarly, workers with a postsecondary education gain access to the majority of jobs with livable wages, employer-provided healthcare, and retirement benefits.[15] **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:

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2. U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2019. "Quantifying the Impact of SNAP Benefits on the U.S. Economy and Jobs". https://bit.ly/3lMnQmE
3. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2022. "Occupations that Need More Education for Entry are Projected to Grow Faster Than Average". https://bit.ly/44fCWBs
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/3Y7fp4l
5. U.S. Department of Agriculture: Food and Nutrition Service. "SNAP Work Requirements". https://bit.ly/3DxNpxm
6. GAO-19-95. 2018. "FOOD INSECURITY: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits". https://bit.ly/3QIt1kK
7. Strategy Labs. January 2023. "States with Higher Education Attainment Goals". https://bit.ly/3DuS5nF
8. Lumina Foundation. "A Stronger Nation: Higher Education Attainment Data. https://bit.ly/3O7zkLQ
9. TICAS calculations using a pooled sample from Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) 2018 through 2022. Attainment rates should be interpreted as estimates and not precise counts of degree attainment among SNAP participants and non-participants in a state.
10. Parker, K. November 2021. "What's behind the growing gap between men and women in college completion?". https://pewrsr.ch/3OuxEgT
11. Association of Community College Trustees. October 2022. ACCT Awarded Federal Grant to Expand SNAP E&T Programs to More Community College Campuses. https://bit.ly/48ByBvO
12. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. May 2022. "Education pays, 2021." https://bit.ly/3Ki7QCd
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15. Troste, P. et al. "It's Not Just the Money - The Benefits of College Education to Individuals and to Society". https://bit.ly/45IfPGG