The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) is the nation’s largest food assistance program. SNAP provides a modest benefit to ensure people with low incomes (or those experiencing temporary financial hardship) can afford their most basic need for food.

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

Postsecondary credentials will continue to be essential for workers and for a thriving economy. The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS) predicts that jobs that requiring more education for entry will grow faster than average. In response, states are marshalling federal and state resources, including public benefits like SNAP, to increase the educational attainment of state residents and advance workforce needs. These state efforts are undermined by SNAP’s complex and outdated eligibility rules that prevent millions of people from accessing postsecondary education to improve their economic mobility and self-sufficiency. Modernizing SNAP would also improve its alignment with the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the Carl D. Perkins Career & Technical Education Improvement Act (Perkins Act) and better support state efforts to maximize investments across federal programs.

**FARM BILL RECOMMENDATIONS**

Congress has an opportunity to modernize SNAP to better reflect the needs of individuals, employers, and the economy. The following steps are crucial for modernizing SNAP, making it more efficient, responsive, and impactful. We recommend that Congress:

1. **Amend section 6(d)(4) of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. 2015(d)(4)).**

   In subparagraph B in clause (i)(V), insert “consisting of an industry-recognized certificate or certification, a certificate of completion of an apprenticeship, a license recognized by the State involved or Federal Government, or an associate or baccalaureate degree” after “including educational programs.”

2. **Adopt the EATS Act: Amend the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. 2011 et seq.)**

   In section 3(m)(5), add at end the following: “(F) Individuals who are bona fide students enrolled at least half time in any recognized school, training program, or institution of higher education.”

   In section 6— (A) in subsection (d)(2)(C), strike “(except that any such person enrolled in an institution of higher education shall be ineligible to participate in the supplemental nutrition assistance program unless he or she meets the requirements of subsection (e) of this section)”, and (B) by striking subsection (e).
ADOPTING THESE RECOMMENDATIONS TO MODERNIZE SNAP BENEFITS INDIVIDUALS, EMPLOYERS, AND THE ECONOMY

Removing the barriers to postsecondary education in SNAP aligns and maximizes government spending across higher education and public benefits, reflects investment in evidence-based approaches that improve employment outcomes, and supports the needs of the economy and 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 requirements, unless they qualify for an exemption. To meet the work requirement participants can count work, searching for work, and even unpaid volunteering, however, enrollment in a postsecondary program does not count except under narrow circumstances. 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. We must recognize that postsecondary credentials are workforce development and align program eligibility rules accordingly.

As demand for workers with more education grows, it is counterproductive to mandate that SNAP participants can engage in unpaid work but not 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 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 end up receiving 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. The majority of undergraduate students who enroll in college now have 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 and 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.

Please contact Carrie Welton, Senior Director of Policy & Advocacy: Anti-Poverty & Basic Needs at cwelton@ticas.org with any questions about these recommendations.