



# MAZON

A Jewish Response  
To Hunger

## BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: Supporting Students with Access to SNAP

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In January 2019, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a new [report](#) on food insecurity among college students. The report points out the limited utility of campus food pantries and the importance of helping students connect to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) so that they can afford to purchase food on a regular basis.

***The GAO estimates that 57% of students who are likely food insecure and eligible for SNAP do not receive it.***

This is a lost opportunity to supplement financial aid and help students succeed in college. This brief, the first in the *Beyond the Food Pantry* series, explains how advocates can support students by increasing access to SNAP.

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### RAISE AWARENESS

Many people who work with college students are unaware of how the SNAP program works and who is eligible. Some even believe that students are simply ineligible. Advocates should work to educate their communities, spreading the word about the following facts:

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamps, was first created by the Food Stamp Act of 1964 and then renamed in 2008. SNAP is a means-tested program that provides a monthly benefit, via an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card, that can be used at retail and grocery stores or farmers' markets to purchase any food, except alcohol, pet food, or prepared foods.

To be eligible, a household's gross monthly income cannot be over 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL). States do have flexibility to increase the income limits up to 200 percent of FPL using Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE). The SNAP benefit is not intended to pay for the entire household food budget, but to supplement it. In 2018, the maximum monthly benefit amount for a single individual was \$192 and a family of 3 was eligible for up to \$505 per month.<sup>i</sup>

Federal law has placed some limits on SNAP eligibility for students. This limitation, often called the SNAP Student Rule, has contributed to the misunderstanding that all students attending college are ineligible.

College students can qualify for SNAP based on a broad list of exceptions, assuming they meet the SNAP income and asset criteria and one of the following criteria:

- working for pay at least 20 hours per week;<sup>ii</sup>
- receiving, or been awarded and anticipate receiving, any amount of Federal or State Work-Study;
- caring for a child under age 6;
- caring for a child age 6-11 as a single-parent while enrolled full time or unable to obtain childcare;
- receiving TANF benefits;<sup>iii</sup>
- unable to work because of a disability;<sup>iv</sup>
- under the age of 18 or older than 50; or
- attending college as part of a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) or other state or locally funded training program, or equivalent.<sup>v, iv</sup>

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## INCREASE APPLICATIONS

Many students who are eligible for SNAP never even apply. Fixing this requires that SNAP become a regular part of the conversation about financial supports for college students. Colleges should collaborate with state SNAP agencies to inform college students about SNAP eligibility and help them access SNAP benefits. College financial aid offices should disseminate this information, as should other college organizations serving low-income students (including campus food pantries).

State SNAP agencies can develop guidance or training for college officials on student eligibility rules, conduct outreach to local colleges and universities, partner with community partners to host office hours, screen students for eligibility, and host enrollment clinics on college campuses or areas with large populations of students.

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## CLARIFY ELIGIBILITY

Campus advocates can work to clarify and maximize eligibility by working with their states. While the federal government sets the SNAP benefit levels and eligibility rules, states have significant authority and flexibility in determining whether individuals or households meet the program's eligibility requirements. States are allowed to establish some state-specific modifications in how they administer SNAP policy. States should consider students' eligibility and the application process when making modifications.

For example, states have flexibility regarding which academic programs qualify a student for the SNAP exemption pertaining to enrollment in programs for employment and training. These programs must be operated by a state or local government, target low-income households, and increase participant's employability. States can take steps to partner with community colleges and designate specific educational programs to qualify as employment and training. States and colleges can then refer students enrolled in the designated employment and trainings to the state SNAP agency to determine if they are eligible for SNAP benefits.

Some states partially fund their state financial aid programs for low-income college students with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant dollars, which triggers one of the exemptions to allow students to access SNAP. This is an effective way to enroll students in SNAP. States may use federal TANF block grant funds on a wide range of benefits and services, including to support work, education,

and training programs. Because recipients of state-level financial aid in such states technically receive TANF benefits, they are eligible for the corresponding SNAP student exemption.

Nearly one in four college students has a child. Students who are pregnant or postpartum may be eligible for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The federal government oversees WIC, but WIC is also administered by state and local agencies; therefore, states can ease accessibility of WIC for eligible college students.

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## ACCEPT EBT ON CAMPUS

Students receiving SNAP need access to be able to use that resource when purchasing food on campus. Colleges can negotiate with existing contracted food vendors or outside vendors to enable EBT use at retail and grocery markets on campus. Expanding use of EBT on campus will eliminate barriers such as time and proximity to grocery stores, improve access to nutritious food, and boost awareness and usage of SNAP among students.

A small but growing number of colleges are beginning to allow SNAP EBT at eligible campus stores. SNAP can also be used for “grab and go” food items that require little or no preparation. Stores can become SNAP eligible if they meet USDA’s stocking requirement.

Furthermore, states can pursue another federal option known as the Restaurant Meals Program (RMP), which allows certain SNAP recipients to use their benefits for hot meals in EBT-approved on-campus restaurants and dining. At this time, California is the only state that has implemented RMP on some campuses and it is only restricted to SNAP recipients who are either elderly, disabled or homeless.

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## SNAP WORKS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

College is a key pathway to economic mobility and well-being. While college is now more accessible to minority, first-generation and low-income students than it has been in the past, affordability can derail completion. Many of these students have overcome multiple barriers to arrive at college, only to have unmet basic needs—such as food and nutrition—threaten their success.

SNAP is the largest and most effective federal assistance program to combat food insecurity. SNAP allows low-income households to spend less of their very limited budgets on food, freeing resources that could go toward other basic needs.

Campus advocates must move beyond food pantries to advocate for federal and policy changes to SNAP, and work with state agencies to maximize access to ensure more low-income students have access to necessary nutrition to thrive and complete college.

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<sup>i</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture (2018). Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program website. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Retrieved from: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/eligibility#What%20deductions%20are%20allowed%20in%20SNAP>

<sup>ii</sup> Many states have received a waiver allowing them to average hours of employment over a month. Schools may need to provide documentation of hours of work to students employed as course assistants even if they are not paid on hourly basis.

<sup>iii</sup> May also apply to students who receive other TANF-funded benefits, such as child care, diversion payments, etc.

<sup>iv</sup> Individuals who are unable to work because of disability are exempt from the student exclusion (and the 3-month time limit). Meeting this exception does not require total and permanent disability at the level of Supplemental Security Income or Supplemental Security Disability Income eligibility.

<sup>v</sup> 7 U.S.C. 2015(e) and 7 CFR 273.5.

<sup>vi</sup> Lower-Basch, E. and Lee, H. (2014). SNAP Policy Brief: College Student Eligibility. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy. Retrieved from: <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/SNAP-College-Student-Eligibility.pdf>.



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