While enrollment, retention, and persistence numbers are plummeting across the nation, the economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic creates an imminent threat for college students’ ability to secure food, housing, and other basic needs. We have an opportunity to help them connect with food benefits and must act now.

Formerly known as food stamps, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federally funded monthly benefit available to individuals and households meeting predetermined asset and income criteria. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, expanded previous limitations to SNAP eligibility access, opening possibilities for college students enrolled in higher education at least half-time, under the new following two criteria:

• Students with an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) of $0 based on their FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid).
• Students eligible to participate in the federal or state work-study program during the current academic year (this applies even if a work-study assignment has not started or is not available).

Higher education institutions must reach eligible students immediately. Beyond the Act’s requirement to do so, this will help them secure resources to buy groceries, remain enrolled, and graduate. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice makes the following recommendations to inform, serve, and care for students, especially those who can potentially be eligible for SNAP under the new temporary changes:

1. Identify $0 EFC and work-study eligible students. Communicate their newly SNAP potential eligibility by phone, text, email, financial aid award, work-study program determination, and bursar’s communication.

For example: “Congratulations on your award! If you are concerned or have difficulty affording groceries or accessing enough food to eat every day, we have good news: you may be eligible for new opportunities to get additional supports including SNAP. To explore your options and apply, call [add name and contact information of your institution’s student support center, regional SNAP hotline (search here), and/or community partner (if applicable)].”
2. **Provide easy access to help students obtain documents required for SNAP consideration.** Incorporate and highlight links to students’ work-study authorization, Student Aid Report (SAR), enrollment profile summary, and other college related documents along with information about the new SNAP eligibility opportunity to the financial aid page, student portal, online orientation platform, scholarships, and emergency aid application (among other channels) to direct students to this information.

3. **Train key staff** (e.g., financial aid officers, counselors, student affairs staff, and student leaders/workers) to amplify the new changes and connect students with support, using language that empowers them to take action by removing the stigmas related to public benefits.

4. **Engage faculty and student-led organizations to disseminate information about SNAP** during non-academic activities, at the beginning and end of class, via emails, and with a syllabus statement. This will also strengthen students’ safety net and increase their sense of belonging.

5. **Establish partnerships with SNAP advocates** (e.g., local social services agencies and/or community-based organizations) to identify referral system ensuring that students get the support they need to navigate, troubleshoot the application process, and obtain SNAP. This will also increase the institution’s capacity to connect students with additional financial services like unemployment, utilities, childcare, and cash assistance.

Given the extensive research showing that college improves a vast array of social and economic outcomes, connecting eligible students to SNAP so they can better learn, should be a priority for higher education institutions.

The empathy and guidance that students receive from trusted sources within their institution will set them up for success, decrease their levels of anxiety, and enable them to access additional financial supports that are fundamental for their learning.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

- Supporting Students with Access to SNAP
- Surviving COVID-19: A #RealCollege Guide for Students
- Supporting #RealCollege Students with Caring Enrollment Management and Financial Aid Practices During COVID-19
- Getting Started Addressing Basic Needs Insecurity on Campus
- Hungry to Learn Documentary (Soledad O’Brien Productions, 2019)
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