

From Safety Net to Struggle: The End of Temporary SNAP Exemptions for College Students

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Student (In)Eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: An Overview

College students are much more likely to experience food insecurity than the typical American adult. In fact, 42 percent of surveyed students were identified as food insecure in the [Fall 2021 Student Financial Wellness Survey \(SFWS\)](#). Despite facing higher rates of basic needs insecurity and greater exposure to poverty, [this population has faced numerous barriers to accessing food assistance](#) through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Limiting students' access to SNAP benefits has been premised on the notion that students receive a variety of resources from their families and schools (e.g., financial aid, grants, loans, familial assistance), resulting in far less deprivation and vulnerability than their financial situation might otherwise imply. This reasoning fails to consider that students are often heading households themselves and may be relying on insufficient wages to fund both their living and educational expenses.

General eligibility for SNAP is determined through various factors, including [monthly/net income, citizenship, and household composition](#). For over 40 years, [SNAP eligibility for college students](#) has been further limited to those who are enrolled at least half-time and meet all of the standard eligibility requirements and qualify for at least one of the student-specific exemptions. Some of the common exemptions for students include: (1) Being under age 18 or age 50 or older; (2) Working a minimum of 20 hours per week; (3) Having a physical or mental disability; and (4) Participating in a state or federal work study program.

eligibility for students who met certain requirements, including those who:

1. Were eligible to participate in state or federal work study programs during the regular academic calendar year (as determined by the student's institution of higher education)
 2. Had an expected family contribution (EFC) of zero dollars for the academic year (using data from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA))
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This allowed up to three million previously ineligible students to become temporarily qualified to apply for SNAP. However, this expansion will only be active until 30 days after the end of the nationwide COVID-19 public health emergency. Assuming the expiration date for the current declarations holds (May 11, 2023), the two temporary SNAP exemptions will sunset on June 10, 2023. The end of expanded eligibility, combined with rising inflation, could exacerbate the college hunger crisis and result in even more reports of food insecurity on campuses across the country.

How to Move Forward?

The process of determining college student eligibility for SNAP is unnecessarily burdensome and complex, leaving many eligible students without access to critical benefits. For students who do qualify for SNAP, meeting certain requirements—such as working 20 hours a week—can discourage full-time attendance in college, delaying time to degree and potentially increasing student debt.

By eliminating the student-specific eligibility restrictions or revising the Food and Nutrition Act to simplify these requirements, students can take full advantage of a proven program designed to ameliorate food insecurity.

Without direct action, the circumstances of food insecure students are unlikely to improve in the near future. While food pantries and similar interventions can act as temporary solutions for students in need, public policy change is needed to address the more systemic issues that threaten the wellbeing and success of food insecure students. For more suggestions on improving basic needs security on campus, see the [Benefits Data Trust Toolkit For Leveraging Data to Find Eligible Students](#).
