

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.



These restrictions make it difficult for students to access these critical benefits; in fact, [only 17 percent of four-year students and 22 percent of two-year students](#) accessed food assistance from January to October 2020, well into the COVID-19 pandemic.

In hopes of improving access to SNAP for college students during the COVID-19 emergency, the U.S. Department of Education, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), temporarily expanded SNAP 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))



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 and Trellis' report on food insecurity among college students, Studying on Empty. Institutions can also participate in the Student Financial Wellness Survey to gain detailed information on the prevalence of basic needs insecurity and other challenges faced by their students.

Recent Trellis Research publications

Inside the College Mental Health Crisis: Evidence from the Healthy Minds Study

Cornett, A. (2023). Inside the College Mental Health Crisis: Evidence from the Healthy Minds Study. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Research-Brief_Mar23_MentalHealthCrisis.pdf

Student Financial Wellness Survey Report: Fall 2021

Fletcher, C., Webster, J., Cornett, A., Niznik, A., Gardner, T., & Knaff, C. (2022). *Student Financial Wellness Survey report: Fall 2021*. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/SFWS-Report-Fall-2021.pdf>

Hungry Minds: Student Awareness and Use of Food Pantries at 91 Colleges and Universities

Cornett, A. (2022). Hungry Minds: Student Awareness and Use of Food Pantries at 91 Colleges and Universities. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/71646-Research-Brief-MAY2022_FINAL.pdf

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Interested in collaborations or need research expertise? Trellis Research welcomes opportunities to inform policymakers and help organizations address their analytical needs. For more information, please contact Trellis Research at Trellisresearch@trelliscompany.org or visit us on Twitter ([@TrellisResearch](https://twitter.com/TrellisResearch)).

The Student Financial Wellness Survey is a free national survey offered by Trellis Company that explores the connections between student finances, academic success, and more. Interested in participating in the Fall 2023 implementation of SFWS? Learn more here: www.trelliscompany.org/SFWS-get-started

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