

## SNAP and the Federal Work Study Rule: Increasing College Student Success for Low-Income Students

*July 2016 by Heather E. King and Jennifer J. Maguire*

### Summary

College student food insecurity is a growing concern in the United States, as evidenced by emerging reports. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the most effective program to reduce food insecurity, yet college students are automatically disqualified unless they meet certain, often difficult to meet or verify, exemptions. This report outlines recommendations that would allow students to qualify for SNAP based on work study eligibility, which is reserved for low-income students. Recommendations also include how to streamline the process of qualifying for SNAP based on students' Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) reports.

### Introduction

The cost of college has risen at an astonishing rate in the last 10 years. At 4-year public institutions, the price of tuition and fees for a full-time student rose 40% between 2005-06 and 2015-16 after adjusting for inflation. At two-year public colleges, it rose 29%. In addition, college students with low-incomes at four-year public colleges in 2011-12 experienced \$12,000 in total expenses after financial aid and an average of an \$8,000 shortfall at two-year public colleges (Ma and Baum, 2015). Not surprisingly, students from families in the highest income quartile were 8 times more likely to graduate in 2013 with a Bachelor's degree by age 24 than students from low-income families (77% versus 6%). What is perhaps worse is that this gap has increased; in 1970, those in the highest income quartile were 6 times more likely to graduate (40% versus 6%) (Calahan & Perna, 2015). These figures emerge amidst projections that 65 percent of jobs in the United States will require postsecondary education or training by 2020 (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl, 2013).

Current efforts at decreasing the disparity often emphasize increasing academic supports, such as advising, tutoring and mentoring. Although these supports are essential, recent reports suggest



nonacademic factors may also be key. Low food security contributes to poorer educational outcomes at the college level (Cady, 2014; Cochrane and Szabo-Kubitz, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, Broton, and Eisenberg, 2015; Maroto, Snelling and Linck, 2015; and, Patten-Lopez, Lopez-Cevallos and Cancel-Tirado, 2014), including persistence in college and degree completion (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, and Eisenberg, 2015).

Food security is defined as regularly having enough quality food for an active, healthy life (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, and Singh, 2015) and has been increasingly documented as a pressing issue on many college campuses (Cady, 2015; Cochrane and Szabo-Kubitz, L., 2016; Chaparro, Sahar, Zaghoul, Holck and Joannie Dobbs, 2008; Crutchfield, 2016; Freudenberg, Jones, Kwan, Tsui, and Gagnon, 2011; Goldrick-Rab, Broton, and Eisenberg, 2015; and, Hughes, Serebryanikova, Donaldson and Leveritt, 2011; Maroto, Snelling and Linck, 2015; Patten-Lopez, Lopez-Cevallos and Cancel-Tirado, 2014). The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is considered the most effective buffer to food insecurity (Colmen-Jensen, Rabbitt, and Singh, 2015), yet college students are automatically disqualified unless they meet specific, often difficult to meet or verify, exemptions established in 1977.

The federal exemptions are as follows, as outlined by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (USDA, 2016):

1. Receive public assistance benefits under a Title IV-A program of the Social Security Act;
2. Take part in a State or federally financed work study program;
3. Work at least 20 hours a week;
4. Are taking care of a dependent household member under the age of 6;
5. Are taking care of a dependent household member over the age of 5 but under 12 and do not have adequate child care to enable them to attend school and work a minimum of 20 hours, or to take part in a State or federally financed work study program; or
6. Are assigned to or placed in a college or certain other schools through:
  - a. A program under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014,
  - b. A program under Section 236 of the Trade Act of 1974,
  - c. An employment and training program under the Food Stamp Act, or
  - d. An employment and training program operated by a State or local government.
  - e. Also, a single parent enrolled full time in college and taking care of a dependent household member under the age of 12 can get SNAP benefits if otherwise eligible.

*Note: Students younger than 17 or older than 50 are not subject to the college student rules.*

A study at Humboldt State University, a mid-sized, public university in northern California, found that 53% of survey respondents (N=1,504) were experiencing either low or very low food security (Maguire, O’Neill and Aberson, 2015), results which are consistent with other university studies (Freudenberg Manzo, Jones, Kwan, Tsui & Gagnon 2011; Hughes, Serebryanikova, Donaldson, and Leveritt, 2011; Patton-Lopez, Lopez-Cevallos, Cancel-Tirado and Vasquez, 2014). Students who qualified for federal work study on this campus were more likely to experience very low food security than those who did not qualify (Maguire, O’Neill

and Aberson, 2015).

This white paper aims to summarize one study’s findings that identify barriers California college



students face in qualifying for CalFresh (California’s SNAP) at Humboldt State University (HSU) and one way HSU students have found to qualify. The paper proposes revising the federal SNAP exemption to align with California’s interpretation of the rule by allowing college students who qualify for work study to automatically qualify for SNAP, rather than specifying they must “take part in a State or federally financed work study program.” This will ensure the program is more accessible to low-income college students nationally at risk of experiencing food insecurity.

### **Background/Problems**

SNAP presents an opportunity to help buffer low-income college students against the consequences of limited financial resources. However, full-time low-income college students are still excluded from qualifying for SNAP unless they meet certain exemptions, many of which are difficult to meet as a college student. In particular, the work rule states students must work a minimum of 20 hours per week of paid employment at minimum wage. This may be in conflict with the time they need to persist in college and complete their degrees. For full-time students, maintaining a job that averages 20 hours per week or more is challenging, especially when many campus positions only allow students to work less than 20 hours per week. Yet history has demonstrated that as unemployment and underemployment rates increase in the U.S., the need for SNAP assistance rises (Stone, Sherman and Keith-Jennings, 2015). College students may be forced into choosing between paid work or dedicating sufficient time to their academics to perform well (Chrane, and Szabo-Kubitz, 2016).

A study was conducted at Humboldt State University to describe the barriers students faced in qualifying for CalFresh and to learn more about circumstances for those who did qualify. Students were recruited from the campus food pantry: 369 students volunteered to be contacted to participate in food security studies and 135 students completed this survey (N=135). The survey was administered online when students opted to take it during electronic sign-in at the campus food pantry or via an email link at their leisure. Questions were multiple-choice and short answer. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (SPSS) to address study aims. Strategies based on General Inductive Analysis (Thomas, 2006) were used with qualitative data to help explain survey responses.

## Results

1. Federal work study (47.54%) was the primary exemption students met to qualify for CalFresh. This included students who were actively employed through federal work study, as well as those who qualified for the program and were willing to take a job, but were not assigned to a work study placement.
2. A large majority of respondents ineligible for CalFresh indicated they did not meet the 20-hour per week work requirement (56 of 66, or 84.85% of, respondents who indicated they were ineligible also reported they did not meet this requirement).
3. Most respondents (61.79%) reported lack of food played a role in lowering academic performance.
4. Students who did not qualify for CalFresh were more likely to report lack of food played a role in time to degree completion than those who did qualify.

## Solution: Revised SNAP exemption for college students

The federal exemption states that students must “take part in a State or federally financed work study program” (USDA, 2016), while CalFresh (the California SNAP program) states students must “be approved for State or federally financed work study for the current school term, as defined by the institution, and anticipate working during the term” (State of California, 2007).

## Recommendations

To reduce hunger among low-income students, federal SNAP program administrators should:

- Revise federal SNAP rules to align with CalFresh rules by clarifying that a college student can be determined eligible for SNAP if anticipating work study program participation and would accept a work study placement if offered.
- Encourage college financial aid offices to disseminate information about SNAP to income eligible students, as indicated on their FASFAs.
- Encourage college financial aid offices to work with local departments of social services to streamline students’ documentation of low-income status in order to qualify for SNAP. For instance, if students qualify for federal work study, then financial aid staff would be encouraged to work with local departments of social services to develop a streamlined process for determining students’ SNAP eligibility.
- Encourage colleges and universities to further research the rate and severity of college student food insecurity; food insecurity’s effects regarding academic performance and time to degree completion; and SNAP eligibility barriers for college students.

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