

POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Connecting College Students to Public Benefits

Partner Benefits Data Trust

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Many college students, particularly students underrepresented in higher education, struggle to afford the full cost of college attendance—not only tuition but also food, housing, health care, and other basic needs. Recognizing this challenge, organizations and higher education institutions are exploring ways to address basic needs insecurity. One key strategy is streamlining access to public benefits programs that help pay for nontuition costs.

Benefits Data Trust is a national nonprofit working to improve access to public benefits that strengthen people’s health and financial security. In 2022, Benefits Data Trust partnered with Education Northwest, Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC), and Montgomery County Community College (Montco) to understand college students’ experiences with food insecurity, familiarity with public benefits programs, and awareness of and experiences with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Our goal was to understand challenges to accessing SNAP and inform efforts to improve access.

Leveraging student voice to develop solutions

Because students are the experts on their own lives, our study leveraged student voice to understand their familiarity and experiences with SNAP. Education Northwest researchers co-designed a student survey and interview protocol with Benefits Data Trust, CCAC, and Montco. Using collaborative online documents, all study partners could provide ongoing feedback to make sure the instruments were clear and relevant. Our final survey included two validated items from the [Hunger Vital Sign](#) to assess students’ food security, as well as other items developed by study partners.

Education Northwest researchers administered the Connecting Students to Benefits survey from October 2022 to February 2023. A total of 1,479 CCAC and Montco students responded. In addition, we interviewed 10 students who applied for SNAP about their experiences. After analyzing the survey and interview data, we shared [our findings with our partners in a comprehensive report](#).

What we learned from students

Increasing student access to SNAP may promote equitable outcomes: Survey results showed that students from groups who are underrepresented in higher education were more likely to experience food insecurity. Yet less than half of all surveyed students knew how to apply for SNAP, and fewer still knew if they were eligible. Uncertainty about eligibility was the most cited reason for not applying for SNAP.

We also learned that students who applied for SNAP faced significant challenges with understanding the application and eligibility, collecting and submitting the necessary documents, getting in-person help, the length of the process, and technology access and issues.

Students recommended that their college increase SNAP visibility through a wider range of marketing approaches. They also suggested additional supports to apply for SNAP, including guidance through the application process; more information about the necessary documents, eligibility, and how to complete the application; an easier application; technology support; and improved casework communication.

Shifting policy and practice to benefit students

The study contributed to a national conversation about how postsecondary institutions, states, and education leaders can improve student access to SNAP. Our report provides two policy recommendations: one for states to codify federal guidance encouraging higher education institutions to use Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) data to connect students with benefit programs, and the other for education leaders to advocate for policy change to make SNAP eligibility easier to understand.

In addition, Benefits Data Trust will use our study brief as a resource to support their newly launched [learning collaborative focused on building the capacity of colleges and universities](#) to connect students to public benefits and help them pay for basic needs.