

# WHAT WORKS FOR TODAY'S STUDENTS—CONNECTING STUDENTS TO MEANS-TESTED BENEFITS



**Making it easier for today's students to access federal benefits to fulfill their basic needs and allow them to pursue their higher learning goals.**

Author: Nikhil Vashee, *Senior Manager, Policy and Strategic Initiatives*  
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Today's students are unlike any that have come before them. They are more diverse in age, race, and income than previous generations of students, and are more likely to be financially independent, working, or parenting. They are also more likely to face basic needs insecurity. According to The Hope Center, three in five college students suffered from basic needs insecurity in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> At two-year institutions, 39 percent experienced food insecurity and almost half were impacted by housing insecurity.<sup>2</sup> Students facing basic needs insecurities are significantly less likely to leave college without completing an associate's or bachelor's degree.<sup>3</sup> Today's students show a great deal of resilience in the face of adversity—but succeeding in an academic environment is extremely difficult without access to basic needs, like food and shelter.

The federal government has various programs designed to provide a safety net for individuals and families. Many of these programs are mean-tested, meaning recipients are eligible based on income levels. Higher Learning Advocates has created a list of these programs, how each program is connected to college students' needs, and the eligibility requirements—the resource can be found [here](#).

However, today's students often face a series of barriers to enrolling in and receiving means-tested benefits, like work requirements or specific exemptions that prevent college students from enrolling. Further, students are often unaware of the benefits available to them and are left to navigate the complexities of the systems on their own. It's estimated that 52 percent of students who faced food or housing insecurity in 2020 didn't apply for benefits because they didn't know how to—leaving thousands of dollars of needed support on the table.<sup>4</sup>

But the hopeful news is that states, institutions, and nonprofit organizations have pioneered several successful programs to reduce the barriers that students face to access means-tested benefits. We outline a few of those key efforts in this resource.

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# Providing Students with Comprehensive Resources to Connect them to Means-Tested Benefits

Accessing means-tested benefits often requires filling out complex applications and long visits to different administrative offices. College students may not apply for means-tested benefits due to a lack of guidance or help with determining eligibility and applying to programs. For example, it is estimated that 18 percent of students are eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), but only three percent actually apply for and receive these benefits.<sup>5</sup> Colleges can be a critical resource to help students navigate applications and eligibility requirements, and studies have shown that campus-based services in a “one-stop shop” greatly decrease the burden on students when enrolling in means-tested benefits.

## SINGLE STOP USA'S COMMUNITY COLLEGE INITIATIVE

Single Stop USA is a national nonprofit that connects low-income families to social services, including means-tested benefits such as SNAP and Medicaid. Single Stop began its community college program in 2009, and now has more than 30 partners across eight states—from Colorado State University campuses to Northern Virginia Community College. Single Stop utilizes an online tool to estimate the potential benefits the student may qualify to receive, then connects the student with staff at the college to assist with their applications to benefit programs. Since 2009, Single Stop and its college partners have connected over 269,272 students to nearly \$548 million in benefits.<sup>6</sup> When students are connected to these supports, it makes it easier to stick to their education plans. A 2016 RAND study shows that students who used Single Stop were between 6-11 percent more likely to persist into their next year of college, and more likely to complete their college programs.<sup>7</sup>

### Spotlight: Nash Community College



Established in 2015, the Single Stop office at Nash Community College (NCC) has served as a model for identifying benefits and wrap-around services for community college students. Through a single location called the Student Wellness Center, NCC provides access to clinical screenings, crisis counseling, and other therapeutic support services provided at no cost to the student, in addition to counselors who assist students in applying to means-tested benefits programs. Between 2015-2020, NCC's Single Stop has identified over \$5 million in federal, state, and local resources for 515 students.<sup>8</sup>



### Challenges

The benefit of Single Stop has shown some variance across colleges that have implemented it. Single Stop, and similar “one-stop shop” programs do ease the burden on students to enroll in available benefits, but they cannot address regulatory barriers and work requirements that still preclude many low-income college students from being eligible for several much needed benefits. Colleges must learn from best practices to ensure they are maximizing the return for students, including doing more to connect students with programs. Even small innovations and nudges can go a long way—a recent study showed that sending a simple email to students advertising the center's services more than doubled the use of the center.<sup>9</sup>

# Reforming SNAP Eligibility Criteria to Clarify and Expand Eligibility

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, provides nutrition benefits to supplement the food budget of low-income families. It is the largest federal program to help Americans struggling with food insecurity—but its design leaves out most low-income college students. Currently, college students can't access SNAP without meeting additional requirements, such as working 20 hours a week or raising a child.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 paused the work and child raising requirements for the time period of the COVID-19 emergency, which expanded SNAP eligibility to as many as three million low-income college students.<sup>10</sup> While Congress continues to consider making these changes permanent, some states have taken the initiative to reform barriers to make it easier for students to access this important benefit beyond the pandemic.

One way that states have improved access to SNAP is designating certain postsecondary institutions and programs as equivalent to a SNAP Employment and Training Programs (SNAP E&T). This allows any student that meets income eligibility criteria to enroll in SNAP just by proving their enrollment in a qualified program. When New York state recently made this change, it opened up SNAP to nearly 75,000 students, which amounts to nearly a quarter of students enrolled in two-year institutions across the state.<sup>11</sup> Revising eligibility criteria for SNAP to reach more of today's students is an important innovation to ensure that students are able to access benefits that they sorely need.

## Spotlight: Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) led the way on reforming SNAP eligibility for students enrolled in vocational and technical programs— in 2010 the state was the first to expand eligibility for SNAP to students enrolled in career and vocational learning programs at community colleges.<sup>12</sup> DTA also worked with the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute to create an easy-to-use eligibility verification form for colleges to quickly confirm eligibility for students, reducing the administrative burden on both colleges and students. It is estimated that 50,000 students benefited from these changes.<sup>13</sup>



## Challenges

Ultimately, these programs work within a federal system that sets a standard riddled with barriers to access SNAP for college students facing food insecurity. While states have found smart ways to expand SNAP access, state plans still must be approved by USDA, creating a persistent federal hurdle for states that want to include more college students in SNAP benefits. Federal legislation such as the Student Food Security Act, introduced in May 2021, would expand SNAP access to all Pell-eligible students. Legislation like this would be a more effective way to expand eligibility for SNAP to all low-income students nationwide, instead of continuing a patchwork of SNAP access for students.<sup>14</sup>

# Subsidized Housing for College Students Experiencing Homelessness

College students are disproportionately more likely to face housing insecurity and homelessness. Twenty-seven percent of students who live on-campus and 43 percent who live off-campus were experiencing housing insecurity in 2020, compared to roughly 0.2 percent of the general population.<sup>1516</sup> While on-campus housing is typically available for undergraduates, it can be too expensive or inconvenient for many, or unavailable for some, like parenting students.

The federal government's Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, often referred to as Section 8 housing, provides rent subsidies to low-income individuals. But college students who don't get support from their institution to enroll in this program often find themselves facing long wait times and difficulty finding appropriate housing. To ease the burden for students, institutions and state higher education agencies have begun partnering with local housing developments to offer nearby, affordable housing for students. For example, the Massachusetts Student Housing Security Pilot allows community college students to access free residential housing at nearby four-year institutions.

## Spotlight: Tacoma Housing Assistance Program



The College Housing Assistance Program, CHAP, began in 2014 as a pilot program offering housing vouchers to 25 homeless and 22 "near homeless" students at Tacoma Community College (TCC) in Washington state.<sup>17</sup> The CHAP vouchers provide a flat subsidy based on household size and students can use them to secure housing on the private rental market. Since its inception in 2014, CHAP has expanded to support 150 students with vouchers funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Moving to Work program, and students receiving an average monthly rental assistance of \$533.<sup>18</sup> Data collected by the Tacoma Housing Authority has shown that 60 percent of students who participated graduated or remained enrolled in college, as opposed to 16 percent of the students who didn't receive such assistance.<sup>19</sup>



## Challenges

Many CHAP students reportedly struggled to find housing despite their vouchers because landlords had negative stereotypes about both tenants that pay with vouchers and about college students. The combined effect of dual negative stereotypes can be disastrous for students seeking housing. Any program that supports college students experiencing homelessness must also build outreach and education efforts to landlords and build up buy-in from the regional community. And ultimately, the federal government needs to continue to support local demonstration programs such as the CHAP program for local housing projects to continue to be successful and to scale effectively for college students.



# Conclusion

Means-tested government benefits are one of the most powerful tools that we use to create a social safety net so that no one has to suffer from the debilitating effects that poverty can bring. When basic needs are covered—such as food on the table or a roof over their heads—students are able to succeed in the classroom and in their goals. But all too often, college students are left out of means-tested programs because of arcane requirements or

simply a lack of knowledge and support. Through outreach, education, and reform institutions, localities, and states have found ways to make it easier to connect students with these programs and protect their basic needs. But because the majority of these means-tested benefits are federal programs, it will be up to the federal government to make needed policy changes and to scale these innovations for students nationwide.

# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Hope Center, #RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic, March 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfson, Julia A, et. al., The effect of food insecurity during college on graduation and type of degree attained: evidence from a nationally representative longitudinal survey, Public Health Nutrition, September 2021.

<sup>4</sup> The Hope Center, #RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic, March 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Young Invincibles, Rethinking SNAP Benefits for College Students, February 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Freudenberg, Nicholas, et. al., College Students and SNAP: The New Face of Food Insecurity in the United States, City College of New York, December 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Daugherty, Lindsay, Connecting College Students to Alternative Sources of Support, RAND Corporation, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Nash News, NCC leads students to more than \$5 million in financial support resources, May 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Godrick-Rab, Sara, et. al., Supporting the Whole Community College Student: The Impact of Nudging for Basic Needs Security, The Hope Center, October 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Granville, Peter, Congress Made 3 Million College Students Newly Eligible for SNAP Food Aid. Here's What Must Come Next, The Century Foundation, February 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Silberstein, Rachel, In New York, SNAP benefits extended to low-income college students, The Times Union, October 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Burnside, Ashley, et. al., Connecting Community College Students to SNAP, Center for Law and Social Policy, April 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Murphy, Warren, Padilla, Sanders, Hayes, Lawson, Torres Introduce the Bicameral Student Food Security Act, May 2021.

<sup>15</sup> The Hope Center, #RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic, March 2021.

<sup>16</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness, State of Homelessness: 2021 Edition.

<sup>17</sup> Godrick-Rab, Sara, et. al., The Hope Center, A First Look At Impacts Of The College Housing Assistance Program At Tacoma Community College, June 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Brey, Jared, Next City, Tacoma's Got Housing Vouchers Just for College Students, February 2020.