

UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON

Nutritional Sciences Program

College Students' Perceptions of SNAP and Strategies to Increase Participation

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NUTR 596: Nutrition Practice
Capstone

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ABSTRACT

Food insecurity is a significant public health issue in the United States and is especially prevalent among college students. One program that addresses food insecurity is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). However, college students' utilization of this program is low. This literature review aims to document perceptions of SNAP among college students and identify factors contributing to low participation rates. In total, five studies revealed the following themes regarding students' perceptions and barriers to participation: confusion about SNAP eligibility rules, frustration with the administrative burdens of applying for SNAP benefits, fear about immigration status, the perception that level of need is not high enough, and perceived stigma and feelings of shame. Consequently, strategies to increase SNAP participation among college students must address these factors.

INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity, defined by the USDA as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life, is a significant public health issue. An estimated 10.5% of households in the United States are food insecure.¹ This public health issue is particularly prevalent among college students. Prevalence estimates among this population vary greatly, but most studies estimate food insecurity rates of over 30 percent.² Food insecurity correlates with poor dietary intake, including decreased intake of fruits and vegetables.³ It is also associated with numerous poor health outcomes, including increased risks of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, obesity, and mental health issues.⁴ For this reason, it is vital to address this issue to promote overall health and well-being.

In the United States, various food assistance programs are in place at the federal, state, and local levels to address high food insecurity rates. One program of particular importance is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program. In Washington State, this program is Basic Food, and it serves approximately 11% of the state's population.⁵ Recently, Basic Food eligibility criteria for students have changed, increasing the number of individuals eligible for the program.⁶

A study conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that, in 2018, about 85% of SNAP-eligible individuals living in the United States received SNAP benefits.⁷ However, by comparison, only about 31% of eligible college students received SNAP benefits.² For this reason, it is vital to understand the factors that may account for these differences in SNAP utilization and participation. It is especially important to pinpoint these factors in Washington State since eligibility among this population has increased. This literature review is a capstone project completed at the University of Washington, in coordination with the United Way of King County (UWKC) in Seattle, Washington. The review aims to understand college students' perceptions of food assistance programs to help explain these differences. Consequently, these findings may inform the UWKC's strategies to increase SNAP participation among college students.

METHODS

I conducted a review of the literature using Google Scholar and PubMed databases. Keywords used in searches included: (college) AND (student) AND (SNAP OR *food stamp* OR *food insecur*). Exclusion criteria included publishing before 2011 or focusing on perceptions of other food assistance programs, such as campus food banks and meal swipe exchange programs. I also excluded studies that pertained to the impacts of food insecurity on college students, without mentioning perceptions or use of food assistance programs. Further, I used “snowball” searching, examining references from relevant articles to identify additional literature. In total, this review includes five studies that documented students’ perceptions of SNAP and food assistance programs.

REVIEW OF IDENTIFIED LITERATURE

Five main themes emerged from the literature regarding college students’ perceptions of SNAP and barriers to participation among this population. Consistently, students expressed the following sentiments:

1. Confusion about SNAP eligibility rules and requirements
2. Frustration with the administrative burdens surrounding the SNAP application process
3. Fear about immigration and citizenship status
4. The perception that their level of need is not high enough to require assistance
5. Feelings of shame and stigma associated with needing public assistance

Confusion Surrounding SNAP Eligibility

One factor significantly impacting college students’ participation in SNAP is confusion and uncertainty regarding program eligibility and how SNAP rules apply to them. In a student discussion group held by the GAO, many students expressed that they were unaware of their SNAP eligibility until told by an official at their college. However, the GAO also found that many college officials, themselves, had difficulty understanding SNAP requirements. Those interviewed explicitly expressed the desire to receive information from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service about college eligibility rules and the application process to educate their students more effectively.²

Administrative Burdens & Application Process

Confusion surrounding SNAP did not just apply to eligibility criteria, but the application process, as well. One study that documented the barriers college students encounter when accessing food assistance concluded that the high administrative burdens associated with the SNAP application process were enough to deter students from applying for benefits even when they qualify. Interviews with students revealed that the time and effort it took to learn about the program and apply were discouraging. Further, students expressed frustration with not knowing whom to speak to for answers or clarifications. Consequently, some students chose to pursue alternative forms of assistance, such as student loans and work-study.⁸ A study conducted at Kentucky State University documented the consequences of this confusion. Researchers found that of the 44.4%

of survey respondents who fit the criteria for food insecurity, only 6.3% of these students were receiving SNAP benefits. In assessing the reasons for low participation, researchers found that SNAP denied 18% of students due to an administrative error in the application process.⁹

Fear due to Immigration Status

One study focused on the confusion and anxiety surrounding applying for SNAP among students who are immigrants. Researchers found that this confusion increased following the Trump Administration's proposal of a public charge rule in 2020, preventing immigrants who were likely to become wards of the state from entering the country or becoming U.S. citizens. The administration briefly implemented the ruling, which heavily impacted people receiving public benefits, before it was struck down in 2021. However, the proposal and controversy surrounding it increased fear and confusion among immigrant households, decreasing this population's desire to access public benefits such as SNAP.⁸

Perceptions of Need

In a mixed-methods study exploring the complexity of college student food insecurity, interviews revealed that many students do not seek out food assistance programs because they do not feel their need is high enough. For example, one student explained that because he chooses to spend money on school, he should provide for himself without help. Many students believed that resources outside of school should go to members of the surrounding community rather than for them. Similarly, students stated that others were worse off than them and that applying for SNAP would take resources away from those they believed had greater need.¹⁰

This theme of being undeserving of benefits also emerged from a qualitative study on students' experiences with food insecurity. Interviews highlighted students' beliefs that their situations regarding food insecurity were not severe enough to merit external help, particularly when compared with other individuals in the community. Students reported whether they have ever thought about applying for SNAP and why. Among those who had not thought about applying, the primary reason (chosen by 70% of study participants) was 'I think other people have greater need.'¹¹

Feelings of Shame and Stigma

Multiple studies found that the feelings of shame and the stigma associated with public benefits deterred many students from seeking assistance, in general. In one study, students mentioned that the social stigma felt by their peers when discussing SNAP and other public assistance programs led them to not apply for benefits. In one study, interviews with food insecure students highlighted both the administrative burdens and the resultant psychological costs associated with applying for SNAP benefits. These psychological costs include stress, loss of autonomy, and a sense of shame. Interviewed students greatly feared their friends' reactions to finding out they were receiving SNAP benefits. While the perceived stigma of being on SNAP exists among the general population, students mentioned feeling an additional sense of judgment for being a young person needing help when their peers did not.⁸

Another qualitative study highlighted, more generally, the stigma associated with not being able to provide for oneself. Students expressed the shame they felt in not being able to afford food without assistance and spoke of how this diminished their sense of dignity. Many students specifically mentioned their worry about being “seen” using SNAP benefits by friends. For some, the potential for friends to “find out” they needed assistance with purchasing food was enough to deter them from using SNAP altogether.¹⁰

STRATEGIES TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION

Approaches to increasing SNAP participation among college students must address the abovementioned perceptions and barriers. Throughout the United States, college administrators, staff, and students have proposed and implemented innovative solutions and programs to increase SNAP participation. The four most common strategies are as follows:

1. Providing on-campus assistance with navigating SNAP and other benefit programs
2. Developing peer support programs and networks
3. Decreasing the perceived stigma and shame associated with receiving SNAP benefits
4. Emphasizing coordinated and state-wide outreach efforts

Navigation Assistance on Campus

Throughout the United States, various programs assist college students in applying for and receiving SNAP benefits. In the study conducted by the GAO, 8 of the 14 colleges surveyed had a coordinated benefits access program. The goal of these programs is to help students apply for various federal and state benefits, specifically at a centralized location.² The holistic nature of these programs and the connection of various campus resources can better address the multifaceted and complex nature of food insecurity.

An example of this type of program is Single Stop, a national nonprofit operating in community colleges and providing a ‘one-stop resource center,’ offering students holistic advising and support with basic needs assistance. The program currently operates at 30 colleges across the United States and has served over 250,000 students.¹² A 2014 [evaluation of Single Stop](#) provided insights into strategies that have increased students’ use of the program, including campus-wide outreach efforts, buy-in from faculty, and the normalization of seeking assistance.

Peer Support Programs

A newer approach to increasing SNAP participation through navigation assistance is the implementation of peer support programs. One of the first documented peer support initiatives was Oh SNAP!, at Humboldt State University. Through this program, college students aim to support their peers experiencing food insecurity by assisting them with the CalFresh application process and connecting them to other local food resources.¹³ Swipe Out Hunger, the leading nonprofit addressing hunger among college students in the United States, recently piloted a similar program at City University of New York (CUNY). The program is a free digital, one-on-one referral service that employs and trains CUNY students to serve as peer navigators. These navigators support fellow students through the SNAP application process and assist them in

accessing other public benefits and campus resources.¹⁴ Cal State-East Bay recently started a similar program, where administrators train work-study students to assist other students in signing up for SNAP benefits. This program is unique, as it operates out of the campus library, leveraging the mindset that students are more likely to utilize the service if it is brought directly to them.¹⁵

Decreasing Perceived Stigma

The peer-to-peer model at both CUNY and Cal State-East Bay can also potentially decrease the perceived stigma surrounding SNAP and accessing other support services. According to recipients of the CUNY program, the fact that those helping them have faced similar challenges and understand their experience brings a sense of comfort and less shame about needing SNAP benefits.¹⁴ At Cal-State, many work-study students providing navigation assistance are also eligible for the program, building a sense of community and decreasing shame associated with receiving help.¹⁵

The messaging used to reach students about SNAP can also impact the perceived stigma associated with needing support. The New England Board of Higher Education recently began an advocacy campaign for messaging on college campuses that normalizes seeking assistance. The board suggests that campus outreach coordinators reframe messaging in a way that considers loss aversion bias, or the tendency to prefer avoiding losses to acquiring equivalent gains. In the case of SNAP, board officials believe that messaging framing SNAP benefits as something to lose rather than something to acquire could increase participation. Similarly, the board suggests using phrases such as “many college students need help paying for food” to help students feel less alone in their struggles.¹⁶ At Cal State-East Bay, messaging has been reframed, with SNAP now referred to as “food aid.” Outreach coordinators communicate to students that if they are eligible for financial aid, they are likely also eligible for food aid. Campus officials feel this has decreased the stigma associated with food assistance and, consequently, has increased SNAP enrollment.¹⁵

These findings suggest that leveraging behavioral science can increase participation in SNAP. While this is an emerging field, there has been some related research conducted by Persistence Plus, a company that uses “nudging” in higher education settings to increase the use of campus resources. Grounded in behavioral science, the company nudges students through text messages to take advantage of food pantries and emergency aid.¹⁷ While not necessarily SNAP specific, the company has outlined best practices for using behavioral science tools to promote assistance seeking.

Increased Outreach

Since the research suggests that students seldom seek out SNAP benefits, it is vital to increase outreach on college campuses to reach more individuals. Many colleges have developed specific SNAP outreach materials with information on the program, how to apply, and where on campus to seek assistance. In California, outreach has extended beyond singular campuses and has become a coordinated effort across the entire state. The California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office and the Foundation for California Community Colleges collaborate with various

community partners on the CalFresh Outreach Project. This project aims to raise awareness and conduct state-wide, coordinated outreach among students to increase enrollment in CalFresh benefits. Strategies include tailored promotional materials, digital outreach, and a pilot program of CalFresh Outreach Student Ambassadors. This program trains students at various community colleges throughout the state on conducting peer-to-peer outreach on their campuses to increase knowledge of food assistance resources.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Although food insecurity is a prominent public health issue among college students, utilization of food assistance programs, such as SNAP, is low among this group compared to the general population. To better understand why this is the case, it is important to discern college students' perceptions of food assistance programs. Subsequently, this information can inform strategies to address them.

Overall, studies in this area suggest that confusion regarding SNAP, including eligibility rules and how to apply for benefits, deters students from applying for benefits. Many students assume they are not eligible even if they are, while those that know they are eligible cite administrative burdens as barriers. Further, the abovementioned studies highlight the perceived stigma and shame college students often feel regarding needing assistance. This perceived stigma pertains to other populations receiving SNAP benefits, but may feel more heightened during a time where peer pressure and a desire to fit in socially is high.⁸ Lastly, these studies suggest that students often feel their need is not significant enough to warrant assistance and that others need SNAP benefits more than them.

Strategies to increase SNAP participation among college students should consider these findings. Existing programs implemented throughout the country have aimed to decrease stigma and shame, centralize services, and lower administrative burdens placed on students. As it stands, these programs have not been thoroughly evaluated to determine whether or not they have effectively increased student participation. However, anecdotally, they seem to be making SNAP more accessible to this population. Future research should aim to evaluate these programs to quantify their impacts.

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