



Considerations for providing SNAP E&T through community colleges: Lessons from the SNAP E&T Pilots

Brief

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded pilot grants to 10 States—California, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington—to test innovative strategies for providing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T). Most of the pilots partnered with community colleges to provide SNAP E&T services. For most, the community college was one of several SNAP E&T providers and it primarily offered occupational skills training. However in two pilots, community colleges were the core service providers and all services were offered through the colleges. Across all pilots, thousands of individuals accessed services through the community colleges during a three-year period. This brief presents the lessons learned from partnering with community colleges to provide SNAP E&T services and the practical considerations State SNAP agencies and community colleges should weigh when working with SNAP E&T participants.

States have considerable flexibility in how they deliver SNAP E&T services. A few States provide E&T services directly through their SNAP agencies, but most States contract with local employment and training providers, such as community-based organizations (CBOs), for-profit training organizations, and workforce agencies. Community colleges can also be an important E&T partner for States. Community colleges have the ability to provide a range of employment and training activities and services at a single location. In addition, many have the organizational structure and administrative resources needed to administer robust SNAP E&T programs, which can be complicated and resource intensive. Although there are many benefits to partnering with community colleges, we learned from the SNAP E&T pilots that there are also some challenges inherent in working with them. These findings from the pilots provide useful lessons for State SNAP agencies to consider when partnering with community colleges.

Community college capacity

The size and capacity of community colleges makes them a good potential partner for SNAP E&T programs. They offer a range of training that can meet the varying needs of SNAP participants at one location. Community colleges generally have the flexibility and resources needed to scale up the SNAP E&T program more easily than smaller partners or to pivot if additional services or classes are needed for an influx of participants.

Community colleges reach a diverse population. Campuses are often located throughout States, including in rural areas where workforce development services may otherwise be limited. They serve a range of people, including non-traditional students—those who are older, attend school part-time, work while in school, or have children. These types of students tend to live in low-income households, which may need and are often eligible for SNAP benefits. Many of these non-traditional students who qualify for SNAP will also be eligible for SNAP E&T services. Therefore, community colleges are likely already serving a large group of individuals who are eligible for and could benefit from the SNAP E&T program, and enrolling students in the program also benefits the community colleges by offsetting some of the participants' costs.

Some community colleges serve individuals who have not earned a high school diploma or the equivalent by co-locating adult education programs on campus. Having basic education and occupational skills training at one location makes it easier for individuals to transition from one program to the next when they are ready and reduces the potential for drop off between programs. Some community colleges offer accelerated opportunities programs that allow students without a diploma to work toward a high school equivalency at the same time they enroll in college courses.



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These types of programs sometimes include additional support from staff on campus to ensure success. In the Kentucky pilot, the services provided through the community college were modeled after an accelerated opportunities program in the area, where success coaches worked closely with students to help them navigate their basic education classes and the college system to ensure they remained in classes.

Community colleges have the infrastructure to provide a “one-stop” location for all SNAP E&T services. Providing services through one location eliminates the need for multiple referrals to other providers, which is often when participants drop out of the program. It also provides a consistent setting for completing activities and receiving support. Two of the SNAP E&T pilots—Mississippi and Virginia—primarily offered all of their SNAP E&T services through community colleges. Although there often was drop off between SNAP E&T enrollment and individuals first showing up at the community college (SNAP agencies conducted pilot enrollment and referred individuals to the community college), once there, the community college provided case management, support services, training, adult education, and work-based learning opportunities (in Mississippi). Pilot participants did not have to work with multiple providers or receive referrals to other locations to obtain the full package of services. This one-stop type of provider may help explain why pilot participants stayed in services longer and participated in activities at higher rates than those who were not offered pilot services (this group was eligible for the existing SNAP E&T program services and might have had to work with multiple providers). The rates of completing activities and receipt of training certification also were much higher for those who had access to pilot services than those who did not, by as much as double.

Practical considerations for working with community colleges

There are many advantages to partnering with community colleges, but there can be challenges too. Community colleges may not be accustomed to working with public assistance programs, and they may not be familiar with the SNAP eligibility rules for students, work requirements policies for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs), financial reimbursements constraints, and reporting requirements. Through the SNAP E&T pilots, States found several unexpected challenges related to wait times to access training, not all SNAP E&T participants being eligible for or having access to services, and community college staff not having the existing tools to provide all SNAP E&T services. As SNAP agencies and community colleges explore partnerships, they should consider these potential pitfalls that could affect engagement and the college’s ability to serve SNAP E&T participants.

The mismatch between SNAP E&T enrollment and community college schedules creates waiting periods. In general, new SNAP participants are flowing into SNAP E&T programs continuously each month, whereas training programs at community colleges are frequently offered on a quarterly or semester basis. This was the case for the pilots that worked with community colleges, and thus, individuals referred to training just after classes began often had to wait until the start of the next scheduled class. Depending on when people entered the program, the wait might be a few weeks to a few months. These wait periods often resulted in participants not starting the training classes. Some individuals left the SNAP E&T program because they were not interested in other available activities or they did not want to wait.



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Some people had concerns about not having a paycheck for such a long period due to the combined wait time and length of the training—they may be waiting to enter the workforce for 6 to 12 months, even for a relatively short training program. In other cases, individuals never started the training after the wait period because they instead found employment or chose to participate in other activities. In some pilots that also offered training through for-profit organizations or CBOs, participants often chose those over the community college, because the courses were offered more frequently, could be completed more quickly, and resulted in similar certifications. This further reduced the number of participants accessing training at the community colleges.

Waiting periods are particularly problematic for those who have work requirements that could affect SNAP eligibility, such as ABAWDs or those in mandatory E&T programs. In Mississippi, which operated a mandatory E&T program, staff noted that those who were waiting for classes to begin were often placed in “filler activities or did busy work,” which neither the staff nor participants felt was beneficial. In Illinois, which also operated a mandatory E&T program, some providers were able to offer job readiness training while participants waiting for training to begin, but this was not consistently available to all individuals.

Waiting periods are likely when working with community colleges for training. State SNAP agencies need to work with community colleges to develop strategies that will keep SNAP participants engaged in useful, skill-building activities during these potential waiting periods. For example, in Virginia, the community colleges offered online, self-paced trainings on digital literacy, soft skills, and job readiness training that people could take while waiting for classes to begin. In some cases, the colleges added training classes for a few occupations when large enough cohorts were waiting to start. State SNAP agencies need to ensure participants can fully engage in qualifying activities that meet work requirements, so they do not lose their SNAP benefits.

Not all SNAP E&T participants will be a good fit for community college services. Although community colleges have the capacity to provide an array of training and other services to meet the needs of a broader group of individuals, they may not be the best venue to serve all SNAP E&T participants. Community colleges establish criteria for who qualifies for each training course, which everyone will not meet, and some SNAP participants may not be ready or willing to start community college activities when they first enroll in the program. During the pilots, staff and participants discussed an array of reasons that all SNAP E&T participants may not be a good fit for community college services, including:

- Most community colleges required aptitude testing, such as the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment or the Test of Adult Basic Education. Staff found that many participants were resistant to taking the tests. They felt intimidated—especially those who had been out of school for many years—or had test anxiety. Although staff tried to support participants and explain the process to them to reduce their fears, some chose not to participate in training because of the testing requirements.

Participants had to obtain a minimum score on the test to be eligible for training. Frequently, those in the pilot did not meet the minimum scores and had to enroll in adult education courses to improve their reading or math skills before enrolling in classes. Some participants were frustrated by this or felt discouraged. The colleges



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that were co-located with adult education had some success in keeping participants engaged, but many participants did not follow through with adult education to improve their scores and start training.

- Generally participants needed a high school diploma or the equivalent to enroll in the community college. In the pilots, 19 percent (Vermont) to 31 percent (Mississippi) of individuals did not have a high school diploma when they enrolled in the pilot. Most of the community colleges did not have an accelerated opportunities program, so these individuals were not able to access classes at community colleges immediately.
- Some pilot participants discussed having fears about going back to school or taking classes on a campus, particularly if they have been out of school for a long time. The average age of those enrolled in the pilots was 32 to 39 years old, so the majority of those in the program had been out of school for at least a decade.

Outstanding community college debt could prevent enrollment.

Generally, to enroll in a community college any outstanding debt with the State college system must be paid before starting new classes. Grantees were surprised by the frequency at which individuals in the pilot had started community college in the past and had unpaid college tuition bills. The amount of the debt ranged from less than a hundred dollars to thousands, and was often from many years before.

Although the SNAP E&T program could pay for all of the costs associated with the new training, the program cannot pay for outstanding tuition or fees (or any existing debt) related to prior enrollment. Participants had to settle the debt with their own funds. However, participants generally did not have the money available to pay off the debt, even when it was a relatively small amount. The inability to pay the debt prevented them from accessing training at the community college.

Despite not being able to find a direct solution to allow indebted participants to enroll at community colleges, a few pilots were able to provide training through other organizations in some cases. Where available, pilots enrolled individuals in training through local CBOs or for-profit organizations. The training options and level of certification were often less extensive, but these options worked well for some participants.

In Mississippi, because some services at the community college were wholly paid for and only open to those in the SNAP E&T pilot, participants could receive those services at the community college even if they had outstanding debt. These services included life skills and job readiness course, work-based learning, job placement, and case management. Participants with outstanding debt could not enroll in other training courses that were open to everyone at the community college, however.

For many community colleges, providing case management and job placement may not be strengths. Community colleges core purpose is to educate and provide training. Some may also provide additional supports for students to help navigate college and provide assistance connecting students to employers once students have completed their coursework. However, for States that would like community colleges to be the primary service provider or where they are the only provider in certain areas, State SNAP agencies need to ensure that the community college has the resources and staff in place to provide the level of support needed for SNAP E&T participants.



In Virginia, staff at one community college noted that serving those in the pilot required different and more intensive supports than were needed for other students in comparable programs. However, they also pointed out that SNAP participants “had the most to gain” from those programs when they succeeded.

- **Case management.** Although they have flexibility in how they do it, every State must provide case management services to all SNAP E&T participants. For the pilots that used community colleges as the primary providers, the colleges did not have any case management models in place before the pilot began. Some had career navigators or coaches on campus, but these staff generally helped participants determine the classes they needed and focused on how to complete training programs or degrees. They typically did not provide assessments, direct case management, or help reducing barriers. Each community college system had to hire new staff to provide case management and develop procedures for providing case management consistently.

The SNAP E&T population faces many barriers that affect engagement, including a lack of transportation or child care, unstable housing, physical or mental health issues, substance use disorders, and past incarceration. The depth of these barriers and how they affected engagement was surprising to many pilot providers. The community college staff were particularly unaware of the level of support that these participants needed. In Virginia, staff at one community college noted that serving those in the pilot required different and more intensive supports than were needed for other students in comparable programs. However, they also pointed out that SNAP participants “had the most to gain” from those programs when they succeeded.

When State SNAP agencies partner with community colleges, they will need to ensure the college can provide the level of support and case management required for SNAP E&T participants or find an alternative option. This could include the State providing the services themselves or identifying another partner in the community to provide them to the participants while enrolled at the college. SNAP E&T participants will require consistent contact with a case manager who has the skillset to work with this population and help mitigate barriers. SNAP E&T programs typically provide direct support services to participants to help with these barriers, including assistance with transportation, child care, or training or work supplies. Case manager may also need to make referrals for housing assistance or mental health services in the community.

- **Job placement services.** After participants complete a training program, it is important that they receive assistance with finding employment. Pilot States found that job placement was not consistently a core service provided by community colleges. Although the colleges were providing training for specific occupations, they were not always able to directly connect participants to employers that were hiring. Few community colleges in the pilot had job placement services on campus. Mississippi tried to develop this capacity, but did not have connections with employers and often struggled to identify and engage employers. Virginia also faced these challenges. Some participants reported being frustrated that job search and career coaching services were not robust enough, and they felt staff lacked direct connections to employers who were hiring in the field for which participants were training.

In the pilots that offered SNAP E&T services through a range of providers, community colleges generally referred participants to another provider in the area to receive help with job placement after completing training. Many providers, including workforce agencies, offer job placement services and have strong connections to employers in the community. They are more easily able to connect participants with job openings. Identifying other community partners who can provide job placement services when participants complete training is a good option for community colleges that do not have robust job placement services available on campus.

Conclusion

As States review their SNAP E&T programs each year and look for opportunities to expand their services, community colleges can be an important partner. Community colleges have the capacity to provide a range of services and to navigate the complexity of operating a SNAP E&T program. At the same time, States have encountered some challenges with the structure of community colleges and limitation on their ability to serve all types of SNAP E&T participants. The experiences of SNAP E&T pilots provide valuable lessons for how SNAP agencies in several States navigated their partnerships with community colleges. As State SNAP agencies explore new or expanded partnerships with community colleges, the lessons from the pilots provide practical considerations for them, such as determining:

- What steps can we take to limit wait times, and what activities are available to those with work requirements during these waiting periods?
- Do we have other providers and activities available to those who may not be interested in or meet the criteria for training at the community colleges?
- Are there other training providers available for those who may not be able to enroll at a particular community college because they have outstanding debt or do not meet the college criteria?
- Can the community college provide the additional services needed for SNAP E&T participants, such as case management, support services, and job placement? If not, how can we provide those services ourselves or through other partners?

For more information: Detailed final findings are available in the full report “Expanding Opportunities & Reducing Barriers to Work: Final Summary Report” at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis>. Reports summarizing final findings from the 10 individual pilot reports also are available.

About the study

In the Agricultural Act of 2014, Congress authorized and funded 10 SNAP E&T pilots to test a range of innovative strategies to help SNAP participants find employment that increases their incomes and reduces their need for public assistance benefits. To encourage a diversity of approaches, each grantee identified focus populations, selected partners and service providers, and determined which services and activities best met their populations’ needs. The legislation that authorized the pilots also included funding for a randomized controlled trial evaluation to assess the impacts of the pilots, which was awarded to Mathematica.

The considerations for providing services through community colleges identified in this brief are based on analyses of qualitative data collected through telephone calls and in-person interviews with pilot staff from State agencies, partners, and providers, and focus groups conducted with individuals participating in the pilot.

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