Using Participant-Driven Assessments in SNAP E&T Programs: Lessons from the SNAP E&T Rapid Cycle Evaluation

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides food benefits to eligible individuals with low incomes. Some SNAP participants may also receive employment and training (E&T) services to help improve their economic self-sufficiency. States are required to operate a SNAP E&T program, but they have broad discretion to determine who to serve and what components (or activities) to offer. At a minimum, States must provide at least one education, training, or employment component, and reimbursements for supports such as assistance with child care, transportation, and training or work supplies. Since fiscal year 2020, States are also required to provide case management to every SNAP E&T participant. Case management approaches and content vary by State, but most include an assessment process when participants start the program to understand their life circumstances, barriers to employment, and goals.[1]

Assessments are an integral part of providing effective case management. Case managers typically use assessments when a participant first enrolls in the program to understand the individual's needs and any challenges they face. Based on the results, case managers make recommendations and provide referrals to best support the participant's goals. There are different approaches to conducting assessments. A traditional assessment begins with identifying participants' needs and barriers, where case managers are the primary driver of identifying where changes should occur. Recent research has shown that these types of assessments could contribute to a lack of participant engagement and do not lead to successful outcomes.[2, 3] These assessments often focus on what has gone wrong in a participant's past which could lead to diminished motivation.[4]

In recent years, there has been a trend for programs to shift from the traditional assessment approach to one that is participant-driven and that aims to leverage and foster internal motivation from the participant (Box 1).[4, 5, 6] These assessments have shown some promising outcomes. They also encourage participants to have agency in the case management process by allowing for self-reflection and decision making.

One such assessment, *Stepping Stones to Coaching Success* or *Stepping Stones*, is a simple, one-page tool that allows participants to rate their relevant strengths, skills, needs, and challenges using a defined scale.[7] Case managers then use the results of this assessment as the basis for a conversation about participants' strengths, their priorities, and working together to create a goal and a plan to achieve that goal. A few States participating in the Rapid Cycle Evaluation of Operational Improvements in SNAP E&T Program (SNAP E&T RCE) project used a variation of the *Stepping Stones* assessment in their interventions (Box 2).

> **Box 1. Characteristics of participant-driven assessments**
>
> - Take a strengths-based approach.
> - Help build participant buy-in and enhance motivation.
> - Are dynamic and facilitate discussion.
> - Provide a better match between participants' needs to available services.
> - Save time.
> - Require a shift in how staff provide services.

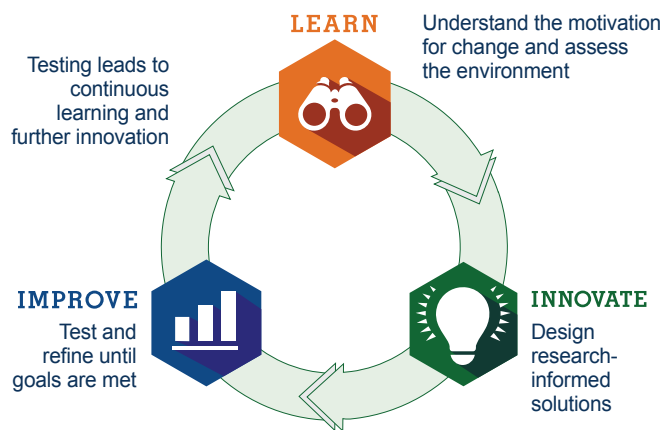> **Box 2. Assessment used in the SNAP E&T RCE project**
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> SNAP E&T programs tested participant-driven assessments as part of the project.
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> • Connecticut. Used the assessment to provide case management to community college students.
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> • Rhode Island. Used the assessment to help better match SNAP participants with E&T providers.
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> • District of Columbia (DC). Used the assessment to provide case management to SNAP E&T participants.

The purpose of this brief is to provide SNAP E&T program leaders and staff with considerations for using participant-driven assessments as part of their case management approach. These considerations come from lessons learned during the SNAP E&T RCE project (Box 3).

> **Box 3. What is the SNAP E&T RCE project?**
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> The rapid cycle evaluation (RCE) project tested seven, low-cost, small-scale interventions in SNAP E&T operations or service to improve SNAP E&T programs and identify how to strengthen the technical assistance FNS provides to States. From 2021 to 2024, Mathematica collaborated with the intervention sites to identify the major challenges their SNAP E&T programs faced—generally recruitment and outreach or participant engagement and receipt of services— and create and test changes to processes to address the challenges. These changes were tested with rigorous methods and assessed using SNAP administrative data and survey and qualitative data from staff and participants.[9]
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> **LEARN** Understand the motivation for change and assess the environment
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> Testing leads to continuous learning and further innovation
>
> **INNOVATE** Design research-informed solutions
>
> **IMPROVE** Test and refine until goals are met

Participant-driven assessments take a strengths-based approach

A strengths-based approach is one that assumes that participants have a set of strengths that they can use to cope with life's challenges. A strengths-based approach is transformative in that it requires a shift in nearly every aspect of case management, including how assessments are conducted. Traditional assessments typically ask questions like "What barriers do you face when finding a job?" A participant-driven assessment might instead develop separate questions for each area necessary for finding a job and ask participants to use a rating scale across each area to identify where participants are succeeding.

The assessments used for the SNAP E&T RCE interventions relied on a rating scale. For example, the assessment DC used for their intervention included several sections focused on individuals' goals, circumstances, and needs. Under each section were a series of anchor statements to help participants decide where they fall on a scale from "need help" to "confident & good to go." Figure 1 provides an example of the structure. It shows a single section from DC's assessment related to "*Deciding on a career*". The first topic related to career awareness includes the anchor statements "I don't know what career I want." and "I know what career I want." Participants read each statement and then decided where they fall on the scale. (DC's entire participant-driven assessment is included at the end of the brief in Figure 2.)

Figure 1. Example questions and rating scale for a participant-driven assessment used by DC in the SNAP E&T RCE project

			NEED HELP	READY TO EXPLORE	MAKING PROGRESS	CONFIDENT & GOOD TO GO	
	Career Awareness	▶ I don't know what career I want.	○	○	○	○	I know what career I want.
	Career Opportunities	▶ I don't know where to go to find "good jobs" that interest me.	○	○	○	○	I know where to find "good jobs" that interest me.
DECIDING ON A CAREER	Career Decision	▶ I don't know which careers are in demand in our region.	○	○	○	○	I know which careers are in demand in our region.
	Wages and salary	▶ I don't know what I need to earn to meet my current expenses.	○	○	○	○	I know what I need to earn to meet my current expenses.
		▶ I don't know what I should expect to be paid in my career.	○	○	○	○	I know what I am likely to be paid in my career.

A participant-driven assessment is meant to be a starting point. Participants may fill out an assessment on their own or with a case manager, but the case manager should follow-up with a discussion to understand the participant's relevant strengths and how they can be leveraged to deal with any challenges identified. For example, the assessment could reveal that the participant relies on family members for transportation and rated themselves "confident and good to go," but through discussion the participant describes that the transportation was often not reliable given their family members worked during the day. After understanding how this could be a problem, they changed their rating to "needs help" and transportation became a more the urgent challenge to address.

Participant-driven assessments can help build participant buy-in and enhance motivation

Although participant-driven assessments identify strengths, they also identify and prioritize challenges, which builds participant buy-in and enhances motivation. There are two aspects of a participant-driven assessment that can help to accomplish this: (1) self-rating areas of need and (2) the discussion around these areas.

The process of rating areas of strengths and challenges can help the participant see where to focus. Also, having a visual display of the ratings helps to foster self-reflection and discovery. As participants self-identify these areas, this can lead to increased buy-in and consensus on priority areas to work on with their case managers.

> " I just feel like, it [the assessment] did help them [the SNAP E&T staff] understand better what I was looking for. "
>
> *—DC SNAP E&T program participant*

The discussion of focus areas can also enhance participants' motivation. Case managers should aim to understand participants' goals for the future and can then guide participants using techniques such as motivational interviewing to prioritize steps to achieve those goals. This type of framing is empowering for the participant, facilitates better conversations with them, and helps to develop ownership for the plan and motivate the participant.

> **" [My case manager] was more concerned about my interest and what it is that I would like to do and what was my goals that I had for my future and she was more interested in, okay, what is it that you want, what is it that you're looking for, what are you looking to gain, what are some of your goals, what are some of the things that you like to do…she was just encouraging me about, you know, sticking with it and continuing…I was going to go and just get like the basic computer information on how to use the computer and she encouraged me to continue. She was like, hey, I think you should go a little further than that, you know, and encourage me to do it. Took a few more computer class and she was like, you never know, you might find, get you a good job that you can work in the office on a computer or something like that. And so I said, okay, I'm gonna go for it. "**

—DC SNAP E&T program participant

Participant-driven assessment are dynamic and facilitate discussion

Traditional assessments are often conducted once at intake and not revisited, but participant-driven assessments are tools that can and should be used over time. For the RCE project, case managers in Connecticut and DC used the assessments to help participants identify and implement strategies for mitigating challenges they are facing and to set and achieve employment and career goals. Then these were revisited during follow-up meetings to assess progress, determine if circumstances changed, and create new strategies and goals, as needed.

Assessments like *Stepping Stones* also help facilitate a conversational approach with participants that traditional assessments are not always structured to do. Providing the nuanced anchor statements by topic helps break out issues that a participant may not consider if just asked a broad question. For example, asking someone if they are interested in training may not elicit the same response as posing a series of questions or statements about their understanding and readiness for the career they want (see Figure 1 for example statements). In a participant-driven assessment, a participant may note that they know what type of career they want and feel confident in their soft skills (such as interviewing) to get job, but they may not know much about the credentials needed for the type of job they want. In this instance, the case manager could coach the participant on what skills are needed and set a goal of completing a training that can give them the right skills and credentials. Case managers can deliver the assessment verbally, ask the participant to complete the assessment in-person, or provide the participant with the assessment to complete on their own and then review in conversation. In Connecticut, case managers at the community colleges integrated the *Stepping Stones* assessment into their existing processes; some conducted the assessment while meeting with students, while others requested that participants complete the assessment prior to the case management meeting.

> **" But I think what's different with this tool as opposed to our [standard assessment] is really, one, it's something that the customer would be able to see, like they would have it in front of them as well. And then also to see where they might fall upon entry to the program. So some of the questions were a little bit more nuanced in, like, where do you see yourself here, do you need more assistance, whatever. And then the [standard assessment] is like a one and done where this one, it's something to come back to and look at throughout the relationship. "**

—DC SNAP E&T program staff member

As case managers and clients work together to complete the assessment and develop a plan, the case managers can help participants select a goal, state why the goal is important, outline the steps necessary to reach the goal, identify what might get in the way of goal attainment, and describe what type of assistance is needed.[8] Case managers might also consider asking participants to identify a person who is a positive influence in their life and who helps them be optimistic about their future to provide an inspiration for goal attainment.

Participant-driven assessments can provide a better match between participants' needs and available services

SNAP E&T program staff can tailor assessments such as *Stepping Stones* based on the context of the SNAP E&T program. For the RCE project, SNAP E&T staff tailored assessments in three sites to evaluate readiness and suitability for employment and training or potential employment opportunities. Rhode Island tailored the participant-driven assessment to better match participants to providers based on E&T providers' specific criteria for their programs.

Participant-driven assessments also improve the match between participants' needs and available services by facilitating discussion between case managers and participants. For example, when working with Connecticut community colleges, project and SNAP E&T staff modified *Stepping Stones* to help with assessing basic needs, health and wellness, school readiness, and career planning (Figure 3). This allowed case managers at this RCE site to obtain a fuller picture of the types of barriers that might hinder participant engagement with the program and codevelop a plan to address barriers.

> **"The questions feel like you're gathering information that will help the person in their referral…it gave us a better opportunity to guide somebody."**
>
> —*Rhode Island SNAP E&T program staff member*

Participant-driven assessments can save time

Participant-driven assessments are typically simple enough that participants can complete them while waiting for an appointment. Traditional assessments can be long and overly detailed, assessing barriers and challenges in every aspect of a participant's life. Coupled with intake or enrollment paperwork, this can increase participant burden and decrease their motivation to engage. In SNAP E&T RCE, project staff worked with each site to tailor the assessment to the areas most related to the goals of the program. In redesigning the assessment, Rhode Island removed questions that were too broad or did not specifically apply to a making a referral. The assessment was also revised to be more participant centered and less administrative (Box 4). This helped to save time for staff by streamlining the questions and focusing on only needed information.

Box 4. Examples of question changes made to assessments

Original assessment	New assessment
What barriers do you need help with to be able to work?	I'm going to read a few statements to you about your skills or items you may need for your career, and I would like you to think about if the statement is true or not. For each, you can tell me if you agree with the statement or if you disagree.
List employment history (employer name, address, pay rate, start/end date)	Are you employed? (options: Yes, 30 or more hours per week; Yes, less than 30 hours per week, or No)
List your current skills and qualifications	I'm going to read a few statements to you about your readiness to work, and I would like you to think about if the statement is true and you are confident about doing it on your own, or if you could use some assistance to help you get ready. For each, you can tell me if you could use a lot of help, a little help, or no help at all.

Participant-driven assessments require a shift in how case managers conduct their work

Implementing a participant-driven assessment may require SNAP E&T case managers to change how they collect and use information. For example, in the Connecticut intervention, many case managers opted to use the questions in the assessment as discussion points with their students, rather than completing it as a survey. This allowed students to answer the assessment questions while providing additional context for their answers. These types of shifts in how staff conduct assessments can be challenging as they represent a program-wide change.

Providing adequate training and time for case managers to feel comfortable using the assessment with participants is needed when implementing participant-driven assessments. Additionally, staff will need continued support and monitoring to ensure any questions and concerns are addressed and that staff are implementing consistently. The type of training and support needed depends on the context of the program. For example, the participant-driven assessment used by the Connecticut site was similar to their current assessment process, so RCE project staff provided an in-person training that briefly reviewed the purpose of the assessment and the assessment itself. Trainees then watched a pre-recorded session of a case manager using the assessment and spent most the of training in paired practice sessions. Following the training, project staff provided additional resources and held office hours for case managers to ask questions.

Conclusion

Participant-driven assessments can be a powerful tool for case managers to better understand participant's strengths and needs, while also empowering participants and allowing them to gain confidence. These assessments help to ask questions in a different way that gives participant a voice and a lead role in the process. If leadership and staff are prepared and supportive of the change, the assessments can transform the interactions between case managers and participants in mutually beneficial ways.

Endnotes

[1] Joyce, K., N. Reid, M. Kharsa, J. Berman, M. Levin, A. Paprocki, and M. Sarver. "Survey of SNAP E&T Case Management." Prepared by Mathematica, Contract No. GS-10F-0050L/12319819F0128. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, March 2023.

[2] Bauer, A., S. Baumgartner, P. Holcomb, and D. Friend. "Adopting a Motivation-Driven Approach to Case Management in HMRE Services." OPRE Report #2023-074, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023.

[3] Joyce, K. and S. McConnell. "Employment Coaching: Working with Low-income Populations to use Self-regulation Skills to Achieve Employment Goals" OPRE Report #2019-67. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019.

[4] Derr, M., and J. McCay. "Goal4 It!™: Science-Informed Approach to Achieving Economic Independence." Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2018.

[5] Leukefeld, C., Carlton, E. L., Staton-Tindall, M., and Delaney, M. "Six-Month Follow-Up Changes for TANF-Eligible Clients Involved in Kentucky's Targeted Assessment Program." Journal of Social Service Research, 38(3), 366–381, 2019.

[6] The Prosperity Agenda. "Family-Centered Coaching: A Toolkit to Transform Practice & Engage Families." W.K. Kellogg Foundation, April 2020.

[7] Derr, M., McCay, J., and Dunn, R. "Lifelong Learning Initiative: Goal4 It! Pro™." Mathematica Policy Research, Washington, DC, 2019.

[8] Gardiner, K., C. Saunders, S. McConnell, K. Joyce, and R. Cook. "Goal4 It!™: Implementation Findings from the Evaluation of Employment Coaching." OPRE Report #2022-305. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022.

[9] Intervention reports can be found at https://www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis.

Figure 2. Assessment from the DC site in the SNAP E&T RCE project

Category	Item	Need Help statement	NEED HELP	READY TO EXPLORE	MAKING PROGRESS	CONFIDENT & GOOD TO GO	Confident statement
DECIDING ON A CAREER	Career Awareness	I don't know what career I want.	○	○	○	○	I know what career I want.
	Career Opportunities	I don't know where to go to find "good jobs" that interest me.	○	○	○	○	I know where to find "good jobs" that interest me.
	Career Decision	I don't know which careers are in demand in our region.	○	○	○	○	I know which careers are in demand in our region.
	Wages and salary	I don't know what I need to earn to meet my current expenses.	○	○	○	○	I know what I need to earn to meet my current expenses.
		I don't know what I should expect to be paid in my career.	○	○	○	○	I know what I am likely to be paid in my career.
PREPARING FOR A CAREER	Credentials	The career I want may require a license, diploma, or certificate but I don't know.	○	○	○	○	I have a license, diploma, or certificate for the job I want.
		I am not sure how to pick a high quality school.	○	○	○	○	I know how to pick a high quality school.
	High school diploma/GED	I don't have a high school diploma or GED.	○	○	○	○	I have a high school diploma or GED.
GETTING THE JOB	Job search	I don't have a resume, cover letter, or experience applying to jobs.	○	○	○	○	I have a resume, cover letter, and have experience applying to jobs.
	Job interviewing	Interviewing for a job makes me uncomfortable and I'm not sure how to get better.	○	○	○	○	I am comfortable interviewing for a job.
GROWING YOUR CAREER	Starting a job	I'm not sure how to succeed or what to expect starting a new job.	○	○	○	○	I feel confident starting a new job.
		I don't have what I need to start work (proper attire, etc.).	○	○	○	○	I have what I need to start work (proper attire, etc.).
		I don't have the skills I need to be successful in my workplace.	○	○	○	○	I have the skills I need to be successful in my workplace.
		I don't understand what is expected from me at my new job.	○	○	○	○	I understand what is expected from me at my new job.
	Career growth	I don't have a plan for advancing my career.	○	○	○	○	I have a plan for advancing my career.
TECH.	Access to Technology	I don't have access to a computer or internet.	○	○	○	○	I have access to a computer and/or internet.
		I don't feel comfortable or know how to use a computer.	○	○	○	○	I feel confident using a computer.
SUPPORTS	Housing	I don't have housing.	○	○	○	○	I have stable and safe housing.
	Childcare	I have no child care.	○	○	○	○	I have reliable childcare and a backup plan.
	Transportation	I have no transportation.	○	○	○	○	I have reliable transportation and a backup plan.
	Personal well-being	My personal well-being or mental health needs attention.	○	○	○	○	I'm doing well and fully able to work.

Figure 3. Assessment from the Connecticut site in the SNAP E&T RCE project

CT STATE
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

SNAP EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

MY NAME _____   ID # _____   DATE _____

COACH/COORDINATOR NAME _____   COLLEGE NAME _____

Stepping Stones to College Success

Take some time to reflect on the following topic areas related to your college success. Where would you say you are currently at each of these areas?
Which area jumps out at you as the most important for setting a goal today?

			NEED HELP	ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT	MAKING PROGRESS	CONFIDENT & GOOD TO GO	
BASIC NEEDS	Childcare ▶	I have no childcare plan for when I am in class.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I have reliable childcare and a reliable backup plan.
	Transportation ▶	I have no transportation to class.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I have reliable transportation to class and a backup plan.
	Food insecurity ▶	I need support to have enough food.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I don't need support to have enough food.
	Housing ▶	I don't have stable housing.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I have stable housing.
	Money management ▶	I often struggle to manage my money.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I know how to manage my money.
HEALTH AND WELLNESS	Personal well-being ▶	My personal well-being needs my attention.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I'm doing well and fully able to attend classes.
	Family well-being ▶	My family challenges get in the way of my progress.	◯	◯	◯	◯	My family is doing well and supports me.
	Social support ▶	I have no social support, or my network is not supportive of me attending school.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I have consistent and effective social support.
SCHOOL READINESS	Academic readiness ▶	I don't feel ready to start my class.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I feel ready to start my class.
	Access to technology ▶	I don't have access to a computer or the internet.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I have access to the technology I need for class.
	Computer skills ▶	I don't feel comfortable or know how to use a computer for my class.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I feel comfortable and have the skills to confidently use a computer for class.
	Time management ▶	I don't know how to manage my time to complete my classwork	◯	◯	◯	◯	I have the time management skills I need to complete my classwork.
CAREER PLANNING	Deciding on a career ▶	I'm not sure what career I want.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I know what career I want.
	Resume and cover letter ▶	I don't have a resume or cover letter.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I have an updated resume and cover letter.
	Interview skills ▶	I don't have the confidence or skills to interview for a job.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I feel confident and am ready to interview for a job.
	Education and training ▶	I don't have the education or training I need to get the job I want.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I have completed the education or training needed to get the job I want.
	Credentials ▶	I don't have the professional certificates or credentials I need to get the job I want.	◯	◯	◯	◯	I have the professional certificates or credentials I need to get the job I want.