Power the Next Generation of Student Success with SNAP E&T

Community colleges hold the key to transforming untapped federal dollars into the lifeline their most vulnerable students need — while cutting the cost of that support in half.

By Donald Dement

ACROSS THE NATION, COMMUNITY COLLEGES SIT at the intersection of education and economic transformation. They are engines of upward mobility — often the only open door for adults seeking to build sustainable living-wage careers. Yet, in serving students who shoulder the heaviest burdens of poverty, food insecurity, and family responsibility, community colleges face a constant challenge: how to fund the holistic support these students need to stay enrolled, persist, and ultimately succeed.

Enter the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T).

For many, it's an unfamiliar acronym. For others, it's a bureaucratic tangle. But at its core, SNAP E&T represents something far simpler — and more powerful. It is a federal reimbursement mechanism designed to help states and their partners (including community colleges) fund workforce and student support programs for SNAP recipients. And yet, despite its transformative potential, billions of available dollars go unused every year.

The Untapped Resource Hidden in Plain Sight

It's a quiet irony: community colleges — institutions built to expand opportunity — are often unaware of one of the most accessible federal tools available to them. The SNAP E&T 50-50 reimbursement model allows colleges to recoup half of their non-federal spending on eligible education and training services.

That means if a college invests non-federal funds in student support, case management, or workforce readiness activities for students receiving SNAP benefits, the federal government reimburses 50 percent of those costs using 50-50 Funds.

These are not competitive grants. There are no application deadlines that expire or waiting lists that drag on. These funds are available through ongoing partnerships with state agencies, sitting

quietly on the table, waiting to be claimed. And yet many colleges either don't know they exist or feel overwhelmed by the idea of implementation, a kind of "opportunity fatigue" that leaves money unspent and students underserved.

Reframing SNAP E&T: From Bureaucracy to Strategy

SNAP E&T is not just a social safety net; it's a strategic reinvestment vehicle for colleges committed to equity and workforce transformation. By aligning their existing student support infrastructure with E&T-eligible activities, colleges can leverage a reliable funding stream to strengthen what they already do best: providing training and opportunities for economic mobility.

Imagine cutting the operational cost of holistic case management in half, not by scaling back services, but by using existing dollars more intentionally.

At a time when colleges face shrinking budgets, staff burnout, and growing student need, this is not a luxury — it's a lifeline. The message to college leaders is simple but urgent: the resources to support your most at-risk students are already here. All that's missing is awareness and activation.

The Case for Case Management

Anyone working in student success knows the truth that data often obscures: academic advising alone doesn't change lives when students are hungry, homeless, or hopeless.

That's where case management steps in as a human bridge between students' lived realities and their educational goals. Effective case management in the community college context is about weekly check-ins, encouragement, and practical problem-solving. It's about letting a student know, "You're not in this alone."

For many SNAP-eligible students — often heads of households balancing school, work, and caregiving — this kind of support is not just beneficial; it's essential. When someone has their back, they stay in school. When they don't, life wins and education loses.

SNAP E&T funding allows colleges to expand this critical work sustainably. By reinvesting federal reimbursements into case management, institutions create a self-sustaining cycle of support, one where every dollar spent on helping students stabilize their lives brings another dollar back to strengthen the system.

A Mission-Driven Imperative

Community colleges have never needed to be convinced of their mission. Their campuses are proof of their commitment to economic mobility, equity, and workforce opportunity. But mission alone can't pay for the case managers, navigators, or student success teams that keep vulnerable learners enrolled.

The beauty of SNAP E&T lies in its alignment with this mission. It empowers colleges to do *more of what they already believe in* — and to do it more sustainably. These are not new programs to build, but existing efforts that can be reframed and reinvested through partnership.

When viewed through that lens, SNAP E&T becomes less of a bureaucratic mechanism and more of a moral and fiscal responsibility. Leaving these dollars unused doesn't just cost institutions financially; it costs communities in lost opportunity, broken persistence, and unrealized potential.

Empowerment Over Dependency

This is not about dependency or welfare. It's about empowerment. SNAP E&T funds futures. It helps individuals who already demonstrate resilience and motivation by pursuing education to access the wraparound supports that make success possible.

For colleges, it's a chance to align compassion with strategy, turning moral intent into measurable impact. Every dollar drawn down helps build a bridge from poverty to potential, one student at a time.

And every community college that embraces this opportunity demonstrates what the sector has always known: education is the most effective anti-poverty program ever created.

The Call to Awareness

If there's a single takeaway, it's this: SNAP E&T is not just another federal program. It's a quiet revolution waiting for activation.

For institutions that serve students balancing survival and schooling, it offers both a moral mandate and a fiscal strategy. Implementing SNAP E&T does require effort. But it's the kind of effort that pays dividends — literally and figuratively — in the lives of students, the sustainability of programs, and the advancement of institutional mission.

In the end, this isn't about selling a service. It's about surfacing an opportunity that belongs to every community college already committed to doing more for those who have less. The funding exists. The framework exists. The students exist.

The only question is whether colleges will claim the resources that could transform the lives of those who walk through their doors each day seeking not just education, but hope.

Dr. Donald Dement is the president of higher education at Graduation Alliance. He can be reached at donald.dement@graduationalliance.com.