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# Leveling the Playing Field:

Exploring SNAP E&T's Potential to Advance  
Economic Opportunity at Postsecondary Four-Year  
Institutions — Two Case Studies



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Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers, postsecondary educators, employers and industry groups, and foundations and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, CAEL fosters a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. A national membership organization established in 1974, CAEL is a part of Strada Collaborative, a mission-driven nonprofit. Learn more at [cael.org](https://cael.org).

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SNAP E&T is a training and supportive service program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service.<sup>1</sup> The goal of SNAP E&T is to help individuals who receive SNAP benefits gain skills, education and training, work, or experience that increases their ability to obtain gainful employment. SNAP E&T also aims to reduce participants' barriers to employment through providing access to supportive services such as transportation, childcare, access to materials such as books or equipment that facilitate their education.



## What is SNAP E&T?

For individuals receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, the SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) program has the power and potential to enhance economic mobility and expand opportunity.<sup>2</sup> At an individual level, SNAP E&T provides access to basic needs support and wraparound services that improve students' ability to attend, persist, and complete credential and degree programs. Ultimately, these supports expand the opportunity of potential gainful employment. At the postsecondary institutional level, SNAP E&T provides funding for postsecondary institutions to support students on SNAP via two pathways:<sup>3</sup>

1. **100% FUNDS**, which are formula funds primarily utilized by state SNAP E&T agencies to support program administration, grow program capacity, and provide direct education and training services to some participants; and
2. **50/50 FUNDS**, which are provided to Third Party Partners (TPPs), such as community colleges, community-based organizations, and other training providers, as reimbursement of up to 50% of non-federal funds used to provide SNAP E&T services to participants. Reimbursement can be received on administrative and direct program expenses as well as supportive services that are reasonable to provide access to education, training, and job readiness. This can include training costs, transportation assistance, child care, and clothing for training or work.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.acct.org/center-for-policy-practice/SNAP-ET#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20connection%20between,job%20search%20training%20and%20assistance>

<sup>2</sup> <https://documents.ncsl.org/wwwncsl/Health/Slides-SNAP-ET-Food-Security-through-Economic-Mobility.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://snaptoskills.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2021-09/SNAP%20to%20Skills%20Toolkit%20-%20Final%20-%20Sept%202023.pdf>

Two-year postsecondary institutions have long been vital partners for SNAP E&T programs. With their priority of open access educational programs, and their focus serving a range of nontraditional students such as older learners and part-time students, two-year institutions provide a level of accessibility and overlap with populations of learners who may be utilizing benefits like SNAP. In a similar vein, two-year institutions often have robust, focused workforce development programs like vocational training or career pathways programs aimed at serving populations that may be more likely to be on, or qualify for SNAP. Two-year institutions also often work in lockstep with state government agencies working to serve populations that qualify for SNAP such as workforce boards, departments of labor, and departments of health and human services. Two-year colleges may even be co-located with agencies and programs providing some of these services. This amounts to higher visibility into the types of infrastructure and public programs like SNAP E&T that may provide additional support for their students and institutions.

Despite this legacy and infrastructure of SNAP E&T at two-year colleges, four-year institutions are increasingly exploring the use of SNAP E&T as a mechanism to advance opportunity and bolster support for their students, particularly nontraditional students, or students who experience poverty and food insecurity. This increased interest is promising new ground, but relatively uncharted territory for four-year institutions. As such, this raises some key questions:

- **How does implementing a SNAP E&T program support economic opportunity, and economic mobility, for students at four-year institutions?;**
- **What policy and practice considerations should four-year institutions be mindful of as they navigate starting and implementing their programs?;**
- **And what are the unique dynamics and challenges that four-year institutions might encounter as they explore and implement programs?**

## **WASHINGTON STATE: A TWO-YEAR COLLEGE SNAP E&T SUCCESS STORY**

Washington state currently draws \$13 million in reimbursed funds for its community colleges, all of which are third party providers.

Spokane College began its program in 2011 serving 141 students, and receiving \$141,000 in reimbursement. In 2022 they had grown their program to serve 888 students, totaling \$1,295,000 in reimbursement. These monies were used to hire 2.77 full time employees, provide laptops, support tuition, and other basic needs for students on campus like the food bank.

Shoreline College began its program in 2007 with 16 students, and \$50,000 in reimbursement. In 2022 they had grown to serve 219 students with \$356,000 in reimbursement. These monies were spent on half-time employees, transportation, peer mentoring programs, focus groups, and events to attract more SNAP students.



To examine these considerations, our team has profiled two four-year institutions exploring implementing SNAP E&T. Lakeland University and Butler University, both participants in CAEL's SNAP E&T Technical Assistance Project, exemplify this work. These universities hope to maximize the potential of SNAP E&T to support students. These case studies profile these universities' approaches to implementing SNAP E&T, the unique challenges they encountered during their exploration, and the guiding principles that keep them on their path. Drawing from the profiles and experiences of these schools, this report closes with a brief road map and recommendations for other four-year schools interested in potentially pursuing or expanding SNAP E&T.

## WHAT IS CAEL'S SNAP E&T TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROJECT?

CAEL's SNAP E&T Technical Assistance Project is a SNAP E&T initiative that offers training and technical assistance to community and technical colleges to either build or advance SNAP E&T programs.

The project is funded through a SNAP E&T National Partnership Grant awarded by the United States Department of Agriculture. The program is administered by CAEL with the support of several partner organizations including the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) and Grant Associates.

Colleges that participate have the opportunity to work directly with partners to connect more students to SNAP E&T benefits and supports at no cost to the school. Supports include high-quality customized technical assistance, connections to peers and other colleges offering SNAP E&T, connections to government leadership and community organizations and other partners.

To learn more about the project, its partners, and the SNAP E&T National Partnership Grant, please visit [cael.org/snap-alcef](https://cael.org/snap-alcef).

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## BUTLER UNIVERSITY

# Leveraging Cohorts, Maximizing Data, and Expanding Opportunities for Adult Learners

Butler University, a private institution in Indianapolis, Indiana, serves approximately 5,700 students across its undergraduate, graduate, and professional certification programs. With a mission centered on expanding opportunity and fostering academic excellence for all learners, Butler cultivates a dynamic learning community that prepares students to lead meaningful and impactful lives.

As part of its commitment to providing flexible, high-quality educational pathways, Butler is exploring implementing a SNAP Employment & Training (SNAP E&T) program to further support adult learners. This initiative aligns with the university's strategic efforts to strengthen holistic student services, particularly for those balancing work, child care, and elder care. By leveraging SNAP E&T resources, Butler would streamline referrals to essential support services and expand in-house supports contributing to student success. The university has already initiated discussions with state administrators to advance this effort and explore implementation pathways.

Butler's commitment to serving all learners provides a solid foundation for leveraging SNAP E&T to enhance career mobility and student success. The university offers a variety of educational programs that align with SNAP E&T's mission of preparing students for meaningful employment.

“Butler has the potential to strengthen pathways for students who are juggling a plethora of responsibilities like school, work, family, and elder care. SNAP E&T gives us an opportunity for that additional support and how we can help meet these students where they are.”

As part of this broader effort, Butler is launching Founder's College in Fall 2025 to expand access to high-quality associate degree programs and strengthen support for historically underrepresented learners. While Founder's College presents an opportunity to incorporate SNAP E&T funding, it is just one part of a larger puzzle aligned with Butler's mission to "boldly innovate and broadly educate, enriching communities and preparing all learners to lead meaningful lives."

As Butler continues to expand, SNAP E&T would strengthen student support services by extending financial and career resources, bridging gaps that traditional financial aid and scholarships may not fully cover.

Through its early explorations of SNAP E&T, Butler has identified two essential strategies for successful implementation:

#### **LEVERAGING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE SUPPORTS NAVIGATING COMPLEX SNAP E&T PROCESSES AND IMPLEMENTATION**

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Launching a SNAP E&T program at a four-year institution can be complex due to limited precedent in similar settings. Butler's participation in CAEL's SNAP E&T Technical Assistance Project has provided access to a network of institutions, technical support, and guidance on policy, compliance, stakeholder engagement, and state partnerships. Connecting with other institutions has helped Butler take informed steps toward implementation.

This collaborative approach has also been key to building relationships with state agencies, determining how federal SNAP E&T funds are allocated, and which institutions qualify as program partners. Since state priorities shape program eligibility and structure, early engagement with administrators ensures institutional goals align with broader state objectives. For many four-year institutions like Butler, navigating these relationships is new territory, making structured support networks an invaluable resource.

"A cohort model offers access to information and networks that would otherwise be difficult to reach. Having a group of institutions pursuing similar initiatives provides invaluable guidance as we navigate this process."

## ENHANCING DATA COLLECTION CAN SUPPORT AND DRIVE STUDENT SUCCESS

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Effective data collection is key to SNAP E&T compliance and tracking student success. While Butler already maintains strong data practices, integrating SNAP E&T would require additional reporting processes to align with state and federal requirements. This presents an opportunity to refine existing systems, ensuring seamless integration, and supporting compliance and student success.

SNAP E&T also requires more detailed financial aid tracking and ongoing updates on student progress. These elements will require strategic solutions aligning with Butler's capacity while strengthening data-driven student support.

Butler University's commitment to expanding access and fostering student success positions it as a forward-thinking institution exploring innovative solutions for supporting historically underrepresented learners. By leveraging cohort-based learning, building state partnerships, and strengthening data-driven practices, Butler is laying the groundwork for sustainable SNAP E&T implementation.

As Butler continues assessing the feasibility of SNAP E&T, it reaffirms its mission to meet students where they are and provide meaningful support to address the complexities of their lives.



“SNAP E&T has specific data requirements, and we will need to integrate them into existing systems or expand upon them to effectively support both students and reporting needs.”

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## LAKELAND UNIVERSITY

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# Creating Generational Economic Opportunity, Cultivating Champions, and Supporting Persistence

Lakeland University is a private university based in Wisconsin that enrolls roughly 2,500 students across its undergraduate and post-graduate programs. With its main campus in Herman, Wisconsin, the university also houses online centers located throughout the state in Pewaukee, Madison, Wisconsin Rapids, Chippewa Falls, Neenah, Green Bay, and Sheboygan. Historically a Christian Seminary with its roots in the United Church of Christ, Lakeland still prides itself on staying true to the religious values of equity and opportunity central to its founding. Its mission focuses on preparing its diverse students to think critically, communicate effectively, and lead ethical and purposeful lives.

Lakeland administrators hope that SNAP E&T helps to enhance student support and promote long-term economic mobility and opportunity for learners and their families. The plan is to “level the playing field” for students facing barriers to perform academically, and live up to the promise of generational economic mobility and opportunity provided by higher education. Lakeland has recently drafted a proposal for its SNAP E&T program, and is in the process of both internal approval with the University and collaboration with the State of Wisconsin. While Lakeland’s SNAP E&T program is currently in its proposal phases, administrators aim to focus on better wraparound support to eliminate the barriers that Lakeland students may face that prohibit them from participating fully in the classroom.



Two key principles have guided Lakeland on its exploration of SNAP E&T as a viable opportunity for a four-year institution:

#### **SNAP E&T IS AN IMPORTANT LEVER TO SUPPORT STUDENTS IN THEIR PERSISTENCE IN THE CLASSROOM AT A FOUR-YEAR SCHOOL**

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SNAP E&T can help students overcome external barriers such as accessing child care, transportation, and other resources, which ultimately enables them to focus on their academics. By pairing these supports with strong financial aid strategies and housing options, students are more likely to persist in their education. The overall outcome ultimately reduces costs for the institution, and delivers a higher return on investment for students.

#### **CULTIVATING SNAP E&T “CHAMPIONS” ACROSS THE UNIVERSITY IS A KEY COMPONENT OF ENSURING BUY-IN AT A FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTION**

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Program advocates across the university have been an essential piece to ensuring successful exploration at Lakeland. At four-year institutions, shared governance requires alignment of faculty overseeing curricular and extracurricular activities alongside administrative teams managing financial aid and student support. This creates a different dynamic than at two-year colleges where there is potential for more programmatic flexibility. For four-year institutions interested in pursuing SNAP E&T, emphasizing cross-departmental collaboration is a key strategy to create buy-in and success within the context of shared governance. This includes engaging university stakeholders across financial aid, food service, housing, and faculty to champion and sustain the program.

“If a student is worried about where their next meal is coming from, or how they can balance class and studies with work and child-rearing, then the student isn’t able to truly benefit from the social mobility provided by higher education.”

In sum, Lakeland University’s commitment to integrating the SNAP E&T program into its work reflects its commitment to fostering equity, opportunity, and long-term economic mobility for its diverse student body. By addressing critical barriers for its students, the proposed program will aim to empower all learners who are eligible for SNAP E&T to fully engage in their education and unlock their potential for future success. Through building strategic internal collaborations and fostering university-wide champions, Lakeland is creating a sustainable model that will not only benefit its students but also will enhance institutional efficiency. As the University continues to prioritize the holistic needs of its students, the SNAP E&T initiative stands as an example of its dedication to the transformative promise of higher education and lifelong learning.

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# Charting a Path: Recommendations for Other Four-Year Postsecondary Institutions Pursuing SNAP E&T

The experiences of Butler University and Lakeland University provide valuable insight for other four-year institutions considering the implementation of SNAP E&T. While each school's approach and journey will be unique, the key takeaways and recommendations from these schools' experiences thus far can help guide successful implementation.

## **SCHOOLS SHOULD ENGAGE FACULTY, STUDENT SUPPORT STAFF, AND ADMINISTRATORS TO CREATE A COALITION OF INTERNAL ADVOCATES WHO CAN DRIVE PROGRAM ADOPTION AND SUCCESS.**

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A key lesson from four-year schools is the importance of securing broad institutional support. SNAP E&T requires collaboration across multiple departments including financial aid, student services, faculty, and leadership. Identifying champions within the institution who can advocate for the program and build cross-departmental partnerships is critical to implementation and sustainability.

## **SCHOOLS SHOULD ESTABLISH CLEAR ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES, IDENTIFY FUNDING SOURCES, AND DEVELOP STREAMLINED DATA COLLECTION PROCESSES TO ENSURE LONG-TERM SUCCESS AND SUSTAINABILITY.**

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Successfully implementing SNAP E&T requires a structured approach to administration and funding. Institutions must determine how to leverage reimbursement funds, track eligible expenses, and build internal processes for compliance and reporting. Streamlining these practices across departments at four-year schools may be a new process, so it is crucial that schools develop processes early in order to effectively manage SNAP E&T.

## **SCHOOLS SHOULD INTEGRATE SNAP E&T INTO THEIR BROADER STUDENT SUPPORT STRATEGIES, AND ENSURE ALIGNMENT ACROSS OTHER ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY-FOCUSED INITIATIVES SUCH AS READINESS AND RETENTION EFFORTS.**

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Both Lakeland and Butler have linked their SNAP E&T efforts to broader institutional missions focused on student success and economic opportunity. SNAP E&T should not be viewed as a standalone program, but as a tool to bolster support for students. Aligning the program with existing efforts at a four-year school such as wraparound supports, career development, and financial aid strategies can maximize the overall impact.

## **SCHOOLS SHOULD SEEK OUT PEER INSTITUTIONS, SUBJECT-MATTER EXPERTS, AND PARTNERS ALREADY INVOLVED IN SNAP E&T TO BUILD A SUPPORTIVE NETWORK AND LEVERAGE SHARED KNOWLEDGE.**

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Navigating the complexities of SNAP E&T can be challenging, particularly for four-year institutions that are new to the program. Engaging with networks and partners, such as the CAEL's SNAP E&T Technical Assistance Project cohort, or other communities of practice can provide essential guidance for roadblocks, technical assistance and expertise for implementation, government relationships that are necessary to succeed, and peer learning opportunities. These networks offered Butler and Lakeland a road map, and can offer similar schools exploring SNAP E&T assistance in building relationships with key stakeholders including state agencies and other partners.

## **CONCLUSION**

For four-year postsecondary institutions seeking to advance economic opportunity for students experiencing financial hardship, food insecurity, or other potential barriers to success, SNAP E&T presents a powerful opportunity to level the playing field. As demonstrated by Butler University and Lakeland University, successful strategizing and implementation requires strong collaboration and alignment with institutional goals. For other four-year schools, building networks, securing institutional buy-in, and developing sustainable processes are key approaches to ensure success. As more four-year schools explore SNAP E&T for their student bodies, their collective experiences will continue to shape best practices and expand opportunities nationwide.