Full-Time Study, Part-Time Work:
STEM Program Demands and SNAP Eligibility

Leanne Davis
March 2026

States across the country are investing heavily in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) pathways at community colleges as a strategy to strengthen workforce pipelines and expand economic mobility, reflecting a broad policy consensus that these institutions play a central role in developing a skilled technical workforce.[1] [2] At the same time, the total cost of attendance extends well beyond tuition, and many students pursuing these programs face substantial non-tuition expenses—including housing, food, transportation, and childcare—while balancing enrollment with work and caregiving responsibilities.[3] Public benefits programs represent a critical component of college affordability,[4] yet prior research shows that many students who are likely eligible for these supports do not use them, raising questions about the barriers that shape utilization.[5]

This brief examines one potential, but often overlooked, factor: the structure of STEM programs themselves. Many STEM pathways include laboratory hours, rigid course sequencing, and expectations of full-time enrollment, all of which limit scheduling flexibility and increase total academic time commitments. These program features shape students' educational experiences and their ability to meet the requirements of public benefits programs. To explore this tension, this brief focuses on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a key source of food assistance for individuals with low incomes. SNAP includes work requirements for many college students, raising a central question: to what extent do the time demands of STEM programs affect students' ability to meet these requirements while remaining enrolled in degree programs?

Drawing on program maps from STEM programs supported through the National Science Foundation's innovative INTuitN-STEM HUB (Investigating Non-Tuition Needs among community college STEM students) at community colleges in Minnesota, Texas, and Washington, we estimate the academic time demands embedded in these programs and compare them with SNAP's work requirements. By examining how program structure and eligibility rules operate in tandem, we consider whether the design of academic programs may shape access to basic needs supports. This approach highlights a potential structural barrier to accessing public

benefits: when required academic time is substantial but not recognized as qualifying activity for benefits eligibility, students may be penalized for enrollment in high-intensity programs, facing additional challenges in meeting their basic needs while pursuing high-demand credentials.

SNAP Supports College Affordability, But Comes with Work Requirements

SNAP is a state-administered federal program that provides food assistance to individuals with low incomes.[6] National estimates suggest that a substantial share of college students who are likely eligible for SNAP do not receive benefits; for example, the U.S. Government Accountability Office estimated that nearly 2 million potentially eligible college students were not participating in the program.[7] Federal rules, however, require most college students to work at least 20 hours per week, or participate in approved employment or training activities, to maintain eligibility unless they qualify for specific exemptions.[8] These requirements define how students can access benefits. While certain activities, such as paid employment or work-study, may count toward the work requirement, time spent in college classes or doing homework does not count. This generally means that to receive SNAP benefits, students must meet a separate standard of work participation, in addition to the time required by their program of study.

While federal rules mandate work requirements, states have the authority to determine how those work hours are counted.[9] For instance, a state may choose to average work hours over a month or an academic term. The method used poses additional challenges for students, as they are often juggling multiple demands on their time, including course scheduling, which may interfere with a rigid work schedule.

Work-study may count toward SNAP eligibility, but only under specific conditions. Students must be approved for work-study at the time of application, the award must apply to the current term, and the student must anticipate working those hours. In practice, this pathway is limited. Students may be awarded work-study but unable to secure a position, and key terms—such as what it means to be "*approved*" or to "*anticipate work*"—are interpreted differently across states. For instance, in Washington this means that a student who expects to be assigned a work-study job is eligible, even if the job isn't available.[10]

Table 1. SNAP Student Eligibility and State Flexibility in Work Requirements and Work-Study

	Federal Baseline	Minnesota	Texas	Washington
Who is subject to student rules	Students enrolled at least half-time (as determined by their college) can qualify for SNAP if they meet an additional set of criteria			
Work Requirement Threshold	State can calculate whether the student worked an average of 20 hours per week over the period of a month, quarter, trimester, or semester	20 hours per week Average across week	20 hours per week Average across week	20 hours per week Average across month
State or Federally Funded Work-Study	Student must be approved for work-study, the work-study must be approved for the school term, and student must anticipate working during that time	No flexibility	No flexibility	Flexibility in definition

These specific rules reflect a core assumption built into policy design: that students can combine work and school in a consistent and predictable way. In practice, access to SNAP is shaped by more than financial need, it is shaped by whether students can sustain the required number of work hours while enrolled in any given academic term.

STEM Programs Are Structured and Time-Intensive

Many community college STEM programs are structured in ways that differ from more flexible or part-time pathways. Programs supported through the S-STEM initiative, in particular, are designed to promote full-time enrollment and steady progression through a defined sequence of courses in high-demand fields.

Table 2. Key Features of S-STEM Programs

	Minnesota	Texas	Washington
Program	STEM (AS)*	Computer Science (AS)*	Natural Resources (AAS)**
Enrollment Intensity	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time
Semester / Quarter	Semester	Semester	Quarter
Total Credits Required in Degree Program	60	63	111
Sequencing Rigidity	Moderate	Moderate	High
Other Academic Requirements			440 internship hours over summer quarters

*AS: Associate of Science degree

**AAS: Associate in Applied Science degree

As described in Table 2, key features of these programs include:[11]

- Full-time enrollment expectations, often requiring an average of 15 credits per term to remain on track for completion within scholarship eligibility window
- Laboratory hours or field-based instruction, which add to scheduled class time and are typically fixed within the weekly schedule
- Group meetings, mentoring sessions, and professional development activities, which are not counted in program hour requirements
- Structured course sequences, where required courses must be taken in a specific order, limiting flexibility in scheduling

While these program features are designed to support students' successful completion of STEM degrees, they also shape how students allocate their time. STEM pathways often require sustained, scheduled engagement across the week, leaving limited room for adjustment. Many of these STEM programs require time commitments comparable to full-time employment. The question is not only how much time these programs require, but how that time aligns with SNAP's work requirements.

## Comparing Program Requirements to SNAP Work Rules

We compare the time demands of STEM programs to SNAP's work requirements using three sources:

- S-STEM program maps from community colleges in Minnesota, Texas, and Washington
- Course schedules, including lecture and laboratory hours
- State-specific SNAP work requirements

Weekly academic time includes both scheduled class and lab hours and estimated time spent studying outside of class. These estimates are then compared to SNAP's work requirement to assess how program structure may shape students' ability to meet eligibility conditions.

S-STEM Students Spend More Than 60 Hours per Week on Academic Requirements

Figure 1. Weekly Academic Time for Full-time S-STEM Students

Number of Hours (per week)

■ Class + Lab   ■ Study Time   ■ S-STEM Activities
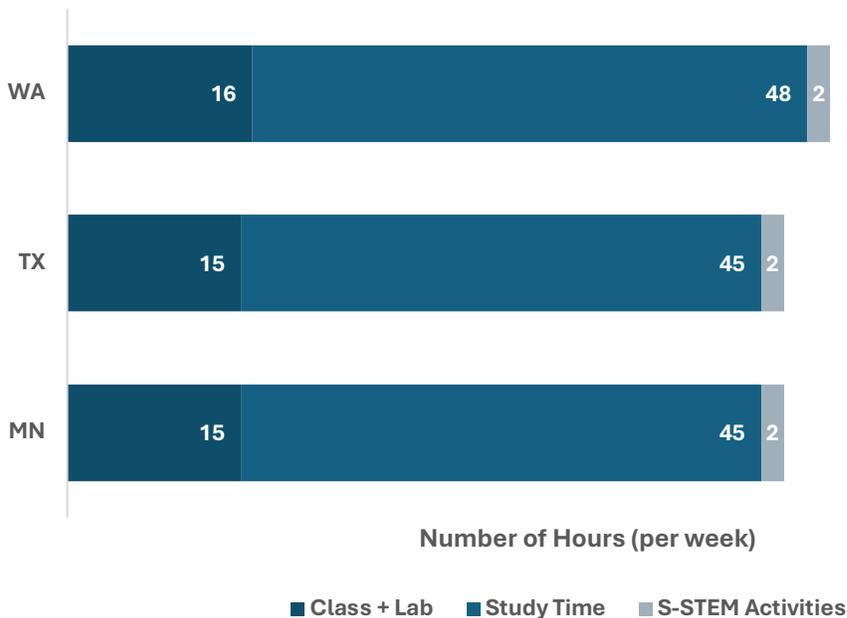
Across programs, full-time STEM students may face weekly commitments exceeding 60 hours when combining coursework, study time, and program requirements. These estimates show that academic requirements alone exceed the equivalent of a full-time job.

When combined with SNAP's 20-hour work requirement, students are effectively expected to maintain two full-time commitments simultaneously.

After Academic Requirements and SNAP Work Requirements, S-STEM Students Only Have 82-86 Hours per Week (or Approximately 12 Hours per Day) for Other Responsibilities, Including Commuting, Caregiving, Eating, Wellness, and Sleep

Figure 2. Remaining Weekly Time After Academic and SNAP Work Requirements
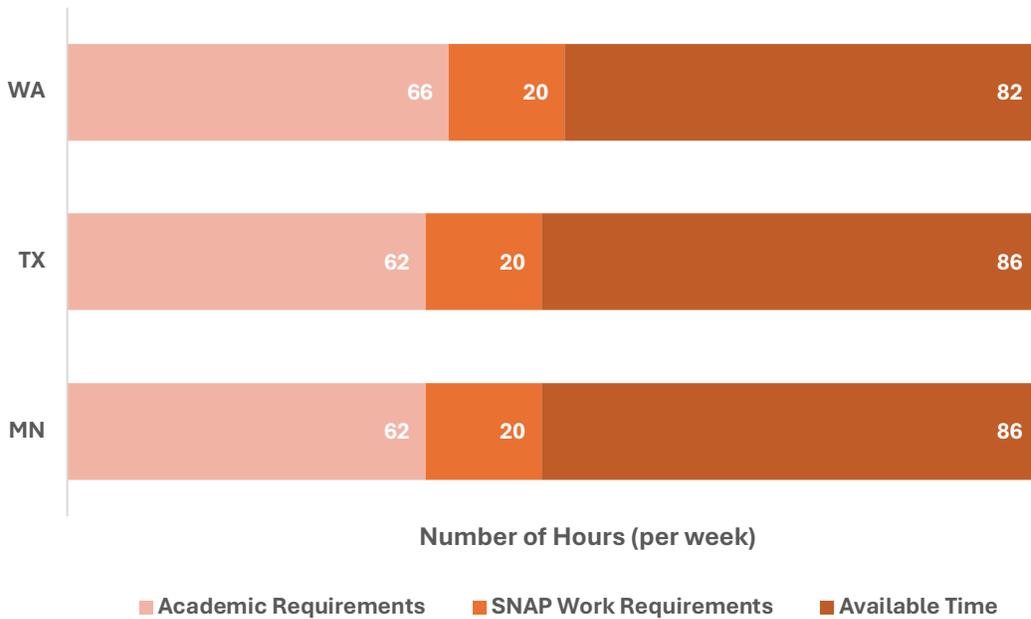
After accounting for academic requirements and SNAP work requirements, students have approximately 80-85 hours remaining each week for all other activities—including commuting, caregiving, wellness, eating, and sleep. That's approximately 12 hours per day.

Program Structure May Limit Access to SNAP

College students' SNAP eligibility is tied to ongoing work participation. For those who do not qualify for exemptions, maintaining benefits requires consistent engagement in paid employment or approved activities. In practice, this means that students must be able to secure and sustain approximately 20 hours of work per week while enrolled.

The structure of many STEM programs may make this standard difficult to meet. As shown above, these programs require substantial weekly time commitments, including fixed class schedules, lab hours, and required sequencing. These requirements reduce students' ability to find employment that aligns with academic obligations. These demands can limit both the number of hours students are able to work and the types of jobs they can realistically hold.

Prior research points to a range of barriers that limit students' use of public benefits, including lack of awareness, uncertainty about eligibility, or administrative complexity.[12] This analysis highlights an additional constraint: the feasibility of meeting ongoing requirements given the time demands of academic programs. In this context, access to SNAP depends on more than financial need, it depends on whether students have sufficient time to meet work requirements while enrolled. Students may be eligible for benefits on paper, but unable to meet the conditions required to receive them while enrolled in intensive programs.

What Colleges Can Do Within Existing Constraints

- **Make program time visible**
  Provide students with clear estimates of weekly time demands.
- **Align scheduling with work feasibility**
  Cluster courses and labs to allow for consistent work blocks.
- **Integrate work-based learning where possible**
  Expand paid internships or placements that may count toward work requirements.
- **Strengthen benefits advising**
  Invest in campus-based staff who can help students understand SNAP eligibility, identify qualifying activities, and navigate application and reporting requirements.

Supporting STEM Students Requires Policy Alignment

As states invest in STEM pathways, ensuring that students can meet basic needs while enrolled is critical to student success. When program requirements leave little room for work, access to supports like SNAP may depend less on eligibility and more on whether students have enough time.

Endnotes

[1] Van Noy, M., & Zeidenberg, M. (2014). *Hidden STEM producers: Community colleges' multiple contributions to STEM education and workforce development*. https://sites.nationalacademies.org/cs/groups/dbassesite/documents/webpage/dbasse_088831.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[2] Community College Research Center. (2022). *Community college STEM pathways* (Policy fact sheet). Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center. https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/community-college-stem-pathways.pdf

[3] Priniski, S. J., Perla, R. O., & Hodge, M. G. (2025). *Being a STEM student is a delicate balancing act: Basic needs insecurity among community college STEM undergraduates.* The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs at Temple University. https://hope.temple.edu/projects/national-science-foundation-s-stem-hub-project/being-a-stem-student

[4] Duke-Benfield, A. E. (2021). *Exploring how public benefits can help support postsecondary students from low-income backgrounds.* Postsecondary Value Commission. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED617071.pdf

[5] U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2024). *Supplemental nutrition assistance program: estimated eligibility and receipt among food insecure college students*. U.S. Government Accountability Office. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-107074#:~:text=GAO%2D24%2D107074%20is%20a%20report%20that%20describes%20food,college%20students%20(3.8%20million)%20experienced%20food%20insecurity.

[6] U.S. Department of Agriculture. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (webpage). https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program

[7] U.S. Government Accountability Office (2024).

[8] Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2025). *A quick guide to SNAP eligibility and benefits.* Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/11-18-08fa.pdf

[9] Rios, L., Welton, C., & Huelsman, M. (2024). *The state of state choices: A national landscape analysis of postsecondary eligibility restrictions and opportunities in SNAP, CCDF, and TANF.* The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs at Temple University.

[10] Rios, L. et al. (2024).

[11] Author's analysis of select S-STEM program requirements.

[12] Rothstein, J., Lacoe, J., Ayers, S., Rothstein, J., Lacoe, J., Ayers, S., Palos Castellanos, K., Dizon-Ross, E., Doherty, A., Henderson, J., Hogg, J., Hoover, S., Perez, A., Weng, J. (2024). Filling the Gap: CalFresh Eligibility Among University of California and California Community College Students. California Policy Lab. https://www.capolicylab.org/filling-the-gap-calfresh-participation-among-university-of-california-and-california-community-college-students/

Appendix

Table 3. Weekly Time Demands of S-STEM Programs and SNAP Eligibility Requirements

State	Program	Weekly Class + Lab (Hours)	Estimated Study Time* (Hours)	Estimated S-STEM Program Activities (Hours)	SNAP Work Requirement (Hours)	Total Weekly Time (Hours)
WA	Natural Resources (AAS)	16	48	2	20	86
TX	Computer Science (AS)	15	45	2	20	82
MN	STEM (AS)	15	45	2	20	82

Note: Study time estimated at approximately three hours per credit hour.