Effectiveness of Work-based Learning for SNAP E&T: 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). The pilots allowed States to offer some activities not available under the existing SNAP E&T program at the time, including paid work-based learning activities that involve hands-on experience in a work setting (often at an employer's place of business). Four States—Illinois, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Vermont—offered work-based learning as a major component of their pilots. This brief describes the effects of services in these four pilots on outcomes such as earnings and employment. It also describes the challenges and lessons learned that the pilots faced when implementing work-based learning.

Work-based learning can be a useful tool for E&T programs to help participants build skills directly needed for employment, while providing them with income. Work-based learning is often used to support people who are unable to find jobs in the labor market, have little or no work experience, or want to move into a new sector but need additional skills or direct experience in order to obtain a job in it. Through work-based learning, individuals are able to obtain real-world work experience that may help lead to sustained, unsubsidized employment.

Although SNAP E&T programs have not been able to provide subsidized work-based learning in the past, the rule implementing the 2018 Farm Bill made subsidized work-based learning an allowable SNAP E&T component beginning in 2020. As SNAP agencies explore the use of work-based learning in SNAP E&T, the findings from the SNAP E&T pilots provide evidence that participants in a SNAP E&T program may benefit from these activities. However, the pilots also highlight some of the challenges that SNAP E&T providers faced when implementing work-based learning. This brief describes findings from the SNAP E&T pilots and considerations for implementing work-based learning activities.[1]

Understanding work-based learning offered in the pilots

Eight of the 10 SNAP E&T pilots offered some type of work-based learning. However, for most pilots, the activities were not widely offered or taken up. Work-based learning was a major component of the program in four pilots—Illinois, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Vermont. Specific offerings varied by State and consisted of different types of work-based learning, such as work experience, on-the-job training, internships, or work study.[2] Some pilots—such as Kentucky and Mississippi—relied on pilot staff to identify work-based learning opportunities, while others—like in Illinois—relied on local workforce agencies to connect pilot participants with local employer networks. Others—like in Vermont—referred participants to other programs in the community—such as Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and vocational rehabilitation programs—to help them find work-based learning opportunities. Work-based learning positions were primarily paid, but some work experience jobs were unpaid in Illinois and Vermont. The positions lasted for a few weeks or a few months.

Findings from the SNAP E&T pilots

Work-based learning activities were challenging to implement. Eight of the 10 SNAP E&T pilots planned to implement work-based learning activities. However, given implementation challenges, four of the pilots (California, Delaware, Georgia, and Washington) had low take-up (from less than 1 percent to almost 5 percent of all participants). States faced a variety of challenges during implementation, such as finding employers

willing to provide work-based learning jobs to participants, finding the right mix of employers, and having a consistent flow of jobs available. For example, in California, which offered a subsidized employment program, employers frequently were not interested in offering work-based learning because they found the paperwork and process to receive subsidies burdensome. Staff in California and Washington also occasionally found it difficult to find employers offering positions for skilled participants who were not looking for an entry-level position. In Delaware, there was a single employer offering subsidized employment, but when the manufacturing industry faced downsizing, they stopped offering subsidized jobs.

Even pilots that implemented work-based learning as a major service component faced challenges in finding jobs that were a good fit for participants. In some rural pilot areas, such as Kentucky, jobs were sometimes difficult to find and required participants to commute for more than an hour each way to available jobs. It was also challenging finding jobs that provided growth opportunities for participants. Entry-level jobs were not attractive for participants who had a work history or were looking for career advancement. For example, in Mississippi, some participants in focus groups reported that they did not find work-based learning to be helpful because they were placed in menial jobs (for example, at a retail store) that did not align with their career interests. Some participants also faced barriers that made it difficult to accept certain jobs. For instance, some jobs had work schedules that were not accommodating to parents (graveyard shifts), physical requirements that participants could not meet (ability to lift 50 pounds), or other requirements that prevented them from accepting the position (such as needing a commercial driver's license or passing a drug test).

Work-based learning in the SNAP E&T pilots

Illinois: Providers offered work experience (paid and unpaid) and on-the-job training. The types of work-based learning opportunities and the duration of activities varied by provider. Some providers offered worked-based learning themselves, while others connected participants with local employers for eight-to-ten weeks of on the job training or work experience opportunities.

Kentucky: Work-based learning opportunities included work experience, internships, and work study. They also offered a small number of on-the-job training positions. Most individuals were assigned to work experience and could work up to 480 hours. Pilot staff helped match participants to work-based learning opportunities and often used their existing employer network to find placements. The pilot also provided work study to a large number of participants while they were in training at the community college. Pilot staff tried to align the work study position with the field in which the participant was training to help them obtain relevant experience.

Mississippi: Participants were offered work experience with an employer in the community. Individuals could work up to 320 hours at $8.50 per hour. Pilot staff at the community college helped participants find employment, but the staff at the college did not have an existing network of employers. They identified employers by attending job fairs; meeting with civic organizations; and reaching out directly to local employers and the local city government. They also asked participants to identify employers for whom they would like to work, and contacted those employers about available work-based learning placements,

Vermont: Many of Vermont's work-based learning opportunities focused on progressive employment activities, which are similar to traditional work-based learning but focused on matching individuals with career paths, or even with specific employers, to engage in progressively more involved work experiences. This program was operated by vocational rehabilitation. Additional paid work opportunities were offered through referrals to WIOA programs.

Finally, some pilots faced challenges related to other subsidy programs in the area. In particular, pilot staff in California learned from employers that SNAP participants were "competing" with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants for subsidized employment positions and the TANF program's subsidized jobs had a higher employer reimbursement rate. Therefore, all things being equal, employers were choosing to hire TANF participants.

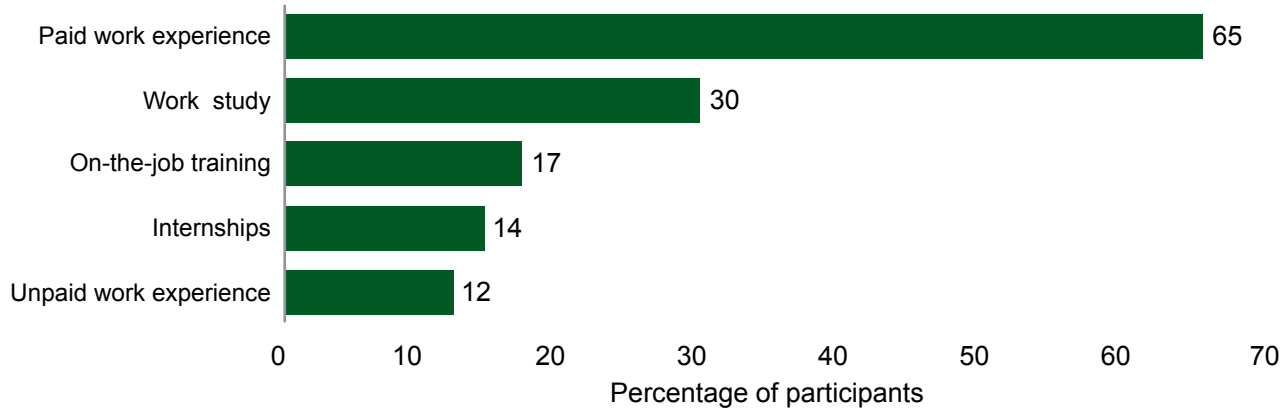
Despite modest take-up rates, most individuals who started work-based learning activities completed them. Across the four pilots that implemented robust work-based learning activities, 23 percent of individuals started work-based learning. This varied from 8 percent in Vermont to 38 percent in Kentucky. Among those who started work-based learning, nearly two-thirds completed it. Individuals spent, on average, nearly four months participating in work-based learning.

A variety of work-based learning activities were offered; paid work experience was most common. Individuals most frequently started paid work experiences (65 percent), followed by work study, on-the-job training, internships, and unpaid work experience (Figure 1). Paid work experience and work study were attractive to employers, because the full wage for these opportunities generally were paid to the participant by the provider or the SNAP agency. Employers were not involved in subsidizing any portion of the wage and did not employ the participant. This made the process for employers much easier. However, pilot staff recognized that these positions were mainly entry-level work in the service or retail industries and did not transition into unsubsidized jobs for participants when their hours were completed. For example, in Kentucky the employers were often small businesses like a local motorcycle repair shop, motel, grocery store, nurseries, or elementary school, where participants worked in customer service, food preparation, janitorial services, and child care. Because of the nature of these jobs, they were usually offered to individuals who did not have an extensive work history or found it difficult to obtain an unsubsidized job. In most pilots, providers tried to find employment that fit with an individual's career interests, but these positions generally were used to provide individuals with experience for their resumes and offer income while gaining experience, rather than providing a career pathway.

Paid work experience and work study were attractive to employers, because the full wage for these opportunities generally were paid to the participant by the provider or the SNAP agency.

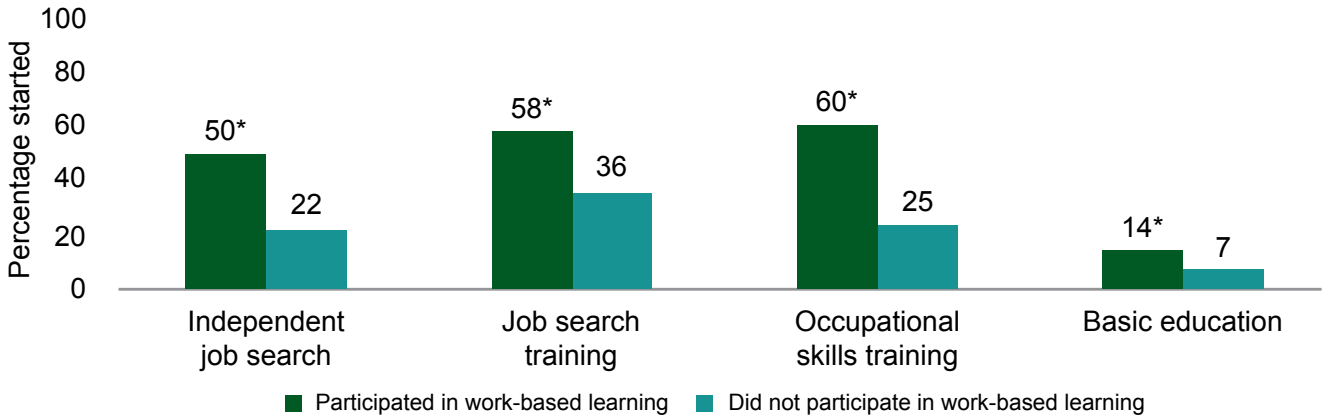
Individuals who participated in work-based learning were more

Figure 1. Paid work experience was the most common work-based learning type



likely to participate in other activities. In the pilots, work-based learning activities were often offered alongside other activities, and participants usually received additional supports from case managers. Those who participated in a work-based learning activity were twice as likely to participate in other employment and training-related activities, such as independent job search and job search training, compared to individuals who did not participate in work-based learning (Figure 2). In addition, nearly all individuals who participated in work-based learning received higher participant reimbursements and more case management compared to those who did not participate in work-based learning.

Figure 2. Work-based learning participants started other activities at higher rates



* Difference in estimates between individuals who participated in work-based learning activities and those who did not is significantly different from zero at the 0.01 level, two-tailed test.

During that time, individuals who participated in work-based learning were nearly three times more likely to complete other SNAP E&T activities.

Individuals who participated in work-based learning engaged in the pilots for longer periods of time. Overall, those who participated in work-based learning remained in the pilot for over two months longer than those who did not (245 days versus 173 days). During that time, individuals who participated in work-based learning were nearly three times more likely to complete other SNAP E&T activities. For example, 45 percent of individuals who participated in work-based learning completed job search training and 32 percent completed occupational skills training, compared to only 18 and 14 percent of those who did not participate. Work-based learning participants were also more than twice as likely to receive a training credential (25 versus 10 percent).

Those who participated in work-based learning experienced greater increases in employment and earnings compared to those who did not. For individuals who participated in work-based learning activities, pilot services led to an increase in employment in the three years after enrolling in the pilot. They also led to an increase in the number of hours individuals worked, and the amount of money they earned. For those who did not participate in work-based learning, pilot services had no effect or a negative effect on rates of employment, hours worked, and earnings (Figure 3). For example, for individuals who participated in work-based learning, pilot services led to a 5 percentage point increase in employment rates and $1,399 increase in earnings in the third year after pilot enrollment. In comparison, those who did not participate in work-based learning while in the pilot had no change in employment and a $292 increase in earnings in the third year.

Figure 3. The pilots increased earnings and rates of employment for those who participated in work-based learning

	Change in employment		Change in annual earnings	
Year after pilot enrollment	Participated	Did not participate	Participated	Did not participate
Year 1	+ 11%*	-2%	-$158	-$77
Year 2	+ 8%*	0%	$978*	$90
Year 3	+ 5%*	0%	$1,399*	$292

*Significantly different from individuals who participated in work-based learning at the 0.05 level, two-tailed test.

Considerations for SNAP agencies interested in work-based learning activities

This brief provides new information regarding the association between participation in work-based learning, receipt of other services, and labor market outcomes. The findings suggest that despite challenges to implementation, work-based learning can be an effective tool to help keep individuals engaged in services as they develop skills and gain work experience. These opportunities, when combined with other activities and services, can lead to unsubsidized employment and increased earnings over time. Findings also suggest several important considerations for SNAP agencies that are contemplating offering or currently offering work-based learning activities:

Selection of work-based learning opportunities needs to be driven by both employers' and participants' needs. The workforce providers in the pilots often began with an employer network and tried to match participants to available positions. Although, understanding employers' needs and identifying a pool of opportunities is important, it is equally important to understand the needs and interests of participants to ensure these opportunities are a good fit. Pilot staff found that many participants did not have preferences and were flexible in the jobs they would take, which made matching them to the network of employer easy. However, some participants had barriers or specific goals in mind, and pilots frequently had difficulty in matching them to employers because they were not open to taking any available position. For example, in Mississippi, pilot staff did not have a large employer network, so one community college found success in asking participants to identify employers for whom they would like to work and reaching out to see if the employer would be interested in offering a work-based learning position. Likewise in Kentucky, staff would ask participants, where they would want to work, if they could choose, and tried to find jobs that met their needs. In one case, the case manager was able to get a woman a position at the hospital that she had been trying to get hired at for years, and it eventually turned into a full-time job after she completed her work-based learning hours. To improve participant experiences in work-based learning and increase the likelihood that work-based learning opportunities transition into career opportunities, SNAP agencies could work with participants to identify attainable placements that meet participant career goals and align with participant skills.

Prioritize employers where work-based learning can transition into unsubsidized employment. In the pilots, more often than not work-based learning opportunities did not lead to permanent positions. Participants frequently mentioned

To address challenges related to employer recruitment and retention, some providers collaborated with other organizations or existing employer networks, such as those offered through WIOA. When these networks were not available, some pilots hired additional staff to conduct employer outreach.

that they loved being able to work, but when their hours ended so did the job, and there was not an opportunity to stay. When selecting employers for work-based learning, States should ensure that employers are committed to training participants and have opportunities for permanent positions. Also, if employers are not following through over time, placements should end. Most providers suggested that they did talk to employers about committing to place participants after work-based learning ended, but few followed through. In discussions with employers, the primary reason for not hiring participants after the placement ended was that they could not afford to pay for the unsubsidized position.

States can leverage community partners or employer networks to identify work-based learning opportunities. Providers that did not have existing employer networks, such as community colleges, sometimes found it difficult to develop employer connections and find placements. To address challenges related to employer recruitment and retention, some providers collaborated with other organizations or existing employer networks, such as those offered through WIOA. When these networks were not available, some pilots hired additional staff to conduct employer outreach. SNAP agencies interested in implementing work-based learning activities should assess the strength of their employer relations and consider whether they will be able to identify additional support in order to find and retain employers.

Other subsidy programs available in the area could affect placement of SNAP participants. California's work-based learning offerings were not implemented as planned (as discussed above), in part because of competing subsidy programs available to employers. To avoid similar situations, SNAP agencies should research whether other programs offer subsidies. If so, they should align subsidy amounts with those offered by other programs to help ensure that employers do not choose one participant over the other as a result of the available subsidy amount.

Conclusion

Despite implementation challenges, work-based learning is associated with increased rates of employment and earnings. By outlining the benefits, challenges, and suggested considerations related to work-based learning implementation, this brief provides additional information and guidance to SNAP agencies interested in incorporating work-based learning into their programs. These findings will help States implement work-based learning in their SNAP E&T programs and avoid common implementation pitfalls.

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.*

Endnotes

[1] Although any wages participants earn through subsidized work-based learning in SNAP E&T are currently counted as income for SNAP eligibility, this was not how income was treated for the pilots. Any wages that pilot participants received through work-based learning were not reported or counted toward SNAP eligibility. Therefore, the pilots cannot provide any best practices on how States can balance providing subsidized wages to help participants build their skills with those same wages reducing SNAP benefits levels and potentially making participants ineligible for SNAP and the E&T program.

[2] The pilots were designed before the 2018 Farm Bill. Therefore definitions of work-based learning types may differ from those in current FNS regulations. Across the pilots, work-based learning is a term that may be applied to a broad range of learning experiences. **Work experience** was generally offered to individuals who did not have an extensive work history or found it difficult to obtain an unsubsidized job. They worked at a range of businesses in the community and were paid wages for the hours they worked. The provider or SNAP agency paid those wages directly to the participants; there were no labor costs to the business where the participants worked and they were not directly employed by those businesses during the subsidized period. **On-the-job training** was for participants who were hired by an employer and were learning new skills for their job. The employer paid the participant directly and some portion of their wages were subsidized by the program to offset training or low productivity costs while learning the job. **Internships** were short-term, learning experiences in a workplace associated with a training program the participant was completing. The internships could happen during or shortly after completing classroom training to obtain "real world" experience in the field. These positions could be paid or unpaid, but most were paid in the pilots through stipends or hourly wages. Internships were much shorter than other types of work-based learning, usually only a few weeks. **Work study** was also for participants who were in training programs, but it was primarily for those in community colleges and wages were paid by the college (with SNAP E&T program funds as needed). These position were longer-term than internships (they could last as long as the participant was in college). Staff generally tried to find positions that were in the participant's field of study, so they could obtain relevant experience, although this was not always possible. Two pilots, that were not included in the analysis for this brief, offered **subsidized wages** to employers when they hired pilot participants. Similar to on-the-job training, the employer hired participants directly and were reimbursed for a portion of the wages they paid the participants. This was not tied to training, but was a standard percentage or dollar amount of the wages that would be reimbursed. In California, the employer could receive the wage subsidies for up to 9 months (the percentage subsidized progressively reduced over time from 100 percent to 50 percent), and in Delaware it was for up to 90 days (the program subsidized $2 per hour for up to 40 hours per week).

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 program design and data provided in this brief are based on the analyses of qualitative data collected through telephone calls and in-person interviews with pilot staff from State agencies, partners, and providers, and quantitative data on service provision by State agencies, survey data from participants, and unemployment wage records.

Prepared by Kelley Monzella, James Mabli, Gretchen Rowe, and Rachel Bleiweiss-Sande

May 2022

Mathematica
Progress Together

Produced by Mathematica for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service.