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Short-Term Assistance, Long-Term Success: The Top Strategies to Help #RealCollege Students through Federal Pandemic Relief Funds

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Background: The Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund and Student Basic Needs Insecurity

For three consecutive academic years, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended the entire higher education system. Beginning in March of 2020, the pandemic forced institutions to shift to online learning and remote work, states faced uncertain short- and long-term budget dynamics, and students faced unimaginable disruption in the face of both public health and national economic emergencies. College enrollment plummeted and has yet to recover, with community colleges in particular losing nearly 15% of their students within two years. In addition, as a result of economic disruption and consistent with long-term trends, students across the country faced widespread basic needs insecurity. According to The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice's most recent #RealCollege survey of nearly 200,000 students attending 202 colleges and universities in 42 states, about three in five students faced some form of basic needs insecurity, including one in three students who faced food insecurity and nearly half who experienced housing insecurity, in the fall of 2020.

In response, Congress stepped in and allocated relief to institutions and students, beginning with the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March 2020. This relief money, broadly known as the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF), has been supplemented twice more in the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) in December 2020 and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act in March 2021. In total, colleges and universities received $75 billion primarily allocated across two streams of funding. Over $30 billion was given to public and private non-profit colleges to use for direct emergency aid to students (known as the "student portion"). In addition, over $38 billion in aid was provided to institutions to use for a broad set of purposes related to addressing the fallout and disruptions created by the pandemic (known as the "institutional portion").[1]

Students who received emergency grants reported that those funds helped them stay enrolled, meet the costs of attending school, and reduce stress. After over a year of conflicting and often shifting guidance, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) has built a set of resources for colleges and universities detailing how they should allocate institutional funds, which includes direct financial assistance and emergency grants to students.

Over six months from the latest round of relief funding, there are substantial resources still available to students and institutions and an opportunity to develop aggressive and innovative strategies to help students. This policy brief details several ways colleges should consider using their remaining HEERF funds to meet students' basic needs while laying the groundwork for programs and practices that reflect the long-standing food, housing, and financial insecurity crises.

Substantial Funding Remains to Support #RealCollege Students

From the outset, some institutions were aggressive and proactive in allocating their HEERF grants, often using innovative approaches to delivering aid quickly, equitably, and efficiently. Yet many other colleges and universities still have considerable HEERF funds that can be awarded to students, faculty, and staff or used to create and expand programs that address basic needs and other financial insecurity. Reporting from the U.S. Department of Education shows that in 39 states more than half of all HEERF funding had yet to be allocated as of September 30, 2021. Also, more than two-thirds of HEERF dollars remain unspent in two states (Alaska and Hawaii).

Certainly, it makes sense for institutions to hold onto a small portion of relief funds given the unexpected nature of the pandemic, economic uncertainty, and broad hesitation as to whether there will be additional rounds of HEERF funding. However, given that nearly three-fourths of students face unmet financial need and almost three in five students face some form of basic needs insecurity, institutions have both an opportunity and an obligation to get the aid into the hands of current and former students as quickly and equitably as possible.

Further, HEERF emergency aid is designed to be flexible and allocated to a much wider range of students than traditional Title IV financial aid. The U.S. Department of Education has clarified that HEERF emergency aid can be provided to several additional groups of students, including:

- Those unable to fill out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA);
- Undocumented students and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients;
- Those enrolled in dual-enrollment programs;
- Non-degree seeking, non-credit, and continuing education students; and
- Students who have left school anytime and for any reason since March 13, 2020.

In addition, HEERF funds can be used for any component of a student's cost of attendance or emergency costs such as food, housing, physical and mental health care, or childcare. The U.S. Department of Education has explicitly stated that funds should be allocated to students experiencing basic needs insecurity, including those who have faced "significant unexpected expenses, such as the loss of employment (either for themselves or their families), reduced income, or food or housing insecurity."

Colleges and universities also have broad flexibility in allocating the institutional portion of the funds, so long as the uses relate to defraying expenses associated with the ongoing pandemic or meeting students' emergency needs. The U.S. Department of Education has provided a long list of ways that institutions can reimburse themselves for lost revenues as a result of the pandemic. These lost or reduced revenues may include or relate to, but are not limited to, decreased enrollment, tuition, room and board, research, childcare services, food services, events, and facilities. The compelling aspect of this guidance is that colleges and universities can build new programs that tackle basic needs insecurity and provide aid to a much larger pool of students than ever before.

Coordinate Expanded Basic Needs Supports and Student Benefits

The resources allocated to institutions and students via HEERF are substantial, but they are not the only recent expansion of federal support to address student basic needs. Congress also made almost 3 million additional students eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps) benefits by broadening eligibility to those who have a $0 Expected Family Contribution (EFC) or are eligible to participate in a federal or state work-study program. There is also substantial rental assistance relief available to renters facing housing insecurity or on the cusp of eviction through the Treasury Department's Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP). State and local rules for receiving rental assistance vary, but some states explicitly allow groups like independent, full-time college students to apply for and receive support to pay rent.

At the same time, campuses across the country, sometimes in partnership with community organizations, have begun to create campus hubs that offer services such as emergency aid, public benefits access, case management, and food pantries in a centralized location or office on-campus. The Hope Center's research suggests that these hubs offer a promising model in helping students access supports that mitigate emergencies, especially when students are reminded of these services via simple email nudges.

Institutions should consider allocating HEERF dollars for planning, technical assistance, and training to set-up and expand basic needs centers, like the Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC) at Amarillo College in Texas. These centers integrate support services and help students access HEERF emergency aid and non-HEERF pandemic relief, like expanded SNAP and ERAP, and support applying for benefits like the Child Tax Credit, childcare support, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), or state and federal financial aid. In some states like California, which recently allocated $30 million to support basic needs centers, institutions can leverage state funding to staff centers, plan for future expansion, and train workers, students, and community members.

Colleges and universities should consider using HEERF, which can be used on any portion of a student's cost of attendance, on vouchers for free transport or cash assistance equivalent to the cost of getting to campus. Local governments, like Los Angeles, have begun to leverage direct support from the ARP Act to allow community college students free access to public transportation. Further, institutions like the City University of New York (CUNY) and Rio Hondo College in California have seen positive results from offering free or discounted transportation benefits.

Create Universal Meals Programs

Given the extensive food insecurity across campuses and recognizing that students in higher education no longer have access to free, balanced meals through the National School Lunch Program, some colleges and universities have begun to provide free meals on campus. Evaluations of meal voucher programs, like the program at Bunker Hill Community College in Massachusetts, have shown positive results on credit attainment, students' general well-being and helped reduce the severity of food insecurity. White Mountains Community College in New Hampshire recently announced a first-of-its-kind meal program that provides daily breakfast and lunch and weekly dinner to all students. Ozarks Technical and Community College in Missouri also used HEERF funding to expand a free breakfast program to its campuses.

Universal meal programs, funded through HEERF institutional dollars, can also be created with aggressive outreach around expanded SNAP benefits. Thus, students currently and newly eligible for SNAP—particularly $0 EFC students—would have the option of a free on-campus meal and additional benefits, which would allow them to buy nutritious food for their household and family.

Expand Broadband and Remote Learning

As the pandemic shifted to learning remotely and online, access to reliable internet and laptops has become essential to learning. The latest #RealCollege survey suggests that four in 10 students struggle with computer or internet access. Given the equity issues surrounding Wi-Fi access, particularly for students in rural and tribal communities, and that the risks of COVID-19 are likely to continue well into future academic years, colleges and universities should use HEERF funding to expand the ability of students to learn and work remotely. HEERF institutional dollars can be used to purchase Wi-Fi hotspots, laptops, and other equipment for students. Many colleges, including Diné College, have purchased laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots and also built new "microcampuses" to support remote connectivity and allow students to travel shorter distances to access the internet.

Institutions may be able to leverage HEERF funding with other federal initiatives to expand connectivity. For example, Congress has allocated a new $65 billion funding stream from the November 2021 bipartisan infrastructure bill to supporting expanded broadband in rural and underserved areas, and it also includes $14 billion to help low-income students connect to broadband. Finally, the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Emergency Broadband Benefit program currently offers a $50 monthly discount to households in which one person received a Pell Grant. Institutions could conceivably leverage multiple streams of funding by helping students access the $50 FCC broadband benefit and applying HEERF funds to cover the remainder of the cost of in-home Wi-Fi. HEERF funds could also cover internet access and provide necessary computers and equipment for low-income students and basic needs-insecure students who do not receive Pell or are unable to fill out a FAFSA.

Provide Mental Health Supports

More than one in three students reported experiencing anxiety or depression in the fall of 2020, reflecting the need for institutions to address student mental and emotional health concerns. Colleges and universities are encouraged to use HEERF institutional funds on services that support mental and emotional health and keep students on track to succeed in school and beyond.

For example, the CUNY system used HEERF funds to expand mental health services and clinical staff across all 18 of its campuses. Also, institutions like Passaic County Community College and Monmouth University in New Jersey have hired social workers and mental health counselors and employed student counselors and student affairs staff to address mental health needs as well as food and housing insecurity.

In addition to providing and broadly communicating the availability of mental health supports via HEERF funds, colleges should ensure that students who have previously received, or apply for, emergency aid are targeted for outreach. These students have demonstrated need that likely extends beyond one-time financial support. In addition to offering student supports like mental health services, colleges can use HEERF funds to develop and update resource guides for students with information on accessing and determining eligibility for other public benefits, including Medicaid in some states.

Cancel Student Debt

In the past year, spurred on by advocates, states and institutions have begun to examine the amount of debt held on student accounts (often referred to as "institutional debt") for unpaid tuition, fees, or other money owed to the institution. These debts can lead to schools withholding student transcripts or diplomas, preventing them from registering, returning to school, transferring elsewhere, or even getting a job. In some states, including Ohio and New York, debts are turned over to the state Attorney General or special recovery units, who can hound students well after they leave school.

One allowable and encouraging use of HEERF funds is canceling debts and clearing student account balances, both for students currently enrolled or those who have left school for any reason since the beginning of the public health emergency. Historically Black Colleges like Florida A&M, Wilberforce University, and Delaware State, large systems like the City University of New York and Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, and community colleges like the Community College of Philadelphia and Quinsigamond Community College in Massachusetts have all instituted substantial HEERF-funded debt cancellation policies.

Colleges and universities can cancel the debt in one of two ways: (a) by getting affirmative consent from students to use an emergency grant to close an account balance, if the institution's officials communicate to the students that they retain maximum flexibility with emergency aid and do not have to use it for that purpose; or (b) canceling debt and counting it as lost revenue.

While HEERF emergency aid cannot be a condition for a student returning to school (i.e., colleges cannot accompany the aid with a demand the student re-enroll), institutions are required to use a portion of funds to conduct direct outreach to students about the opportunity to receive a financial aid adjustment due to recent unemployment, loss of income, or other extenuating or emergency circumstances. Pairing that outreach with automatic debt cancellation may eliminate some likely barriers to re-enrolling and completing their degree or program.

Deliver Guaranteed Monthly Income and Emergency Aid Maintainence Payments for Students

HEERF aid is far from the only flexible cash assistance made available through the three rounds of federal pandemic relief funds. In addition to three rounds of direct cash assistance to households and a redesigned Child Tax Credit that can be delivered monthly, cities and localities across the country, including Seattle, Chicago, and Minneapolis, have announced plans to leverage federal support through the ARP offer a basic monthly income to a limited number of households.

These pilot programs build on a promising set of research and policies around basic or guaranteed income, and given the inherent flexibility of HEERF student and institutional funds, could be expanded to include those enrolled in higher education.

For example, institutions could identify students who face exceptional need (e.g., facing one or more forms of basic needs insecurity, $0 EFC students, parenting students, and those who apply for and receive emergency aid) and offer a monthly basic needs grant to cover the price of necessities. In addition, given that students utilizing emergency aid are often one additional emergency away from dropping out or becoming food or housing insecure, institutions should consider making monthly emergency aid maintenance payments that span a semester or academic year to those who experience acute need.

Assuming the monthly or regular grants remain flexible and are delivered to those experiencing high levels of need, institutions could allocate both student and institutional funds toward regular payments to students. Doing so would create a level of predictability for students, mitigate against bouts of unemployment, and allow them to focus on learning.

Expand Aid and Professional Development for Staff and Faculty

Recognizing that faculty and staff working conditions affect and reflect student learning conditions, institutions should ensure that workers on campus do not experience basic needs insecurity or financial precarity as well. Research from before the pandemic suggests that basic needs insecurity is relatively common across the higher education instructional workforce, and the pandemic has been particularly disruptive for adjunct and contingent faculty.

Institutions may use HEERF dollars to pay for employee costs associated with the pandemic, costs related to shifting instructional delivery, and pay wages for staff who were unable to work during a period of any total or partial campus closures. Institutions should consider using remaining HEERF institutional funds to ensure that faculty and staff have access to emergency financial assistance and professional development and training to address the new requirements and challenges that come with teaching and addressing the needs of students in a pandemic and post-pandemic environment.

Given the reduction in the adjunct, part-time, and contingent faculty workforce, HEERF dollars could be targeted specifically at those who have lost their job or reduced the number of classes they teach, providing a down payment on training and professional development opportunities, paid leave and other benefits, or extending opportunities for rehiring.

It's Time to Maximize Relief for #RealCollege Students

For the first time since the Higher Education Act of 1965, Congress has provided the opportunity for institutions to provide direct cash assistance outside of the often-complex bureaucracy that accompanies Title IV financial aid. In addition, institutions have substantial resources to expand programs or create new initiatives that address the ongoing crisis of student basic needs insecurity. Further, colleges and universities have a chance to leverage federal relief funds outside of the $75 billion allocated through HEERF by connecting students and staff alike with expanded public benefits and pilot projects that work to build a fair economy and get workers back on their feet.

The U.S. Department of Education has offered substantial flexibility and guidance that allows more students to see relief than ever before and encourages institutions to focus on students who have often been marginalized or shut out of campus, local, state, and federal resources. By expanding and centralizing basic needs supports, offering predictable and robust cash assistance, aiding faculty and staff, and maximizing students' ability to learn and work remotely, institutions can finally commit to maximizing these funds in ways that reach #RealCollege students in both the short- and long-term.

Notes and References

[1] Across the three relief acts, in addition to the student portion and institutional portion, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) received an additional $4.85 billion, and $840 million was provided to private for-profit colleges explicitly for emergency grants to students. For more on the funding allocations for HBCUs, TCUs, and MSIs, see here and for updated information on HEERF funds awarded, see here.