LESSONS LEARNED

What the past year can — and can't — tell us about the future of emergency aid.

BY DAVID HELENE

OVER THE PAST EIGHTEEN MONTHS, COMMUNITY COLLEGES have received tens of billions in much-needed investment from the federal government's Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF), creating a singular and unprecedented opportunity to address students' financial hardships and basic needs.

While for many institutions HEERF presented the first encounter with emergency aid, community colleges have long been employing such programs to support students around their basic needs and are extremely familiar with the task at hand.

In many ways, the federal government's acknowledgement of the need for emergency aid — and the inclusion of emergency funding in the various stimulus bills — can largely be attributed to the research and practice in the community college realm over the past decade, which has led the way in developing and disseminating best practices for distributing funds to students.

But despite community colleges' experience with emergency aid distribution, many institutions have struggled to effectively administer HEERF emergency aid. The sheer volume of dollars, the stop-start nature of federal guidance, and restrictions to awarding only Title IV students in HEERF I, among other challenges, have created material capacity constraints and understandable fears around compliance. Those challenges have, in turn, led institutions in many cases to optimize for minimizing administrative burden at the expense of student success. As a result, according to the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, only 32% of students experiencing basic needs insecurity have actually received emergency aid, and students on average have had to wait 13 days for funding.

At a macro level, despite the fact that emergency aid supply has matched demand for perhaps the first (and only) time, dollars are also doing out slowly in aggregate. As of June 30 In Washington state, for example, HEERF I emergency aid funds had yet to be exhausted (more than one year after the state received them from the federal government), and not a single community college in the state had distributed 50% of its student portion of HEERF II. Unfortunately, Washington's experience is far from the exception.

What barriers have stood in the way of distributing aid more effectively — and how can institutions learn from the best practices of their peers to help more students receive the funding support they need?

Overcoming Challenges

What we've learned from our work with community colleges is that in many cases, the greatest barrier to effective distribution of emergency aid is internal infrastructure. Overnight, institutions have been expected to service huge amounts of federal aid funding (in some cases, tens of millions) without the corresponding resources to support the administration of these dollars. As a result, many have reasonably resorted to heuristics to meet compliance standards, such as awarding $0 expected family contribution (EFC) students only or distributing equal awards to all students, as the staffing required to oversee an equitable and fast-moving application program would otherwise prove too costly.

Such methodologies are entirely understandable as a way of providing some kind of defensible benchmark for aid distribution. But they often fail to capture the real-time financial conditions of students and prioritize need accordingly. EFC by definition is a lagging metric and has been shown to omit critical financial information, such as household debt, which is disproportionately borne by Black families. Just as important, an EFC-based calculation by definition omits non-Title IV students including DACA students and undocumented students, who have been found to endure material additional financial burdens — even though those students are explicitly meant to be served under HEERF III.

Scaling What Works

Despite the challenges of distributing aid, many community colleges have been able to stay true to an equity-centered approach to serve all students quickly and effectively.

Consider the case of Dallas College, which worked quickly in the wake of the CARES Act to ensure all students would have access to funding. Dallas College created a single application through Edquity that enabled approved Title IV students to receive CARES Act funds, and approved non-Title IV students to receive philanthropic dollars. The platform created a system whereby students were not stigmatized, othered, or forced to jump through hoops in the aid application process. All received uniform communication. And all were funded in an average of 48 hours. Since last June, Dallas College has processed over 20,000 applications for emergency aid in this way, and has since opened up federal funds to all students as encouraged under HEERF III.

The experience of Dallas College suggests a number of different best practices for distribution of HEERF funds, including:

- **Make communications and eligibility universal:** When funding is widely available, clear and broad communication to the entire student body can ensure that as many students as possible understand how to confirm eligibility and apply for aid. Institutions like Pierce College are using this approach to reach the greatest number of students as quickly as possible, and then deploying technology to help them rapidly prioritize need and distribute funds accordingly.
- **Increase award amounts:** Historical emergency aid often was less than $500 on average, but HEERF has allowed for larger award amounts. Dallas College has provided larger awards targeted to the issues students are experiencing, particularly when students experience more than one issue at a time, which is the case for over 70% of student applicants.
- **Prioritize need, access, and speed of service:** Programs should be student-centered by allowing all students to indicate possible financial hardships and should prioritize getting these dollars out to students in 24-48 hours.

A growing body of research suggests that such an approach can yield material outcomes around completion. Compton College, for instance, found that when it prioritized speed and equity in its awarding process, students who received emergency aid graduated at twice the rate as those not served; and San Diego Community College District has seen the use of aid distribution platforms narrow equity gaps in the demographics of its awards.

What's Next?

While these are no doubt best practices, what's particularly tricky is that institutions may have to rethink — and partially unlearn — them when resources prove to be scarcer as we reach the "HEERF cliff." When institutions are no longer drawing down federal funds for emergency aid, distribution will require even more targeted needs assessments and prioritization of need, as block grants will no longer be feasible. And it will require more coordinated interaction with other supports like emergency rental assistance, SNAP, and other benefits to ensure collective resources are going the farthest to meet student needs — and for the students who need it most.

Understanding the resource shortfall that's to come, it's extra critical for us to get the process right now — and continue to prove out the efficacy and equity of these cash assistance programs. As we've seen this past year, if community colleges lead the way on student success, federal and state governments will have a north star that can help policymakers make better-informed decisions about the investments students need most.

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