EMERGENCY GRANT PROGRAM

A Guide to the Project Success Emergency Grant Program

OVERVIEW

ABOUT PROJECT SUCCESS

In collaboration with Federal Student Aid, Trellis Company, a nonprofit corporation, works with participating minority-serving institutions to provide students, faculty, staff, and campus/district leaders with resources, support, and information to address student recruitment, retention, degree completion, and cohort default rates. These services are offered at no cost to the institution.

ABOUT TRELLIS

Trellis is a nonprofit company with origins in administration of federal student loan programs. As such, Trellis has more than 30 years of experience working with students, higher education institutions, and community partners to expand educational opportunities and successes for students.

PURPOSE OF THE EMERGENCY GRANT PROGRAM

To address student retention challenges, Trellis is offering emergency grant funding for your campus to assist students with unforeseen financial need. For many low-income students, an unforeseen expense for something like a car repair or medical bill can create a financial emergency that threatens their college hopes. While typically not large expenses, they can be enough to force these students into a tough choice: stay in college or pay the bill. Research has shown that when colleges quickly pay these unforeseen, emergency bills on behalf of students, more low-income college students stay enrolled and on track for graduation.

Referral to Project Success Coaching

Schools should encourage students to utilize Trellis' financial coaching program (after emergency grant funds have been provided to address a student's immediate need) to help empower the student to avoid future emergencies to the extent possible, through a combination of additional planning and accessing community resources, as appropriate.

Trellis coaches use a student-centered approach that encourages critical thinking and planning. Coaching sessions are individualized to the needs of each student, confidential, delivered virtually (via phone and video), and free.

More information about Trellis financial coaching, including an introduction to the coaching staff, resources, student testimonials, and access to our appointment scheduling system, can be found at http://www.aie.org/coaching.

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INSTITUTIONAL ELIGIBILITY

Institutions using at least one other Trellis Project Success service are invited to apply for emergency grant funding as part of the holistic services offered through Project Success. The award process is non-competitive; awards are approved based on demonstration of a robust program plan meeting all eligibility requirements. Institutions that do not qualify for this award cycle may re-submit in any subsequent cycle, depending on availability of funding, and should address any reviewer concerns.

Selected institutions will agree to adhere to the following programmatic guidelines:

- Funding amounts are based on tiers correlating to student enrollment.

- Campuses will receive a $5,000 one-time capacity building award prior to the initial award disbursement. Additional capacity building funding may be available for subsequent years, pending availability of funding and approval of a renewal application. The capacity award is for the institution's use to help to set up the program.

- Schools will administer this program from an office other than the Financial Aid Office.

- Colleges are strongly encouraged to refer students requesting emergency grants to additional campus, community, and Project Success resources to supplement the grant, address root causes or contributing factors to the financial emergency, and further support the student's persistence.

- Campuses will provide sustainability plans for the grant program, developed in conjunction with their Trellis consultants, as part of the reporting requirements.

TRELLIS' COMMITMENT

In addition to providing funding for emergency awards, Trellis commits to support your school in the development of the program by providing:

- Consultation on defining "emergency"

- Guidance/templates/best practices to assist in developing the student application, review process, promotional materials and communication plan, etc.

- Financial coaching to any interested emergency grant applicants (after grant funding approval or denial; coaching will not be a requirement for emergency grant application consideration)

- Opportunities to learn from peer institutions participating in the Trellis Emergency Grant Program
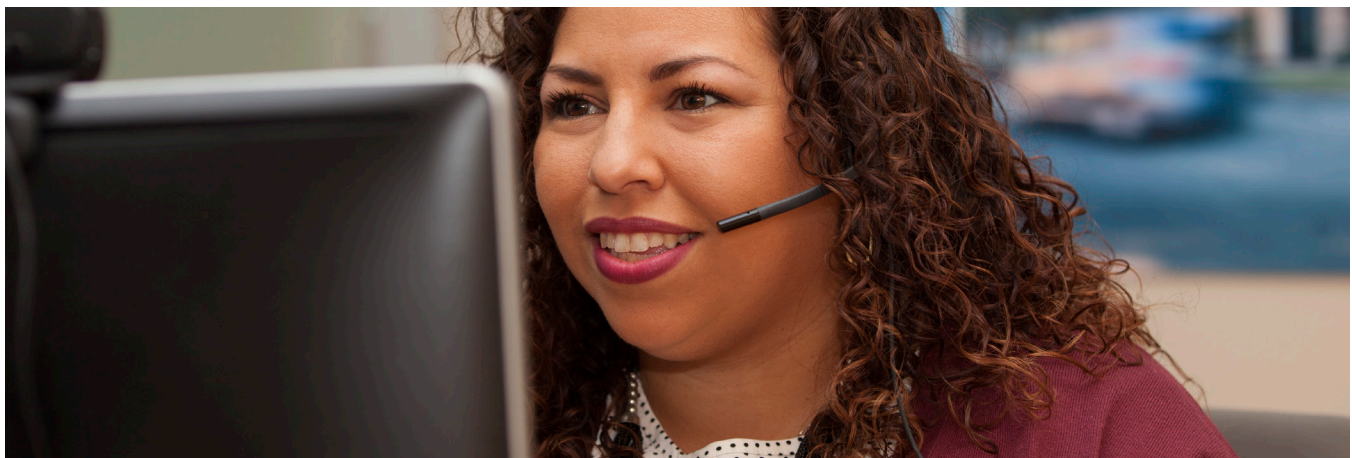
INSTITUTIONAL APPLICATION PROCEDURE

Complete the Project Success Emergency Grant Program Application for Academic Year 2018 – 2019 and email it, along with all required attachments, to projectsuccessgrants@trelliscompany.org by noon CDT on the date provided to you by your Trellis consultant. You will be required to include the following documents at the time of application:

- Signature forms: print a hard copy to gather the necessary signatures, and then scan the completed document and submit as a PDF

- A copy of your Student Application; you may use the Trellis Emergency Grant Application template instead

- If your institution is not located in Texas, a copy of your IRS W-9 form

- Completed CrushFTP sign-up form

- Optional for all applicants: additional attachments such as tables and graphs that support your answers to the application questions

Be sure your institution meets all requirements and fully understands how this program works before spending time completing the various application materials. Institutional commitment to the program has been key to past grantees' successes.

- Begin collaborating right away with the people who will need to provide input on your plans and ultimately sign-off on your application. This should include your president or chancellor and your colleagues in areas responsible for budgeting, financial aid, processing payments, and reporting enrollment data to the National Student Clearinghouse.

- Collaborate with your colleagues in Institutional Research or other relevant departments to complete the reporting documents.

What to Expect if Your Application is Approved

1. Trellis will email a Grant Agreement to the designated emergency grant program primary contact at your institution.

2. Institution will return the completed Grant Agreement to Trellis.

3. Trellis will disburse the $5,000 capacity building grant funds on or after July 1, 2018.

4. Trellis will make the first (fall term) disbursement of emergency grant funding on or after September 1, 2018.

5. Trellis will make the second (spring term) disbursement of emergency grant funding on or after January 15, 2019 (conditional upon receipt of fall term report).

6. Depending on funding availability, renewal applications and guidelines will be available summer 2019.

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REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Data Elements to be Reported to Trellis

Each January, July, and September, schools are expected to report to Trellis the following data elements for students who have received a Trellis emergency grant during the preceding term:

- Date of birth
- Gender
- Parent(s) attainment of associate's degree or higher
- Ethnicity
- Race
- Marital status of student
- Dependents of student
- Veteran status
- Foster child status
- Application submission date
- Award decision date
- Institution name
- Fully paid date

- Support services to which student was referred
- Term/semester
- Year
- Category of aid (based on categories provided by Trellis on the reporting form, such as utilities, housing/rent, food, medical/dental, personal automobile expenses, public transportation/bus passes, child care, fuel, etc.)
- Total requested
- Total awarded
- Total denied
- Total paid
- Reenrollment data

Clearinghouse Enrollment Data to be Reported Each Semester

Reporting to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) each term of enrollment data for all students, including race/ethnicity information, will facilitate more robust datasets and increase the ability of professionals to support all students to completion.

Each February and October, schools are expected to provide de-identified NSC enrollment data (graduated, full-time, half-time, less than half-time, withdrew, or session not attended) to Trellis for students who have received emergency grants.

This reporting will require coordination with the campus office or department responsible for NSC reporting, to ensure that a data request is submitted to the Clearinghouse well in advance of each reporting deadline.

Narrative Reports

Trellis requests that institutions submit narrative reports on program progress and sustainability efforts every year via a brief online survey. These reports are a key component of this grant, as the successes and challenges you share help us to learn more about how to best help students address obstacles to program completion.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Trellis recorded webinar "Dash Emergency Grant" discusses the structure, success, and best practices of a long-term emergency grant program administered by Great Lakes, another GA participating in Project Success
- Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's Emergency Aid Network, including sample application templates
- Wisconsin Hope Lab publication "Distributing Emergency Aid to College Students: Recommendations and Sample Distribution Protocol" (Includes sample application template.)

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STUDENT APPLICATION PROCESS AND PROCEDURES

Students facing financial emergencies are in crisis. Colleges need basic information to pay students' emergency expenses but don't want to create unnecessary barriers to access through complicated application processes. The easier colleges can make it for students to quickly benefit from emergency funds, the sooner they will return their focus to school and move toward completion.

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY GUIDELINES

Award amounts:

- Average award anticipated: $500

- Preferred award limit: $1,000

- Schools may use their discretion to award up to $1,500, if needed. Trellis seeks to serve as many students as possible; however, award amounts should be sufficient to cover the emergency at hand. Trellis defers to the school's discretion.

Fund use:

- Funds should be allocated for unforeseen circumstances only.

- Funds are intended to be provided on a one-time basis for students.

- Assistance is intended to support students without other economic resources. Students should demonstrate financial need; schools will define how this is determined.

- Funds are not to be used to cover school expenses (parking, fines, tuition, books, supplies, required tools/equipment, etc.).

- Funds should not be added to a student's ledger or statement of account.

Student status:

- Must be undergraduate, degree-seeking students enrolled part-time or full-time.

- Graduate students are not eligible for emergency grants.

- Must be enrolled during the semester in which emergency grant funds are awarded (students may be eligible for summer funding if they are enrolled in summer classes or they were enrolled in both the previous and upcoming fall semesters).

- Trellis Company places no restriction on number of credits earned; schools may include additional requirements at their discretion.

THE STUDENT APPLICATION

You may use the included Trellis Emergency Grant Application template in its entirety, modifying it to include additional items as you wish, or you may develop your own application. We recommend you collect the data points requested on the student grant disbursement report (template included with your application materials) during the application process to ensure you have all data required to submit the report to Trellis.

- May be online or hard copy.

- Should be as brief and student-friendly as possible.

- Should include documentation of the student's expense. A few examples: For a car repair, a student should provide a mechanic's estimate. For backup child care, a student should provide a bill from the child care provider.

- Request the emergency payment due date on the application; schools should keep in mind that the funds will need to be disbursed by that date.

- Collect any data reporting elements (under "Reporting Requirements: Data Elements to be Reported to Trellis" above) that are not collected elsewhere through institutional processes.

YOUR APPLICATION MUST INCLUDE STUDENT WAIVER AUTHORIZING DATA. EXACT LANGUAGE TO USE IS BELOW:

By submitting this emergency grant request, I acknowledge and give consent for data to be shared with the Department of Education and Trellis Company, or their representatives, as part of Project Success. I understand that my information will not be sold for any purpose and will not be distributed to other parties. Examples of data shared include, but are not limited to: student name and ID, enrollment status, annual income, EFC, emergency request amount, emergency request type, etc.

PRINT FULL NAME HERE:

Signature:

Date:

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INTERVENTIONS

We know small grants help low-income students weather financial emergencies and stay in school and on course for completion. However, emergency grants are only one piece of the puzzle in helping students stay on track. When students connect with an advisor and other long-term resources, they are more likely to stay enrolled until degree completion. Grantees have found following up with students and offering them these long-term resources to be an important student success strategy.

- The student application should include messaging directing students to future resources (post-emergency), such as campus and community resources, public benefits, and financial literacy/planning resources that can address the root causes and contributing factors leading to their unforeseen expenses and assist with long-term planning.

- As part of the application, we recommend the school:

  – Meet one-on-one with the student seeking an emergency grant before making the award determination and ask, "What will you do if you don't get this funding?" It's the best way to assess the magnitude of their financial emergency.

  – Encourage students to meet with a Trellis financial coach, following resolution of the emergency. Students can book a coaching appointment at **http://www.aie.org/coaching/**.

AWARD DETERMINATIONS

It is imperative that schools develop seamless coordination between student support offices and the office disbursing grant funds, to pay emergency expenses quickly and assist the student in returning his or her attention to their academic commitments.

- Develop guidelines/evaluation rubric to help ensure consistency in the decisions of review committee:

  – Establish a definition of "emergency." Project Success recommends: "A financial emergency is defined as an unforeseen expense that, if not resolved quickly, could lead to the student's departure from the college and loss of momentum toward completion."

  – Provide examples of what might and might not qualify. We expect that these examples will grow and evolve as the program progresses; we recommend that you learn from early applications to help refine your guidelines.

- Establish a process for reviewing and making an award determination and notifying the student of the approval or denial within two business days of receiving a completed application and required documentation.

AWARD DISBURSEMENTS

Students face unique pressures and challenges and shouldn't be judged for the financial circumstances that drive them to apply for assistance. The goal is to prevent as many students as possible from stopping or dropping out due to unforeseen expenses. We have seen that it is important for those making award determinations to meet frequently to calibrate their decisions.

- Disburse each emergency grant within two business days (see below) of approving it, by either paying the third party named in the submitted documentation or issuing a gift card (for the specific business to be reimbursed) that can be used to pay the unforeseen expense.

  - As a reminder: these timing requirements are in place to help ensure that students' needs are met in an expedited manner. In considering ways to meet the requirements, keep in mind the ultimate goal. For example, even if you are unable to physically deliver a check to an automotive mechanic within two days, as long as you have communicated with the mechanic and they have accepted your assurance that payment is forthcoming, that would meet the requirement that the student's emergency was resolved within the required time period.

- Payments must not be disbursed to students directly. However, it is acceptable to give students a vendor-specific gift card (such as a grocery store card) that cannot be used for general purposes. General-use or cash-value gift cards (such as Visa gift card) are not allowed.

DISBURSEMENT WITHIN TWO BUSINESS DAYS

An emergency, by definition, demands swift action, and the financial emergencies our grant addresses are no different. For grants to have their desired effect—keeping students on track—institutions should act quickly on grant applications and then get funds to the third parties requiring payment.

Many schools have questions about establishing processes to facilitate disbursements to third parties within two business days. Some options we have encountered while working with colleagues:

Purchasing cards
Many schools can designate a purchasing card for the program and eliminate the need for a W-9. For other schools (depending on institutional policy), use of a P-card can remove the need for immediate documentation; they are able to disburse the funds first, if a W-9 is received within that billing cycle.

Pre-identified vendors
Pre-entering W-9s can speed up the process. For utilities, for example, schools can approve the company that covers their students ahead of time. For vendors such as auto repair, the school may already have vendors they work with; alternately, they could reach out to all vendors in a certain radius of the campus and pre-populate their accounting system with W-9s from those vendors.

Vendor gift cards
Cards that can only be used at approved vendors, such as grocery stores, may be acceptable to give directly to students. General use gift cards cannot be used.

COMMUNICATION AND TRAINING ···

Small grants that address unexpected expenses can keep students who are on the edge financially enrolled, allowing them to progress toward completion. But small grants are only helpful when students know the grants are available, feel it's acceptable to ask for help, and know where to go to get the funds. In our experience, we've found that faculty and staff referrals are key, as faculty and staff are often the first points of contact for students. Promotion materials can also help disseminate information about the availability of emergency grants.

- Educate faculty and staff about the availability of the program.

- Ensure that all grant dollars and contributed funds earmarked for making emergency grants are awarded to eligible students by the end of the summer term each grant year; unused funds may result in a reduction of future grant funding.

- Do everything possible to ensure that everyone involved in award decisions agrees on what constitutes a financial emergency for students. As noted previously, for purposes of this grant program, we recommend that a financial emergency be defined as an unforeseen expense that, if not resolved quickly, could lead to the student's departure from the college and loss of momentum toward completion. The word "unforeseen" is key in our experience. We urge asking students, "What will you do if you don't get this funding?"

- Be compassionate toward students requesting assistance and don't judge them for their financial situations. They've shown an admirable commitment to building a brighter future by enrolling at your institution and asking for support.

- Train faculty and staff who work with your students about the availability of Project Success and the Emergency Grant program and help them understand their key role in referring students. Faculty and staff tend to make fantastic ambassadors for emergency grants, especially when you can follow up with them after they refer students to you. They can help you assist many more students, which will help you retain many more students.

About Trellis Company

To learn more, **visit www.trelliscompany.org/about-trellis**.

To learn more about college and career planning,
visit **www.aie.org.**

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