



Delivering Emergency Aid Services During COVID-19

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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrust students, their support networks, and institutions of higher education toward a financial crisis. In response, the U.S. Senate signed the CARES Act into law, which provides institutions of higher education with \$14 billion to support various campus functions. Within the CARES Act, the Senate allocated funding for institutions of higher education to create emergency aid programs.

Although emergency aid programs have existed (both formally and informally) on college campuses for decades, they are under-researched within academia. Instead, large national organizations have produced descriptive studies on the types of emergency aid programs colleges and universities facilitate across the country. Of these studies, NASPA (2016), the Wisconsin Hope Lab (2017), the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2018), and the Hope Center (2020) have articulated how professionals conceptualize, start, administer, and assess emergency aid programs.

Given the immediacy of challenges presented by COVID-19 and the availability of CARES Act funding, many institutions are moving quickly to develop emergency aid programs on their campuses. Yet, institutions of higher education may lack clear guidance given the ambiguity surrounding funding and timing. To support the higher education community, this report synthesizes existing reports and provides a framework for creating, administering, and assessing emergency aid programs.

COMMON PRACTICES FOR STARTING AN EMERGENCY AID PROGRAM

- 1.) **Identify campus leaders and an emergency aid committee to guide decision making.** Emergency aid reports have consistently emphasized the need for emergency aid programs to have clear leadership and a committee to spread awareness of the program. This committee also guides what types of aid to distribute and to which students. This process should consolidate the managers of any currently existing emergency aid programs to optimize efficiency.
- 2.) **Network with other emergency programs on campus to consolidate resources.** Reports suggest campuses may already have emergency aid programs across several different units (ex: Dean of Students, Emergency Services, Student Life). However, having several different programs on campus may be confusing for students. Consolidating emergency aid programs optimizes human resources to maximize student benefits. It is also possible that disbursement methods and data collection efforts can be consolidated to further optimize resources.
- 3.) **Define an emergency and adopt clear protocols for prioritizing student needs and assessing how to best distribute aid.** Professionals should consider prioritizing need based on categories, such as housing, food, academic expenses, or other types of necessities. These categories of need could emerge from conversations with the emergency aid committee or with students on campus to better understand needs. Even with substantial funding associated with the CARES Act, there will still be a scarcity of resources to support all students. Having intentional conversations will further the equitable distribution of funding.

- 4.) **Develop a cross-training program to increase counseling capacity.** Increasing an institution's student counseling capacity is critical for emergency aid programs, especially in a crisis situation, such as COVID-19. Students are likely to be anxious and have questions about the program, and institutions should cross-train non-emergency aid staff to assist with emergency aid programming.
- 5.) **Create clear, simple student application with documentation of emergency type and dollar amount need.** Increasing student application requirements will likely increase the difficulty that students may experience when applying. Staff should avoid extraneous requirements, such as personal essays, in the application. Though the campus may normally ask students for detailed written documentation, COVID-19 necessitates the simplest application possible. However, application requirements are key for records retention, assessment, and reporting. The Department of Education may require documentation for how COVID-19 emergency funds are spent, and this data may be captured during the student application process. In a COVID-19 environment, campuses must consider how students will submit documents and applications digitally and how that data can be used for future reporting.
- 6.) **Develop a clear protocol for how to assess student applications.** Assuming limited financial and human resources, prioritization of student need becomes an essential conversation. Many campuses have an active decision-making committee, while others assess need based on a rubric. Additionally, professionals should avoid being paralyzed by a scarcity mindset that can lead to under-distribution of resources, delaying the application review process. Most importantly, professionals must provide students with clear guidance to reduce uncertainty, explain the student appeal process, and alleviate any perceived unfairness regarding aid distribution.
- 7.) **Create a system of disbursement that will allow for quick disbursement of funds to students.** Staff should consider their campuses' capabilities and the various disbursement models available. These include making direct-to-student payments or paying vendors directly for needs submitted by the student. Additionally, staff should seek guidance and determine whether the financial support will count as a financial resource for the student.
- 8.) **Make the program extremely visible for all stakeholders.** Promotion of emergency aid programs is critical in a COVID-19 environment when various campus stakeholders are delivering emergency communication at a rapid pace. Reports have consistently found that word of mouth is generally the fastest way to spread awareness of an emergency aid campaign. Staff must consider how to get information to students who need it the most, and how other campus stakeholders can increase word-of-mouth about the emergency aid program in a completely digital environment. A campus point person could create communication structures to respond to student questions in a timely manner, increasing program visibility. Staff should also educate faculty members on emergency aid programs, as faculty likely have the highest level of direct student contact.
- 9.) **Develop a data collection system to report on how you distribute funds.** Once staff builds the program's structure, there must be a data collection system. Such a system allows staff to report on fund disbursement, students served, the types of student emergencies, and post-aid communication plans with students. Moreover, a data collection system also allows programs to tie emergency aid funding to student outcomes such as retention, graduation, post-graduation employment, and

successful repayment of loans. Such research would greatly inform the higher education community about how to better administer emergency aid programs to optimize student benefits and support future fundraising activities.

CHALLENGES OF STARTING AND ADMINISTERING EMERGENCY AID PROGRAMS

- 1.) **Decentralized offerings.** It is possible that multiple units on campus already disburse some sort of emergency aid, possibly confusing students. As a result, it is increasingly important for units across campus to consolidate resources and create simple guidance on the various emergency aid options for students.
- 2.) **Unclear guidance.** Given the CARES Act was recently passed, institutions of higher education will need additional guidance on how they are able to assess student need and disburse emergency funds. As a result, institutions should prepare to administer emergency aid programs and then adapt protocols and adjust programming based on Department of Education guidance. In this regard, flexibility is critical.
- 3.) **Slow decision making and distribution.** Even though emergency aid programs should be supported by a committee, slow decision-making and distribution methods can harm a student's ability to receive funds efficiently. As a result, a rapid decisioning process is critical for students to receive the aid quickly and address their emergency.
- 4.) **Varying levels of campus commitment.** Emergency aid programs are truly campus-wide initiatives. Support is needed from all areas of campus (ex: IT, Business Offices, Student Affairs, Financial Aid, Institutional Research, Registrar, Institutional Advancement). As the program develops, stakeholders may resist program developments for a variety of reasons. Here, staff must maintain focus on student need and move forward with emergency aid programming, even without universal buy-in from all stakeholders.
- 5.) **Unclear funding sources.** Although the CARES Act will provide emergency aid funds for campuses across the country, staff must consider the long-term viability of emergency aid programs beyond COVID-19. However, we know that the student need will continue well beyond the COVID-19 funding support. Having an emergency aid committee can help with strategic planning and fundraising initiatives to maintain programming that students can rely on for multiple years.
- 6.) **No checks and balances regarding finances.** For Title IV programs, federal regulations require there be a separation of duties between the office that authorizes funds and the office that disburses funds. Separation of duties helps reduce risk of misuse. Similarly, it is good practice to maintain controls to involve more than one person in the approving and disbursement of emergency aid. Approval and disbursement in the hands of a single individual risks misuse.
- 7.) **No checks and balances regarding data.** Reports often suggest that emergency aid programs must have data collection procedures to ensure that programming is documented and can be assessed to evaluate effectiveness. CARES Act guidance has outlined basic information that institutions must gather from students during the emergency aid application process. In addition, without ongoing assessment of a program's effectiveness, it is difficult to understand whether funds are optimized and students are best served.

Relevant Resources

CARES Act Letter from the Secretary of the Department of Education (April 9, 2020)

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/caresactgrantfundingcoverletterfinal.pdf>

CARES Act Guide for How to Apply for Funding (April 9, 2020)

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/guidancetoapplyforheerf.pdf>

CARES Act and GRANTS.GOV Application Submission Guidelines and Tips (April 9, 2020)

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/grantsgovsubmittipsheerf.pdf>

CARES Act Formula and Emergency Aid Allocation Amounts (April 9, 2020)

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/allocationsforsection18004a1ofcaresact.pdf>

CARES Act Recipient Funding and Agreement (April 9, 2020)

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/caresheerfcertificationandagreementfinalombapprovedforissuance.pdf>

Trellis Company Webinar on Emergency Aid Services (April 7, 2020)

Delivering Emergency Aid Services During COVID-19. <https://www.trelliscompany.org/portfolio-items/delivering-emergency-aid-services-during-covid-19/>

NASPA Report on Emergency Aid Programs (2016)

Kruger, K., Parnell, A., & Wesaw, A. (2016). *NASPA: Landscape analysis of emergency aid programs*. Retrieved from https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/Emergency_Aid_Report.pdf

Wisconsin Hope Lab Report on Distributing Emergency Aid (2017)

Goldrick-Rab, S., & Cady, C. (2017, September). *Distributing emergency aid to college students: Recommendations and sample distribution protocol*. Retrieved from <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/emergency-aid-distribution-sample-protocol.pdf>

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Report on Emergency Aid Programs (2018)

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB]. (2018). *The Texas emergency aid report: Advocating for emergency aid programs in higher education*. Retrieved from <http://www.60x30tx.com/media/1453/emergency-aid-report.pdf>

The Hope Center Report on Distributing Emergency Aid (2020)

Goldrick-Rab, S. (2020, April). *Beyond the food pantry: Guide to emergency aid distribution*. Retrieved from https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BTFP_COVID19_EmergencyAid.pdf

Suggestions for Further Reading

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