

Today's Students + Emergency Aid

What is emergency aid?

In postsecondary education, emergency aid refers to financial assistance given to students to help them pay for unexpected expenses that impede their ability to continue participating in courses and working toward their degree or credential. Emergency aid can be used to cover everything from a car repair to unpaid institutional fees, and has been especially instrumental in helping today's students who have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, when institutions abruptly closed campuses in the spring, many students were left with unexpected expenses like airfare, moving costs, and storage rentals—emergency aid helped them bridge unforeseen financial gaps.

Financial Assistance for:



Car Repairs



Institutional Fees



Airfare



Moving Costs



Storage Rentals



and other unexpected expenses

Why is emergency aid important for today's students?

As new cases of COVID-19 exposure and infection rise every day, many of the nation's institutions of higher education are sending students home from campus and switching to fully online or hybrid online models of delivery. These sudden campus closures can have dire economic consequences for students, especially low-income and marginalized students who rely on campus as more than a place to attend lectures.

For the 60 percent of today's students who work while in school, the massive unemployment facing our nation's workers right now may add to heightened financial pressure for students. Further, one in four students is a parent. They may have relied on campus or community-based child care only to have

those centers shut down and find themselves now responsible for round-the-clock child care. This need may lead student parents to walk away from a part-time job, creating further financial stress.

Emergency aid can help fill the gaps for these students who need to access food, safe and stable housing, broadband and devices, child care, medical expenses, and transportation, among other needs.

COVID + Emergency Aid

On March 27, 2020 the president signed the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) Act*. The CARES Act allocated \$6.28 billion to the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to distribute to institutions of higher education for emergency aid to students affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Minority serving institutions (MSIs), including historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), received an additional \$1.4 billion in funding to use, in part, for grants to help students pay for attendance costs.

Unfortunately, when ED issued regulatory guidance to institutions of higher education for the student emergency aid funding, the department only permitted students eligible for federal student loans and Pell Grants to receive aid. This requirement created complexity on campuses as institutions saw need across their entire student population, including those who may not have applied for federal student aid and those who are not eligible to apply, such as students who are recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA), veterans using GI Bill benefits, and international students. These shortcomings, combined with onerous reporting requirements that led to schools choosing to not accept funds designated for emergency aid, have left a large portion of today's students unable to access the emergency aid they need.

Sara K.'s Emergency Aid Story

In the spring of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic forced campuses to close, Sara was a 27-year-old junior at Smith College and part of the Ada Comstock Scholars Program for students of nontraditional age. Sara, employed through Work Study in the Entrepreneurship and Innovation Center, lost her job due to the closure and needed extra financial assistance to pay for essentials like rent, bills, and health care.

Through the emergency aid provisions of the CARES Act, Smith College allocated around \$600 per eligible student, including Sara. While appreciated, \$600 was not enough to cover all of her essential costs. Sara also applied for and received emergency aid from the Ada Comstock Scholars Program and accessed funds through a mutual aid program set up by students and private donors to help college students pay for rent and other basic needs over the summer.

Policy Recommendation

While programs established under the CARES Act were a good start in providing students with emergency aid, today's students need more permanent solutions to unexpected financial barriers that keep them from persisting in their postsecondary programs.

Policymakers should create a competitive grant program to create and fund emergency aid programs at institutions of higher education. In addition to providing emergency aid, this grant program would provide a more robust structure needed to notify students of their potential eligibility for emergency aid and for other benefit programs they may be eligible for, and would create more transparent criteria and processes for students to receive emergency aid.

Today's students continue to face incredible challenges in their higher education journeys and require meaningful supports both inside and outside the classroom. A robust and thoughtful emergency aid program would assist students facing emergencies throughout the pandemic and beyond in order to achieve their educational goals.



**Competitive
Grant Program**



**Transparent Criteria
& Processes**