# Improving Emergency Financial Aid Programs to Help Students Stay in College

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Getting a college degree is an increasingly expensive endeavor and many students struggle to make ends meet while they are in school. Although the rising cost of college tuition and fees receives a great deal of public attention, students face other costs, too – including often hefty payments for living expenses, textbooks, and transportation to and from classes. These inescapable extra costs constitute half to three-quarters of total college expenses, and when students cannot afford to cover them, they often struggle to focus on school work and spend less time in the classroom. In dire cases, students may find themselves without a secure place to live or enough food to eat.

Financial aid for college students is meant to help cover the extra expenses, but aid packages often fall short because of chronic underfunding and complex bureaucratic administrative hurdles. Researchers and practitioners have found that when students run into short-term financial problems, college financial aid offices often have difficulty responding quickly.

In addition to traditional financial aid programs, there is also a need for emergency assistance. Promptly responsive emergency aid programs can help keep students enrolled, perhaps allowing more of them to complete studies and receive degrees. In a recent research project we used surveys and interviews to examine such programs, aiming to better understand how they operate and when they succeed. Our work lays the groundwork for much-needed additional evaluations.

## What We Know about Emergency Aid Programs

More than one hundred emergency aid programs operate on college and university campuses around the nation. All such programs share the goal of helping students overcome financial emergencies that otherwise might lead them to quit school.

However, existing programs do not follow any standard approach or design. Varied program designs and implementation protocols are influenced by institution-specific factors including the level of available resources and agreements with funding partners. Some programs, like Scholarship America's "Dreamkeepers," involve external service providers who offer administrative guidance and support together with funds.

In most programs, the process for delivering emergency aid includes an application, followed by review and decision-making, and finally a disbursement of funds.

- Staff members may assist students in the application process, or students may simply fill in forms online.

- The review process may include examining the student's eligibility and use of financial aid; additionally, the request must be vetted to determine whether the emergency presents a genuine need. An individual staff member or a committee then makes a decision usually within a short time, but occasionally days or even weeks after an application is received.

- When aid is authorized, distributions may involve checks to third parties to cover approved expenses, deposits to student accounts, or cash or gift cards given directly to the student.

## Program Challenges

What is an "emergency?" All programs confront this difficult question as they ration limited resources. Administrators must engage in gatekeeping and make tough choices while also being compassionate and effective in helping students. Emergency aid programs at most schools include expenses like medical bills, rent or utilities, and transportation costs like car repairs. But of course not every "emergency" a student experiences fits within defined categories. When unusual emergencies pop up, complicated eligibility decisions may have to be made, delaying the delivery of aid.

Inadequate program funding levels are a major challenge, and often the resources available fall short of meeting student need. Some emergency programs have conditions that make it impossible for administrators to make consistent awards to all needy students – for instance, they may not be allowed to serve undocumented students or students in their first semester of school. Frontline workers who interact directly with students facing emergencies often face great difficulty in distributing limited funds promptly while also ensuring that emergency aid funds are sufficiently safeguarded and delivered within the constraints of the eligibility criteria.

## Improving Programs as They Spread

Evaluations have not been completed to assess the design or impact of emergency aid programs. Without a body of research available to steer program design, programs have been developed on the fly by colleges and universities. Given that aid recipients differ in many ways, some difficult to measure, it is hard to know if this specific type of intervention actually keeps students in school. But we do know that these programs are spreading and are popular among administrators and students. As a way to help students cope with rising costs, emergency aid needs to be carefully designed and administered. To that end, we offer four recommendations:

- Eligibility criteria and practices must be transparent, but also flexible enough to respond to unusual circumstances.

- Traditional financial aid and emergency aid should be coordinated, but not when it may impose barriers to distributing emergency aid swiftly and equitably.

- Administrators of emergency programs should know about other types of support that may be available to students experiencing financial emergencies.

- Every program should collect data – to guide program administration, support fundraising, and enable systematic evaluation and improvement of emergency aid programs.

**Read more in Karole Dachelet and Sara Goldrick-Rab, "Investing in Student Completion: Overcoming Financial Barriers to Retention through Small-Dollar Grants and Emergency-Aid Programs," Wisconsin HOPE Lab Report for Scholarship America, December 2015.**