

Making the Most of \$40 Billion

Congress just authorized funding for colleges as part of the American Rescue plan, and here's how it should be used, write Russell Lowery-Hart and Madeline Pumariega.

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https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/media/GettyImages-1295528743.jpg

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A year into COVID-19, college students are continuing to grapple with the aftershocks of a pandemic that has hit hard among a segment of the population already struggling with food, housing and income insecurity.

[Course Hero survey \(https://www.coursehero.com/blog/coronavirus-the-cost-of-college/\)](https://www.coursehero.com/blog/coronavirus-the-cost-of-college/) of more than 100,000 students.

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<https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>). Undergraduate enrollment this fall plummeted [by 3.6 percent \(https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Fall_2020.pdf\)](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Fall_2020.pdf) -- or more than 560,200 students. When the data are disaggregated, they raise critical questions about equity, as the declines are especially steep among community college students, first-generation students and students from low-income backgrounds.

In an era when the new majority of learners are working, have children or go to college part-time, the complexities of paying for higher education are greater than ever. Even before the pandemic, [2019 data \(https://schoolhouseconnection.org/realcollege2020-research/#:~:text=%23RealCollege2020%20Research%20Shows%2017%25%20of%20College%20Students%20Feb%2012%2C%202020&text=On%20February%2012%2C%20the%20Hope,needs%20insecurity%20among%20](https://schoolhouseconnection.org/realcollege2020-research/#:~:text=%23RealCollege2020%20Research%20Shows%2017%25%20of%20College%20Students%20Feb%2012%2C%202020&text=On%20February%2012%2C%20the%20Hope,needs%20insecurity%20among%20) from research conducted by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice found that 46 percent had been housing insecure at some time during the past year, and 39 percent had experienced food insecurity within 30 days of the survey.

COVID-19 has only magnified those challenges. But the good news is that help is on the way. Congress recently authorized \$39.6 billion in funding for colleges and universities as part of the American Rescue Plan, half of which is required to be used for emergency student aid.

As community college leaders, we are heartened to see the federal government take action on this crucial issue. This was in many ways an affirmation of what those in the community college movement have long been advocating -- from networks like Achieving the Dream and [JFF's Policy Leadership Trust \(https://www.jff.org/points-of-view/5-ways-states-can-put-americans-back-work-and-transform-higher-education/\)](https://www.jff.org/points-of-view/5-ways-states-can-put-americans-back-work-and-transform-higher-education/) coalition to advocates like the Hope Center.

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task of disbursing those billions of dollars in ways that can actually help the millions of students still reeling from a year racked by financial, academic and personal challenges.

Here are three ways emergency aid can be leveraged to make the greatest impact.

Address basic needs. Research shows that between [11](#) (https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/92331/assessing_food_insecurity_on_campus_3.pdf) and [45 percent](#) (https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/HOPE_realcollege_National_report_digital.pdf) of college students are unable to afford enough food to stay healthy. As the pandemic has raged on, food insecurity has only grown, with an estimated [one in six Americans](#) (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/one-in-six-could-go-hungry-2020-as-covid-19-persists>) going hungry. Likewise, students are [struggling to pay rent](#) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/05/01/students-campus-housing-struggle-make-rent>).

In a recent survey of 17,000 students, basic human needs such as food and housing each accounted for a quarter of students' most pressing emergency aid needs. Students cannot focus on academic work if they are busy wondering where their next meal is coming from or if they are going to be evicted. Emergency aid must be targeted toward alleviating these basic but pressing needs.

At Miami Dade College, for example, students have long had access to eight food pantry locations across campus, stocked by donations and run by volunteers. Any student is allowed to receive food from the pantry. Last year, the college also began offering grocery store gift cards -- ranging between \$50 and \$100 -- to students who had visited the pantry at least three times.

Students at Amarillo College also have access to a food pantry. As the pandemic continued, the college created a digital storefront so students could safely request food from the pantry online.

Close the digital divide. The massive shift to remote and hybrid learning that occurred in response to the pandemic has underscored just how wide the digital divide remains. According to a [survey by New America and Third Way](#) (<http://thirdway.imgix.net/New-America-and-Third-Way-Higher-Ed-Student-Polling-Data.pdf>), nearly 60 percent of college students surveyed last year said that they did not have adequate access to a stable, high-speed internet connection.

Students from low-income backgrounds who have relied on campus internet and computers were left struggling to find technology not only to complete assignments but also to attend class. Community

student needs during the pandemic are part of a larger, integrated system. Miami Dade's Single Stop program is, as the name implies, a one-stop shop for a variety of social services.

Students experiencing food insecurity, for instance, can not only visit the pantry but also work with coordinators who can help them be screened for a variety of federal, state and local resources like [SNAP \(https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program\)](https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program). Over the past 12 years, Single Stop has helped 66,000 students receive food assistance, mental health counseling, financial coaching, legal aid and other services. Miami Dade has built an ecosystem of external partners that includes community-based organizations and private and public sector agencies that help provide holistic support to its students.

Amarillo College takes a similarly holistic approach. The college's No Excuses Poverty Initiative is a systemic approach to combating student poverty. The program is designed to increase persistence and improve graduation rates among students from low-income backgrounds, and it consists of four major components: social services, a food pantry, a mentoring program and a career center. It integrates accelerated learning, predictive analytics, wraparound social services and emergency aid into one system -- resulting in a completion growth rate of 185 percent over the past six years. Having such robust -- and easy-to-navigate -- systems in place have been crucial to helping students find the aid they need.

Emergency aid has long been a crucial component of helping students stay enrolled and on track to a degree, and it is great to see more institutions and policy makers taking note of its importance. The biggest lesson we, as education leaders, can take from the pandemic, however, is this: the pandemic exacerbated these challenges but did not create them.

Let this year serve as a radical awakening about how we understand and begin to address the needs of today's college students. We can't allow the cost of living to derail college hopes for millions of them.

Bio

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