

IDEAS

What Congress Could Do to Keep More College Students Enrolled

The pandemic has left many students struggling to afford tuition, food, and housing. They need emergency cash assistance—delivered fast.

By Sara Goldrick-Rab



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***About the author:** Sara Goldrick-Rab is a professor of sociology and medicine and the president and founder of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University. She is also chief strategy officer at Edquity.*

This fall I received desperate messages from many of my students at Temple University, Philadelphia's public university. They wanted to know where they could find help catching up on bills, and described having to choose between rent, groceries, and gas. Five of my undergraduates lost a family member to COVID-19.

A college education is more essential than ever to economic stability. But across the nation, college students are struggling to cover basic needs and are unsure if they can afford tuition for the spring semester. Many people assume that students can rely on their parents or apply for financial aid to keep them enrolled. But not all students are privileged enough to have a family safety net, and applying for financial aid can be a slow and convoluted process, rife with administrative burden.

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This spring, Congress designated more than \$6 billion in emergency aid for higher-education institutions in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Colleges and universities did their best to get those dollars to students quickly. But Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos issued complex and exclusionary restrictions on the funds. College leaders had to waste time and money in court, challenging the Department of Education and paying lawyers to sort out the secretary's ever-changing guidance. That administrative burden was especially challenging for public colleges, and particularly community colleges, which were already allocated insufficient funds. Incredibly, a disproportionate amount of CARES

funding flowed to small private colleges compared with public institutions, where most of the student need was concentrated.

Many students did not get a stimulus check or pandemic unemployment insurance, and the federal government denied requests to make it easier for students to receive support from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

In April, my research team at the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice surveyed more than 38,000 students. We found that within months of the pandemic's onset, nearly three in five were short of funds for food and housing. This fall, college enrollment among recent high-school graduates fell by almost 22 percent. Among graduates of high-poverty schools, there was a 33 percent drop. For community colleges, total enrollment is down more than 9 percent.

Without sufficient help from the federal government, many colleges and universities have tried to support students on their own through emergency aid, usually paid for through philanthropy. Like other fast-emerging cash-transfer programs, including the guaranteed-income initiatives of groups like Mayors for Guaranteed Income, emergency-aid programs focus on quickly addressing a financial crisis to help stabilize an individual or a family. In contrast to food pantries, meal vouchers, or gas cards, emergency grants can be used flexibly, so students can meet their most pressing needs and achieve their goals.

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But most colleges' resources pale in comparison to students' needs. More than 40 percent of undergraduates attend community college, which face a \$78 billion funding shortfall. Regional public universities enroll a significant share of students—far more than the Ivy League—but also operate on thin financial margins. Just 25 institutions hold half of all endowment assets—the funds most easily deployed to offer students emergency aid—and the rest try to manage and hope for a gift from MacKenzie Scott.

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When my team surveyed 155 colleges and universities across the country to learn about how coronavirus relief affected them, we found that delivering CARES dollars took 44 percent longer compared with their other, much smaller emergency-aid programs, many of which were ad hoc. Because these institutions lacked the capacity to quickly accept and process applications and disburse funds at scale, students waited an average of 13 days for support. Research suggests that the optimal timeline for distribution is 48 hours or less; this is especially important for students with children or with less access to family wealth, and first-generation students.

Emergency-aid distribution doesn't have to be this way. In fact, the Brooklyn-based company Edquity, where I serve as chief strategy officer, has worked to support institutions with an app that allows students to apply for and receive funds within 24 hours. Over the past five months, we've vetted more than 20,000 applications and supported more than 5,500 students, distributing more than \$5.1 million at diverse

places including Dallas College, Western Governors University, Amarillo College, and Compton College. We are succeeding at getting emergency aid to students the way my grandfather helped me when I was in college—quickly and without judgment.

Many students, including some of my own, aren't sure they can afford to return for another college semester. They need financial support delivered flexibly, quickly, and respectfully. They should not have to demonstrate their poverty or rehash trauma to merit support. At a time when many students feel isolated from their college community, such support conveys caring and can keep them in school.

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To help students in crisis, Congress must provide resources for institutions to scale up their emergency-aid programs and deliver the funds efficiently and equitably. This past week, Congress did finally pass the Emergency Coronavirus Relief Act of 2020, although President Trump has so far refused to sign it. The bill includes \$22.7 billion for higher education, with at least \$6 billion in emergency aid allocated to students. That is a good start, but the amount falls short of the underlying need. In addition, the legislation offers little guidance regarding student eligibility or institutional distribution, which increases the likelihood that students will face significant and inequitable barriers when it comes to accessing the funds.

Basic-needs insecurity is a key reason students are missing classes, dropping out mid-semester, and reporting high levels of disengagement. They are struggling with unexpected job losses, a lack of affordable child care, online K–12 schooling for their children, mental- and physical-health struggles, and a lack of money for rent and food. College students are an integral part of every community around the nation and will be a key part of our recovery. We simply can't afford to live in a country where difficulty covering the most basic living expenses puts essential education beyond reach.
