



Emergency Student Aid to Mitigate COVID-19 Pandemic Disruptions on Community College Credential Attainment

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There has always been a need to support community college students financially. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, two-thirds of Texas community college students reported that they would have difficulty coming up with \$500 if an emergency happened. In response to a Texas Association of Community Colleges (TACC) survey of student needs during the outbreak, three-fourths of students reported that \$500 for an emergency would be difficult to find. The pandemic has exacerbated students' troubles; student jobs and income were significantly disrupted, and hours spent caring for children and others soared. Housing, food, and health stresses paint a sober picture of student need across Texas.

Texas Students' Needs and Community Colleges' Readiness to Respond

The results of two recent TACC surveys suggest an urgent and acute need for both emergency student aid and technical assistance in developing campus-based emergency aid programming. Besides the lack of emergency savings discussed above, TACC's Student Needs Survey (fielded March 30th to April 21st, 2020) revealed that 57 percent of Texas community college students experienced a job loss, income decrease, loss of work hours, or some combination since the outbreak began. Less than half reported that everyone in their household had medical insurance or other coverage, and even fewer were confident that everyone in their household could access adequate medical care if needed.

Though somewhat less severe, other aspects of students' basic needs were also compromised. About one in three students considered it likely they would pay their rent or mortgage late or not in full, over 40 percent considered it likely they would pay their utilities late or not in full, and nearly 20 percent considered it likely that they would lose their utilities or need to temporarily live with others. Students also reported uncertainty regarding their food situation, with 22 percent considering it probable or definite that they would experience one or more conditions of food insecurity within 30 days, and a further 22 percent rating food insecurity a "maybe."

Compounded by technology issues and difficulty studying amidst exceptional new dependent care obligations, students' basic needs struggles were already influencing students' academic plans. About 58 percent of students considered it at least as likely as not that they will take fewer classes than planned next semester, and a full two-thirds considered it that likely that they will delay graduation. While only 12 percent put at least even odds on dropping out, that number is not insignificant, and 36 percent of students reported they were at least as likely as not to stop out, or leave but return in future semesters, which drastically increases the risk of ultimately dropping out. Among students with transfer plans, 32 percent thought it was probable or definite that they would be compelled to cancel or delay their plans.

Across all categories, a similar pattern nearly always holds: if students in general are struggling in a particular way, Black and Hispanic students were experiencing the same issue more severely. Seventy percent of White students found it difficult to acquire \$500 in an emergency, compared to 76 percent of Hispanic students and 79 percent of Black students. Fifty-two percent of White students were confident in their household's access to medical care, compared to 34 percent of Hispanic students and 43 percent of Black students. Black students were seven percentage points and Hispanic students were 14 percentage points more likely to anticipate changing their academic plans for financial reasons. Already more financially vulnerable than their peers, Black and Hispanic students have been disproportionately harmed by the many disruptions of the pandemic, with their ability to persist in higher education disproportionately jeopardized as a result.

Given students' urgent needs and the CARES Act's unprecedented allocation of funds specifically for emergency aid, TACC adapted Trellis Company's Emergency Aid Checklist² into an online survey instrument and requested that all 50 community college districts complete it. Between April 16 and April 28, 2020, 41 colleges indicated their progress on 29 distinct tasks related to establishing and operating an effective emergency aid program. The results suggest substantial need for various forms of technical and material assistance in developing emergency aid capacity at Texas community colleges.

The survey showed that many colleges did not yet possess fundamental elements of the infrastructure needed for an emergency aid program. The only infrastructure pieces already complete at most colleges pertained to administrative organization—assigning who is responsible for which tasks—but fully 30 percent of colleges had yet to establish an administrative lead for emergency aid programming. Data collection tools for reporting and assessment, communication plans, and data reporting mechanisms were in place at fewer than one-third of colleges, and barely over one-third had a complete student application for emergency aid. These results suggest that developing the infrastructure necessary to manage the influx of emergency funding is the first foray into systematized emergency aid programming for as many as two-thirds of Texas community colleges.

Given this starting point, it is not surprising that most colleges still lack most components necessary to administer CARES Act funds. While evolving guidance from the Department of Education (ED) has proven challenging, only 15 percent of colleges had developed an internal rubric outlining priority criteria for awards, and 21 percent had determined a funding methodology. With the single exception of an organizational step—identifying the application review team, at 51 percent—between 23 and 38 percent of colleges had completed the other tasks required for students to apply for funds and colleges to disburse them. Several tasks involving data streams, student account information, and records retention had not yet been initiated at over 35 percent of colleges.

As colleges scramble to establish application and disbursement systems, they seem to be postponing tasks seen as either non-essential or non-urgent. Only half of colleges have established the lead office for required ED reporting, a critical task following disbursement. All other post-disbursement tasks have been completed at fewer than 15 percent of colleges. Only five percent have completed a plan to assess the emergency aid program, 62 percent have not begun working on an assessment plan, and 28 percent have no plans to make one.

To help all community colleges effectively respond to students' basic needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the months and years following this global health crisis, the T.L.L. Temple Foundation invited grant funding proposals for both immediate and long-term actions to improve and scale effective emergency aid programs in East Texas community colleges.

The T.L.L. Temple Foundation Program

Three East Texas colleges (Kilgore College, Panola College, and Texarkana College) were awarded one-time grants of \$125,000 each to provide "rapid, flexible financial assistance to undergraduate students impacted by the pandemic, [focused on addressing] students' most urgent financial needs". Designed to keep students on track, aid was to be prioritized for students who were close to, or making progress toward, credential completion in high-demand, high-wage fields.

Colleges dispersed aid to students enrolled during any 2021 semester. By year-end \$347,951.92 (93%) of the \$375,000 grand funds had been dispersed to a total of 317 students with an average award of \$1,097.64. All funding went directly to students (no institutional overhead was charged against the grant funds).

A review of the results makes the evidence clear. Over 80% of students receiving aid had either graduated (41%) or were still enrolled (42%) at the onset of the spring 2022 semester. While no college has completed a thorough data analysis to date, the perspective from each institution is that the *Emergency Student Aid* funding has been an overwhelming success in terms of having helped students toward their education and training goals. In addition, institutional practices, perspectives, and data collection priorities have changed because of this round of funding.

The simplicity and flexibility built into the grant were key to colleges' success "the T.L.L. Temple Foundation [empowered] community college partners to determine how to best assess their students' needs and design the most appropriate and impactful emergency assistance model."

What follows is a summary of interviews conducted with each college, an overview of aid eligibility, and a review of data provided.

Interview Summary

Each college participated in a post-grant interview. As the table below illustrates, interviews revealed the effectiveness of the grants, behavioral and attitudinal changes around emergency aid funding, and a renewed focus on data. The following table is a set of selected and paraphrased quotes from the interviews.

Interview Responses		
Kilgore	Panola	Texarkana
<i>Is there any evidence of improved completion rates as a result of this program?</i>		
We had 65 unduplicated students helped through this aid. Even in the face of the pandemic 41 of them are completed and 16 are still enrolled. That is an 88% success rate! I believe that this is a substantial rate of increase in terms of persistence and completion. The assistance afforded by the foundation helped the students to stay on track and some to go ahead and finish.	We saw 96% complete, persist, or transfer. We saw 66% of students that received aid complete. We tracked them from the time they received aid up to the current semester; so even if they did not receive aid in a subsequent semester, we still tracked them all the way through.	We have seen improvements to graduation. In combination with the TLL funding and other efforts, this has absolutely been a lifesaver to some of these students.
<i>In the absence of this particular funding, what do you think may have been the outcome?</i>		
For the students that received aid, I don't know if they would have stopped out or not, but my sense is that many of these students would not have continued or finished their studies, certainly not at the rate we are seeing that happen. We would have had smaller awards and helped fewer students.	We did raise \$15,000 for this type of effort locally, but without this grant, we would not have had nearly as much access to funding. We would not have had emergency funding for so many students.	No doubt, some of these students would not have persisted to completion or would have had a much harder time.
<i>Did you have a similar program in place for students that have stopped out and/or students that are near completion prior to this grant?</i>		
We had a different emergency aid program, but not this specific type of program. This (TLL Temple funding) was targeting specific majors, predominately tech majors in high demand in our area.	We had no emergency aid program prior to Covid. During Covid, our local foundation gave us a grant to utilize however we saw fit and a separate grant has been helping us distribute Wal-Mart cards. So we had a greater need for scholarships; that's what drove the structure for this particular grant funding.	We did not have emergency aid that even began to approach this capacity. We did have one-time help of \$300 for emergencies, tuition, fees, technology, or books and supplies. The TLL Temple funding let us help so many more students than we have been able to help in the past.

What, if any, are the lessons learned from this type of 'last-mile' financial support? Has this changed the institution's views on this kind of aid? Will any of the programs/processes to support students continue?

Kilgore	Panola	Texarkana
<p>The data is compelling. It has really caught our attention. Because of this grant, our staff will expand this type of effort.</p>	<p>We track all students on completion and retention because we think that is so important. That is one thing we will take away from this experience; we will track students more closely from here on out.</p> <p>Completion scholarships, we will bring this back to local donors.</p>	<p>The data collection requirement for this grant really prompted us to look at data differently. We started looking at students who were 2/3 or closer to the finish line. We are grateful that this has put us on a path that we would not have been on.</p> <p>We are actually considering new scholarships for students "finish strong" looking to our own foundation for this type of stop-out/drop-out or "last-mile" scholarship.</p> <p>We have initiated specific recruitment to these students and reengage with them and let them know there is specific funding available to them.</p>

During interviews, each college expressed satisfaction with their implementation of their respective processes, applications, and disbursement methods, potentially as a result of the flexibility built into the funding that allowed each institution to implement funding with only a few overarching requirements. Making the process simple not only worked for the institutions, it made a difference for students as well. One interviewee noted that their effort around making the process as simple as possible was the key to their success in distributing all the funds in a timely fashion, "The whole process was really easy on the student end. The easier the process, the more applications we get...simplicity, simplicity, simplicity."

The only suggestion for improvement of funding requirements was related to the limitation regarding specific majors, "My regret is that some students did not get access to help because of major. All students are struggling and only the select students could get access to this funding. I am cognizant of the results, but it's hard to ignore the opportunity lost for other students."

Aid Eligibility

Each institution started with the grant requirements and then built simple and manageable eligibility requirements for the aid.

Student Eligibility		
Kilgore	Panola	Texarkana
<i>Prior Enrollment</i>		
Have completed at least 12 semester credit hours and have a minimum of a 2.0 GPA. (Alternate eligibility criteria considered for continuing education students.)	Students must have been enrolled during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students must be at 50% completion or more towards earning a credential	No prior enrollment requirement
<i>Current Enrollment</i>		
Be currently enrolled in at least 12 semester credit hours or a workforce/continuing education program and be in good academic and disciplinary standing, and actively attending class.	Students must be enrolled in at least 6 hours during a long term or 3 hours during a short term. Priority will be given to students earning credentials that leads to opportunities in high-demand, high-wage careers.	Currently enrolled with priority given to students who are seeking a certificate or degree that lead to opportunities in high-demand, high-wage careers.
<i>Demonstrate Need</i>		
Have a financial hardship/need documented on the FAFSA/TASFA or resulting from an emergency, accident, or other unexpected, critical incident such as a job loss.	Students must have suffered a financial impact due to the COVID-19 pandemic.	Must have completed a FASFA or TASFA for the current aid period and have urgent financial needs that are not covered by other federal, state, or institutional aid.

There were important differences in aid focus among the institutions. Panola used grant funding for scholarships only; existing emergency aid had been in place previously and the greater need was seen for paying for direct college expenses. Texarkana chose to focus on direct disbursements to more students in smaller amounts; disbursements were typically for \$750. Kilgore funded fewer students overall and essentially split aid between direct aid and paying college expenses. This variety in how aid was targeted speaks to the flexibility written into the grant requirements.

Data Overview

Over the grant period \$347,952 was dispersed to a total of 317 students with an average award of \$1,098. All funding went directly to students as per grant requirements.

Aid Disbursement				
	Kilgore	Panola	Texarkana	Total
Grant Amount (\$)	125,000	125,000	125,000	375,000
Total Disbursement (\$)	97,952	125,000	125,000	347,952
Percent Disbursed	78%	100%	100%	93%
Number of Students	65	97	155	317
Total Awards	101	124	156	381
Avg # of Awards/Student	1.6	1.3	1.0	1.2
Avg Award (\$)	970	1,008	801	913
Avg Award/Student (\$)	1,507	1,289	806	1,098

The table below tells the real success story of this grant funding, showing 83% of students either completed or still enrolled.

Completion and Retention of Aid Recipients					
	Kilgore	Panola	Texarkana	Total	Percentage
Completed	41	65	25	131	41%
Continued Enrollment	16	28	90	111	42%
Stopped-Out	8	4	40	75	16%
Total	65	97	155	317	

While these colleges have a typical enrollment split between males and females, female aid recipients were even further overrepresented. This is likely a result of the combination of grant requirements around high-demand, high-wage fields and female dominance in Allied Health.

Economically disadvantaged, and similarly Black and Hispanic, student overrepresentation was to be expected and likely encouraged given the design and purpose of the grant.

Institutional Student Population vs. Aid Recipients						
	Kilgore		Panola		Texarkana	
	Institutional Student Population	Aid Recipients	Institutional Student Population	Aid Recipients	Institutional Student Population	Aid Recipients
Black	20%	17%	19%	35%	21%	32%
Hispanic	23%	22%	17%	12%	8%	10%
White	49%	51%	60%	48%	61%	50%
Asian	1%	0%	1%	0%	1%	1%
Other	7%	11%	3%	4%	8%	6%
Male	41%	31%	35%	16%	36%	27%
Female	59%	69%	65%	84%	64%	73%
Economically Disadvantaged	53%	75%	51%	65%	72%	86%
Not Economically Disadvantaged	47%	25%	49%	35%	28%	14%

Conclusion

Kilgore College, Panola College, and Texarkana College provided rapid, flexible financial assistance to undergraduate students impacted by the pandemic with funding from the T.L.L. Temple Foundation. As a result, the colleges were able to keep aid recipients on track to credential completion in high-demand, high-wage fields. The success of this program will inform the planning for potential launch and expansion of similar programs and the provision of technical assistance to more colleges to support flexibility in emergency aid processes to quickly serve students in need.



Texas Success Center

The Texas Association of Community College's Texas Success Center is a leader in the field of community college leadership and institutional change. Bringing coherence to the statewide student success strategy, our work provides the foundation and framework for innovative practice and policy that help give every community college student the best chance for success.

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