



For College, Community, and Justice

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BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY:

Supporting #RealCollege Students with Caring Enrollment Management and Financial Aid Practices During COVID-19

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Colleges and universities across the United States and around the world are scrambling to keep their students, faculty, and staff healthy, safe, and educated during the COVID-19 pandemic. To help you effectively support students, our team at The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice offers the following considerations and resources for enrollment management and financial aid offices.

COMMUNICATE CARE FOR YOUR STUDENTS

Students are humans first. The more a student feels connected to and understood by their college or university, the more likely they are to stay enrolled and engaged. As a Financial Aid office, you possess critical information that students want. The trick is to communicate it in a way they can hear it during a time of great distress.

- Communications should convey care along with urgency. To the extent possible, affirm for students that you believe in them and want their education to continue. This is key to ensuring that they return to your institution and resume enrollment following the crisis.
- Use multiple platforms and modes to reach students. Video messages are especially useful when communicating caring.
- Remember that [scarcity and stress](#) reduce executive functioning. Students will have more difficulty planning and navigating bureaucracy during this time. Whenever possible, eliminate application processes and require less from them, not more.
- Provide the contact information of a specific person to answer specific questions. Please avoid offering only generic emails (e.g. financialaid@institution.edu) as students cannot be confident that they will receive a response in a timely fashion. For example, divide students by last name and assign staff to answer emails from each group. Please also avoid requiring students to call a number to receive support. This is stressful and a form of administrative burden.

- Keep messages short and clear. Including no more than two pieces of critical information per message will help students understand what you are trying to convey.
- Equip faculty with key information so that they can disseminate it too.
- It is critical that students receive important information *repeatedly*, as when they are stressed, they are less likely to recognize and receive it the first time it is offered. Send reminders.

SPECIFIC SUPPORTS

Emergency Aid

Now is the time to advertise your emergency aid fund online, putting information in as many places as possible so students can find it, and ensuring that the fund's operations are as smooth and fast-moving as possible.

- Be sure that students can quickly find the fund and connect with an application online.
- Emphasize that the aid consists of grants that do not have to be repaid.
- While the fund is likely to run out of money, simply making students aware that it is available provides a sense of caring.
- Keep collecting applications even when funds are out. Use information on the number and types of unfunded applications to fundraise for more support.
- Match all applicants with a navigator to help them find alternative forms of support. You may be able to create a template that peer navigators can employ to do this—this might be a good form of work-study employment.
- An application and distribution system helps you be ready to support students away from campus. If you need a new online emergency aid distribution system, [Edquity](#) is offering immediate support, including offering free distribution for two institutions.¹

Work Study

Many students will find that their on-campus or off-campus employment end during this crisis. Do your best to continue support with work-study funding. Whenever possible, employ students to work remotely. For students who cannot work remotely, use the authority that [Federal Student Aid has highlighted](#) to pay students for the hours they would have worked during the semester.

Return to Title Four Aid (R2T4)

If classes are moving online, proactively notify students that they must stay enrolled to maintain their financial aid eligibility. Be sure to clarify what constitutes enrollment, as holding synchronous class sessions may not be required.

The pivot to online courses is often most challenging for low-income and first-generation students. Here is a [guide](#) from Sean Michael Morris to help students make the transition; offering this support alongside messages about financial aid requirements helps students know that you care.

Consider carefully the implications of cancelling the rest of the semester completely or closing for a period of time. Currently [Federal Student Aid does not have the authority to waive R2T4 requirements](#) for students when the enrollment period is shortened. If you close and re-open any student who does not return will be subject to R2T4 provisions. The same will apply if you close completely. If closing is unavoidable, consider revising repayment options for students subject to R2T4 to offer longer timelines and more flexibility to pay bills owed.

Professional Judgement and Appeals

While institutions are focused on the short-term implications of this situation, the longer term implications need to be thought about soon. As businesses close, the students and families who already struggled the most to pay for college are likely to be the hardest hit. Hourly workers are very likely to see their income decline, those with savings will have to draw them down and those without will be pushed onto public benefits. It is almost certain that financial aid offices will see an increase in appeals for students in the 2020-2021 academic year. Plans for how to deal with that surge need to be in place ahead of time. Institutions should start proactively telling students that they can appeal for things like lost income, job losses, reduced savings and unexpected medical expense. Without proactive communication to students, [those who need the help the most will be the least likely to ask for an appeal](#).

Connect Students to Public Benefits

Some students may be [eligible for SNAP](#). Be sure to get them information about that critical program and help them apply. You may direct students to your state health and human services websites that offer resources about available public benefit programs and screeners to test their eligibility.

Decision Deadlines for Prospective Students

Extend your decision deadline and do it now. Students and families are unlikely to be in a position to make decisions on where they can attend college at this time, even if they are, decisions made under stress are [unlikely to be decisions that stick](#), so keeping a May 1 deadline is likely to ruin yield predictions and lead to increased summer melt. [Jon Boeckenstedt](#) has a [great thread](#) on some of the reasons why extending your deadline makes sense. It is worth noting that colleges that respond quickly and with compassion at this time are likely to be viewed more favorably by students and families when they do make their final decisions.

Enrollment Deposits

Most colleges have systems in place to waive enrollment deposits for student who cannot afford to pay them. They are often not well advertised or easily available though. Now is the time to start informing your prospective students that they can request a waiver, or if possible, to start offering those waivers pro-actively to students from low and moderate income backgrounds. Prospective students who were already likely to struggle to come up with the money for an enrollment deposit are going to find it even harder now if they do not receive support. Providing waivers now is likely to help your eventual yield rates, increase student feelings of connection to your institution and ensure that enrollment rates for students from low and moderate income backgrounds do not decline precipitously.

NOTES

¹ Disclosure: Sara Goldrick-Rab, Founding Director of the Hope Center, is also Chief Strategy Officer for Emergency Aid at Edquity, where she serves as a paid consultant and holds stock.