STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE:

Texas Students & Practitioners Share Their Experiences With Higher Ed Emergency Relief Funds

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Executive Summary

In November 2023, The Education Trust released [“Who Received Federal Emergency Aid Funding in Texas? A Closer Look at Pandemic Funding Awarded to Postsecondary Students,”](#) which examined the distribution and impact of Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) aid at postsecondary institutions in Texas. Our analysis of publicly available 2021 data revealed that, despite having similar average amounts of unmet financial need, Texas students enrolled at public two-year colleges were less likely to receive emergency aid and received smaller average award amounts than students enrolled at public four-year universities.

Nearly 473,000 Texas community college students received an average emergency aid award of $1,400. Compared to public four-year colleges in Texas, community colleges in the state distributed aid to more non-Pell recipients than Pell recipients. While rates varied widely at individual institutions, those colleges that distributed aid to a larger percentage of their student body tended to have higher retention rates among first-time students.

Following this quantitative analysis, we wanted to better understand the context and decisions of community college leaders and practitioners who navigated the pandemic and distributed federal emergency relief funding and the experiences of students who received it. To gather insights directly from community college administrators and students, we conducted focus groups and disseminated an accompanying survey focused on the following questions:

- How did practitioners interpret the purpose and goal of HEERF aid?

- What factors influenced how practitioners designed their federal aid determination and distribution processes?

- What data sources did practitioners rely upon to identify student need and distribute aid responsively?

- What innovations or best practices emerged from the strategies institutions used to distribute HEERF aid?

- How did students experience and access HEERF aid? How did students use the funds and how did these funds impact their educational trajectory?

Based on our qualitative analysis of stakeholder responses, this report spotlights challenges that various Texas institutions faced and the creative ways in which these institutions confronted them and offers recommendations organized around these key findings:

Key Findings

1

Even at institutions with pre-pandemic emergency aid programs, practitioners faced new challenges administering HEERF aid.

2

As their aid determination and distribution methodologies evolved, practitioners developed new ways to assess student need.

3

Practitioners relied heavily on email and word of mouth to promote the availability of aid, while students preferred more targeted and direct outreach strategies.

4

Students and practitioners reported using emergency aid primarily to cover non-tuition costs.

5

While students and practitioners emphasized the necessity of emergency aid, they attributed postsecondary retention to the combined impact of direct aid and other student support services.

6

Limited data infrastructure and capacity hindered most institutions' ability to assess the impact of emergency aid on student success measures.

Introduction

Over the past 25 years, Texas has made successive efforts to expand access to institutions of higher education and improve postsecondary attainment rates by establishing strategic plans to support students of all backgrounds. Following "Closing the Gaps" in 2000, "60x30TX" was established in 2015 with the goal of ensuring that 60% of Texan young adults obtain a postsecondary credential or degree by 2030. In 2022, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, that plan was expanded under "Building a Talent Strong Texas" to include all working-age Texans and align credential attainment with workforce demands. Throughout that time, the state has reinforced its commitment to equity and publicly acknowledged that Texas cannot meet its goals without advancing them equitably.[1]

Community colleges play an essential role in the pursuit of these goals, since they enroll 43% of all postsecondary students in Texas and reflect the demographic diversity of the state. The sector serves 70% of all freshmen and sophomores of color, draws 36% of its enrollment from students over the age of 22, and awards 44% of all credentials to students from low-income backgrounds.[2]

While community colleges tend to have substantially lower tuition than four-year colleges, the average Texas community college student has more than $1,000 per month in unmet financial need — since the cost of attendance is not fully covered by financial aid or family contribution. Due, in part, to systemic gaps limiting access to federal and state financial aid programs and rising non-tuition costs such as food, housing, and transportation, unmet need continues to hinder students' ability to complete their postsecondary education. Data shows that Texas students with no unmet need are far more likely to complete their degree than their peers with unmet need.[3]

Recognizing their students' needs and the harmful impact that even relatively small financial emergencies can have on their postsecondary trajectory, Texas community colleges were at the forefront of creating emergency aid programs even before the pandemic. Unfortunately, the needs of students were heightened by the pandemic, which exacerbated the challenges that low-income students and students of color faced and triggered steep enrollment and revenue declines at community colleges, which enroll large numbers of those students. Fortunately, Congress approved the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) and distributed more than $6.5 billion in emergency aid to Texas institutions at a time when many institutions and students needed a lifeline.

As higher education institutions transitioned to remote learning and sought innovative ways to ensure that students had access to high-speed internet and technology, institutional leaders wrestled with how to meet students' increased needs with limited funding, while confronting the pandemic's impact on their own personal lives. Meanwhile, students navigated the uncertainty of the pandemic and disruptions to their postsecondary education. Many experienced a messy transition to online learning because they lacked the necessary resources and support to connect remotely; others had increased caregiver responsibilities or experienced an unexpected illness or unemployment.

To better understand the context and decisions of community college leaders and practitioners who navigated the pandemic and distributed federal emergency relief funding and the experiences of students who received it, we conducted focus groups and surveys with community college administrators and practitioners who helped determine how funds were distributed and students who were directly impacted by federal emergency relief aid. This report captures what we found. It also features promising practices from Texas institutions and makes recommendations to improve student success moving forward.

Key Findings:

Even at Institutions With Pre-Pandemic Emergency Aid Programs, Practitioners Faced New Challenges Administering HEERF Aid

Several participating institutions introduced emergency aid programs to help address students' unexpected and acute financial needs prior to receiving federal HEERF dollars. Practitioners said that they drew upon the experiences and knowledge gained from those pre-existing programs as they considered how to administer relief funds. Practitioners were also able to leverage their familiarity with relevant bureaucratic processes, documentation requirements, and systems for internal collaboration to streamline implementation of HEERF aid—including everything from needs assessment to fund allocation and distribution monitoring. So, although the pandemic brought unexpected challenges, participants said they did not feel totally unprepared.

A director of financial aid noted:

> *"Before COVID, the Board established an emergency fund scholarship for students, so we did have something in place prior to COVID hitting. So, when we received HEERF funds, we weren't [starting from scratch]. We did kind of have something in place already to give us guidance when establishing the guidelines for the HEERF funds distribution."*

It was, however, also clear that pre-existing programs would only take practitioners so far, given the unprecedented scale and complexity of the pandemic. The sheer scope and urgency of students' needs, along with the scale of federal funds, required shifts in both mindset and practice. When articulating the goals associated with HEERF aid, practitioners expressed a need to not only disburse aid quickly to students, but to simultaneously identify and address the barriers to learning that students were confronting in real time.

Another director of financial aid said:

> *"There was no envisioning. It was more like, OK, we got to get to the next 24 hours. Now we're going to get to the next week. There was no time to plan because we were in emergency crisis mode."*

An assistant vice chancellor of student services said:

> *"One of the lasting effects of going through that process and focusing so much on looking at what a student needs and how we can get them through is that if there was a need, there was a way somebody could figure out a way to fulfill that need. I think it shifted the mindset of all our employees about looking at the need the student has and I think we approach those problems in a different way now than we did pre-pandemic."*

The immediate urgency to disburse aid was intensified by the swift transition to distance learning and the need to develop online systems to support application completion, aid processing, and funds disbursement. This was not an easy adjustment, as campuses confronted outdated infrastructure and a lack of high-speed internet connectivity. The transition was especially challenging for rural institutions in isolated areas with limited broadband and home internet access for students.

"We had the resources available pre-COVID, but when COVID hit, we had to learn how to primarily care for our students remotely," one director of social services said. "What I remember vividly about not returning after March was that we worked with students via email, Google phone, and Zoom to still provide access to emergency aid programs and federal funding."

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT: ADDRESSING CONNECTIVITY BARRIERS

Recognizing the digital connectivity challenges facing students, Panola College utilized institutional HEERF dollars to introduce a Wi-Fi connectivity system in its campus parking lot and implement a hotspot checkout system. These solutions allowed students to access the internet from the convenience of their cars and stay connected when not on campus. With HEERF money no longer available, the institution is exploring funding sources to sustain and expand the program, aiming to establish hotspots in key areas like the library.

Practitioners had to navigate increased demands with limited staff and create innovative ways to ensure that students could stay in contact with their services and stay the academic course. Many reported creating online application processes, providing Wi-Fi hotspots to students, and offering laptop rentals. While many of the institutions wanted to upgrade technology infrastructure prior to the pandemic, they utilized HEERF institutional dollars not only to offer online instruction but launch digital systems to more quickly meet the needs of their students.

One director of financial aid said:

"We were able to speed through the emergency aid awarding process even faster than [before]. At that point, we were able to provide EA within 48 hours or so. By requesting signatures electronically, we moved through those processes more efficiently and quickly, so we could really help students as fast as we could. That has been something that we have adopted and used to this day."

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT: INNOVATING FOR SERVICE DELIVERY

During the pandemic, Amarillo College augmented its on-campus food pantry by introducing an online shopping system, using Google Docs for seamless ordering through major retailers like Target and Walmart. This allowed students — especially those with work or family responsibilities — to more conveniently access essential items outside of traditional business hours by placing orders and selecting flexible pickup times around their schedules.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Conduct a regular student-needs assessment:** Leaders should routinely collect and review data trends to understand how resources, including emergency aid, can be used to effectively address student needs. Trends can inform future areas for investment or partnership.

- **Leverage learning management systems to deploy student-needs assessments:** Using an existing system can improve uptake and completion of student-needs assessments. Assessments should be deployed multiple times during the year to assess and respond to students' changing circumstances more accurately.

As Their Aid Determination and Distribution Methodologies Evolved, Practitioners Developed New Ways to Assess Student Need

Across all institutions, practitioners worked urgently to ensure that emergency aid funds reached the students most in need, while operating with limited resources and navigating changing federal eligibility requirements.

Under the first round of HEERF grants, the federal Department of Education restricted receipt of aid to students meeting Title IV eligibility requirements. These requirements excluded international students, students with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, undocumented students, and non-credit students. While federal guidance did not require students to have a completed FAFSA, many institutions initially used this as a shortcut to determine student eligibility. In subsequent rounds of HEERF funding, federal eligibility requirements were made less restrictive and expanded student access.

Lack of clarity around the rules governing the distribution process — who could receive aid and how much they could receive — presented a challenge for many colleges in the early stages. Practitioners wanted to respond quickly to students in need of support, but worried about compliance.

For example, one vice president for institutional advancement said:

> *"There was a lot of confusion about what we needed for HEERF funds. Like who qualified and who didn't qualify. It was a lot of back and forth, and so [we] were cautious about it. We were nervous. We didn't want them to come back and say, no, you did it wrong. Now you have to pay us all this money back."*

While navigating these changing restrictions, practitioners continued to gain a better understanding of the pandemic's impact on their student populations. Leaders noted that there was increased demand for pre-existing programs and recognized the dramatic ways in which students' circumstances were changing. This pushed them to seek more up-to-date information directly from students. One director of social services said:

"For emergency aid, the advocacy and resource office helped in creating assessments, including the right questions. We actually had direct access to a database of students completing those assessments and could see the results of how they answered. We verified the information they stated and handed it over to the financial aid office for them to distribute aid."

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT: REDESIGNING INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION

Situated in a tourist-centric town that's heavily reliant on visitor influx for jobs, Galveston College swiftly recognized the devastating impact of the pandemic on student employment and income. To navigate this crisis and respond to unprecedented student need, the college established a task force including top leadership, financial aid staff, grant specialists, and representatives from across the institution. The goal was to assess available resources, gain insights into effective processes, and expedite the distribution of much-needed funds to affected students. The task force streamlined the review and processing of applications and reallocated funds to bolster the student financial aid pool.

In an effort to adapt their aid determination and distribution processes and capture the dynamic nature of students' needs during the pandemic, practitioners established systems that augmented existing financial aid data with information about students' self-reported needs. While the level of supporting documentation or explanation may have varied, it was common for institutions to utilize simple applications that allowed students to self-identify their most pressing areas of need without introducing additional barriers that could discourage completion.

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT: QUANTIFYING BASIC NEEDS EXPENSES

Amidst the pandemic, San Jacinto College embarked on a detailed study to quantify the costs associated with various basic needs such as child care, housing, and technology. The objective was to establish an appropriate and feasible financial aid allocation for each category of need. Students then identified their categories of need through a user friendly interface, each associated with a predetermined dollar amount. If the total calculated aid allocation fell short of addressing the full scope of a student's needs, the student was directed to additional resources and support services within the college or through partner organizations.

Increased federal flexibility in eligibility requirements, along with these new methods of assessing student need, allowed practitioners to better assist those who fell through the cracks during the first round of aid distribution.

"We knew that our non-credit students didn't get as much financial aid," one assistant vice chancellor said. "We wanted to make sure that students were able to complete their program, which would get them in and out into the workforce, so that they could start earning money."

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT: USING TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Amarillo College developed a student-needs assessment to determine how to distribute HEERF aid and categorize students by various levels of risk. For students identified as low risk, the institution disseminates vital resources and accompanying links directly to students' email. Students identified as high risk receive a resource list and are connected directly to an advocate, ensuring immediate assistance. This system allows the college to identify and address needs quickly before they threaten students' ability to stay in school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Form a cross-functional task force or committee to manage strategies for addressing student needs:** Include leaders, faculty, and staff from relevant departments to assess available resources, potential gaps, and advance robust systems of support.

- **Adopt routine methods to measure and monitor changes to students' unmet needs:** Gaps identified at the individual and student-body level should guide institutional approaches to capacity-building, financial aid, and community partnerships.

Practitioners Relied Heavily on Email and Word of Mouth to Promote the Availability of Aid, While Students Preferred More Targeted and Direct Outreach Strategies

To communicate information about federal emergency aid to students, practitioners consistently highlighted word of mouth and email as their most widely used methods. While students reported hearing about emergency aid availability in various ways, they confirmed that word of mouth and email were most common.

One vice president of strategic initiatives said:

> *"I think our best marketing tool was word of mouth — just the students talking to each other or visiting one of our offices and expressing a need. [An email] campaign also let students know the assessment was available and when they could start completing that. As soon as we sent it out, we had applications coming in."*

Practitioners believe that students often rely on peer recommendations and conversations within their social circles to learn about aid availability, application processes, and award distribution. However, students had differing perceptions regarding the efficacy and efficiency of such outreach strategies. While these methods may have led focus group participants to uncover aid, they were concerned about over-reliance on these methods.

> *"There was not any real internal communication that I saw, so I thought maybe it was a scam,"*
> *a transfer student said.*

A returning student from another college shared a similar sentiment and called the financial aid office for more information because she was skeptical about an email she received:

> *"I kind of thought [the email] was a scam at first. I mean, at that point, I was getting a loan because I no longer received financial aid because I had too many hours. I went to the school and contacted them, and they told me to click on the link because the government was giving us money."*

Overall, students viewed these outreach strategies as limiting exposure and suggested a more targeted, direct approach that utilized other trusted messengers on campus. While they valued word of mouth from peers, students like the returning student quoted below expressed a desire for institutional leaders to leverage professors and advisers more, since they have more central and consistent roles in students' academic journeys:

> *"I think advisers are underutilized; you know those were the people that helped me. That was the person that said apply or could give me information."*

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT: ENGAGING FACULTY, STAFF, AND VOLUNTEERS

Lee College proactively involves faculty and staff in outreach and marketing endeavors. Recognizing their pivotal roles in students' lives, leaders have instituted targeted training programs focused on equipping faculty and staff with skills to engage effectively with students, destigmatize seeking help, and foster an environment that encourages open dialogue and support.

San Jacinto College mobilizes community volunteers for personal student outreach. Equipped with a guiding script, volunteers conduct phone calls to help assess student needs, emphasize the shared nature of their challenges, and encourage students to use campus resources and reach out for additional assistance.

A first-generation student shared how a neighbor, who was also a faculty member, mentioned the opportunity to apply for federal dollars and walked her through the application process:

"My neighbor works for the school. She knew that my husband and I had just lost our jobs. If I couldn't finish school, I would have been defeated. She told me about the aid and said I needed to apply for it. I did and I received aid. I would not have known about it had it not been for my neighbor."

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Collaborate with students to develop outreach and communication strategies:** Student voice is essential to craft effective messaging, identify trusted messengers, and utilize multiple platforms that will reach all student groups.

- **Develop communication strategies that include trained faculty and staff**: Engaging faculty and staff can increase awareness of available programs and improve referral rates. Faculty and staff should be trained to identify students' potential needs, normalize seeking help, and make referrals to the appropriate resources.

Students and Practitioners Reported Using Emergency Aid Primarily to Cover Non-Tuition Costs

Focus group discussions with students and practitioners shed light on students' struggles to manage rising non-tuition costs associated with higher education. While our quantitative analysis found that community college students received an average emergency aid award of approximately $1,400, more than half of this amount was offset by increases in the average cost of attendance.[4] More than tuition and fees, food and housing costs represented the largest portion of this increase. Our findings highlighted the pressing reality that students often grapple with high levels of basic needs insecurity while pursuing their postsecondary credential or degree.

These challenges were evident as students shared how they utilized emergency aid. One student, who was a caretaker to her ill mother and recently unemployed husband, used the aid to pay the bills that mattered most. In her case, that meant paying rent in advance to ensure that her family had a roof over their heads while she focused on completing the semester.

A parenting student noted that the aid gave them much-needed flexibility to cut back on extra work hours and focus on being the best student and parent possible during a period of transition:

"I ended up doing [maintenance work] at a McDonald's to make extra money, but I would have to be up at 2 a.m. With that aid, I was able to leave that job because I had the money to cover that gap. It helped with the transition, as I left the Marine Corps a bit prior. It was all an awkward transition for me. So, that helped me get away from that line of work that [was] taxing my body. I could focus on my schoolwork and being a present parent."

Practitioners shared similar stories. Referencing the data collected from student applications for aid, one practitioner noted that only 30% of students used the federal dollars to cover tuition costs, and child care was the number one need, followed by technology. Other practitioners cited other student needs assessment data to anticipate student support.

A director of institutional research said:

"We knew that the majority of students were using [federal relief funds] for housing, and then transportation. Food was the largest expense."

While practitioners sought additional resources beyond federal relief funds to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, many knew that the crisis had only exacerbated basic needs insecurity among students. One practitioner, a dean of student support services, highlighted the ongoing barriers to postsecondary success facing students and the need to sustain systems of support beyond the pandemic:

"I hope that it's not something just now, but those efforts continue to focus on basic needs [food insecurity, housing, and child care] which you know, are really expensive."

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT: ENHANCING SUPPORT SERVICES THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

Amarillo College has taken measures to address and alleviate its student body's pressing mental health needs. Through data collection, the college discovered that a staggering 84% of their students had suffered negative impacts on various aspects of their lives due to the pandemic, with mental health being the most consistently affected area.

Recognizing the urgency of the situation, Amarillo College sought partnerships to complement existing services. Using HEERF dollars, they launched "Timely Care," a comprehensive program that offers medical and mental health support to all students and their dependents 24/7, 365 days a year. Since its launch, students have had rapid access to licensed physicians and therapists, with an impressive average wait time of four minutes to talk to a therapist and seven minutes to speak with a doctor. The program also offers a range of other services, including psychiatric services, health coaching, and peer support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Centralize student services:** Establishing a known one-stop shop for resources and referrals can help ensure that students get the appropriate services and supports.

- **Collaborate with local partners to connect students to a network of supports:** Community-based organizations and local government agencies can help add shared capacity to deliver tailored financial and basic needs services, including access to public benefits assistance.

- **Define and measure the gap between need, available resources, and capacity for care:** Compile the data needed to gain a comprehensive view of unmet student need, assess access and utilization of available financial and support services, and identify gaps to be addressed. Use this analysis to articulate the desired role of emergency aid.

While Students and Practitioners Emphasized the Necessity of Emergency Aid, They Attributed Postsecondary Retention to the Combined Impact of Direct aid and Other Student Support Services

When asked to evaluate the impact of HEERF aid, practitioners and students noted that multiple systems of support are essential to address the varied and interconnected needs that can derail an individual's pursuit of a college education. When asked if federal dollars allowed students to remain enrolled or reenroll, the answers — from both students and practitioners — highlighted student support systems that accompanied the direct receipt of aid. Many believe it was the combination of additional aid and wraparound resources that helped students to overcome challenges, persist, or complete their postsecondary degree.

"The combination of emergency relief funds, institution funds, programming, they work together,"
said an assistance vice chancellor of finance.

"For us it was learning that we have to really focus on meeting the needs of students in a holistic way,"
a dean of student support services said.

Students said they consistently worried about affording basic needs amidst the pandemic. Given the uncertainty of employment, housing, and even health scares that increased caregiver responsibilities, students often struggled to balance life and academics. Even with emergency aid, parenting students, in particular, were unsure how they would overcome the mounting obstacles brought on by the pandemic. Practitioners had to act quickly and recognize that parenting students could not manage the complexities of parenting and going to college during a pandemic alone. Coordinated institution-wide support was key to student success, one vice chancellor noted:

"We had a lot of programs that were already really strong, but with the pandemic, we brought everybody together. We had to understand what resources we had on campus for students, so if they didn't get enough money to cover what they were looking for, we were able to direct them to other places."

An assistant vice chancellor echoed that sentiment:

"We had to understand the resources we had in a comprehensive way, so that if we did have a student or knew of a student in need, we were working with one department to cover books. We were finding every which way that we possibly could help our students."

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT: INVESTING IN CASE MANAGEMENT

During the pandemic, Dallas College implemented a more structured and robust case management approach. The college doubled its number of case managers to ensure that at least two or three professionals are available on every campus. Complementing this effort, the college also established several community partnerships and meets regularly with local stakeholders. The focus on warm handoffs ensures a seamless transition for students seeking external services, marking a holistic approach to student well-being and success that extends beyond the academic realm.

The pandemic pushed departments to leverage the expertise and resources of various on- and off-campus supports not only to ensure access to federal aid but to connect students with the supports they needed. The impact of this collaboration and integration was felt among students. One parenting student said:

"I received child care through the workforce, but with COVID, I wasn't going to receive that child care anymore. I used the emergency funds to help pay for rent, so I never knew how I would pay for [child care]. I really needed child care, so it was really nice for [the college] to have that option for me.

Speaking to the interplay of direct aid and other support services, a dean said:

"They're staying in school because they can send their kids to child care for free or drop-in child care. Instead of having to pay for groceries, they can go to the food pantries. They can put that money, that $50 or $60 or $70 toward something else, like a bill. It's helping them to stay in school is what we know."

From that perspective, access to a food pantry not only addressed immediate food insecurity but also allowed students to allocate limited financial resources toward other basic needs like housing or transportation. While the amount of HEERF aid may have been insufficient to meet the many and varied needs of all students, it is evident that practitioners and students viewed direct emergency aid as just one piece of a larger puzzle. When connected with other forms of support available on- and off-campus, it appears that colleges had greater success in helping students to stay the academic course.

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT: BUILDING FINANCIAL LITERACY SKILLS

During the pandemic, Galveston College introduced comprehensive financial wellness services to address a noticeable gap in guidance for students receiving federal aid. The college integrated financial literacy education into their aid distribution process to help students better navigate their own immediate financial challenges and position them for future success in the long term. Practices and programs like this demonstrate a commitment to empowering students academically and equipping them with the tools to navigate and plan for a secure financial future beyond the campus walls.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop a holistic strategy to address unmet need that "braids" resources across departments**: Fully addressing the depth and breadth of students' financial and basic needs requires collaboration, strategic resource allocation, and shared goals. This integration allows students to receive additional support and access to resources, promoting a more targeted approach for students.

- **Develop approaches that can be tailored to students' unique circumstances and needs.** There is no single approach to address student financial and basic needs. It will likely require the right mix of financial aid, emergency aid, public benefits assistance, and on- and off-campus services.

Limited Data Infrastructure and Capacity Hindered Most Institutions' Ability to Assess the Impact of Emergency Aid on Student Success Measures

Practitioners consistently identified data as a crucial tool for fostering continuous improvement and demonstrating the impact of emergency aid programs. When collected and utilized appropriately, data can provide insights about who is accessing services and for what purpose, inform targeted outreach strategies, discern trends amongst student populations, and articulate impact or the lack thereof. Multiple focus group participants cited compelling impact data from pre-pandemic emergency aid programs.

One vice president of institutional advancement said:

> *"We saw that first year when we did the emergency funding from our foundation, we had a 99% completion and persistence rate for every student who received it …. We've been doing the emergency scholarships every year and this last year we had an 83% persistence and completion rate from everyone who received it."*

However, when asked about the impact of HEERF aid on student outcomes, practitioners like the associate vice chancellor of student services quoted below expressed a greater level of uncertainty, given limited institutional capacity to track student-level receipt of federal emergency aid and subsequent success measures like persistence and completion:

> *"People were impacted in so many ways that I just don't know if we could ever measure whether receiving $1,000 to $3,000 affected their ability to overcome any personal circumstances. A lot of anecdotal information from emails and talking to students that it really helped at the time, but we don't know the longevity for sure."*

A dean said:

> *"We can't say 100% it's because of federal aid or some of the other basic needs that we're giving, but it probably has a great impact."*

Compared to pre-pandemic emergency aid programs, institutions disbursed federal aid at a much wider scale — in some instances to more than 80% of their student population. Most of the institutions represented in our focus groups simply lacked the comprehensive data systems, processes, and capacity necessary to analyze the relationship between receipt of aid and longitudinal academic outcomes. Looking forward, quality data infrastructure is imperative for all stakeholders — including practitioners, college leaders, and policymakers — to better understand the impact of emergency aid and make informed decisions that improve students' ability to persist in college, complete a degree, and successfully transition into the workforce.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Invest in student-level data infrastructure and capacity:** Data systems should integrate student-level academic and financial data, as well as status and receipt of relevant support services. Ideally, these systems should be designed to support individual case management and enable aggregate analysis and reporting.

- **Establish methods to evaluate the efficacy of emergency aid programs:** Data that measures student outcomes associated with aid distribution will improve program efficacy and provide a key component of "storytelling" for policymakers and funders.

Looking Ahead

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered how Texas community colleges seek to address the varying challenges that arise while students are pursuing a postsecondary education. As colleges across the state adapted to distribute an unprecedented amount of federal emergency relief funding quickly and efficiently, they learned lessons and developed innovative practices for assessing student need, strengthening outreach to students, and implementing more collaborative and comprehensive support services.

Fortunately, with community colleges facing the fiscal cliff as federal HEERF dollars run out, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 8 in 2023 to address the pivotal role these institutions play in reaching the state's postsecondary attainment and workforce goals. The legislation will send an additional $680 million to community colleges over the next two years using a new state community college funding formula based on student outcomes, including weights for high-need student groups and credential attainment in high-demand fields.
As students continue to confront significant unmet financial and basic needs, now is the time for community college leaders to capitalize on lessons learned and determine which promising strategies to sustain by maximizing the state's new funding formula. Despite the obstacles these institutions had to overcome during the pandemic, they have emerged with a strong foundation from which to more fully meet their students' needs and support postsecondary student success in the future.

Research Methodology

For this study, we utilized qualitative methods to understand how practitioners and students at public two-year institutions in Texas allocated and were impacted by federal Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) dollars.

To ensure that our sample included a diversity of institutions and aid disbursement, data collected through the Department of Education was used to create a case study database that allowed us to identify and directly reach out to institutions that used promising practices potential bright spots and/or overcame barriers that may have prevented equitable and efficient aid distribution. Focus group interest forms and surveys were then disseminated through higher education partners and coalitions.

Focus groups and one-on-one interviews were conducted from June to November 2023. Participants shared their in-depth experiences and insights in a compensated, 75-minute video call. To accommodate stakeholders with limited capacity, an accompanying survey was designed and distributed to ensure that their input was included in this research. The survey was concise, and questions were reflective of the focus group protocol to ensure validity. In total, 24 students and 30 practitioners from a wide range of departments and positions at 10 institutions participated.

At the conclusion of the qualitative process, transcripts were coded using DeDoose software. Generated codes from the dataset were condensed into overarching themes that were then synthesized into the report findings.

Endnotes

1. Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (2022). 2022-2020 Strategic Plan: Building a Talent Strong Texas. https://reportcenter.highered.texas.gov/agency-publication/miscellaneous/building-talent-strong-texas/

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