

HEERF WORKS: HOW GRANTS HAVE SUPPORTED STUDENTS AT PUBLIC RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES

In the two years since a national emergency was declared due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our nation’s colleges and universities have worked tirelessly to guide students and campus communities through the resulting public health and economic crises.

Whether it was rapidly closing campuses as the virus first began to spread in spring 2020, planning for a responsible return to campus in fall that year, coordinating vaccine rollouts throughout spring 2021, or responding to the Delta and Omicron variants in fall 2021 and winter 2022, each new academic term presented unique challenges.

Spanning both the Trump and Biden administrations and two sessions of Congress, leaders from both political parties assembled and passed three emergency funding packages that have provided higher education with significant resources to address unprecedented challenges,

including nearly \$77 billion in Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) grant aid.

APLU members received over \$20 billion in HEERF grants to support their campus communities, which include 4.2 million undergraduates, 1.2 million graduate students, and 1.1 million faculty and staff. This support includes nearly \$8.5 billion for student emergency grant aid, \$10.5 billion for institutional relief, and an additional \$1.7 billion in support for members of APLU that are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), and other eligible institutions (see chart on pg. 2).¹

This federal support has been instrumental in helping institutions navigate the changing conditions these past two years, protect public health, support students, and chart a course forward for campus communities.²

COVID-19 LEGISLATION, FUNDS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION EMERGENCY RELIEF

| | CORONAVIRUS AID, RELIEF, AND ECONOMIC SECURITY (CARES) ACT | CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE AND RELIEF SUPPLEMENTAL APPROPRIATIONS ACT (CRRSAA) | AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT (ARPA) |
|---|--|--|---------------------------------|
| DATE ENACTED | March 27, 2020 | December 27, 2020 | March 11, 2021 |
| FUNDS DISBURSED | Spring/Summer 2020 | Winter 2021 | Summer 2021 |
| APLU INSTITUTION HEERF AWARDS | \$3.85 billion | \$6.05 billion | \$10.65 billion |
| TOTAL HEERF GRANT FUNDING FOR ALL POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS | \$14 billion | \$23 billion | \$40 billion |

Based on publicly available data on COVID-19 Legislation and HEERF grant award data collected by APLU.

HEERF GRANTS AT APLU INSTITUTIONS

APLU members used HEERF grant funds to provide critical support, spending emergency funds in a responsible and timely manner. By the close of 2021, APLU members had already spent nearly \$14.5 billion or over 70 percent of the total HEERF dollars received by their campuses (the majority of which was only made available to them six months earlier) and put in place plans to spend down the remainder of emergency funds going into 2022. These remaining funds will allow institutions to continue supporting students and their campus communities through pandemic recovery.

The nearly \$14.5 billion institutions have spent exceeds the total amount received by APLU institutions from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) combined, which totaled just under \$10 billion.

The following sections spotlight examples of how APLU member institutions disbursed student emergency aid and used institutional support to help their campus communities throughout 2020 and 2021. Additionally, this document provides examples of how APLU’s member HBCUs and MSIs addressed a range of needs with this support.

BY THE CLOSE OF 2021, APLU MEMBERS HAD ALREADY SPENT NEARLY \$14.5 BILLION OR OVER 70 PERCENT OF THE TOTAL HEERF DOLLARS RECEIVED BY THEIR CAMPUSES.

APLU MEMBER HEERF GRANT EXPENDITURES, THROUGH DECEMBER 2021

| | HEERF I, II, AND III RECEIVED | HEERF I, II, AND III SPENT | PERCENTAGE SPENT |
|--|-------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|
| TOTAL HEERF GRANTS FOR APLU INSTITUTIONS | \$20,666,524,448 | \$14,474,193,628 | 70.04% |
| STUDENT PORTION | \$8,496,102,813 | \$6,736,411,487 | 79.29% |
| INSTITUTIONAL PORTION | \$10,509,558,231 | \$6,976,528,667 | 66.38% |
| ADDITIONAL FUNDS FOR HBCUS | \$1,160,799,363 | \$523,728,210 | 45.12% |
| ADDITIONAL FUNDS FOR MSIS | \$399,793,382 | \$183,375,192 | 45.87% |
| ADDITIONAL FUNDS FOR SIP SCHOOLS | \$97,378,201 | \$53,356,157 | 54.79% |

Data collected for 196 APLU member systems and campuses from the [Education Stabilization Fund database](#) maintained by the U.S. Department of Education on February 14, 2022. Data represent expenditures through December 2021, including for funding from ARPA that was received only six months earlier.

HEERF STUDENT EMERGENCY AID

The personal toll the pandemic has taken on many students is immense. The pandemic led to some students delaying graduation; many lost their current jobs or had future career opportunities withdrawn; and dependent students and students with families faced an array of new financial hurdles. Emergency financial support provided a lifeline to students working to advance their education while struggling with unprecedented challenges stemming from the global pandemic.

From the time federal emergency aid was first distributed to campuses in spring 2020 through the end of 2021, APLU member campuses disbursed over \$6.7 billion in emergency aid grants—nearly 80 percent of total funds received—to undergraduate and graduate students across the country. Emergency grants have helped students pay for essential needs such as rent and food, as well as course materials, transportation costs, medical expenses, and other unforeseen costs throughout the pandemic. With many students facing precarious financial conditions prior to the pandemic, this funding helped them address basic needs while staying on track to a degree. Those needs continue and schools will be continuing to disburse the remaining funds.

While every campus developed a different process and methodology for distributing these funds, three primary frameworks emerged for awarding aid:

- 1) pre-set automatic awards to low-income students paired with a campus-wide application process for additional emergency aid;
- 2) a campus-wide application process for all emergency aid awards; and
- 3) automatic awards to all eligible students for all emergency aid awards.³

In one example, the University of Florida awarded nearly \$68 million in emergency grants to students through the end of 2021, nearly 90



percent of student emergency grant aid the campus received.⁴ This funding benefitted 15,661 students in need with the first round of funding, 18,805 students with the second round, and more than 33,962 students with the latest funding provided through the American Rescue Plan Act. The campus automatically awarded pre-set emergency aid grants to students with demonstrated financial need, then provided a campus-wide application process for all eligible students to request emergency aid.

“Due to coronavirus, my father has experienced reduced hours at work, as well as my mother being furloughed, leading to financial hardships with covering my expenses such as rent, food, and textbooks for my courses,” wrote one UF student when applying for emergency support. Another student shared: “my entire family and I caught the virus and required my mother and I to take off excessive days of work off and unfortunately miss many payments because of it.” Emergency grant aid helped fill in some of the financial gaps students faced as the pandemic impacted both the health of students and their families as well as their work.



At the University of California, Los Angeles, nearly \$82 million in emergency

grants has been awarded to students during the pandemic, including 33,815 undergraduate and graduate students with the first round of funding, 14,329 students with the second round, and 13,603 students so far with the latest round of funding. Rounds two and three of UCLA’s student emergency aid has been targeted toward students facing exceptional need due to the pandemic.

At the University of Maryland, College Park, nearly 16,600 students received \$50 million in emergency financial aid—nearly 14,000 undergraduate students and 2,600 graduate



students. More than half of the aid was automatically disbursed to students with demonstrated financial need, with the other half distributed to students based upon additional applications for aid.

One University of Maryland student shared, “Thanks to the help, I paid for rent, groceries and was able to concentrate on school as I finished the semester. I am forever grateful as the aid came exactly when I needed.”

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These examples provide a snapshot of the tremendous need students have faced throughout the pandemic, and the impact HEERF student emergency aid has had for millions of students across APLU member campuses.


HEERF INSTITUTIONAL AID

In early 2021, using survey information collected by member institutions, APLU estimated that institutions would face revenue losses totaling around \$20.8 billion through the end of 2021.⁵ Congress helped offset these tremendous financial losses by providing over \$10.5 billion in direct aid to APLU institutions, in part to financially stabilize institutions and help provide students with refunds for housing, dining, parking, and other expenses. Campuses also used institutional aid to address the health impacts of the pandemic, including making investments in COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, masks and other personal protective equipment, cleaning supplies, and more.

APLU members have also used these funds to support students and campus communities through a range of new initiatives:

Supporting Students Through Investments in Technology

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY  As higher education shifted online at the beginning of the pandemic, many institutions made essential technology investments on campus. Northern Arizona University, for example, invested \$5 million to make technology upgrades in classrooms to support a hybrid learning environment, make Wi-Fi enhancements on its Flagstaff campus and through mobile hotspots in various communities of need. It also established a student laptop and mobile hotspot loaner program.

UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON  In another example, the University of Houston invested in its new Advanced HyFlex Classrooms project, equipping 50 classrooms with technology to support flexible instruction. This has allowed students to attend class on-site in a traditional manner or to attend remotely via desktop video conferencing with full interaction with the instructor and fellow students. These rooms provide students and faculty with the resources needed to support both effective in-class and remote learning to accommodate students’ needs. The initial student response to the initiative has been hugely positive. Many students report wanting the on-campus classroom experience much of the time, but having the online option built into traditionally in-person classes has created flexibility in the event a student gets sick or has another conflict arise.

Addressing Student Mental Health Needs on Campus

Amid an unprecedented surge in needs for mental health services, institutions have and continue to use funds to expand counseling support



for students. In one example, the State University of New York System invested \$24 million of its HEERF

institutional funds on mental health programs such as residential-staff training to identify warning signs and refer students to services; expanding SUNY’s Crisis Text Line, Peer-to-Peer hotlines; and campus student counseling networks.

Northern Arizona University also spent a portion of its HEERF institutional funds to support student mental health. The campus invested \$300,000 to expand both in-person and virtual mental health counseling services, which has been crucial during the pandemic to support student wellbeing and mental health.

Funding Food and Housing Initiatives



In 2021, North Carolina A&T University invested over \$42.5 million in HEERF institutional funds to provide a range of supports to students, including \$6 million on housing and dining scholarships. The university awarded students living on campus with \$250 scholarships toward on-campus housing, supporting 5,471 students in spring/summer 2021 and 5,343 students in fall 2021. Further, the university provided \$250 toward meal plans for 6,274 students in spring/summer 2021 and 5,927 students in fall 2021.

Investing in Student Success and Completion

Campuses have also used institutional funds to invest in student success and completion initiatives on campus—helping students stay on track academically despite the multifaceted challenges of the pandemic.

For example, Mississippi State University used



\$1.2 million of its institutional aid to provide completion grants of up to \$1,000 each to 1,257 undergraduate students who were close to graduation. Completion grant

recipients were all Pell-eligible students with unmet financial need—each student was in good academic standing and had completed 75 percent or more of the student’s academic program required hours.

EARLY RESULTS FROM MISSISSIPPI STATE HAVE SHOWN THAT 95 PERCENT OF RECIPIENTS IN 2021 HAVE ALREADY GRADUATED OR ARE STILL ENROLLED AT THE INSTITUTION. GRANT RECIPIENTS ALSO APPEAR 12 PERCENT MORE LIKELY TO GRADUATE IN TWO SEMESTERS THAN NON-GRANT RECIPIENTS, ALLOWING THEM TO ENTER THE WORKFORCE EARLIER.

One Mississippi State student who received a completion grant shared, “This grant will help me out with continuing my education here and receiving the aid I need to complete my degree. Thank you for making me feel noticed and proud of what I have accomplished.”

In another example, North Carolina A&T University used \$207,000 to support 63 students in spring/summer 2021 and 73 students in fall 2021 through the campus Aggies at the Goal Line Program. Aggies at the Goal Line is a degree completion program the university started to reach students who did not finish their bachelor’s degree return to the university to finish their course of study. The program is fully online and tailored to support the needs of nontraditional college students.

Directing Additional Aid to Students and Providing Debt Forgiveness

During the pandemic, many financially challenged students have accrued institutional debts ranging from a few dollars to thousands that could lead to them leaving college—and once they leave, some may never return.



To address this challenge, Sacramento State distributed more than \$1.8 million of HEERF institutional aid to nearly 1,400 students to cancel unpaid fees accrued during the pandemic. Gina Curry, Sacramento State's associate vice president for Financial Services, said the debt can affect students' credit and long-term can hurt them financially. "We're taking that debt away, clearing a pathway for them to attend school," she said.

And, using an additional \$10 million of HEERF institutional funds, Northern Arizona University provided additional direct aid to students in the form of emergency financial aid grants and debt forgiveness programs to help students persist in their studies.

HEERF HBCU, MSI, AND SIP FUNDS

For the 61 Minority Serving Institutions within APLU's membership, including 23 Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the additional dedicated support Congress provided has allowed campuses to do more to help students. This funding included \$1.16 billion for HBCUs, almost \$400 million for other MSIs, and \$97 million for campuses eligible for the Strengthening Institutions Program (SIP) funds.

Spotlighting HBCU Investments in Debt Forgiveness

In summer 2021, Delaware State University was one of the first campuses to announce it would

Delaware State University use \$731,000 of its HBCU funding to clear students' institutional debt. The average eligible student received about \$3,276 in debt relief. Virginia State University also announced it would pay the balances owed to the university for students who attended the institution either in 2020 or spring 2021.



Adding to the trend, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) used \$16 million of its HBCU funding to cover fees, tuition, and unpaid student account balances during the 2020-2021 school year. "Clearing student account balances from the previous school year was a way of practicing our motto of 'Excellence with Caring' by supporting students and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic," said William E. Hudson Jr., FAMU's vice president for student affairs.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic has brought about unprecedented changes to higher education, but with support from the federal government, colleges and universities have been able to meet this moment and support their students and campus communities. Through direct support to students in the form of emergency aid grants, campuses have been able to provide students with resources to address financial hardships caused by the pandemic. Further, the additional institutional aid and support for HBCUs, MSIs, and SIP schools has given campuses the ability to invest in a range of new initiatives that have supported access to technology, addressed mental health needs, subsidized food and housing, advanced student success and completion, and relieved student debts.

Moving into 2022, the vast majority of remaining HEERF grant dollars will be expended by colleges and universities as they continue to address the ongoing impact of the pandemic. There

is no doubt that these emergency funds have played a significant role in helping students and universities through the health and economic challenges brought about by COVID-19. The positive impact of these emergency investments demonstrates what is achievable when the federal government partners with colleges and universities to support critical public institutions and invest in the success of their students.

ENDNOTES

¹ Data collected for 196 APLU member systems and campuses from the [Education Stabilization Fund](#) database maintained by the U.S. Department of Education on February 14, 2022. Data represent expenditures through December 2021.

² In advance of the November 15, 2021 Congressional hearing on HEERF, APLU submitted a [letter](#) to House and Senate education committee leadership providing additional background on implementation.

³ In spring 2021, APLU released a [policy brief](#) that looked at the distribution of the first round of HEERF emergency grant aid to students, highlighting the variety of methodologies used by campuses and some of the distinct implementation challenges.

⁴ Institutional examples, data, and quotations were provided by APLU member institutions.

⁵ APLU [policy brief](#) estimating the financial toll of the pandemic on public research universities.

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