Emergency and Need-Based Aid for Student Success

FLORIDA COLLEGE ACCESS NETWORK

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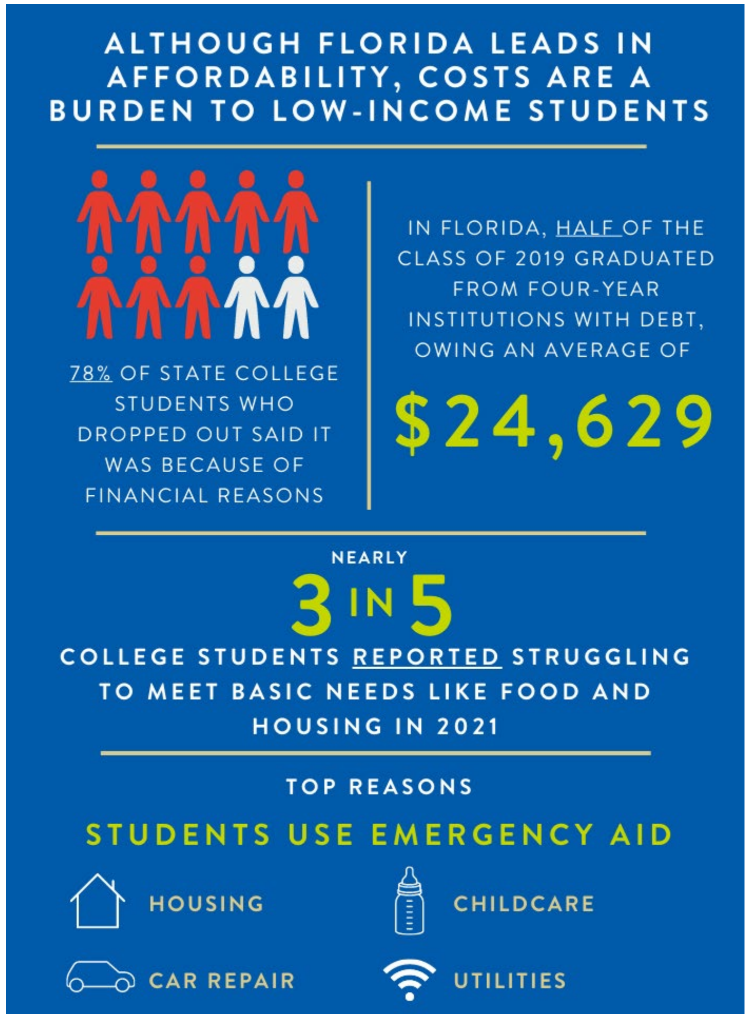
Overview of Need-based and Emergency-based aid in Florida

Helping Floridians complete high-quality degrees and certificates is a critical economic and strategic priority. Nearly 1 in 5 Floridians over 25 have some college experience but no degree. Yet 2 out of every 3 new jobs created in Florida by 2025 will require education or training beyond high school. To remain competitive, Florida will need more people with high-quality degrees and certificates.



While tuition at Florida's public colleges and universities is second-lowest in the country, college costs, which include things like transportation and textbooks, are still a great burden — especially for low-income families. And cost is one of the most often-cited barriers to students dropping out or stopping out of college.

While the pandemic exacerbated financial issues for many students, it also presented an opportunity to provide more flexible dollars to students to support college costs. Florida institutions of higher education gave at least half of federal aid assistance directly to students in the form of emergency grants and assistance.

Emergency aid (EA) s a critical college retention tool for supporting students who face economic shortfalls that might disrupt their college education. In contrast to other efforts to address students' basic needs, such as meal vouchers and gas cards, the dollars distributed by emergency grant programs can be used flexibly to meet students' specific needs and achieve their goals. There are different types of EA, including cash grants, loans, campus vouchers, food pantries, emergency housing, and restricted grants (like grocery gift cards), but emergency cash grants are cited as the most flexible tool.

The last several years have only highlighted the role need- and emergency-based aid play in student success, and many students across Florida shared that aid money was the only thing that helped them stay in college. Federal pandemic funding will expire in mid-2022, but the needs of students will not. We can build off of the institutional infrastructure federal funds have helped create to distribute state need- and emergency-based aid programs.

Barriers to Completion

While tuition is the most visible cost in higher education, it is not the only thing students must pay for when they decide to go to college. Students and their families are expected to also plan for the cost of fees, housing, technology, transportation, childcare, and textbooks, and many students experience unforeseen expenses that they may not be prepared to address. The average college student today is over 24 years old and works full- or part-time. There are more adult learners going to school and juggling multiple responsibilities that may get in the way of completion. Some of the largest financial barriers include:

Decreased buying power of federal need-based aid

- When the Pell Grant program was first passed, the maximum award covered 87% of tuition and fees at a four-year public institution. While the maximum award has since increased, Pell has not kept pace with increasing tuition costs. As a result, Pell now covers less than 30% of tuition and fees at a four-year public institution.
- Although Pell aid has risen to offset any increase in tuition since the 1980s, it remains insufficient to offset the large increase in living expenses for students today.

Institutional debt

- Low-income students may also quickly rack up institutional debt, such as unpaid balances for tuition, library fines, or parking fees, and are prevented from re-enrolling as a result. This is a common reason students stop out, and acts as a harder stop for students to return to school later in life.
- Roughly 6.6 million students are estimated to have stranded credits due to $15 billion in unpaid balances to colleges and universities, and if they attend a school that withholds transcripts as collateral for small unpaid balances, students may not be able to access credits they have earned.

Other outside factors

- A variety of interwoven factors affect whether students complete college. In a survey of community college non-returnees, only one in six said that the reason for not returning was school-related. Most students reported more than one reason for their reason for stopping out. For example, many students struggle to balance schoolwork with child care and work.
- The pandemic has exacerbated the web of outside factors that can stop students: many students struggle to pay for school if they or their parent lost their job, and/or struggle with health-related issues.

Promising Practices

Destination Graduation

Pre-pandemic, many colleges and universities had emergency aid (EA) programs in place, often funded by philanthropic or institutional dollars. A collaboration through UpliftED with Heart of Florida United Way and Seminole State College of Florida, Destination Graduation (DG) helps students stay in college by providing assistance with life needs, such as food and housing insecurity, utilities, transportation and child care. The program takes a comprehensive approach, providing timely referrals to community services and emergency aid for students facing immediate need. Many students are just one emergency away from financial instability that can take them out of school. DG steps in to fill that gap specifically for low-income, first-generation, and veteran students to overcome non-academic barriers to college completion.

Destination Graduation works differently than a typical financial aid office or food pantry. DG's primary purpose is to increase the graduation rates of low-income and veteran students attending Seminole State College, and its unique structure as a program outside of the college gives it the flexibility to utilize both the college's resources and other community resources. DG navigators are available on-campus, as well as through text, email, and video call to hear students' stories and ensure they can quickly access emergency funds or resources.

On average, DG gives students about $750 dollars in emergency aid for things like housing, utilities, childcare, and car repair, and nearly 80% of the students DG works with reenroll. DG believes it is a replicable program and provides resources on its website to help other communities or institutions that may be interested.

Recommendations

Expand holistic whole-community approaches to aid

As shown by the success of Destination Graduation**, community-led models of emergency aid with seamless connections** are proven to get more students to and through postsecondary education. More communities should establish linkages across campuses, while utilizing both core and nontraditional partners. Community models can also broaden emergency aid beyond an isolated grant and into a web of resources and available support across regions. Moving aid outside of the financial aid office also means the community can be more nimble, particularly when students' situations are time-sensitive emergencies.

Continue to prioritize efforts to decrease non-tuition costs

Florida leads the way in tuition affordability for the nation, but tuition is not the only cost of attending postsecondary education. While the state has effectively frozen tuition and fees, costs for items such as textbooks and course materials continue to increase. In Florida in 2019-20, the average cost for books and supplies was just under $1500, and nearly half of Florida students in said they took fewer courses because of textbook and material costs. To combat this, institutions have found ways to decrease the cost of course materials by offering subscription-based access to course materials and **expanding the usage of Open Educational Resources (OER)**. Additionally, legislation was passed this year to increase access to OER, which created a statewide database of free educational resources. Institutions can continue to lead the way by creating and broadening other initiatives that make college more affordable.

Scale a statewide initiative to support students

Although the pandemic put a spotlight on students' outside needs, they are not going away, and students will continue to need short-term assistance to stay in school and finish their degrees or credentials. Many institutions are leveraging their own dollars to provide emergency aid, but **Florida should consider creating a sustainable funding source as a component of need-based aid** – particularly at a time when costs of living in cities across Florida are rising. In North Carolina, community college students who face unforeseen financial emergencies have been able to access $1,000 Finish Line grants since 2018. In the first year, Finish Line grants helped more than 3,000 students remain on track to complete their degree or credential, at a cost of $2 million dollars. Because emergency aid allotments are typically one-time payments for students in crisis, the cost is not as high as a traditional financial aid program, but the impact is significant.