Community College Research Center
Elizabeth Ganga
ganga@tc.edu | 212-678-3394

How Community Colleges Used Federal COVID Funding, Where the Funding Succeeded, and What Happens Now

Surveys in Six States Fill In Blanks on Unprecedented Higher Education Funding

New York, June 11, 2024 — During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government made unprecedented investments in community colleges to keep colleges operating and address students' financial challenges so they could stay enrolled.

A new study finds that, despite the large infusion of funding, community colleges spent nearly all the relief they received and used it to address a variety of student and institutional needs. It also finds that the relief helped colleges quickly pivot to online instruction and address other student needs as they emerged, such as for mental health counseling.

But with the Higher Education Emergency Relief, or HEER, funding having expired on June 30, 2023, colleges are concerned about their ability to continue to provide funding to students in an emergency, and they're looking for other sources of funds to continue some programs.

"In many ways, the fact that HEER funds have ended make the study findings all the more important, as they point not only to the ongoing challenges students are facing but also to strategies that are worth continuing investing in moving forward to support student success," said Serena C. Klempin, research associate at the Community College Research Center (CCRC) and lead author of one of two new reports.

CCRC and the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) surveyed community colleges in six states for the Accelerating Recovery in Community Colleges (ARCC) Network, a federally funded network of research projects on how colleges are recovering from the pandemic. The survey of 265 colleges in California, Michigan, New York (State University of New York colleges only), Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas covered 43% of the nation's community college students. The survey sought to gather information on the pandemic recovery activities colleges implemented using the funds, colleges' perceptions of how successful funds were in addressing student and institutional needs during the pandemic, and colleges' views of unmet needs.

Two reports detail the survey findings:

- *Pandemic Relief Spending and Recovery Strategies: Findings From a Survey of Community Colleges in Six States*, by CCRC researchers, reports on all the findings from the six survey states.
- *How Did Pandemic Recovery Funding Support California Community Colleges?*, by researchers at the PPIC Higher Education Center, focuses on the California findings.

"The large infusion of federal funds provided colleges with an opportunity to experiment with and invest in strategies that they felt would most benefit students and institutions," said Olga Rodriguez, director of the PPIC Higher Education Center. “It was encouraging to find that students were the biggest beneficiaries of HEER investments and that colleges expected to continue offering supports aimed at improving student well-being and lowering the cost of attending college.”

The HEER funding totaled $25 billion for community colleges, half for direct aid to students and half for institutional expenses. Across all 976 community colleges in the U.S., colleges received an average of $9.9 million in student aid and $13.6 million in institutional aid.

From 2020 through 2023, across all colleges in the research sample, over 1.6 million students received aid through HEER funds. Colleges often targeted the aid to low-income students or used a combination of universal and targeted strategies for disbursing the funds to students.

How Colleges Spent HEER Funds

In addition to sending money directly to students, colleges used their institutional funds to invest in increasing safety protocols, to bolster their infrastructure to deliver instruction and services online, and to provide additional student aid to students with financial needs. The most frequently cited use was for expenses related to campus safety such as face masks and upgrades to air ventilation systems (92% of colleges), followed by technology hardware (88%), equipment and supplies (86%), distance learning supplies (78%), and faculty and staff training (78%), which often focused on how to use technology and online resources to deliver instruction and services.

The largest dollar amount went to cover lost revenue from tuition and fees, which helped colleges avoid laying off faculty and staff. Most colleges also used institutional aid to supplement their student aid by offering emergency grants to needy students and/or paying off student debt.

Over the years of the pandemic, the spending shifted. Expenditures related to campus safety and technology remained strong. But fewer colleges said they spent HEER funds on them over time, while the number of colleges that spent the funds to support students’ mental health increased in each of the three years, likely reflecting the toll the pandemic took on students’ mental health and an increased awareness of students’ mental health needs over the course of the pandemic.

Colleges perceived the use of HEER funds to be largely successful in helping both students and institutions manage the difficulties created by the pandemic, including by covering students’ expenses. More than 80% of colleges thought the funding was at least somewhat successful at keeping students enrolled and helping them graduate. Colleges in California perceived the most successful strategies for supporting students to be expanding supports and services such as academic advising and tutoring and improving affordability by lowering costs and providing emergency aid.

Colleges’ Concerns with the End of HEER Funds

Colleges used HEER funds both to fund existing services and to begin offering new ones based on needs that arose during the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, the majority of colleges already offered student aid, food pantries, and health and mental health services, but fewer than a third of colleges had services in place to provide technology hardware, high-speed internet, and housing assistance. These three areas recorded the largest increases in the proportion of colleges that did not offer such services before the pandemic but did so afterward.

Colleges' main concern about the end of HEER funding was that it would limit their ability to support students during an emergency. Their top priority for using future funding was additional student aid. Concerns about the end of HEER funding and priorities for future funding expose a continuing need for flexible resources to address students' financial needs.

A webinar on the findings of the two reports will be held on June 26 at 2 p.m. ET/11 a.m. PT.

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The Accelerating Recovery in Community Colleges (ARCC) Network brings together research teams from across the United States to explore strategies community colleges can use to bring back students who left during the COVID-19 pandemic, support their learning, and ensure they can succeed in the rapidly evolving post-pandemic economy. It is led by the Community College Research Center, Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research at the University of California, Davis, and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

The Community College Research Center studies community colleges because they provide critical access to postsecondary education and are uniquely positioned to promote equity and social mobility in the United States. Our mission is to conduct research that helps these institutions strengthen opportunities and improve outcomes for their students, particularly those from underserved populations.

The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) is a nonprofit think tank dedicated to informing and improving public policy in California through independent, objective, nonpartisan research on major economic, social, and political issues. PPIC does not take or support positions on any ballot measure or on any local, state, or federal legislation, nor does it endorse, support, or oppose any political parties or candidates for public office.

The research reported here was supported by the US Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences through Grants R305X220022 and R305B200017 to Teachers College, Columbia University. The California report was supported by the Sutton Family Fund and the Institute of Education Sciences Grant R305X220016 to the Regents of the University of California and subaward to the Public Policy Institute of California. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.