BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY:

Faculty-Run Emergency Aid for Students

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This guide provides information and resources for faculty at colleges and universities to set up and successfully run their own emergency aid programs, including information on the FAST Fund model as one successful example of how faculty-run programs work.

EMERGENCY AID MATTERS

Today's students need more support than they receive. Thanks to the new economics of college, costs are skyrocketing, financial aid is insufficient, and students are struggling to survive. Small, unexpected expenses create barriers to enrollment, persistence, and completion. One way faculty try to address these concerns is through emergency aid programs that provide resources rapidly to stop unplanned expenses from forcing students out of college.

Since 2017 the FAST Fund (Faculty and Students Together) has supported thirteen colleges with faculty-led emergency aid programs for students. It offers one model for consideration and is shared in the hopes of inspiring others.

WHY FACULTY ARE ESSENTIAL

Students who fall asleep in class, are unable to submit assignments, or rarely show up are often challenging for professors to educate. They represent an opportunity to make a big difference, a chance to do work that really matters. Many of these students are experiencing financial challenges that weigh them down.

Students see faculty daily. In fact, professors are probably the only college representative with whom students interact each day. Faculty-run emergency aid programs can function as a lifeline for students while campuses work on broader, institutional-level supports for students.

When a college financial aid office administers emergency aid, it runs into rules and restrictions faculty-run programs can often avoid. Done properly, this sort of emergency support can take the place of a gift from a friend or family member economically-challenged students often cannot obtain. Just as a wealthier parent might step in to fix their student's car, a faculty member can offer support for a single mom who lacks such help.

The FAST Fund: Faculty and Students Together

The FAST Fund began in 2016 with the publication of Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab's book *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*. *Paying the Price* documents the high price students and their families pay for college in painstaking detail. Many of these students land in debt with nothing to show for it; *this* was a call to action.

Book royalties, speaking fees, other honoraria, and, eventually, prizes garnered for *Paying the Price* helped Sara launch the FAST Fund. But it took a national village to grow and sustain it. When the Grawemeyer Award in Education was bestowed on the book in 2017, Sara donated the $100,000 prize via a matching campaign. In just one month, hundreds of people from around the nation contributed, raising another $33,000.

The FAST Fund gives money to professors and they give it to students. Professors are asked to abide by four simple evidence-based principles:

1. Help students. Put your care for them front and center.
2. Don't ask students to do prohibitive paperwork. This includes *not* requiring the FAFSA, or asking them to "prove" their need, grades, or other requirements.
3. Move quickly. Make a decision without imposing a waiting period.
4. Just give. No need to name the donor, thank the Fund, or file a lot of paperwork.

FAST Fund recipients include professors at these and many other institutions:

- Bunker Hill Community College
- California State University-Long Beach
- Estrella Mountain Community College
- Milwaukee Area Technical College
- Community College of Philadelphia

FAST Fund successes include:

- Payment of a $300 license fee that allowed a student to secure an early childhood administrator credential.
- Provision of $345 for a student experiencing homelessness to secure housing and food.
- Paying a $300 licensing fee so a student could start their work in early childhood education.

For more information visit thefastfund.org.

HOW EFFECTIVE EMERGENCY AID LOOKS

Emergency aid programs help keep life's challenges from impeding students' academic success. They also show faculty *care* about their students' success. This is a critical element in a "culture of caring" as implemented by institutions like Amarillo College. This is why Dean of Learner Support and Transitions at Western Technical College, Chad Dull, advocated for faculty-run funds:

> *"Students are people first, people with rich, full lives. Why should we require people to tell difficult stories multiple times to get what they need? Faculty are the front lines and the primary relationship owners; help should come directly through those relationships."*

Following a few basic principles will help make the program effective:

- **Keep it simple.** Emergency aid needs to be delivered fast to be meaningful for students. Aim for no more than a 48-hour turnaround from application to distribution.
- **Remember: Students are humans first.** Help delivered with care is especially meaningful. All outreach, communications, paperwork, and processes should be human-centered.
- **Minimize barriers**. Be sure the eligibility criteria are clear and as easy to meet as possible. Unnecessary hurdles harm students.
- **Make students aware.** Advertise widely, use an application process open to any student, and ensure undocumented students are aware the program is open to them, too.
- **Reach for equity.** in reviewing cases and making determinations, consider if the student has access to other grant resources (perhaps based on academic merit) and help them pursue those instead, saving the emergency grant for students lacking similar advantages.
- **Provide additional resources.** Cash aid is important but should not be given alone. Students should get additional information and resources in areas such as food, housing, benefits access, childcare, FEMA or other emergency relief programs and counseling.

GETTING STARTED

FUNDRAISING

Maintaining a steady flow of funding is critical to the sustainability of any emergency aid program. Here are some examples of ways FAST Fund colleges and other programs have devised ways to raise money.

- At Milwaukee Area Technical College, a summer concert, Valentine's Day gala, and silent auction were used to raise funds.
- The first FAST Fund programs raised much of the seed funding through a cash match from a major donor. A large (nearly $100,000) donation was offered as a matching challenge for other donors. This approach leveraged the power of a single donation to increase smaller gifts.

A key component of developing sustainable funding is collecting data and stories to demonstrate the impact of your emergency aid program. This should be done both quantitatively (dollars allocated, student retention data), and qualitatively (student stories) to create a clear and exciting picture of how contributing to the FAST Fund directly contributes to student success.

To receive funds, you will need to obtain 501(c)3 nonprofit status. The FAST Fund participating colleges receive this support from its parent organization, Believe in Students. You could locate a community nonprofit to serve as your fund's fiscal sponsor or see if your college has a foundation willing to help. Confer with your colleagues to see if they know of a church, local food bank, United Way, or other organization that might help. This is typically faster and simpler than establishing a new non-profit. You can also create your own non-profit to administer the funds by establishing a 501(c)3 organization.

ESTABLISHING AN APPLICATION PROCESS

Ask students to provide basic information. This can include but is not limited to:

- Students' contact information and program
- Students' emergency need(s)
- Student ID
- GPA
- Whether or not they receive financial aid
- A faculty reference
- A description of the need
- Some form of verification for the cost (receipt, invoice, etc.).

This allows the emergency fund to accurately assess the need, determine what other resources the student can access and process the request with the goal of covering the students' emergency need within 48 hours. Information about GPA or financial aid eligibility should only be used to help determine if the student is eligible for *additional* aid beyond that which the emergency aid fund can provide.

Many college funds make eligibility dependent on federal financial aid participation. The FAST Fund does not, and we recommend against it. There may be good reasons a student is not receiving federal financial aid. They may have reached the end of their lifetime eligibility. Alternatively, their parents may not be paying for their college education but make too much for their dependent student to qualify for federal financial aid.

For more detailed information on creating the application process for an emergency aid program, including a sample application, we suggest you look at Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab and Clare Cady's *Distributing Emergency Aid to College Students: Recommendations and Sample Distribution Protocol.* You may also want to look at the application form created by the FAST fund at Milwaukee Area Technical College.

ASSESSING STUDENT NEED

The simpler the need criterion the faster the student will receive funding. The simplest way to determine if a student is eligible for emergency is to apply the following criterion:

- Can the student demonstrate need? This can be done through a receipt, invoice, eviction notice, or clear description of their situation (in the case of a student experiencing homelessness).
- Is the need immediate? Does the students' need present a direct and timely threat to their ability to meet their basic needs?
- Will this help the student to continue their studies?
- Is the student enrolled at the school, or will they enroll as a result of the funding being provided?

Determine what expenses you can cover with your emergency aid programs. Create broad guidelines to allocate funding to avoid excluding students with unique needs. The broadest guideline would be that an emergency expense can be covered if the non-payment of that expense would lead to the student not enrolling in school or dropping out.

DISTRIBUTING FUNDS

There are many ways the funding can leveraged to cover student needs. All emergency aid programs must develop a clear process for payment or allocation of funds. This can include a number of methods like:

- Providing funds to the student directly in the form of cash or a check.
- Purchasing or paying for the expense(s) with a debit card tied to a bank account.
- Allowing for invoicing for services directly from vendors (like mechanics, utility companies, or landlords) with checks cut to cover funds.
- Payment directly to the school to cover fees, services, tuition, etc.

In all cases the emergency aid fund should document the situation and the payment made. Whenever possible ensure follow-up with the student to confirm the need was met, see if the student has any other needs, and collect information from the student about aid impact.

COORDINATION AND COOPERATION

Providing referrals and additional resource options helps increase the power of your emergency aid, providing students with an even better chance at success. Connecting students to public benefits programs, additional scholarship programs, helping them file FAFSAs (if they haven't but can), and making referrals to local organizations and businesses can provide longer term support for students in need. These additional resources can ensure that:

- Students receive the most assistance possible
- The emergency aid fund maximizes and stretches its dollars
- Students are aware of all the campus' available resources
- Students are not denied college emergency funds because they didn't provide required information or know who to contact

Forging connections and collaborations can create fast and easy ways to administer emergency aid dollars. For example, by developing a relationship with a local mechanic you can send students who apply for car repair assistance to that business. The mechanic can fix the students' vehicle quickly and invoice directly. This creates simple payment pathways for using emergency aid and may result in opportunities for discounts resulting from partnering with and supporting local business.

We recognize that faculty often have little time to develop the sorts of partnerships and coordination networks we describe here. We suggest the starting point for any such efforts be pre-existing professional and personal relationships with businesses and people who may be able to support your emergency aid program. When setting up the FAST Fund at Milwaukee

Area Technical College, Emeritus Professor of Economics, Michael Rosen, turned to faculty referrals to help build connections:

> *"I've generally asked faculty members for resource references. For example, an auto tech faculty referred me to a tire place where I have developed a relationship"*

NOW IS THE TIME

With a growing focus on getting students to completion and heightened concern around food and housing security, faculty have many reasons to add emergency aid to their set of tools for keeping students engaged. We hope we've inspired you to start or join a program and care for your students like this!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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