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BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: How Student-Led Emergency Aid Came to the Rescue During the Pandemic

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When the pandemic struck in March 2020 and the City College of San Francisco (CCSF) had to close, students lost access to food pantries, laptops, WiFi, printing, jobs, and much more. They quickly began to face food and housing insecurities while trying to finish out the semester remotely. A student told us, “My family stopped receiving income and we were not able to pay for bills such as dentist, rent and others.”

One of the first responders in this crisis was a small student-led organization: Students Making A Change (SMAC). We are members of SMAC—there are 10 members in total. Together we are committed to improving student equity at CCSF and across California through advocacy and organizing. Recognizing the challenge facing students, our organization quickly fielded an online survey asking students what resources they most needed. The answer was clear: money was the top priority.

So SMAC began fundraising. Marjorie Blen led the effort, working with Aliya Chisti of the Free City College Program. We were successful: the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth, and Families issued SMAC a \$300,000 emergency grant. Suddenly, for the first time ever, we were about to operate a new emergency aid program— in the middle of a pandemic. This brief describes what happened next.

A PROGRAM FOCUSED ON EQUITY GOALS

Direct Emergency Financial Relief Initiative kicked off at the start of July. Over the next month, we distributed \$500 in direct cash aid to 561 low-income CCSF students who were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic but left out of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

Our mission seemed simple: get money into the hands of the *right students* (students that needed it most) *as quickly as possible*. We designed an application with [26 simple questions](#) that could be completed in 10 minutes or less. After filling out an application, a student could expect a reply within 5-10 days. To verify their enrollment, students also had to provide their school email, a screenshot of their student ID, and an unofficial transcript. Upon receiving an award letter in their email, students could expect their cash aid to

quickly follow. If a student was eligible for the grant but hadn't submitted all of the necessary documentation they received an email regarding pending paperwork. Additionally, we compiled a list of these pending students to give to the retention program staff. Staff from the retention program emailed and called students to see if they had questions or required assistance with enrollment.

Students could receive their money by check, Venmo, Paypal, or gift card. This allowed all students to receive money easily by eliminating any potential barriers such as not having a bank account, a license, citizenship status, a smart phone, etc. However, most students received checks because Venmo and Paypal limit the number of transactions one can process per week.

OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATIONS

We did two major rounds of outreach and distribution. The first round of outreach centered on Black and Latinx students, since data shows that those populations are met with the greatest barriers to receiving aid. Our second round of outreach was broader, allowing us to reach other communities of color along with white students that were disenfranchised due to income, country of origin, involvement in the justice or foster care system, etc.

To get the message about the program out to students, we posted videos on social media announcing the program and held an Instagram Live to explain it in more detail. We also posted [online flyers](#) to all our social media accounts.

As we designed the outreach materials, we focused on the "AHUY method": Agitate, Hope, Urgency, You. Our flyer and messaging was intended to agitate (Are you a continuing CCSF student that was excluded from the CARES Act?), bring hope (Students Making A Change wants to help! Apply for \$500), promote urgency (limited grants available), and focus on you (You do not want to miss out, go to our [website](#) to apply and learn more about the grant).

We also encouraged grant recipients to access resources that would help them with their ongoing studies at CCSF. We created a streamlined website dedicated to connecting students with campus support services as well as a number of short instructive videos with eye-catching titles.



Streamline website to support students during COVID-19



In our effort to help reduce anxiety, we are offering connections to essential resources.

studentsmakingchange.org/resources

Streamline website connecting students with campus support services



Please schedule an appointment with one of these great people at CCSF who can support you:

studentsmakingchange.org/ccsfsupport

Short instructive videos with eye-catching titles



Get more money! Watch [this short video](#) about applying for scholarships.

Get your classes! Watch [this short video](#) about how to use assist.org.

Finish English and Math classes at CCSF in one year! Watch [this short video](#) about the law that allows you to do this.

IMPACT

We succeeded in achieving our goals. All of the 561 grants went to students who did not receive aid from the CARES Act: including undocumented students, students with DACA status, citizens who have not completed a federal financial aid application, non-citizens, former foster-care youth, international students, and justice-impacted students. Fully 94% of the recipients were students of color: 42% were Asian, 33% were Latinx, and 11% were African American. Eighty percent of recipients reported an income of \$15,000 or less. One in three recipients was a parenting student, and 76% was a first-generation college student. Fully 80% of the recipients said that they were experiencing at least one of the following challenges:

- I do not have a permanent place to stay
- I am currently in an unsafe living situation
- I am experiencing difficulty obtaining enough food for myself and/or my family
- I have expenses I am currently unsure how I will cover
- I do not have the resources I need in order to take my classes
- I lost my financial aid or scholarship
- I am a student commuting from outside of San Francisco
- I have been priced out of living in the Bay Area

Each of these students received \$500 in the summer following the onset of the pandemic to support essentials such as groceries, rent and utilities, medical bills, and educational costs, amongst others. Students informed us that financial insecurity was affecting their physical, mental, and emotional health. These grants provided some mental relief for students as they were able to meet their basic needs for that month. Additionally, students commented that they felt supported, loved, and seen by receiving this cash aid. It gave them hope and made them feel that they weren't alone. You can read many student testimonials [here](#).



I work in the restaurant industry and because of that I have been struggling to pay rent and food. I've been experiencing panic attacks and it's really bad having those sensations. Most of my family are not working so I have had to help them financially but all my savings that I had are gone. This financial support will help me to pay my rent and that way I will have some relief."

Students also began to build or rebuild trusting relationships with college support staff/systems. With the campus being closed many students felt disconnected from their college community and no longer knew where to go for support or assistance. By using the Direct Emergency Financial Relief Initiative as an engagement strategy, students were both given clear, accessible information about how to re-engage and were incentivized to do so. This effort has resulted in hundreds of students re-enrolling at CCSF for fall semester 2020 – continuing their educational journey towards greater financial security for themselves and their families.

WHAT MATTERED MOST: TRUST, CONNECTION, ENGAGEMENT

As we think about the work we did together, we notice that several aspects were intentional and strategic. Three elements in particular helped us succeed.

- 1. We engaged trusted partners and allies:** We began by partnering with CCSF's retention programs as they serve historically underserved equity populations including undocumented students, low-income students, and students of color. We then connected to additional campus programs that served a broader group of students. We asked that programs: (1) inform their students about the \$500 grant by phone and emails; (2) support their students with applying to the grant; and (3) support their students with enrolling in CCSF for Fall 2020 to meet the grant requirement. These partnerships were fruitful because SMAC has cultivated and maintained relationships with these programs over many years. We also partnered with Coleman Advocates for administrative support so that the workload would be manageable.

- 2. We focused on personal connections:** We held Zoom meetings that included video tutorials clearly laying out each step of the application process and allowed students to ask questions. Retention program coordinators participated in the Zoom sessions and were the primary contact inviting students to the sessions. Students had a trusting relationship with the coordinators. This seemed to be an essential element facilitating their willingness to learn more about and eventually apply for the emergency grant.
- 3. We leverage direct aid as an engagement strategy:** We knew that in addition to a one-time grant of \$500, CCSF students would need tangible on-going support to get them through the pandemic and the long-lasting future repercussions of the pandemic. Students approved for cash aid had to complete an engagement requirement along with receiving their \$500. Options included scheduling a counseling appointment, scheduling an appointment to create an educational plan, or attending a Zoom event with the retention program. The program staff had seen a significant drop in student engagement after in-person programming had ended as a result of COVID-19. Retention program staff said that student involvement significantly improved thanks to this grant program requirement – new and former students used their services to enroll in the fall 2020 semester as well as connect to long-term support options. Students felt new levels of support during this challenging time and strengthened trusting relationships that they will be able to turn to in the future.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR SMAC

Across California, SMAC is advocating to increase financial aid to cover the total cost of community college beyond tuition and fees such as food, housing, health care and other basic needs. Locally we are currently [asking](#) City College of San Francisco to match our efforts in distributing over \$300,000 worth of basic needs support to students. How can you help? SMAC is asking foundations, community colleges, and community members to [donate](#) to SMAC's Direct Emergency Financial Aid Relief program. Students need your help right now— any contribution helps.

AUTHORS

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