

Transcription for

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 1: DISTRIBUTING \$6.3 BILLION IN EMERGENCY AID FOR STUDENTS

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THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 1: DISTRIBUTING \$6.3 BILLION IN EMERGENCY AID FOR STUDENTS

PAUL FAIN (HOST)

DAVID BAIME

AMELIA PARNELL

18:49

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NARRATOR: Support for this podcast is provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is committed to preserving and expanding educational opportunity for today's students. Now more than ever.

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PAUL FAIN: Welcome to the Key with IHE. I'm Paul Fain, the host, transmitting to your home from my basement in Washington, DC. I hope you all are doing well.

In this episode, the first on the Key, we're discussing the nearly \$6.3 billion Congress appropriated as emergency aid for college students whose lives and educations have been disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic. For context, that amount is nearly a quarter of what the federal government spends on Pell Grants each year. The Education Department began distributing the aid to colleges on April 9th. College officials right now are scrambling to figure out how and to whom to distribute the aid and how to do it very quickly.

To help us make sense of this fast-moving story, I spoke with David Baime, the American Association of Community Colleges senior vice president for government relations and policy analysis, who's been tracking the policy issues around the aid's distribution. I also interviewed Amelia Parnell, vice president for research and policy at NASPA, Student Affairs in Higher Education. Dr. Parnell is an expert on student success, who's written about emergency aid since the practice first emerged a few years ago. Now on to the conversation...

David Baime, thanks for being with us.

DAVID BAIME: Thanks for having me.

PAUL FAIN: So, \$14 billion for higher education, roughly \$6.26 billion last week targeted to students through emergency aid... Obviously, that's a lot of money and trying to deal with a lot of need out there. What do you see as the kind of overarching goal that Congress wanted to serve with that first allotment for emergency aid and how do you see colleges starting to use it?

DAVID BAIME: Yeah, well, as listeners will know, the first portion of the Higher Education Emergency Fund is now available to institutions to provide directly to their students. The institutions have responded very quickly in developing policies for disseminating the money, although they do have a year to allocate it to their students. And at this point, there are a lot of conversations occurring both within the colleges and between the colleges about, you know, how to best meet the needs of students. I think, you know, Congress, when they provided these funds was very much focused on the plight of students who've had their economic lives upended as well as their family lives changed very much.

And, of course, community colleges have the highest percentage of students in any sector who are working, and so the employment situation impacts the community colleges disproportionately. And, you know, our students in many cases are the workers in the service industries that have lost their positions, you know, within the last few weeks. And so I think Congress was aware of that. It appropriately placed a strong emphasis on financial assistance for students, and also, I think, very wisely provided a substantial degree of flexibility to campuses in determining which students and which amounts students should receive under the emergency grant portion of the formula grants.

PAUL FAIN: So what are some of the questions... I know, this is a lot of money and a lot of complexity here, but what are some of the questions you're hearing most from your members about what they

need to know to begin getting that money into the hands of students who need it most?

DAVID BAIME: Secretary DeVos' guidance to institutions did talk about allocating the funds on the basis of financial need of students, recommended providing funding that didn't exceed the current Pell Grant maximum. So that gives colleges a little bit of some guideposts of ways to think about allocating the money.

The element of financial need, however, and allocating along those lines does come into some conflict with trying to distribute funds as quickly as possible and efficiently without going through a kind of a fine-grained student-by-student analysis of where students are as a result of, you know, the radical changes in the economy, and, again, in their own personal situations.

So I think one of the issues that colleges are confronting is, do I try to sift through the entire student body, or at least make an attempt to try to prioritize in terms of student financial need solely or primarily, or do I look more across the board into certain categories of students, and provide more blanket kinds of aid amounts to students as we do this?

And also, of course, a whole 'nother set of questions is, setting aside the whole financial perspective, is which types of programs students should receive assistance for and which even categories of students themselves. Should it be noncredit students, which we believe can be served with this funding, which is a high priority of community colleges and a big part of what our institutions do, and other students as well?

PAUL FAIN: Is there a general consensus on that, on some of those tough questions, or are you hearing a wide range of takes from community colleges and systems out there?

DAVID BAIME: I think that at this point there's a sense that the federal government really wants institutions to use their best judgment about who is most in need of support, and so I think that colleges are thinking that they are going to be backed by the government whatever decisions they make. And so I think they're being more ambitious maybe and more feeling less the specter of being, you know, held in some way, sanctioned for making misjudgments about their use of the funds.

PAUL FAIN: I would think on those campuses it wasn't like they had a lot of resources to burn. The

administrative piece of doing this has just got to be an enormous challenge. And we're talking days and weeks here to try to get the money out, correct?

DAVID BAIME: Yeah, the colleges felt a tremendous interest and enthusiasm about making these funds available to their students, but also the guidance that the Department provided did recommend that institutions think about the fact that there are that students are going to be impacted by the pandemic in the weeks and months to come, and that, hopefully, students will stay enrolled. After all, that's the reason to be providing this support in the first place. And so the institutions need to do some planning about allocating these funds, you know, over time and not just making all of it available immediately. Of course, we're very much hoping there will be additional assistance provided. We're advocating for that, but in the meantime, there needs to be, you know, a little bit of foresight about how these funds might roll out over time.

PAUL FAIN: Now I know states are requesting a lot of assistance right now. I know there's talk about a jobs bill, a lot of action on Capitol Hill. What do you think the odds are of more aid specifically targeted to students through emergency aid? Is that something that you see likely to be more coming?

DAVID BAIME: I think there's pretty good support for it. I think that Congress has made it clear that they don't simply want to support institutions, as essential as institutions are, and as true as it is, if you don't have a good institution and a college to offer programs to students, then you don't have any students.

But I think that Congress is also, as I mentioned, you know, very much making student needs the priority. Congress is also concerned about, of course, former students who have student debts and what the current economic situation means for them. So I expect that Congress will provide additional support for institutions because the case for it is so compelling. But I also think, in the process of doing that, that they are going to want to continue making sure that students can finance their educations.

And then, of course, from the community college perspective, we are asking the Congress to provide support for job training programs to help address the inevitable need on both the part of the employers and people who've lost their jobs to get new skill sets in order to reintegrate into the economy. Of course, it's impossible to tell at this early point, you know, how things are going to be different, but, essentially, everybody who takes a look at what's happened over just the last month in terms of the jobs situation, expects that we will have a very different type of economy, certainly many different businesses operating in different ways when we come out of the end of this pandemic. And, of course, as we all know, unfortunately, this is not going to be over in a very short order. You can guess about how

long, but that, you know, there are going to be changes in behaviors that are going to be occurring over a number of months.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. Well, David, thank you very much for taking time. I know time is hard to find these days, so, much appreciated that you took some to talk to us and our listeners. And keep in touch.

DAVID BAIME: Thanks again, Paul. Be well.

PAUL FAIN: All right, next up, Amelia Parnell... Please stay tuned.

I'm here with Amelia Parnell. Dr. Parnell, thank so much for your time.

AMELIA PARNELL: Sure.

PAUL FAIN: So you've been studying emergency aid for a while. Can you talk about how the practice kind of evolved, where things stand, how the industry really came to use emergency aid, and kind of at what scale?

AMELIA PARNELL: Sure. I would say the good news amid all of these challenging issues is that emergency aid is a topic that many campuses have been addressing for years. And so NASPA kind of got into the conversation around 2016, when we did a landscape analysis and found about 500 campuses based on a simple definition that said that they actually provide some type of emergency aid. And so from there, there have been a lot of other researchers, a lot of other scholars who've written about it, a lot of other campuses that have tried to actually deploy these resources. And so I gladly say good news in that kind of the curtain got pulled back. What used to be a practice that probably wasn't as well communicated or advertised for a lot of different reasons now is kind of commonplace. It's not uncommon to have a campus say that they provide those resources, so that's actually good.

I think that what we surfaced four years ago are some of the same challenges that we would probably see some campuses today experience, which is that the need probably still outpaces the supply of aid available. And I think there are still some challenges around definitions for those who want those to

describe what actually counts as an emergency now.

PAUL FAIN: What does count as emergency aid, generally?

AMELIA PARNELL: I think , while there's no central definition, most campuses would say that if a student is experiencing something that's largely going to impact or impede their ability to continue on at the campus is worth the discussion. Now I think the framing around if a student lost their cell phone versus if they didn't have food, that's the easy one. Some would say, what's a short-term emergency versus something that's more persistent or long term. But the bottom line is, in these current times, if it's something that significantly impeding a student's ability to persist, we would say that's one of the conversations about emergency aid.

PAUL FAIN: What are some of the dollar amounts that you see most common? I mean, I think the Department put a recommended cap on the Pell, which would be a large amount of emergency aid relatively, but...

AMELIA PARNELL: Right.

PAUL FAIN: What... I know it can be just a few hundred dollars, the difference between a student stopping out or not.

AMELIA PARNELL: Oh, absolutely. I'd say that, based on the research I've seen, even up to today, most campuses would probably say it falls in the range of somewhere around a few hundred dollars. I don't know that I've seen very many that exceed about \$1000 or \$1500. But depending on the emergency, it could get to be that much. But on most occasions, it's usually somewhere around \$400 or \$500.

PAUL FAIN: So this is a different situation for everybody in every way. You've got more than \$6 billion from the feds, a burning need to distribute it quickly, if the student's institution is scrambling to do that. What are you hearing from the field? You know, we're talking about in the last week too, so I know this is just happening now.

AMELIA PARNELL: Yeah. I think we're hearing the same types of emergency needs. Many of them relate to personal things--food, shelter. There are a lot of students who had to be displaced from the residence hall. And not all of them had a solid place to go back and call home, or a place that they can live until their campus returns to in-person type operations, so temporary displacement, that could be a type of need. Many students who are now living in spaces that are more remote and don't have WiFi access or access to stable internet, those are concerns. And they might not seem immediately like an emergency, but they are, because if you can't get access to your courses, you can't take the classes--that, of course, would hinder your ability to progress in the major. So a lot of those areas I would say.

Within probably two weeks, so before a lot of this happened, students were still actually leaving the campuses, a lot of campuses were providing emergency aid resources, like flights home, ability to get students from the campus to another location... So, I think it kind of covers a range of issues and types of items that students would need. But those would probably be close to the top.

PAUL FAIN: Yeah, you know, when you talk about helping students get home, I know there's been a lot debate about whether or not colleges can use this new allocation from the feds to reimburse some of those previous expenditures. As colleges are scrambling to make these decisions, to determine who should get aid and whether they can count some of that previous allocations, what do you recommend? I mean, what are you hearing as well? Those are tough decisions.

AMELIA PARNELL: That is a tough decision. And I don't know that I've heard very many campuses say that looking to get the aid to kind of reimburse themselves for what they've already spent. But I do think this probably is a case of the overall financial picture for most campuses. Some campuses that had the resources on hand and could do that, might not pursue that because they actually are not as much in a dire situation as some campuses are really are going to facing some really tough challenges financially. So I don't know that it's a question of should you or should you not, but I think instead it's probably a matter of looking at all the variables of how you might disburse aid for the long term, knowing that none of us really are sure about when the campus will come back online, if it will some time in the fall or some point later. If it were me, I might not use all the resources to reimburse expenses already made, but instead to look forward and say how many students going forward might still be in an emergency condition, how might we serve them for the longer term.

PAUL FAIN: And that all makes sense. You know, I wonder about trying to make a decision quickly while also thinking about the long term--not easy, particularly for, you know, community colleges and other resource-starved institutions. Everybody's struggling with resources now. How do you balance that, that kind of short-term need to get aid out quickly versus being really strategic?

AMELIA PARNELL: Oh, yeah. In that case, let me clarify my previous remark. When I say longer term, I don't mean months, I mean not worrying about reimbursing the dollars already spent, but instead, thinking about the students who will need something in the next few weeks, which feels like a longer term. I certainly wouldn't suggest that any campus keep their resources on hand for months ahead, because that's just too long.

I think what we've seen from most of the campuses we've talked to in NASPA is that they've said that they've been able to get the aid out quickly, and that's most essential. So I would say, if we know that there will be some students probably in the next two weeks that need aid, definitely, I would be looking forward, as opposed to trying to reimburse, you know, expenses from the campus.

Now, I don't want to make any of my campus friends angry, that would say, hey, we spent a whole lot of money, we need to get some of that back. But I think knowing that we have so much uncertainty, and the longer students are away from campus and still living in an environment that's very different, those who have the most need will continue to have some challenges. And I think that campuses thinking very proactively about that would serve them well.

PAUL FAIN: As an expert who's studied emergency aid for a while, any best practices or specific institutions that do pretty interesting things you might encourage folks to look at in these challenging times?

AMELIA PARNELL: Well, one of my favorites is still Saint John's University, and I think their ability to do this... Speaking of timing, it's a great example, so they had, I mean, a huge amount of demand for emergency aid. And they were able to mobilize resources and get a lot of contributions, and some significant organization, and turn most of those requests for emergency aid around within 48 hours. And so I don't know that that's... I mean, that's a pretty high bar, but I would say a lot of other campuses, if they have the capacity to, even in strained conditions, to turn around--by turn around, I mean fulfill an emergency aid request quickly--that is tremendous for a student who's out there, you know, really, really struggling.

I say the second, which is probably a little bit more strategic but so very important, is communication is critical, you know, knowing that students can't physically be there to knock on someone's door or in most cases pick up the phone and call someone, might get some automated messages, the extent to

which campuses can make the process clear and the parameters around what they have to do very, very clearly understood would be fantastic for students.

So there are lot of best practices, I think, that we would probably highlight from 2016--the use of technology, communication, adequate fundraising, and thing like that. But the two to me that I think still rise to the top in this current situation would be the timing of the aid and getting it out as smoothly and quickly as possible, and the second, communicating well what needs to be done and who to reach out to.

PAUL FAIN: Timing has changed for everybody these days. Planning in months is impossible, as you said earlier.

AMELIA PARNELL: Yeah.

PAUL FAIN: Well, Dr. Parnell, I've learned a lot here. I hope it's really helpful for our readers as well, and I appreciate your time.

AMELIA PARNELL: Thank you very much.

PAUL FAIN: That's a wrap for Episode 1 of the Key. Hope you'll join us next time as we discuss a federal jobs bill and what that might mean for post-secondary education. Catch you next time.

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