



California
Community
Colleges



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Emergency Assistance

A Toolkit for California Community Colleges

June 2025

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Emergency Assistance: A Toolkit for California Community Colleges

June 2025

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Background and Purpose

In the last five years, the use of emergency financial assistance (EA), also known as emergency aid or microgrants, has surged due to federal funding¹ made available to higher education institutions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. EA provides students experiencing life emergencies with small amounts of financial support to address their immediate need, typically without affecting their overall financial aid package.

Although federal funding has recently been exhausted, college students in California continue to struggle with financial challenges. Two thirds of students attending one of 88 California community colleges experienced at least one type of basic need insecurity, such as food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness.² Moreover, students who are traditionally underserved (e.g., foster care-involved, parenting students, students with a disability) experience basic need insecurity at disproportionately high rates. Unfortunately, this high level of basic needs insecurity among California community colleges students means that relatively small, unexpected life occurrences can threaten the ability of these

students to remain enrolled in college and reach their educational goals. A recent national survey of undergraduates has found that about half of undergraduates would have trouble obtaining \$500 in cash or credit to meet an unexpected financial need.³

Emergency Assistance in California: Timeline

2020: COVID Higher Education Emergency Relief (HEER) funds were provided to institutions of higher education to address student needs and retention. Part of these funds went toward supporting students' immediate, emergency financial needs due to the pandemic, such as those arising from pandemic-related job loss or housing insecurity.

2021: Assembly Bill 132 provided \$100 million to establish Basic Needs Centers at each California community college.

2023: Budget Act of 2023 allocated \$43.5 million annually to the California community colleges to support **Basic Needs** staff, who collaborate with offices and programs across their campuses to provide **emergency assistance** to students.

What Is “Emergency Assistance?”

Emergency financial assistance (EA) encompasses both monetary and nonmonetary aid for students experiencing financial shocks or crises that threaten their ability to stay enrolled in college. In this Toolkit, we use “assistance” and “aid” interchangeably. Considerations offered in this toolkit focus on EA in the form of unrestricted or restricted grants, but we acknowledge that aid may also be provided by way of emergency loans and nonmonetary forms for support. The goal of EA is student retention: helping students to remain enrolled and complete their degree, certificate, or transfer requirements, and ultimately to realize their postsecondary education objectives.

When financial emergencies occur, college students often need to pause or stop attending college to work more hours, tend to family members in need, or use their resources to address the immediate situation. More than 50% of students who stop out of college state that financial reasons were a leading cause.⁴ Once students stop attending college, it can be difficult to get back on track. Only about one in 10 students who recently stopped out of college re-enrolled within two years.⁵

College and universities nationwide have addressed these needs by providing EA to support students dealing with a one-time or short-term financial hardship, allowing them to remain enrolled in their courses and complete their educations. See page 4 for information about studies of EA.

Purpose of This Toolkit

The purpose of this Toolkit is to provide guidance and resources to college leaders, staff, and administrators on various aspects of implementation of EA to strengthen the provision of aid to students who need it.

The **Chancellor’s Office** recently released a [Basic Needs Toolkit](#) sharing best practices with California community colleges, which includes a brief section on Emergency Aid programs. Examples of college emergency grant programs:

[Los Rios Colleges Foundation - Student Emergency Fund Grants](#)

[Laney College Emergency Grant Program:](#)
[Santa Barbara City College Student Emergency Fund](#)

Considerations offered in this Toolkit are based on review of existing studies, resources, and literature; descriptive EA data, including system-wide data and data specific to California’s community colleges; and input from college students and staff about their recent experiences with EA.⁶

Note: Hyperlinks provided in this Toolkit are active as of the time of this writing: June 2025.

The Toolkit offers guidance structured around five key components of EA, described in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1. Key Components of Emergency Assistance

<u>Infrastructure</u>	<u>Marketing</u>	<u>Application</u>	<u>Awarding</u>	<u>Distribution</u>
Types of funding, administrative structures, staffing, and tracking systems that promote implementation of EA.	Effective approaches to dissemination of information about EA, and types of outlets through which to market information to students and staff.	Application forms and processes, eligibility information, and <u>an</u> approach to working with students during the application process.	Decisions about EA awards, based on a range of factors, and communication about decisions.	Timing and types of disbursements of EA funds or distribution of EA resources.

Studies on Emergency Assistance

Use of Emergency Financial Assistance by Colleges and Students

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a landscape study on EA programs found that more than half of postsecondary institutions offered financial support to students experiencing hardship, and that some have done so for multiple years.⁷ This study also found that the sources of funding for these programs primarily came from foundations and individual donors. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, federal funding (known as the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund [HEERF]) and state funding became critical sources of funding to support students experiencing financial crises. However, federal funding has ended and postsecondary institutions will likely revert to relying on funds provided by states, foundations, and donors.

Few students used EA prior to the pandemic due to resource constraints.⁸ However, according to a 2022 survey of college students, after the onset of the pandemic, more than half of students reported receiving EA from their colleges.⁹ These rates are likely higher among students with financial need.¹⁰ When asked about what EA was used for, studies show that students applying for EA used those funds for expenses such as rent, utilities, transportation, books, help with child care, and, to a lesser extent, food.¹¹ The need for these funds are often related to students experiencing unexpected expenses, like unexpected medical bills, or unexpected losses in sources of income, like job loss or loss of child support.¹² Research on students' basic needs also suggests that need in one area, like housing, is correlated with needs in related areas.¹³

Impacts of Emergency Financial Assistance on Student Experiences

When asked, students who received EA often reported feeling less stressed and more likely to stay enrolled in college as a result of receiving funds.¹⁴ However, the empirical evidence on the impact of EA on student academic outcomes such as retention and degree completion is mixed. A recent quasi-experimental study found that students who received a one-time emergency financial relief had higher retention and graduation rates than similar peers who did not receive those funds.¹⁵ In contrast, an evaluation of a case management intervention at a community college in Texas, which leveraged a randomized control design that also examined the impact on EA, found no evidence of the impact of EA on students' academic outcomes without additional supports.¹⁶ However, it should be noted that in this intervention the maximum EA a student could receive over a three-year period was \$1,500.

Infrastructure

College infrastructure is critical for the successful provision of EA to students. In this section of the Toolkit, we address key aspects of infrastructure for consideration when implementing EA programs. These aspects include funding, administrative structure, staffing capacity, and use of data tracking systems.

Funding

Colleges often combine funds from different sources — including federal, state, local, and private or philanthropic funds — to provide EA to as many students in need as possible. Many students who experience financial emergencies are already receiving federal financial aid, and EA should not impact students' financial aid packages.¹⁷ Colleges should work with students to exhaust financial aid resources prior to determining if EA is necessary. In some cases, colleges may release early financial aid disbursements (or partial disbursements) to assist students in emergency situations. These may be funded through foundation or other accounts and reimbursed when state or federal financial aid funds are received. Below we detail the different sources and discuss the potential implications for using those sources.

Federal And State Aid

In recent years, the largest funding source for emergency financial assistance has been the Higher Education Emergency Relief (HEER) funds.¹⁸ Nearly \$25 billion of [HEER funds](#) were provided to community colleges over a three-year period and a portion of that was allotted specifically for colleges to provide emergency assistance to students suffering hardship due to the pandemic.¹⁹ This federal funding expired in 2023 and it is unclear whether federal funding will revert back to prepandemic supports or whether additional funds will be made available to colleges to continue providing EA directly to students. In addition to HEER funds, restrictions on [Federal Supplemental Education Opportunity Grant](#) (FSEOG) funds — grant aid for students with exceptional need — were relaxed during the pandemic such that these funds could be used for emergency assistance.²⁰ However, current FY 2026 budget proposals eliminate FSEOG completely.²¹

In addition to using these federal funds, California has provided colleges with Basic Needs (BN) grants since 2021 (see sidebar, p. 1). California community college students also benefit from EA provided through Disaster Relief Emergency Student Financial Aid (SB 116) and the

State Emergency Aid Grant (AB540). Furthermore, colleges may tap into the following sources for EA:

[CalWORKS \(TANF\) or Tribal TANF](#) funds are federal block grants provided to states to help low-income families through cash aid, job training, childcare support, and other welfare-to-work programs.

[Student Equity and Achievement Program \(SEA\)](#) is a California Community Colleges initiative to provide funds intended to close equity gaps and improve student success.

[Extended Opportunity Programs and Services \(EOPS\)](#) provides support services and resources to help low-income and historically underserved California community college students.

[Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education \(CARE\)](#) was established as part of EOPS to provide resources specifically for students who are single parents and receive cash aid from CalWORKS or Tribal TANF.

College foundations are individual 5013C nonprofit organizations belonging to California community college, and they can raise funds to support students. Due to their flexible nature, foundations can play a pivotal role in quickly providing emergency assistance to students experiencing immediate needs.

[Veterans Services](#), available at the system and college levels, allow colleges to provide immediate assistance, including food pantries and [laptop loan programs](#), to students who are veterans.

Housing Assistance initiatives such as the [Homeless and Housing Insecurity Program](#) (HHIP) can assist students who require rapid rehousing. For example, see the [Barstow College HHIP program](#).

This is not an exhaustive list of federal and state funding sources. Colleges may take stock of programs and offices — such as athletics departments, LGBT Centers, and Native American Student Support and Success Programs — that have resources to provide EA to students experiencing unexpected hardship. Per California statute, state [lottery funds](#) may also be used to support EA.

Philanthropic Support

Philanthropic funding can support colleges with the provision of EA. For example, in 2020, the Jay Pritzker Foundation pledged \$100 million to the California Community Colleges through the Foundation for California Community Colleges. Similarly, the Finish Line Scholars

Program provides annual scholarships of up to \$18,500 and EA to students across 34 colleges.²²

A network of philanthropic foundations supports the [California College Student Emergency Support Fund](#). Students can apply for one-time \$500 hardship grants at: <https://www.missionassetfund.org/ca-college-student-grant/>

Nonmonetary Local Aid

Colleges are encouraged to maintain strong relationships and connections with local partners. Best practices for EA suggest that colleges engage with community-based resources.²³ Local businesses, municipalities, community agencies, and nonprofit organizations can support colleges in providing EA to students. Staff may refer students to local community food banks or connect students with transportation benefits. For example, [Golden West College](#) provides a link on its website to free local bus passes. Shasta College provides links to community resources related to [mental health and crisis support](#) and [legal aid](#).

In addition to providing EA, colleges can offer a range of resources that can assist students in emergency situations.²⁴ Gift cards for groceries and gas, in addition to bus passes, laptops, and food pantries are usually available through California Community Colleges' Basic Needs Centers (BNCs). Several reports and tools that describe the availability and impacts of BNCs across California and nationwide are available:

[California Community Colleges Basic Needs Center Toolkit](#)

[Back to Basics: Solving Today's Students' Food, Housing, And Basic Needs Insecurities](#)

Administrative Structure

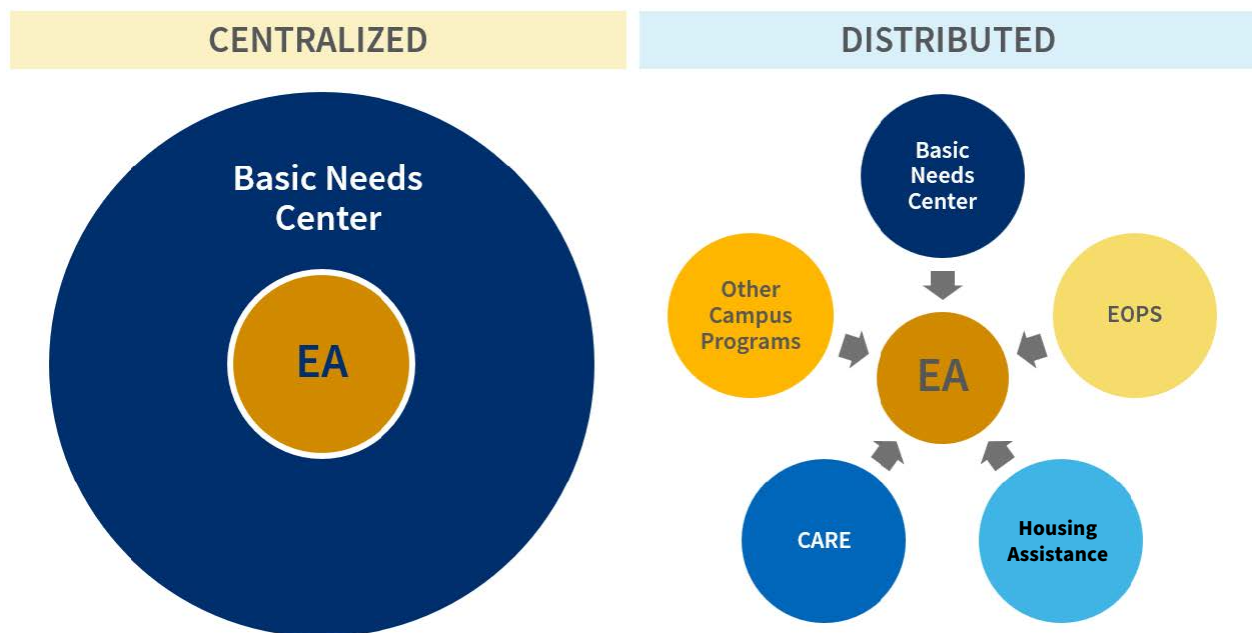
Colleges use various approaches for day-to-day administration of EA programs.²⁵ These approaches fall into one of two broad arrangements: centralized models or distributed models (Exhibit 2).

Centralized: Staff from across the college refer students in need of EA to one centralized location on campus. Students typically access EA through meeting with one individual or visiting one office, such as a BNC. This approach may simplify the process for students; it also clarifies the entry point to EA. Additionally, it may expose students to a variety of other resources offered by this centralized office that they otherwise would not know about. This approach may work best at smaller colleges, since one point of contact would process all EA requests. This approach also requires a good deal of marketing and

coordination so that staff and students know whom to contact or where to go when in need of EA.

Distributed: This model allows for multiple entry points for students at the college to access EA. Students may access EA through a “home” program they already participate in — for example, EOPS. Staff from multiple offices or programs (e.g., CARE, HHIP, veterans resource center, financial aid office) may refer students to EA or provide it themselves. This approach may work well at larger colleges, but a clear system of coordination and communication is critical.

Exhibit 2. Centralized and Distributed Models for Implementing EA Programs



In both models, colleges should work closely with their BNCs to determine if those BNCs can meet students' immediate emergency needs. Typically, college staff who administer EA will also work closely with their financial aid offices.

Staffing Capacity

Staff members are critical for connecting with students and understanding their needs, providing accurate information about EA, processing requests, and disbursing aid. Staff from a range of campus programs and offices can work together to effectively implement EA.²⁶

Forming a Team

Consider forming a college EA team led by a high-level administrator.²⁷ EA committees with clear leadership on campus can help elevate EA needs and fundraising for EA. Such teams can also ensure that EA implementation and operations are effective and efficient. To build capacity, EA teams may take part in a self-assessment to determine capacities and areas for improvement.²⁸ The [Emergency Aid for Higher Education Toolkit from Equal Measure](#) provides an example of a self-assessment and action planning tool.



All the directors of the leadership from these different departments are part of the student affairs leadership team that is headed by our Vice President of Student Services. And I think that that's where the collaboration begins—in us working together, you know. We're updating each other weekly when there are things that are coming down like special grant funding.”

– EA Staff

Student Workers

Administrators may consider using student workers from their colleges or from local partner institutions (e.g., universities with students in Master of Social Work programs) to support staff in providing EA services for students in need. Sometimes referred to as near-peer advocates or peer navigators, fellow students can be trained to provide relatable support, as well as sympathy and empathy, for students experiencing financial crises. In addition, employing students in such roles can offer a cost-effective way to build staff capacity on college campuses.

Coordination across staff, offices, and departments is critical regardless of the staffing approach used for the administration of EA programs. The section below offers suggestions for tools and systems to facilitate coordination. Regardless of staffing approach, using a **case management system** with students experiencing emergencies is beneficial. Research suggests that EA *may be* more impactful for student retention when paired with case management approaches.²⁹ This approach entails that staff understand student needs; refer students to the right office, program, or process for obtaining support; and follow up to monitor the students' outcomes and progress.



We actually seek out funding specifically with supportive services built into that funding. And so we're able to be a little bit nimble in what we can provide as far as supportive services directly to the students.”

– EA Staff

Data Tracking Systems

Strong communication tools and data tracking systems are key to facilitating coordination across staff and offices so that they can effectively and efficiently address the needs of students experiencing financial crises.

A range of software programs used across college campuses can serve this need. For example, faculty and staff can use this software to indicate whether a student may be experiencing a crisis in which they may need EA. These indicators can then be used by EA teams or “Students of Concern” teams — which often include staff from financial aid and student services offices — attending to students with the most need. In addition, tracking software can help EA staff follow up with students and assess their individual outcomes, determining if EA helped students stay enrolled in college, if students were able to achieve financial stability, and/or if students need additional supports.



Continuing the collaboration, the networking, the communication, it's pivotal for all of our departments to be able to assist our students, especially when it comes to emergency assistance.”

– EA Staff

Closely documenting the need for and distribution of EA is also important for improving the administration of EA. Records of EA disbursement will keep EA staff up to date on the availability and use of funds, facilitate reporting to financial aid departments and funders, and ensure students do not receive more than the maximum amount of aid allowed (e.g., \$500 per semester), so that other students in need may also benefit from EA.

It is important that faculty, counselors, and other staff working with students have ways of referring students to services that meet their needs, and of coordinating across offices to effectively provide EA to students. The privacy of the student must also be maintained, and information about their situation should be shared only with the student's consent. Staff should ensure they are complying with all FERPA and IRS regulations when sharing student educational or income data or other information.



We do tracking on [specific data management tool], and it is broken into the category in which you're giving funding — Is it for transportation? Is it for food? Housing? It's broken down and it's tracked with the amounts. It is reported to the financial aid office as well. Even though it might not count against their unmet need, the financial aid office does have a record of where that money is going.”

– EA Staff

Finally, documenting the use of EA is important for self-evaluation purposes.³⁰ Carefully managed documentation on EA requests, use of EA funds, and the types of students requesting and receiving EA, when connected to student academic information, can be beneficial for understanding the effectiveness of EA and the types of students who benefit from EA most.

Marketing

Building awareness for the use of EA is a common challenge for colleges. Word of mouth is often the primary method by which students and staff learn about EA programs.³¹ However, a limited marketing strategy could mean that students with the greatest need never hear about these programs. As a result, college administrators might consider a wide marketing strategy that includes employing multiple approaches and outlets for dissemination of information on EA.³²



The more students who are accessing emergency funds, they're telling their classmates and their friends about it and they're coming in."

– EA Staff

Approaches to Marketing

The following are examples of approaches that administrators may consider when trying to improve awareness of EA at their colleges:

Build staff and faculty awareness: Faculty and some staff members, like academic advisers, are critical members of the college community when it comes to direct access to students, particularly for students in online-only or partially online programs. These individuals are also known and trusted sources of information for students. However, some faculty members and staff may not be aware of the current EA resources available to students. Building continual and consistent awareness of EA programs among faculty and staff means these individuals can contribute to a college-wide marketing strategy to build awareness among students.³³ When engaging staff and faculty in student outreach, it is important to equip faculty and staff with the skills to communicate to students about EA in a destigmatizing and empathetic manner.³⁴ See examples below (**Class Materials**, p. 15) on how faculty can include a basic needs statement in their class syllabi.

Timing: When considering the timing of marketing of EA programs to students, administrators could leverage opportunities to build early awareness among a broad base of students. For example, information on EA could be shared during orientation for first-

year students, flyers could be distributed during welcome week, and short presentations could be made in first-year seminars. Administrators may also consider points in the academic year when student funds may be limited — and thus when a student may be vulnerable if an emergency arises — like the end of a term, between typical pay periods, or when notices for unpaid student account balances are sent.

Proactive versus reactive: Rather than waiting for students who experience crises to ask for help, administrators could take proactive steps to reach out to students who may need, or will likely need, EA. This could include identifying needs with the use of an intake survey³⁵ for incoming first-time or transfer students in which students answer questions that may signal economic hardship. Another proactive approach could also include seeking out students who may be struggling in a gateway course early in the semester or those with outstanding balances on their account.

Wraparound resources: The need for EA often indicates deep-rooted economic hardships that students face. When promoting EA, administrators may consider incorporating additional information on related wraparound resources — like a campus food pantry, housing assistance, transportation assistance, employment assistance, and mental health resources — available at their colleges.

Student voice: College administrators may also consider ways to get student input on their outreach approaches. This could include creating a small student committee to review and provide feedback on a college’s marketing approaches as well as the specific language used to market EA to students. Colleges might leverage existing student senate bodies or other student groups on campus to provide this type of input.



[Staff member] would go to the center where all the veterans were at, like where we would work on homework or just hang out, and she would share different programs that she had available and one of them was [EA]. And I had told her that my car broke down... I was just like venting and she told me about it, about the emergency fund that she had.”

– EA Student

Use of Multiple Outlets

Wide marketing strategies include multiple outlets to ensure EA awareness extends to a broad swath of students.³⁶ Below are example outlets that administrators could consider when trying to build awareness of EA at their colleges:

Emailing and texting: The use of email is a common method of disseminating information on EA to students. However, students may be overloaded with emails from their colleges and may miss valuable information about EA programs. Administrators may consider other ways of communicating directly to students, like text messaging. Whether communicating by email or text, colleges could personalize these messages and ensure that the messengers of this direct outreach are known and trusted sources of information, as some students may think the outreach is a scam.³⁷ See the sample emails, texts, and social media posts for EA marketing in the [Trellis Emergency Aid Toolkit](#).

Digital spaces: College websites are among the most common online spaces to market EA programs (see an example of a college's EA webpage in Exhibit 3). Webpages on basic needs resources, like EA, should be accessible, clear, and easy to find on the college's website. In addition to housing information on EA on a college's website, administrators could leverage the use of social media accounts (see an example of a college's social media post in Exhibit 4) and online student-facing platforms or learning management systems.

Exhibit 3. Example of EA webpage

Student Emergency Fund

+ Basic Needs Programs SBCC > Centers for Equity and Social Justice > Basic Needs Programs > Student Emergency Fund

Emergency funds assist students in meeting financial needs as a result of an unexpected event or emergency.

Emergency Funds Grants are sums of money (generally under \$500) meant to help address an immediate need. There is a maximum Emergency Funds Grant amount each student may receive each academic year, and all grants are dependent on funds available to the Basic Needs Program. Students may receive multiple grants over the course of an academic year, but the total amount awarded will not exceed the annual maximum amount.

The purpose of this funds is to assist students in extenuating circumstances stay enrolled in college and progress toward graduation, while connecting students with resources that best meet their needs. We encourage students to explore additional resources available to them throughout the Basic Needs Center.

Funds are limited. Due to the very high volume of application submissions, appointments and requests it may one to two weeks to process your request. You will be contacted as soon as possible regarding the status of your application and/or request.

If you are requesting emergency funding and are a credit student, make sure to have completed your FAFSA or CA Dream Act Application.

Applications for The Spring '25 Semester
To ensure equitable distribution of emergency funds, students may only receive an emergency award once per academic year. All applications are assessed on a case-by-case basis.

▼ Expand All ▲ Collapse All

What is the maximum amount I can be awarded?	+
Am I eligible?	+
What is considered an unexpected emergency?	+
What is not covered by the emergency fund?	+
Do I need to pay the award back?	+
How long does it take to receive emergency funds?	+

[Basic Needs Programs Home](#)

Source: Screenshot from college webpage on EA: <https://www.sbcc.edu/equity/basic-needs-programs/emergency-fund.php>

Exhibit 4. Example of EA Social Media Post



Source: Screenshot from College Instagram post in 2022: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CYNGb2ev80J/>

Print resources: Strategic use and placement of flyers and posters with information on EA, including eligibility and application details, can aid in building student awareness of EA programs. These print materials should include simple and stigma-free messages to students about EA, along with QR codes with links to webpages with more detail on EA and the EA application form. Also consider including an email address or phone number that students can use for questions on their EA needs and for support when experiencing a crisis.

College-facing media: Information on EA can be shared with students leveraging student newspapers, newsletters, or other broadcast media.

Class materials: A statement about EA and other basic needs support could be included in a class syllabus. Ideally, this statement would include language that affirms economic hardships among students, point students to the specific supports available, and provide contact information if available. Examples of basic needs statements for use in syllabi:

[El Camino College Basic Needs Syllabus Statement](#)

[San Diego Mesa College Basic Needs Syllabus Statement](#)



Something that really caught me, like really surprised me when I first got here was the amount of outreach that goes on here in our institution. ... We have awareness month and we have different booths from all the departments. We come together and we're just basically promoting what services each department has. And there's a good turnout and students are out there getting all that information. And so, I think the more knowledge you have about what's available, your success rates I think will definitely increase just because of knowing that there is assistance out there."

– EA Staff

Application

There should be multiple ways for students to request EA, including completing a brief online intake form or application, walking into an office or BNC, receiving a referral from staff or faculty, or making a simple inquiry by phone or email. Best practices suggest that application forms and processes be easy to use and that staff use a compassionate approach when processing students' requests for EA.

Application Forms and Processes

The application process should be simple, straightforward, and result in a timely response, ideally within 24 to 48 hours.³⁸ Applications or intake forms should be short, accessible, and easy to find on college websites.³⁹

See the [Bakersfield College](#) and [Golden West College](#) websites for example forms. Instead of creating new and separate EA applications, colleges can use applications for BNC resources and provide a space for students to describe their immediate needs. Staff can then review the description to determine whether the situation qualifies as an emergency. If colleges use this process, staff must monitor applications daily, if not

more frequently (i.e., on a rolling basis as they are submitted). If possible, do not require that students provide lengthy explanations and justifications of their emergency need.⁴⁰

Keep EA Applications Short and Easy

Key information to request:

- Name, email, phone
- Current assistance received (e.g., CalWORKS)
- Program participation (e.g., EOPS, veterans center)
- Type of need (e.g., food, housing)
- Parenting status
- Open-ended field for explanation of situation

Shortly after submitting the form, a student should receive notification — such as a call, email, or text — from a staff member, who can gather more information about the emergency situation to determine how to best provide assistance. This may include providing a specific

resource (e.g., gas card, one-time grant) or referring the student to a program to which they already belong and can provide needed support (e.g., CARE, EOPS).

Eligibility Requirements

A college may set eligibility criteria for EA, depending on the funding source. Some “unrestricted” funds allow for flexibility in decision making about use of funds, while other “restricted” funding sources may have specific criteria. For example, HHIP requires students to be enrolled in six units to receive services. Students should generally provide documentation, if possible, of the emergent need as well.

Sample student eligibility requirements for EA may include:

Enrollment status: The student must be enrolled at the time of their request and be in good standing. There could be exceptions to this. For example, if a student is planning to enroll but an emergency situation is preventing enrollment, the college may decide to provide EA to support the student in getting their classes, textbooks, and materials.

Income eligibility: Guidance from the field suggests that eligibility requirements, if used, should be kept simple and not rely on FAFSA or California Dream Act Application (CADAA) completion.⁴¹ If students do not have a FAFSA or CADAA application on file, they can begin this application process while EA is being processed. Lacking a financial aid application *should not* prevent a student from receiving EA.

Needs assessment: Students should demonstrate need by submitting documentation in a timely manner. Examples of documentation may include a bill from a mechanic (indicating lack of transportation), an eviction notice, pictures of apartment/housing damage that needs fixing, and letters from utility companies with outstanding balances. The documentation requirement *should not* be overly burdensome.

A Compassionate Approach

During the application process with students, communicate compassion, understanding, and empathy. It is extremely difficult for some students to ask for help, especially for monetary support or what might be thought of as a “hand out.” Students have expressed hesitation about requesting EA funds because they do not feel they deserve limited funds that someone else might need more. Remaining nonjudgmental and expressing support is essential. Practices and examples of ["motivational interviewing" \(Exhibit 5\) and understanding implicit bias](#) can help provide concrete steps college staff can take to best assist students during emergencies. Gaining a deep and comprehensive understanding of the college’s student

populations can help staff understand issues that might be affecting students, leading to emergency situations before students even request funds.



Everyone was very kind and understanding and just wanted to help me out as soon as possible.”

– EA Student

Using an empathetic approach can go a long way when serving students during a crisis and will encourage students to spread the word about supportive services the college provides.



[Student services specialist] is a really good guy and really understanding. He knows people’s situations, how it affects them, you know what I mean? I was worried. I’m like, okay, how am I gonna get to school on Tuesday and Thursday? And he kind of put everything at ease and I had a really good experience.”

– EA Student

Exhibit 5. Student Interviewing Tips

MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

In working to get to the “root cause,” consider using motivational interviewing techniques.

OPEN- ENDED

- What brought you here today?
- Can you describe your emergency and what led up to this event?
- What was that like for you?

AFFIRMATIONS:

- You showed a lot of [the person’s trait, such as determination] by doing that.
- Despite what happened last week, it’s clear you’re concerned about changing your [challenge/circumstance].

ADVICE/FEEDBACK:

- Do you mind if we spend a few minutes talking about...? [Followed by]
- Are you interested in learning more about...?

REFLECTIVE LISTENING:

- It sounds like...
- It seems as if...
- What I hear you saying...
- I get the sense that...

Source: https://www.equalmeasure.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/EAToolkit-022619_Updated.pdf

Awarding

Making decisions about whether to award EA to students, how much, and in what form, is a critical component of EA. Decisions may be based on a range of important factors, including whether the situation warrants EA, the amount of EA funding and resources available, the number of students in need and seeking assistance (i.e., demand), and eligibility requirements and documentation.

Decisions about Emergencies And EA Awards

Deciding whether a student's situation fits a proposed **definition of an emergency** is challenging. Prior reports demonstrate that there is not one consistent definition of "emergency" across colleges or the national field.⁴² Some colleges may have specific definitions. For example, [American River College](#) publicizes definitions of emergency and nonemergency situations that allow for emergency grants on their website. For others, defining an emergency is subjective and relies at least in part on the judgment of college staff. Setting clear and specific guidelines for defining an emergency has its value, but college staff also need flexibility to make subjective decisions.

Colleges with high levels of demand and low amounts of EA may need to use a specific tool such as a road map⁴³ or checklist when making award decisions. Decision rules should not be overly rigid and should rely on some basic minimal criteria.

Criteria for awarding aid and decision steps may include:

- Reason for request (e.g., food, housing) and documentation of need
- Time-sensitive nature of request
- Eligibility criteria
- Impact on student's immediate physical health/safety
- Impact on student's ability to stay enrolled in courses
- Other aid/resources available to students

College staff need to act quickly when assisting students experiencing emergencies. Applications and criteria should be reviewed in a timely manner, without staff getting bogged down in procedures and paperwork.

Like decision criteria, **eligibility requirements** should be used as a guide and be flexible. It is important that college staff have room to use discretion and judgment when assisting students in crisis.



On our website, students would submit an intake form for emergency aid. And that emergency aid form, we monitor it every day, staff monitor it as much as we can because when a student is facing an emergency, it can be the day of, it can be in a couple of days. We then go ahead and see if the student is enrolled in current semester. And then we do look at their GPA and their units, but that doesn't determine if they're going to get the emergency grant or not. We then go ahead and schedule an appointment as soon as something is available. And if it's an emergency, like they're getting evicted, time matters, then we'll schedule the day of."

– EA Staff

Communicating About Decisions

Students should be informed about their EA award as soon as feasibly possible. When alerting students to the decision, colleges should provide clear and specific details about how and when assistance will be provided, including timing, amounts (if the award is an EA grant) or details about other resources (e.g., grocery cards), where to pick up the check or resource if applicable (see “Distribution” section below), and whom to contact with questions. If a student is *not* awarded EA, this should be communicated in writing as soon as possible. If a student is informed via telephone call that they will not receive EA, staff may confirm the decision in a follow-up email, with a brief explanation of why the EA request was not fulfilled. In addition, along with the no-award decision message, colleges can provide students with resources they can contact and use that may help with their needs (e.g., local food bank, community legal assistance, local shelter). In addition to communicating decisions to students, staff administering EA to students should report EA distribution to the financial aid office.

Distribution

The distribution of approved EA funds directly to the student is another crucial component in the EA process. In a time when students are already experiencing stress due to financial crises, the goal of EA should be to minimize further stress so that students can concentrate on their academic studies. However, the traditional systems in which to disburse financial aid to students have not been set up for rapid disbursement. In this section of the Toolkit, we provide college administrators with key areas for consideration when planning for and fulfilling disbursement of EA to students.

Timing of EA Disbursements

The timing between determination of an award and the disbursement to students depends on multiple factors including, but not limited to:

- The time sensitivity of the student's need
- The type of emergency
- The amount needed to address the emergency
- The method by which aid is shared
- Staff capacity to authorize funds

Some financial crises can be resolved within one or two business days. For example, a student who is experiencing immediate food insecurity could be provided with prepurchased gift cards to a local grocery store or could get referred to their campus food pantry.

However, if the student needs flexible funds (like cash) because they are experiencing a sudden loss of income, other offices will likely need to be involved in the disbursement process. This could mean additional wait times for communication and coordination. College administrators should consider ways in which to streamline the disbursement process so that the EA funds do not get held up unnecessarily.

Types of EA Disbursements

As mentioned, the timing of disbursement is often associated with the type of EA offered. Administrators might consider a variety of options in which to disburse aid.

Prepaid gift cards may offer the quickest turnaround if college offices keep them on hand. However, these gift cards may not be appropriate for students with greater need.

Traditional checks can allow more aid to go to students with greater need but often take more time to process. In addition, traditional checks require the student to either have a bank account in which they deposit into their account or be willing to cash their check at a check-cashing outlet, for a fee, if they do not have a bank account. Sometimes checks can be processed within 7 to 10 days, but in some cases, checks can take up to two to three weeks for students to receive, particularly when the check is being processed through the campus business office.

Direct deposits eliminate the need for the student to go through the steps to deposit a check into their account. However, the use of direct deposit requires that the student has a bank account in which the college can deposit the EA funds.



Our emergency grant is completely different because of the urgency of the situation. What we try to do is once we've identified the need and verified the need, then we work. That's why it comes from the foundation account, because then we're able to cut a check and, you know, have them come pick it up."

– EA Staff



We're averaging six to 13 checks a week, roughly. So, that's six to 13 housing insecurities a week that requires a check large enough that we have to get two approvers and go through a process to get. So, figuring out a way to speed that up would be super beneficial, but at the same time, we're kind of in this weird spot because we want the students to come to us before it's a three-day or quit."

– EA Staff

Endnotes

¹ This federal funding is known as the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Emergency Grants for Postsecondary Education, Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) and includes the following: CARES: Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (HEERF I); CRRSAA: Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (HEERF II); and ARP: American Rescue Plan (HEERF III).

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¹⁴ Goldrick-Rab, S., Hacker, N. L., Kienzl, G., Price, D. V., & Curtis, D. (2021). *When care isn't enough: Scaling emergency aid during the pandemic*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED626843.pdf>

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