

Advancing Basic Needs Support AT AMARILLO COLLEGE USING HEERF

Postsecondary education leaders have a tremendous opportunity to reimagine current systems and uplift often underserved adult learners through strategic use of the federal stimulus provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security ([CARES](#)), Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations ([CRRSA](#)), and American Rescue Plan ([ARP](#)) Acts. In alignment with the Accelerating Recovery through Credentials [Rapid Response Toolkit](#) and [Adult-Ready Playbook](#), this brief focuses on Amarillo College's use of the federal higher education emergency relief funds (HEERF) to address student poverty and basic needs.

On January 20, 2022, The U.S. Department of Education (ED) provided additional [guidance](#) as to how colleges and universities could advance basic needs support using higher education emergency relief funds (HEERF). This guidance recognized HEERF could be used to address food and housing insecurity, childcare and transportation needs, and access to healthcare and federal benefits (i.e., medicare; SNAP; TANF). Amarillo College took this guidance to the next level, leveraging a [longstanding commitment](#) to addressing students' basic needs through the institution's [Advocacy and Resource Center](#).

At the start of the pandemic, equipping students with the fiscal resources needed to be successful was a main priority for leadership at Amarillo College. In fact, the institution demonstrated this priority by investing more than 50 percent of their relief funds in student support. Of the \$29 million in HEERF funding given to the institution, approximately \$19 million went directly to students through emergency grants and institutional debt forgiveness. Moreover, institutional leaders invested to deepen and broaden social support for students. On the following page are three early steps the college took to leverage stimulus funds to address students' basic needs.



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of the \$29 million in HEERF funding given to Amarillo went **directly to students** through emergency grants and institutional debt forgiveness.

- 1 Know your student body.** Amarillo’s strategic and innovative use of HEERF was enabled by an earlier effort taken by the college to more clearly define and understand the Amarillo student. Relying on institutional enrollment data, Amarillo leadership determined that their typical student is, in fact, not an 18-year old directly out of high school. Instead, the “traditional” Amarillo student is a first-generation, woman of color, who has children and financial need, and is striving toward a credential that would provide her and her family economic opportunity. A fictional persona, “Maria,” was developed by college leadership to help redirect strategy and policy to account for the needs of their student body. As the institution began crafting policies and procedures with *Maria* in mind, they began more fully addressing the needs of their learners. Having a clear understanding of students and their needs will help higher education leaders more effectively prioritize support for those needs.
- 2 Intentionally target aid at students with the most needs.** Amarillo College targeted HEERF dollars at students through self-assessment surveys and direct outreach. Rather than dividing up the student portion of HEERF and equally distributing the funds, staff communicated directly with students attending the institution to understand their personal and educational needs. Students were then classified based on their reported need and connected to the appropriate resources. In total, staff conducted over 3,000 phone calls with students. This intentional targeting of emergency aid ensured that students with the most need were being prioritized in the disbursement process. Further, through the institution’s [Fresh Start program](#), leaders dedicated an additional \$850k for 908 students to receive institutional debt relief. This allowed these learners to re-enroll in coursework and continue their path forward to a credential. This financial support showcases Amarillo’s commitment to helping students cover their full cost of attendance, beyond tuition and fees, including food, housing, childcare, transportation, and more.
- 3 Put the necessary wraparound supports in place to ensure students can access and navigate resources.** Amarillo College used HEERF to hire additional case managers to assist with outreach and connecting students to institutional resources. This includes connecting students to online and in-person mental healthcare and academic tutoring as well as legal aid, childcare, and transportation. Amarillo College leaders continue to address and directly combat poverty that jeopardizes students’ social and economic mobility through early intervention. The college plans to sustain these new positions and resources beyond HEERF to remove barriers to completion and uplift learners with unmet need.

The federal stimulus provides higher education leaders a once-in-a-generation opportunity to invest in our postsecondary education institutions and uplift often underserved learners. Three COVID relief bills ([CARES](#); [CRRSA](#); and [ARP](#)) designate nearly \$77 billion for higher education, providing ample resources for leaders to strategically and innovatively support learners. When faced with the question “**What advice would you give to peer institutions who are considering how to maximize the long-term impact of HEERF investments?**” President Russell Lowery-Hart replied, “*This is a moment where we have investments that give us a chance to pilot and reimagine structures of learning and time to degree. I hope we don’t miss this moment. I’m afraid we will. I’m afraid that institutions will simply use these HEERF funds to prop up broken systems, rather than reimagine and rethink them. So, that’s my call. Don’t miss the moment we are in now.*” This brief echoes this sentiment and encourages higher education leaders to proactively seek opportunities for innovative HEERF use.