One Year Later: Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 Emergency Grants on SBCC Students

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sbccfoundation.org
**Summary**

On March 30, 2020, less than two weeks into the statewide shutdown and ensuing economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic, the SBCC Foundation launched its COVID-19 Student Emergency Grant Fund. This was the largest emergency grant program in the Foundation’s history and among the first response funds deployed anywhere in the country.

The timing of the COVID-19 Emergency Grant Program was significant. The intent was to help SBCC students meet their basic needs and stay enrolled in school. The strategy was to provide immediate bridge support for students until such time that federal, state, or other community aid became available. The Foundation notified students of the funding opportunity via email, campus networks, and its social media channels.

Over the course of four weeks, the Foundation distributed over $2 million to more than 2,300 SBCC students. These grants, providing up to $1,000 per student, offered assistance with housing, food, childcare, medical bills, and other critical resources needed to stabilize households and helped students make the transition to remote learning.

The Foundation recently conducted a survey with grant recipients to learn how they are faring one year later. Below are some of the findings.

**Findings**

Our survey found that 67% of students who received an SBCC Foundation COVID-19 Emergency Grant back in March/April 2020 were still enrolled at SBCC during the Spring 2021 semester. Of the nearly 33% who were no longer enrolled, 17% graduated or transferred to a four-year college or university, while 16% dropped out for another reason.

By way of comparison, the college saw an overall retention rate of 43% from Spring 2020 to Spring 2021; 57% did not re-enroll, with 19% graduating or transferring. The remaining 38% who dropped out for another reason amounted to 5,080 students, 449 (9%) of whom received at least one CARES grant last year and 4,631 (91%) of whom did not.

Bottom line, the Foundation’s survey data and the college’s CARES grant data demonstrate that continuing students receiving emergency grants last year were significantly more likely to stay enrolled at SBCC.

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1 The Foundation received 453 responses (a 20% response rate).

2 The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act or CARES Act, was passed by Congress on March 27th, 2020. This bill allotted $2.2 trillion to provide fast and direct economic aid to the American people negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Of that money, approximately $14 billion was given to the Office of Postsecondary Education as the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund, or HEERF.
The students who were no longer enrolled at SBCC in the Spring 2021 semester reported the following barriers and causes:

- Unable to afford the cost of attendance.
- The need to choose work over school during the pandemic.
- Concerns related to their health and/or that of family members.
- The need to care for children (due to closed schools, day care facilities, etc.).

It is important to note that over 50% of our survey respondents reported that they struggled with online learning—from finding an appropriate study space to lacking necessary technology to missing the traditional campus experience. This was true for grant recipients who remained enrolled as well as those who didn’t and is consistent with previous findings from a campus-wide survey that was conducted by SBCC administration back in December 2020.

Of the 16% of Foundation emergency grant recipients who dropped out during the pandemic plan, 60% indicated that they plan to return to SBCC or another college in the future. Less than 5% reported they did not intend to resume their post-secondary education. Another 5% were unsure of their future plans.

**What We Learned**

1. Emergency grants are an important and effective tool to help students remain enrolled in classes. Scholarships and financial aid help offset the costs of traditional expenses like tuition, books, and enrollment but oftentimes that is not enough. A recent study by the Hope Center found that 58% of students at 2-year institutions struggled to meet their basic needs during the pandemic; 36% were housing insecure, 44% were food insecure, and 11% experienced homelessness. However, these numbers are just slightly higher than their pre-pandemic rates.³

   *Basic needs insecurity among college students in the United States continues to be a widespread problem.*

   Enter emergency aid. When the pandemic first hit, many SBCC students needed help beyond what traditional avenues of financial aid could provide. Having sufficient resources on hand at the start of the pandemic allowed the Foundation to respond quickly to the critical and immediate needs of our students in the form of emergency grants. This immediate cash assistance could be used for rent, groceries, transportation, childcare and other expenses—with the aim of keeping students in school.

   Emergency aid has proven to help address basic needs insecurity among students and can effectively improve retention and combat poverty on college campuses.

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2. **Increased support services are needed to encourage students who dropped out to return to college.** According to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), only 13% of college students who drop out of school return in the next five years. Of those who do re-enroll, only about a half eventually obtain a degree. At SBCC, a campus-wide task force has been working for many months to develop new and improved support services to promote a return to campus and help students remain enrolled. In addition, the Foundation—in keeping with our commitment to increase college access—will be welcoming back all SBCC Promise students whose academic journeys were temporarily halted due to COVID-19, regardless of their reason for leaving.

3. **Remote learning is a helpful option for some students, but not all.** Community colleges across the country will likely adapt by finding a new mix of online and in-person classes. This will provide some welcome alternatives for students with different learning styles and much-needed flexibility for those juggling work-life balance. SBCC will offer a combination of in-person and remote courses in Fall 2021 and remains committed to providing students with what they need to be successful as we navigate our “new normal.”

**In Their Own Words**

As educational institutions continue to study the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students’ learning journeys and the higher education system as a whole, the Foundation is confident that the emergency grants provided to SBCC students one year ago were a valuable tool and helped many students remain enrolled in classes during a very challenging time. The following are a selection of quotes from grant recipients expressing their gratitude for the support.

“I graduated from the SBCC ADN program in May and I am so grateful for the support that the school and the program provided throughout this past year. The help I received contributed immensely to my success here and I love this school so much; coming here was the best choice I could have made in obtaining my degree.” – Kailyn Z.

“The help was a huge game changer for me and I appreciate it so much! I never would have made it! I now have offers from SDSU and others thanks to your help!” – Juli P.

“I just want to say thank you for the grants that were given. Those grants allowed me and my husband to continue our classes. Although I did have to drop a semester. I was able to continue courses in the summer. I am happy to say that I will be transferring to a 4-year college in the fall and couldn’t have done it without the grants.” – Dianna P.

“I am a working mother but I’m going back to school to have a better future for me and my family.” – Endang S.