Using Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) Institutional Portion Grant Funds to Meet the Basic Needs of Students[1,2]

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

January 20, 2022

These FAQs are intended to provide answers and examples of allowable uses of HEERF Institutional Portion grant funds for students' basic needs, such as student, academic, financial, and mental health support. The lists provided are not exhaustive but illustrate the wide range of strategies institutions of higher education (IHEs) can employ to meet the basic needs of students. For additional ideas on how IHEs might help meet the basic needs of students, please refer to ED COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 3 and our Best Practices Clearinghouse.

As a reminder, HEERF grants provide broad flexibility to each institution and its leaders to address their institution's specific needs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. **Question: How may institutions provide greater student support services that help underserved students affected by the pandemic, such as childcare, food, housing, transportation, and health care?**

   Answer: Generally, grantees have broad flexibility to better support students as part of efforts to appropriately meet the needs of all students navigating the coronavirus pandemic.

   Childcare: For example, to support students who have unmet childcare needs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, grantees can temporarily expand capacity of on-campus childcare centers or create childcare subsidy programs to provide vouchers or grants for parenting students to use with local childcare providers (including those off-campus).

   - Example: Bergen Community College in New Jersey used HEERF to subsidize 25 slots at their on-campus Child Development Center to remove financial barriers to students' education and support student persistence and success.

   Food: Institutions can use HEERF grant funds to provide meal vouchers, expand offerings at campus-based food pantries, create universal meal programs, expand staffing to serve students longer throughout the day to limit dining hall capacity and allow for social distancing, and any other strategies to ensure students are not experiencing food scarcity as a

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[1] Other than statutory and regulatory requirements included in the document, the contents of this guidance do not have the force and effect of law and are not meant to bind the public. This document is intended only to provide clarity to the public regarding existing requirements under the law or agency policies.

[2] This document contains references to information created and maintained by other public and/or private organizations. Note that this information is provided for information purposes and for the reader's convenience. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this outside information. Further, references to this external information does not reflect their importance, and their inclusion should not be construed as an endorsement of any kind of the proffered views, products, or services by either the U.S. Department of Education of the Federal government.

result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Institutions can also use HEERF grant funds to coordinate and facilitate peer-to-peer meal swipe programs that allow students with excess meals on meal plans to share with classmates experiencing food insecurity.

- Example: Tarleton State University in Texas used HEERF institutional funding to build out their food pantries at both their Stephenville and Fort Worth campuses. Tarleton used HEERF to purchase refrigerators and freezers which facilitated expanded offerings from only non-perishables to fresh fruits, vegetables, eggs, and proteins.

Transportation: Institutions are encouraged to adapt strategies for what works best for their location and student population. For example, grantees may use HEERF grant funds to subsidize or cover the full cost of public transportation for students, or to provide free or discounted parking to students to ensure that they are able to park their vehicles and avoid forms of transit that may have greater exposure to COVID-19.

- Example: Texas Women's University in Texas used HEERF to subsidize parking permits for students on campus. This has allowed students to avoid forms of transportation that may have greater exposure to COVID-19.

Academic: HEERF grant funds can also be used to create a textbook voucher program for qualifying students who have experienced financial changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To increase academic success, institutions also can create or expand course offerings, tutoring, and mentor programs, as well as enhance access to technology to assist with learning losses or gaps caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Example: East Carolina University in North Carolina is using HEERF to employ additional tutors and academic coaches, supplementing instruction in many large, high-demand classes with learning assistants, and providing summer tuition grants. ECU also will expand summer course offerings to help students catch up on and/or accelerate their progress toward degree completion.

Housing: HEERF can be used to subsidize on- and off-campus housing costs for students who are experiencing housing insecurity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, or by providing rent support to students. HEERF grant funds can also be used to expand emergency and temporary housing in dormitories and off-campus housing for students affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Example: North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University used HEERF aid to establish a housing scholarship for students to afford on-campus housing.

Mental health and health care: An institution can use HEERF grant funds to provide mental health services and supports for students and faculty who are experiencing COVID-19 pandemic-related trauma, including students who were experiencing trauma prior to the pandemic that the pandemic may have exacerbated. This includes using HEERF grant funds for:

a) Developing or expanding on-campus student support centers or campus health services that provide mentoring, counseling, and social and emotional learning supports to students in individual or group sessions.
b) Assisting with the cost of mental health services, such as student health insurance, health fees, and associated out-of-pocket expenses.
c) Expanding the reach of mental health supports for students by leveraging technology through digital platforms, like telehealth services, and increasing access to devices and the internet.

- Example: The City University of New York System used HEERF grant funds to expand its mental health services by offering 24/7 access to counselors through a crisis text line at a time when increasing numbers of students at CUNY and across the country are struggling with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. **Question: How can institutions use HEERF grants to build long-term capacity to support students' basic needs throughout the pandemic?**

Answer: Although HEERF grants are a one-time infusion of funds, **initial** investments in high-impact basic needs projects can be made now, with ongoing support after initial success provided through philanthropic efforts, local partnerships, or other funding sources.

For example, HEERF grant funds can be used to pay for staff or contractor work to coordinate, plan, or implement services that continue to support students' basic needs throughout the pandemic and beyond. Such uses can include identifying and filling gaps in existing services, coordinating a cross-institution taskforce to better serve students' needs, developing a long-term plan to establish a basic needs center, implementing plans to train and hire long-term staff focused on supporting students' basic needs, expanding digital infrastructure to support technology-enabled learning and service options, including virtual/remote services.

- Example: Amarillo College in Texas is using HEERF grant funds to expand the reach of its Advocacy and Resource Center which connects students to services and resources that can assist them when they encounter life barriers that may impede their success.

Institutions seeking to provide high-quality, free textbooks and supplies to their students can use their HEERF grant funds to establish a library or program of Open Educational Resources (OER) or form a partnership with an existing OER platform.

- Example: Chippewa Valley Technical College in Wisconsin used HEERF funding to draft a new OER nursing textbook expanding on CVTC's existing Department of Education-funded Open Textbook Pilot grant project. The new OER is projected to save CVTC students more than $38,000 annually, with the potential to save students at technical colleges across Wisconsin upwards of $650,000 annually, saving students much needed funds as the pandemic has made affording school materials more difficult.

3. **Question: How can institutions use HEERF grants to provide direct outreach to students and help connect students to existing local, state, or federal benefits and resources?**

   Answer: Institutions can use HEERF grant funds to pay for staff or contractor support to provide direct outreach to students to inform them of available benefits, including providing assistance with applications and screening, and helping field and implement diverse and personalized outreach approaches that more effectively connect eligible students with benefits. Institutions also can use funds to create programs, to contract with services that assist grantees, or to connect students with existing resources, including conducting text-message campaigns, and developing technological infrastructure to support long-term benefits navigation. Funds also can be used to pay for any new or repurposed staff if the work of those individuals is associated with meeting students' basic needs during the pandemic.

   For example, HEERF funds can pay for staff time associated with building partnerships, including with non-profit organizations helping connect eligible students to federal benefits such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); local health insurance navigation programs; nearby Head Start programs; programs providing assistance with housing costs; or non-profit organizations helping eligible non-tax filers apply for refundable tax credits such as the Child Tax Credit, Recovery Rebate Credits (for those who have not yet received the full amount of their American Rescue Plan Economic Impact Payment), or Earned Income Tax Credit.

4. **Question: How do grantees report using funds for basic needs?**

   Answer: Grantees should report their use of HEERF grants for basic needs in quarterly and annual reports in the appropriate section of the Quarterly Budget and Reporting Form, which may be found here. The form's existing budget categories cover an array of possible uses, but if there is no clear section under which to record a particular use of funds, please use the section "Other uses of (a)(1) Institutional Portion funds," and enter information regarding how your institution is helping to meet the basic needs of students.