Using COVID-19 Relief Funds to **Boost Equity in Digital Learning**

When the scope and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary education emerged in the spring of 2020, conventional wisdom was that higher education institutions faced a huge challenge. Fast forward to 2022, and the implications are more nuanced. Thanks mainly to federal relief funds, the fiscal picture is not as dire as predicted, but the challenge of equitably reaching students – particularly those traditionally marginalized by higher education – has grown.

Many institutions are now faced with the rare opportunity of having substantial one-time funds that must be spent soon and can be used in myriad ways to support equitable student outcomes, provided the outcomes are in response to the pandemic. Using these one-time funds to invest in digital learning and ensuring it equitably benefits students who have been poorly served by higher education can strengthen institutions today and future-proof them. Certainly, there are other priorities and required uses of funds, but investing in digital learning for equity can and should be part of the broader effort of responding to the pandemic. The Department of Education has recently issued guidance on using COVID-19 relief funds and has explicitly identified technology-enabled learning as one potential path for institutions to use one-time money to build long-term student support capacity.[1]

[1] U.S. Department of Education, "Using Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) Institutional Portion Grant Funds to Meet the Basic Needs of Students," https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/heerf-support-basic-needs-final.pdf.

every learner everywhere

What is **Digital Learning?**

Digital learning includes a broad range of content and communication tools, curricular models, design strategies, and services that personalize instruction for students in blended and online learning environments. Evidence demonstrates digital solutions lower the cost of course materials, improving access to them. In addition, digital solutions, such as adaptive learning, paired with active learning have the potential to improve course outcomes for poverty-affected students, and Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students.

Funding Limitations & Requirements

The most recent federal COVID-19 relief package was enacted March 11, 2021, so aren't those funds gone? Not necessarily. Although there is substantial variation by institution, federal data at the state level show that a substantial portion of the funds have not yet been spent.[2]

The three major pieces of legislation[3] that make up the bulk of the federal COVID-19 response operate differently from most previous federal grants. Each successive law added more money to the various grant programs supporting institutions; each also reset the date by which institutions must use the money. The current regulations for the largest of these grant programs—the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF)—initially required institutions to use most funding within one year of their most recent grant award, which would have set a deadline of May 2022. However, the Department of Education has indicated that it will provide automatic no-cost extensions to institutions that would push the deadline to May 2023.[4] The most recent award for the majority of institutions was in May 2021, meaning funds must be spent by May 2022 (or May 2023 if an institution successfully pursues a no-cost extension). There is a little time remaining to identify strategic spending opportunities from federal relief grant awards, so institutions must act now.

[2] Although there are numerous funding programs within the COVID-19 relief packages, this summary focuses on the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) as the largest funding source directly for institutions, but the general ideas described herein also apply to other federal funding sources within the broader COVID-19 relief bills. Department of Education data are currently reported through November 30, 2021.

[3] The three major bills are: The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA), and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

[4] See U.S. Department of Education, "Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund III Frequently Asked Questions," question 39 for details. https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/arpfaq.pdf

Possible Digital Learning Investments

If institutions have unspent funding, leadership must identify and prioritize strategic investments. Across the country, institutions are searching for the "one-time investment" that supports student success, improves equity, and fortifies them against future academic disruptions. Strategic investments in digital learning have the potential to do all of the above.

Spending on some components of digital learning is an allowable expense, particularly if the spending defrays technology and other costs associated with adapting to the pandemic's new educational realities, including faculty and staff training.[5] As the learning environment has changed over the past two years, the required institutional responses to provide a high-quality and equitable digital education have as well.

Investments that respond to the pandemic, support digital learning, and have the potential to improve equity include:

- Course Design – Effectively developing new courses that will be resilient to changes brought by the pandemic and help digital learning deliver on its potential to improve equity.
- Equity Audits and Assessments – Clearly, the pandemic is having disparate impacts and greatly affecting students that have been poorly served by higher education. Investing in digital learning to center equity would be an effective use of funds.
- Faculty and Staff Development – Investing in training and professional development can help faculty and staff promote equity by taking advantage of advances in digital learning.
- Research and Evaluation – As noted earlier, enhanced digital learning has the potential to improve equity among student outcomes, but, as with any policy or program, institutions must take intentional and affirmative steps to ensure that reality matches this potential through thoughtful research and evaluation.

[5] See U.S. Department of Education, "Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund III Frequently Asked Questions," for more details. https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/arpfaq.pdf

More information about strategies for equitably scaling digital learning is available on the Every Learner Everywhere website at everylearnereverywhere.org. Contact our staff to discuss how your institution can utilize federal relief funding to improve equity through investment in digital learning.