

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SEATTLE COLLEGES MOBILIZE TO HELP STUDENTS AFFECTED BY COVID-19 CRISIS

As hundreds of students deal with job loss, a switch to online learning, and children at home, Colleges build emergency fund to ensure students can stay in school and succeed

Public contributions will support one-time grants for students with acute needs; \$500K campaign goal

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SEATTLE, March 31, 2020 | The Seattle Colleges are a bridge to a better life for thousands of our city's people — many of whom are fighting their way through poverty, historical oppression and other adversity. Our 44,015 students — average age 28 — are often the first in their family to attend college. Many must simultaneously manage school, parenting and work.

The balance can be precarious, and the COVID-19 outbreak threatens to tip many students into crisis, potentially derailing their education. Determined to avoid that outcome, the Seattle Colleges Foundation has launched a \$500,000 Emergency Fund to bridge gaps in other relief efforts and ensure that our students can stay on course, gaining the skills so important not only to their own futures, but the well-being and resilience of our community.

BACKGROUND. Many Seattle Colleges students have jobs in restaurants, hotels and convention spaces. COVID-19 sent these businesses into freefall even before social-distancing and stay-at-home orders went into effect. The state's Employment Security Department reported a [seven-fold increase](#) in unemployment claims by accommodation and food-service workers in the week of March 14 to March 21. Students in other lines of work have been hit hard, too, for example those who drive Uber or Lyft.

The Colleges moved to online instruction on March 17, making it more difficult to hear first-hand from students who have lost jobs. However, scores of students have been in touch by phone or email to describe their circumstances, including:

- **A junior in the Respiratory Therapy program**, relating that 6 of the 22 students in her cohort lost their restaurant or gig-economy jobs all on the same day. Some wonder if they'll be able to continue in the program.
- **A Dean's List student** who said she would need to withdraw from classes because she's lost her restaurant job, and that her three roommates have, also. "I do not have the time or mental capacity to dedicate to finishing out the quarter. I wish it were otherwise, but my livelihood was just swept out from under me for the foreseeable future."
- **A Nursing program student** who lost his job and has two kids at home, with a third arriving in the next month. He's worried about affording food and rent for his family.

- **A student in the Electrical Apprenticeship program.** “I have one more class to complete in my program. Unfortunately, I’ve been laid off because of the coronavirus. I can’t pay for school right now and was wondering if you could help.”

“We know that there are hundreds of other stories just like this,” comments **Kerry Howell, CEO of the Seattle Colleges Foundation,** which raises private dollars to support the mission of the Seattle Colleges (Seattle Central College, South Seattle College and North Seattle College).

“It’s critical to get financial support into the hands of these students, or their education may be cut short,” continues Howell. “Right now we all plainly see that those educated at the Seattle Colleges are so often the ‘essential workers’ keeping our city going during a turbulent time. We have to keep faith with them and their dreams.”

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AID WILL HELP, BUT LEAVES GAPS. The U.S. government’s \$2 trillion dollar relief package will be a huge benefit to students at the Seattle Colleges, not least by providing enhanced unemployment benefits as well as assistance to the kinds of small businesses where many work. Yet we still anticipate gaps that, if unaddressed, could interrupt or upend students’ education. These are questions we’re grappling with:

1. Will unemployment benefits start flowing quickly enough to keep students from losing housing or going hungry? Even prior to this crisis, many of our students had a financially tenuous life. In a 2019 student survey:
 - 44% of respondents experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days.
 - 53% of respondents experienced housing insecurity in the previous year.
 - 21% of respondents experienced homelessness in the previous year.
 - 48% of respondents said a lack of finances was likely or very likely to cause them to withdraw from school.
2. Will lost student jobs come back? Given predictions of a recession, and the evaporation of much community wealth, some lost jobs may not return. Since, at present, federally-enhanced unemployment benefits will run for only four months, some students could again be in financial straits. Complicating matters further, there are student-parents who could perhaps return to work, but will struggle because their children are at home due to day-care and school closures.
3. Will students have the tools for distance learning? Most Seattle Colleges classes will occur online, rather than in-person, for the balance of the school year. The Colleges are striving to get every student the equipment and Internet access to succeed in this learning format. However, the socioeconomics of our students mean that many live on the far side of the digital divide. For example, we’ve heard reports that some students are relying on smart phones to watch lectures and do homework, a solution that’s clearly unsustainable.

COVID-19 EMERGENCY FUND LAUNCHED. Many parts of the community are rallying to support people affected directly and indirectly by COVID-19. We are grateful for these efforts, as well as aid programs emerging from different levels of government. The COVID-19 Emergency Fund of the Seattle Colleges Foundation will tightly focus on gaps in other relief programs that — unaddressed — could halt our students’ progress. In coming months, we anticipate providing grants up to \$1,000 for needs including groceries, rent, child care and educational technology. To learn more:

Online: <https://foundation.seattlecolleges.edu/covid-19-emergency-fund>

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