



The Impact of COVID-19 on Scholarship Recipients in the Triangle

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Executive Summary

In March 2020, like most other scholarship providers, staff at Triangle Community Foundation saw the lives of their scholarship applicants and recipients change suddenly in drastic ways. To capture how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the specific students the Foundation serves, staff added required questions to applications and optional questions to student reports. The responses from students gave staff a fuller picture of the issues facing the Triangle's students; these responses also informed a few simple, but key, solutions in relation to their scholarship program.

This white paper is intended to help scholarship providers who would like additional information regarding the impact of COVID-19 on students and options for how to adapt their programming accordingly. Please feel free to reach out to our Scholarships staff at scholarships@trianglecf.org if you would like to connect on this topic.

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Overview

Triangle Community Foundation (“the Foundation”) was founded in 1983 and seeks to inspire and mobilize giving, leadership, and action in a four-county area in central North Carolina. Scholarships make up three percent of its assets; most are donor-involved, with two funds designated as ‘discretionary,’ open to donations from any community member but whose criteria and award selection is managed by staff. In 2021, the Foundation was home to 41 scholarship funds, and awarded \$640,000 to 126 new scholarship recipients. Staff also worked with 79 additional students receiving renewable scholarships. The scholarships program is part of the overall Education & Youth Impact Area.

In March 2020, the Foundation’s Scholarships team completed its second year with a single scholarship deadline on March 1st, and began processing applications. Suddenly, like the rest of the world, staff found themselves working remotely and wondering just how drastically things had changed for scholarship applicants since they hit ‘submit’ a few short weeks before. Staff immediately knew they would need to be as flexible and responsive to students as they were planning to be for nonprofit grantees, and quickly instituted several key measures to address students’ needs in relation to their scholarship. The team also wanted to know how applicants and recipients were coping, what key issues they were facing, and how these issues could most effectively be addressed within funding parameters.

COVID-19 Impact Data Collection

To collect responses in the least burdensome way possible, questions were added to existing forms used to collect data from students – 1) semester reports from current scholarship recipients, and 2) all new scholarship applications.

Traditionally, recipients of multi-year scholarships are required to submit a short report about their semester and upload a transcript to verify continued academic eligibility at the end of each semester. The Foundation’s Board approved a waiver for the academic eligibility requirement for current recipients beginning with Spring 2020 reports, and instead students were asked two optional questions about the impact of COVID-19 on academics and finances:

We know that COVID-19 has affected individuals and families across the country, and has made learning especially challenging for students.

The follow questions are OPTIONAL, but we encourage you to share your responses if you feel comfortable.

We hope to use this information to gain a better understanding of the effects of COVID-19 on our students and how the Foundation might offer support.

1. **Please tell us how COVID-19 has affected you academically.** We understand that schools have responded differently to COVID-19, including scheduling for classes, grades, etc. Please share any effect the pandemic had on your academics and learning. Note: This question is optional.
2. **Please tell us about how COVID-19 has affected you and your family financially.** Please share the following:
 - a. Did you or your family incur any additional expenses during COVID-19?
 - b. How was your family’s income impacted?Note: This question is optional.

Table 1: Response Rates to COVID-19 Questions from Current Scholarship Recipients

	Academic Impact		Financial Impact		Total Reports Submitted
	# Responses	Response Rate	# Responses	Response Rate	
Spring 2020 Reports	71	71.7%	60	60.6%	99
Fall 2020 Reports	38	40%	35	36.8%	95

In addition to collecting information from current scholarship recipients, three required questions were added to the 2021 scholarship applications (data collected from mid-November 2020 to March 1, 2021):

1. Extenuating Circumstances & Financial Impact of COVID-19

We know the above numbers* do not fully capture the financial picture of our students and their families. Please explain any extenuating circumstances impacting financial need that are not apparent from the above financial information. This can include contributions expected/not expected from a non-custodial parent, education expenses already incurred for older siblings, medical expenses, changes in employment, etc. Please use this space to also share any important financial changes due to the impact of COVID-19.

2. COVID-19 Academic Impact

Please use the space below to share how COVID-19 has impacted your academics. This could include access to technology, learning supports, changes in attention or ability to study, changes in grading scales, etc.

3. COVID-19 Extracurricular Impact

We understand that stay-at-home orders and other limitations due to COVID-19 have impeded the ability to engage in activities normally. What are some activities or extracurriculars you hope to resume once in college and it is safe to return to normal activities?

A total of 1,413 applications were submitted. While these questions were required, some applicants stated there was no impact, so these responses were categorized as “no response.”

Table 2: Responses to COVID-19 Questions by 2021 Scholarship Applicants

	Financial Impact	Extracurricular Impact	Academic Impact
Question Responses	1236	1393	1386
Response Rate	87.5%	98.6%	98.1%

Lessons Learned from Students

The Scholarships team at the Foundation has long known that students are resilient, compassionate, and tenacious. The 4,219 unique question responses collected related to COVID-19 only reinforced that and the team remains in awe of their ability to focus on their academic program in the midst of uncertainty and strife.

Student responses about the impact of COVID-19 were categorized into a few key areas: difficulties at home/in their current living situation, technology, mental health, and economic impacts.

Home Environment

Students told us that many difficulties arose when they moved to virtual/online school. For some students, this meant learning from home and taking care of younger siblings while parents worked remotely or in essential worker roles. For other students, this meant struggling to maintain rent or mortgage payments and adjusting to new living situations, such as living alone in isolation or with roommates who were also juggling remote work or school.

Students shared that home environment issues resulted in difficulty concentrating and staying motivated, struggling to self-teach material and adjust to learning at their own pace, grading scale difficulties, having to increase their effort to keep up with their schoolwork, and in some cases dropping out of certain classes due to difficulties learning at home. Students also expressed that they were no longer able to maintain extracurricular activities, internships, or volunteer opportunities that were previously outside the home, and struggled to maintain their engagement with religious and faith-based organizations.

"Online school has been difficult as well since my four school-age siblings and I all have to do online school from our small three-bedroom apartment. On top of that I am responsible for watching my one-year-old baby brother. I have felt the stress of this added responsibility but know that it's important to keep up my studies while still helping my family."

Technology

Not surprisingly, students also shared that they had technological challenges, primarily around their internet connection and accessing an appropriate device. Many students expressed coping with an unstable or total lack of internet connection or juggling with a connection not meant for so many users at once. In addition, students shared that they had no laptop or computer at home, or only had one to share amongst parents and children. Students completed homework or other assignments on their personal phone to the best of their abilities, and/or drove to parking lots to access Wi-Fi and course material.

"Having school online and at home was a major academic impact on my sister and me. The internet at my house is not very dependable and we don't have a reliable cell phone signal either, so my sister and I have struggled to complete our daily school assignments. When my sister and I have Zoom meetings at the same time, it's hard to focus with the background noise, and sometimes one or both of us lose internet connection."

Mental Health

As have many during the COVID-19 pandemic, students expressed that they have struggled with their mental health. They expressed challenges in connecting socially with peers and feeling isolated, as well as in connecting with teachers for extra help or finding tutoring outside of virtual class. Students who faced internet connectivity problems faced heightened concerns, as they could not engage in virtual extracurriculars when available. Students also felt anxiety regarding COVID-19 protocols, fear for at-risk family members, and in some cases loss of parents or relatives. Students without health insurance faced additional fears about the cost of treatment if they were to contract the virus. Statements from students overwhelmingly expressed feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety.

"Social isolation, lack of motivation, and lack of hands-on learning techniques along with other factors have led me to struggle throughout the year."

"COVID-19 has adjusted my ability to reach out to teachers and gain a personal connection with classmates and instructors. I've struggled with lack of socialness and adjusting to online classes because I need to ask teachers for help sometimes and that isn't provided in huge lecture classes online with no teacher time."

"I experienced more anxiety whenever I was participating in classes; I experienced more panic attacks than usual."

Economic Impacts

Students, like so many others, felt the economic impact of shutdowns and quarantines. Many students saw their parents lose their jobs; children of small business owners saw their parents' business and income contract, resulting in drastically reduced or eliminated family income. Students with undocumented parents faced additional financial hardship, as their parents were unable to benefit from stimulus funds. Many students saw the savings their family had put aside for college expenses suddenly needed for daily cost of living, adding to struggles to pay for and complete their post-secondary programs.

"COVID resulted in a loss of employment due to a reallocation of shifts to full-time employees who upper management decided 'needed it more.' I was forced to spend funds from my savings to cover personal costs (food, gas, bills, etc.)."

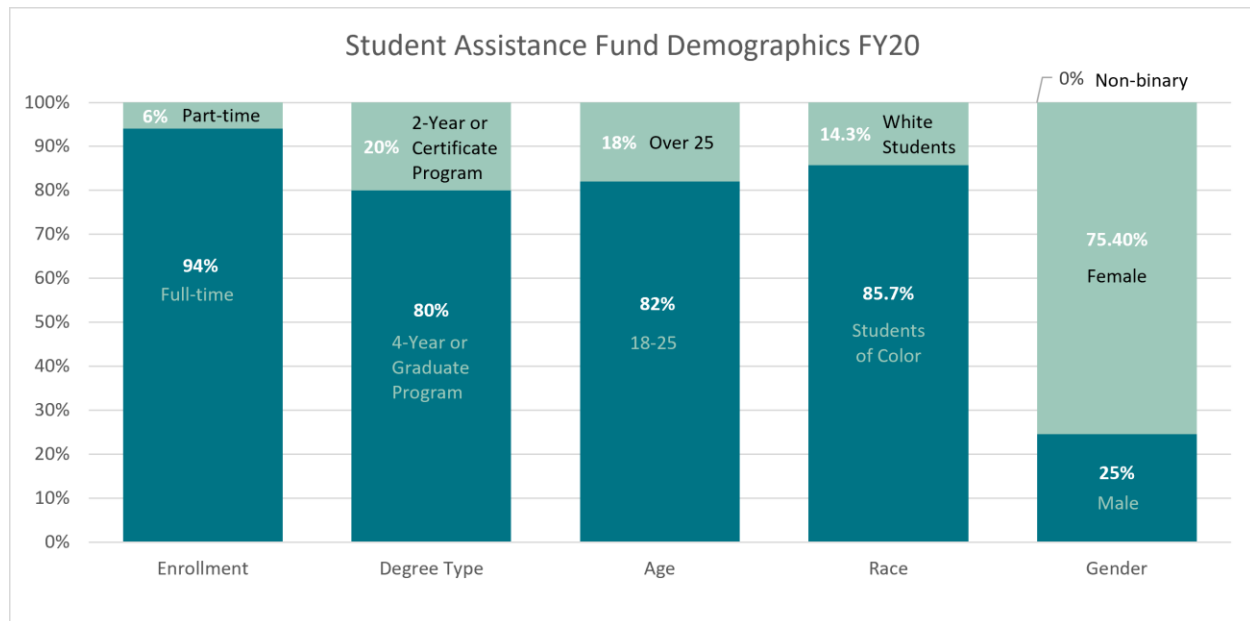
"On top of paying for medical issues and lots of excess travel, some paid internship positions I would have applied to on campus or nearby were cancelled due to COVID."

What Action Triangle Community Foundation Took to Address Immediate Needs

Even without hearing directly from students, Foundation staff knew that current scholars were facing extraordinary strain and difficulties. The Scholarship team's first course of action was to request that the Foundation's Board of Directors allow staff to waive GPA requirements for all students, permitted indefinitely until staff felt confident on-campus learning had resumed its normal course. Thus far, the GPA waiver has been in effect for Spring 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021 semesters. While student response to this change was not formally tracked, several students shared their deep relief and gratitude. Students and donors agreed that this waiver was a helpful and necessary change to support students doing their best to stay in school while caring for themselves and their loved ones.

The team's second course of action was to create and launch the Student Assistance Fund to provide emergency, non-tuition assistance to current scholarship recipients. The Fund is open to any current scholarship recipient who is enrolled (full-time or part-time) in an academic program. Applicants are encouraged to seek emergency funding at their college or university, if available, before applying. Students may apply for up to \$500 to use for needs such as housing, transportation, childcare, health care, transportation, or technology (*Fig. 1*). In the 2020-2021 academic year, the Foundation was able to fund 70 students, totaling \$34,011. Additional data is from this cohort is shown in Figure 1 below.

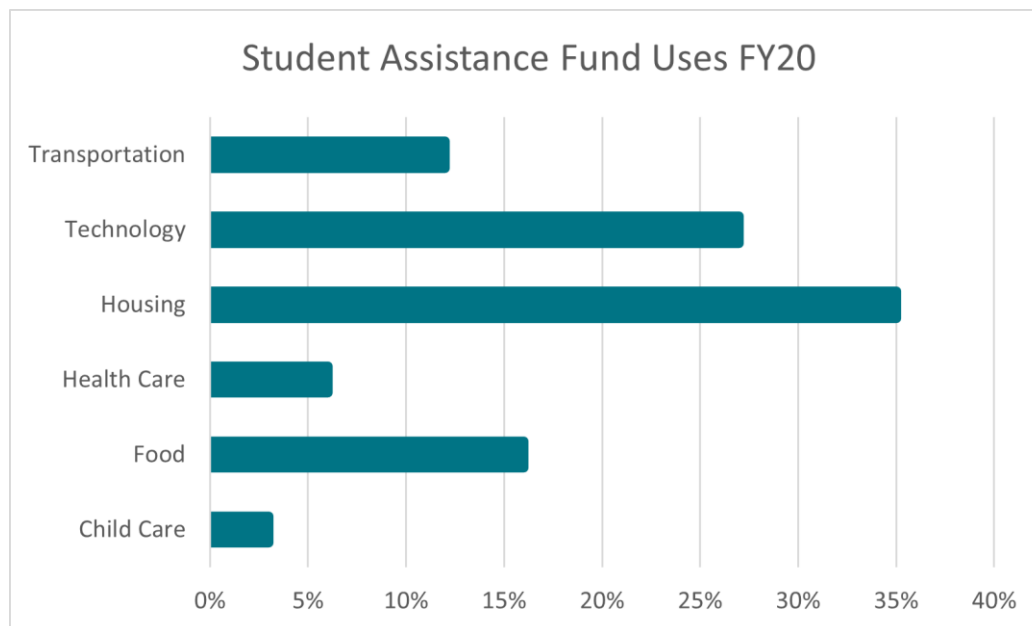
Fig. 1 Student Assistance Fund Demographics FY20



In follow-up forms, students were asked whether the funding they received addressed their full need. Forty-three out of 70 students noted that it did; of the remaining students, they shared that amounts between \$675 and \$1,200 would have met their full need.

The Foundation continues to offer the Fund and has budgeted a \$10,000 allocation each fiscal year. To date, individual donors (primarily donor-advised fundholders) have donated \$52,000 to the Fund. We know that needs will continue, even as the economy stabilizes.

Fig. 2 Student Assistance Fund Uses FY20



Recommendations

The Foundation's Scholarships team noted substantial impact from the flexibility in GPA requirements as well as providing an emergency assistance fund to current scholarship recipients. As a result, recommendations for other scholarship providers include:

1. Being as flexible as possible with application and renewal requirements,
2. Allowing a judgement-free application process (particularly for emergency funds), and
3. Not asking for information not required for evaluation and selection.

The Foundation promotes a student-focused, trust-based application process, and encourages other providers to allow students to share their information without any formal documentation (tax returns, Student Aid Report, etc) required. Early on, students should receive information about what to expect when submitting an application, including the timeline, evaluation process, and, if selected, when and how funds will be disbursed as well as any follow-up requirements. One Student Assistance Fund recipient shared that she liked "that [she] was able to talk freely about what [she] needed the money for without judgment." In these turbulent times, students are carrying significant burdens; if scholarship providers can aid instead of add to those burdens, that should be considered a success.

In closing, a student-focused and informed approach to scholarships is recommended, especially when addressing emergency or emerging needs. Simple additions to application and reporting forms can provide key supplemental information from scholarship applicants and recipients, which can then be utilized to make real-time adjustments to scholarship programs. The Foundation strongly encourages scholarship providers to view their students as partners in identifying ways programs can be responsive to student needs in the midst of crisis.