How to Get Emergency Coronavirus Aid at One University: Sign Up for Summer School



Eastern Michigan U. The campus of Eastern Michigan U.

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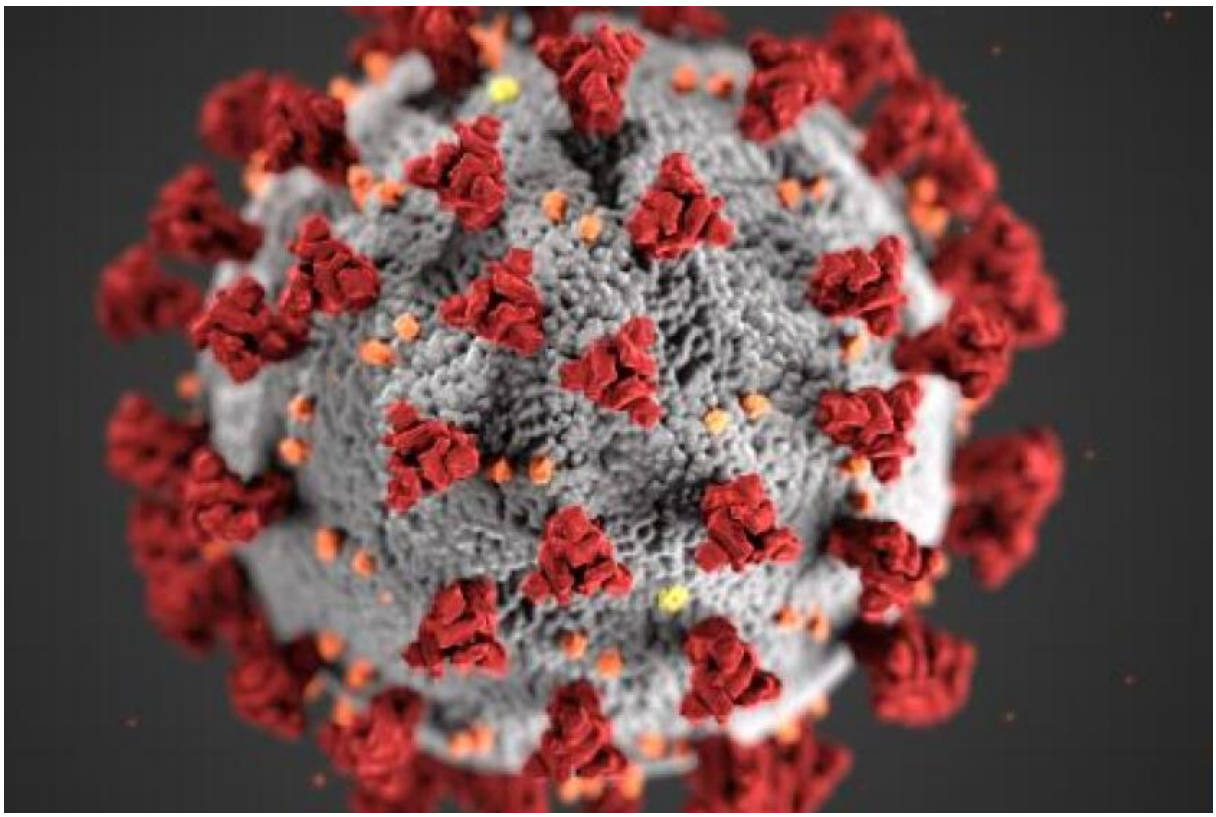
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However, the university is limiting the distribution of at least some of the funds to students enrolled in summer courses, in what appears to be the form of a tuition credit. In a statement, the university said the Cares Act funds will help "defray the cost of technology, online fees, and other technology-related costs due to providing online courses this term." Specifically, the university is offering grants of $500 (for students enrolled in three credits) or $1,000 (for students enrolled in six) to summer-school students who are subject to a university-imposed student fee meant to cover the cost of converting in-person courses into online courses.

In a written response to *The Chronicle,* a university spokesman, Geoff Larcom, said the institution plans "to use funds for a variety of Covid-related costs. First and foremost, we will provide immediate direct grants to students to offset increased costs of attendance."

But one of those increased costs was imposed by the university. On its website, the institution explains that the grant is meant to pay for a new technology fee — $80 per credit — that the university imposed for classes that were previously

face to face. “In fact, the Cares Grant not only covers the online fee, but students taking three credits will receive an additional $260,” according to the website. It’s not clear whether students must spend any remaining money from the grant on tuition, or if they can withdraw it. The purpose of the grant was “to help students persist in their education and complete their degrees,” Larcom wrote.

Riley Garrett, an Eastern Michigan student, said that when she reached out to the university about how it was distributing the Cares Act aid, she was told she would “get it automatically” if she were to register for summer classes.

Like many students at Eastern Michigan, 46 percent of whom receive Pell Grants, Garrett could really use the emergency financial aid. She said she and other members of her family lost their jobs during the coronavirus outbreak and are struggling to get by.

“I think it’s unfair that you can have summer students and transfers that only go to school over the summer at EMU,” Garrett said. “I think they’re harming the students. A lot of people chose to go there because it is way cheaper than going to Michigan State or Western or Central. But I think a lot of students are low income, their families are low income, so I think they could desperately use the money.”

On its website, Eastern Michigan advertises that students can receive Cares Grant funds by enrolling in its summer courses — one of the perks alongside completing courses “in as little as 7 weeks” and engaging with “experienced faculty.”

“Enroll in summer courses and receive an EMU CARES Grant of $500 or $1,000. Eligible students will automatically receive an EMU CARES Grant upon enrollment,” the website says.

In a separate letter to students, the university wrote that the grant funds would provide students with "an overall lower tuition cost," addressing "concerns raised by some students" about the $80-per-credit online fee for summer courses.

If the university is using the federal money to defray the cost of converting in-person courses into online classes, that may violate the certification agreement administrators are required to sign in order to secure the funds.

A college must agree that it will not use the student emergency funds to "reimburse itself for any costs or expenses, including but not limited to any costs associated with significant changes to the delivery of instruction due to the coronavirus and/or any refunds or other benefits that recipient previously issued to students."

In an email to *The Chronicle*, Larcom wrote that the grant "was established after discussions with legal experts who have reviewed the Cares Act extensively."

The Education Department did not immediately respond to questions about Eastern Michigan's use of the federal stimulus money.

"Aggressive recruitment practices like these were not the intended purpose of emergency grants to students; Congress set aside those dollars to help students with unexpected costs in the sudden transition to remote learning," said Clare McCann, deputy director for federal higher-education policy at the think tank New America.

Ben Miller, vice president for postsecondary education at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, said the law gives colleges "essentially universal discretion" to spend the money as long as the use is framed around helping students respond to disruption from the coronavirus.

“This will be far from the last time we [see] institutions make choices in terms of whether to give funds to students enrolled this term versus those attending in the future,” said Miller. “There is some rationale for holding back some of the money for future issues. But getting that balance right between help now and later is going to be hard.”

Larcom said the university is still considering all the ways that it will spend the federal money. “The Cares Act funding includes uses for student support and institutional support. We are fully compliant with the appropriate use of the federal Cares Act requirements under those areas, and have several initiatives in place and under development consistent with these funds.”

In written responses to *The Chronicle*’s questions, Larcom said that the university’s announcement of its Cares grant does not specifically make a reference to the federal funds. “It is a piece of the overall funding behind EMU Cares Grant, but not its sole source,” Larcom wrote.

Garrett and her family are struggling to pay for her basic living essentials, she said. While her entire family is unemployed, only her brother has so far received an unemployment check, which at the moment is supporting her entire household.

Garrett said she did not get a stimulus check because she was listed as a dependent on her mother’s taxes and cannot find another job since they are taking care of their elderly grandmother who is at risk of Covid-19. Now she is trying to stay afloat.

“I know if I’m struggling with money, someone else that goes to Eastern Michigan is,” she said. “I just don’t think that it’s right that they’re doing it this way.”