This University Was Allotted More Cares Act Money Than Any Other. Why Didn't These Students Get Any?



Charlie Leight/ASU Now Jessica Antonio, a student at Arizona State U., said the university should have used money from the Cares Act to help its low-income students.

When Arizona State University transitioned to online-only classes in March, Ja'Mya Williams's grades began to fall.

Without a laptop, the campus library, and her after-class tutoring, the freshman biological-sciences major was forced to complete her assignments on her cellphone or at her friend's house, and struggled to keep up with her honors-level courses.

In order to maintain her GPA to stay on track to get into medical school, she dropped three courses in April. As a result, she lost her financial aid for the

semester, she said, which put her in debt, uncertain whether she could afford to attend Arizona State in the fall. Looking for help, she contacted the honors college and the financial-aid office.

We're sorry. Something went wrong.

We are unable to fully display the content of this page.

The most likely cause of this is a content blocker on your computer or network. Please make sure your computer, VPN, or network allows javascript and allows content to be delivered from c950.chronicle.com and chronicle.blueconic.net.

Once javascript and access to those URLs are allowed, please refresh this page. You may then be asked to log in, create an account if you don't already have one, or subscribe.

If you continue to experience issues, contact us at 202-466-1032 or help@chronicle.com

When Arizona State University transitioned to online-only classes in March, Ja'Mya Williams's grades began to fall.

Without a laptop, the campus library, and her after-class tutoring, the freshman biological-sciences major was forced to complete her assignments on her cellphone or at her friend's house, and struggled to keep up with her honors-level courses.

In order to maintain her GPA to stay on track to get into medical school, she dropped three courses in April. As a result, she lost her financial aid for the semester, she said, which put her in debt, uncertain whether she could afford to attend Arizona State in the fall. Looking for help, she contacted the honors college and the financial-aid office.

Arizona State had access to a pot of money intended to help students just like Williams. The institution was allotted more federal money from the stimulus relief package within the Cares Act than any other university in the country: $63.5 million, at least half of which must go directly to students whose lives were disrupted by the coronavirus.

But the university has still not drawn on its Cares Act money or distributed any of it to students. Instead, the institution says it is saving those funds for future semesters as the pandemic draws on, and has distributed existing, in-house funds to students whose lives were disrupted in the spring. But some low-income students say the university failed to notify them that institutional assistance was available, or they were turned away by the financial-aid office when they asked for assistance.

Williams said she was told the university still did not know when and how it would be distributing Cares Act funds to students. There was nothing they could do for her financially, she said she was told, and she was given no notice about other institutional funds that were available.

“They’ve been claiming that they’ve given out aid to students who need it,” Williams said. “But I know, just based on my own personal circumstances and my financial-aid circumstances, I am a student who needed it. Why didn’t I get financial aid at all?”

On Friday, Arizona State announced its plan for distributing Cares Act funds to students. In most cases, the university said, that distribution will take the form of awards ranging between $500 and $6,000 to about 14,000 students, handed out between now and the end of the spring semester. A little less than half of the $31.7 million will go to students who were enrolled in both the spring and this fall and have never received institutional aid, with smaller amounts going to low-income students, new students, summer enrollees, and students whose financial circumstances have changed, respectively.

Michael M. Crow, Arizona State's president, said in an interview with The Chronicle last month that spreading the funding out would allow the university to "maximize student success" and allow the greatest number of students to complete the academic year and graduate.

"We felt that approach would allow us to say that we got the biggest bang for the investment possible," Crow said. "If you spend all of your money that you have from the Cares Act and it's all gone from the spring semester, then how are you going to help your students finish the rest of the academic year? How are you going to help the ones coming back to finish?"

Due to unclear guidance from the Department of Education and flexibilities on how they are allowed to distribute the federal aid to students, higher-education leaders across the country have grappled with how to best distribute funds to students and have done so through a hodgepodge of methods.

Distributing the funds as a means of ensuring students remain enrolled and graduate is consistent with the intent of the law, said Robert T. Kent, a higher-education attorney at the law firm Bricker and Eckler. "Congress wanted to minimize the impact this virus would have on our country. Keeping students on a trajectory for graduation will do exactly that," Kent said.

But the vast majority of other higher institutions have distributed at least some Cares Act relief to students, according to a survey by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.

The purpose of the Cares Act funds was to meet the immediate needs students faced from unexpected expenses and dramatic income losses — not to help them stay enrolled and complete college, said Clare McCann, deputy director for federal higher-education policy at the think tank New America.

Mellissa Dowd, who will be a senior this fall, said she was forced to pull from savings and pay for bills using her credit card after the coronavirus hit the

Tempe, Ariz., area in March. Dowd, a restaurant worker, had her hours cut before she and her husband, who graduated from ASU in the spring, had to stop working completely for a while after she developed symptoms of the coronavirus.

Dowd watched her emails for updates from ASU about possible Covid-assistance every day after the Cares Act was passed in March but never received any notice that emergency aid was available, she said. She once even tried reaching out to the financial-aid office about possible assistance but said she gave up after being placed on hold for over an hour.

“It just seems that we are being left unnoticed and forgotten during this crisis,” Dowd said.

Any student enrolled in the spring semester that needed assistance simply needed to “raise their hand” by contacting the financial-aid office or the dean of students, Crow said, adding the university sent a voicemail message to every student alerting them that funds were available. The university, he said, had the “highest completion rate for the spring semester we’ve ever had in the history of the institution.” Crow cited this as evidence that officials supported students using non-Cares Act funds.

When asked about students not being informed that relief was available, Crow said, “Often we’ll encounter someone that didn’t get the word for whatever reason. And then what we just say is well, now you’re getting the word. Let’s take care of it.”

A university spokesman told The Chronicle that $8 million in emergency-aid grants, airline flights home, food grants, and store gift cards had been distributed to just over 5,000 students since March 16, plus 2,500 laptops and hundreds of wireless hot spots. The university’s main Tempe campus enrolled 43,000 undergraduates as of fall 2018, about 12,500 of whom received Pell Grants.

After hearing from dozens of students dealing with financial hardships during a series of virtual town halls, ASU's undergraduate student government passed a resolution on June 27 urging Crow to distribute all of the university's Cares Act funds to students.

"These were students who were skipping meals, had no internet connection for long periods of time, were paying rent on credit cards," Daniel Lopez, an ASU senior and student-government senator, told The Chronicle in an interview. The intent was to send a message that they would not tolerate ASU's "penny pinching," Lopez said.

Lopez said the students he spoke with that did receive assistance told him it was a long and frustrating process.

Jessica Antonio, who graduated in the spring, did not own a laptop or have internet at her apartment and was struggling to keep up with her final semester of classes through her cellphone the first week that classes went online.

Antonio forked over hundreds of dollars the following week on a new battery for a laptop that she received through an outside organization and to install internet at her apartment. It wasn't until later that she found out from a university librarian that ASU was distributing laptops and hot spots to students for free.

The expenses put Antonio in a hole financially, but, when she called the financial-aid office in early June, she said she was not offered any financial assistance from the university to stay afloat other than a short-term student loan. In order to get by, she had to skip breakfast for two weeks straight.

"They have Cares Act money, and that could help so many students in so many different situations," said Antonio, referring to the federal funds the university has been allotted but has not drawn from. "If they cared about their students and less about their greed, we wouldn't be struggling still."

Update (July 10, 2020, 5:30 p.m.): This article originally appeared with the headline, "This University Was Allotted More Cares Act Money Than Any Other. None of It Has Gone to Students." A spokesman told The Chronicle after the article was published that the university will use Cares Act funds that it has not yet drawn upon to reimburse itself for awards it has given to some summer-school students. The headline has been edited to reflect this.