

# Financial Aid Covid-19 Focus Group Highlights: Student Communications, Appeals and Professional Judgment

## Background

The College Board gathered financial aid professionals from 26 institutions to better understand the unique aid delivery challenges institutions are facing during the Covid-19 pandemic. Discussions focused on two areas:

- Student and family communications
- Appeals for additional aid/professional judgment

**Professional Judgment** – the process of a financial aid professional using discretion to adjust aid application information where unusual, documented circumstances exist.

## Key Questions Asked of Professionals

- Has Covid-19 changed your student financial aid messaging and communication strategies?
- Have appeals increased and are appeals associated with Covid-19?
- Are there successful practices, solutions or resources that have helped to manage appeals and communication processes?

## Communications

### Common Challenges:

- Families are expressing concerns about costs and seeking greater certainty about Fall plans.
- Many offices are offering online services only and operating with reduced staff which present student support challenges.

### Recommendations for Campuses:

- ✓ Personalize communications when possible.
- ✓ Review websites and external messaging.
- ✓ Soften the tone of communications and acknowledge the current environment and family situation.
- ✓ Provide FAQs to common Covid-19 aid concerns and supports.
- ✓ Be proactive and efficient by leveraging virtual counseling and easy scheduling web interfaces.

## Appeals for Aid/Professional Judgment

### Common Themes:

- Majority of institutions see an increase in appeals for additional aid.
- Many institutions have adjusted practices and policies in response to the pandemic.

### Recommendations for Campuses:

- ✓ Be more flexible with supporting documentation; many families may not have access to traditional forms of documentation at this time.
- ✓ Be transparent about the process of appealing and the expected response time.
- ✓ Share information on appeals with other offices on campus to enhance internal communications and coordinated student supports.
- ✓ Consider a proactive and preemptive approach by providing additional grants/scholarships before a family appeals.
- ✓ When 2020 tax documentation is unavailable, consider averaging income from other tax years.
- ✓ Prioritize the most severe cases (death of a family member/extreme medical trauma) and respond immediately.

## College Board Resources

<https://professionals.collegeboard.org/higher-ed/financial-aid/im/tips> - Professional Judgment Tip Sheets for financial aid professionals.

<https://groups.collegeboard.org/fas> - Comprehensive resources for CSS Profile users.

<https://groups.collegeboard.org/powerfaids/> - Comprehensive resources for PowerFAIDS users.

<https://professionals.collegeboard.org/higher-ed/covid-19-updates> - resources and updates for college and university professionals.

**Contact Us** about this publication or other aid initiatives.

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