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://groups.collegeboard.org/fas](https://groups.collegeboard.org/fas) - Comprehensive resources for CSS Profile users.
- [https://groups.collegeboard.org/powerfaids/](https://groups.collegeboard.org/powerfaids/) - Comprehensive resources for PowerFAIDS users.

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