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How federal emergency aid helped offset costs for students in historically Black schools

By — : 12-16 minutes : 10/19/2021

The pandemic has posed unprecedented financial challenges for U.S. colleges and students. The federal government has provided more than \$70 billion in relief. Over \$3 billion specifically for historically Black colleges and universities and more than \$1 billion to minority-serving institutions where many students face fiscal hardship. Yamiche Alcindor reports for our "Rethinking College" series.

- **Judy Woodruff:**

On college campuses across the country, the pandemic has posed unprecedented financial challenges. The federal government has provided \$76 billion in relief, over \$3 billion specifically for historically Black colleges and universities, and more than \$1 billion to minority-serving institutions, where many students face financial hardship.

Yamiche Alcindor reports on how the money is being used to reduce the economic strain on students.

It's part of our series Rethinking College.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

Ever since 19-year-old Manuhe Abebe came to North Carolina Central University, he's had a plan.

- **Manuhe Abebe, College Student:**

I'm actually going to venture capital after I graduate. I know there's only like 4 percent of African Americans in V.C. So, if I become that one minority that could advocate for other minorities, I believe I can definitely make a difference.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

He moved to the U.S. from Ethiopia when he was 4. He is the first in his family to go to college.

- **Manuhe Abebe:**

They came here to give me a better education, a better life. I definitely don't want to waste an opportunity. I want to set an example for my siblings and any other first generation that is going into college.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

But during the pandemic, the balance he owed his school ballooned to some \$7,000. The honor student did not know how he would pay it off. Then he got a surprise.

- **Manuhe Abebe:**

One day, I just woke up and I ended up seeing my balance being cleared. That definitely lessened the stress of having to worry about, how am I supposed to pay for my college?

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

North Carolina Central University is one of many historically Black colleges and universities that used federal pandemic relief funds to clear the outstanding balances owed directly to them in tuitions and fees.

- **Akua Johnson Matherson, Chief Financial Officer, North Carolina Central University:**

We're doing whatever we can.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

The school's chief financial officer, Akua Johnson Matherson, says the goal is retention.

- **Akua Johnson Matherson:**

How can we ensure that our students are getting everything that we can possibly provide, so that they can stay here?

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

It's a welcome relief to students at HBCUs, who are disproportionately low-income.

More than 75 percent get Pell Grants, and many come from Black communities, which were hit hard by wage and job losses during the pandemic.

Fenaba Addo studies student debt.

Fenaba Addo, University of North Carolina: Schools are realizing that the fees that are associated with attending their universities and their colleges are prohibiting them from completing their degree, or maybe delaying their opportunity with completing their degree.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

Trinity Washington University's student population is predominantly Black and Hispanic. Most students are women.

And provost Carlota Ocampo says, on average, they have few resources.

- **Carlota Ocampo, Provost, Trinity Washington University :**

The median family income is \$25,000 a year. That's family income. A \$200 bill can make a difference for them staying in school.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

So, Trinity spent more than \$2 million in American Rescue Plan funds to pay off balances for 535 students.

- **Carlota Ocampo:**

Many of our students have economic great economic need even at the best of times. So, you can well imagine, in an economic downturn, who are the first to be impacted? They don't have family they can run to and say, lend me 1,000 bucks to get through.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

Anissa Young, who emigrated from Jamaica as a teen, is double majoring in business administration and psychology. Until the pandemic hit, her dad helped pay her tuition.

- **Anissa Young, College Student:**

He drives trucks. He works seven days a week or five. He was cut back to two or three.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

When that happened, they could no longer make tuition payments. Young accrued an \$11,000 balance.

How concerned were you about paying this tuition before your debt was wiped away?

- **Anissa Young:**

It was kind of stressful. My dad told me not to worry about it, but, knowing me, I am going to worry about it. After finishing the homework and everything, I will just stay up wondering, is this what I'm going to do? Should we do this? It was it was kind of a struggle, to be honest.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

Young works part-time at a Jamaican restaurant. But her earnings were dwarfed by the size of her debt. When she got an e-mail that her balance was paid off, she couldn't believe it.

- **Anissa Young:**

Honestly, at first, I thought it was a scam, someone hacked Trinity's e-mail. But then I read it, and I'm like, is this it? Like, is this what I have been actually praying for? Like, all of it, just thousands gone.

- **Kiara Tate, College Student:**

Welcome to this evening's NCAA women's volleyball contest.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

Nineteen-year-old Kiara Tate has worked a number of jobs to help cover her college costs, including a work-study position in the athletics department.

- **Kiara Tate:**

I need to work so I can pay my tuition.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

Tate is studying nursing, and has wanted to go to Trinity since she was child.

- **Kiara Tate:**

My mom went to Trinity. And she was coming here when I was in the womb. Everybody's so nice. I fell in love with the college.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

But Tate's account balance of over \$6,000. That made her question whether she could stay in school.

- **Kiara Tate:**

I was just, I don't know how to pay it. I don't work enough hours to pay it. I was pretty worried I was going to get kicked out of college.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

Then she got the news that her account was cleared.

- **Kiara Tate:**

I called my mom and I said: "Mom, my debt is paid off."

And she was like: "What?"

And I said: "My debt is paid off from Trinity. I — they're starting me over, like a financial new start."

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

There's a weight that has been lifted.

- **Kiara Tate:**

Yes, a very big weight.

(LAUGHTER)

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

Provost Ocampo says it's money well spent.

- **Carlota Ocampo:**

This is not giving away free money to students who just are going to run off to Vegas. I mean, these kids work hard in order to put themselves through school so they can better themselves and their families.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

Wiping away the fees students owe their schools does not impact the \$1.7 trillion held nationwide in federal and private student loans. And, on average, Black students have more student loan debt than their white counterparts, says Fenaba Addo.

- **Fenaba Addo:**

But the fees are important as well, because the fees are associated with students' ability to stay enrolled and to complete their degrees. You will have one less financial burden to worry about.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

Schools have used federal dollars to provide other kinds of help.

Denise Perez, a senior studying psychology at Virginia Union University, grew up with 10 brothers in a low-income section of Norfolk, Virginia.

- **Denise Perez, College Student:**

There's not a lot of opportunities there. So, when you're given that chance to leave Norfolk, Virginia, and make a change, you definitely have to take that chance and you just have to run with it.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

She's learned to care for herself. But that got tough when COVID hit.

How did the pandemic impact your situation, both financially, but also emotionally?

- **Denise Perez:**

I was a student who where the professors were like, are you OK? What's going on? Like, this is not you.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

Perez had lost a job and her focus. She struggled to make ends meet.

- **Denise Perez:**

I was thinking about how I'm going to pay my rent, how am I going to make sure that I have food in my mouth.

And my mom said — it's like she still has kids at home. She has her own bills, her own commitments, her own business. And money doesn't grow off the trees.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

Perez got a boost when her school sent her around \$2,000 in emergency aid funded by the CARES Act. With that, plus scholarships, loans, and earnings from her job, she's hung on.

- **Manuhe Abebe:**

I'm still here. I didn't give up. I didn't drop out. Virginia Union is like my world. This is like my comfort zone. This is where I feel like I am me.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

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Virginia Union chief operating officer Allia Carter is exploring more ways to provide more support to students, even without federal relief money.

- **Allia Carter, Chief Operating Officer, Virginia Union University:**

What we used these funds for was to offset the cost of what we call gaps in the idea of affordability.

How do we sustain this? How do you make this doable for those to come into our higher education environment and providing them relief or support that they may need so that they can gain access?

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

At North Carolina Central, Manuhe Abebe is looking forward, now that his financial burden has been eased.

- **Manuhe Abebe:**

I was actually thinking of running for student body president. And I just want to give back to the students and make sure that I'm making an impact.

- **Yamiche Alcindor:**

For the sophomore and so many other students, the focus is now on the future.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Yamiche Alcindor.