CENTER FOR
DIGITAL
EDUCATION

CARES ACT FUNDING:
CYBERSECURITY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The COVID pandemic has upended higher education across the country. Some colleges and universities have resumed in-person classes, while others have kept students at home and are conducting all classes via remote learning platforms. Still others have welcomed students back to campus housing but have kept classrooms closed, so students are engaged in distance learning from their dorm rooms.

The situation, which continues to evolve almost daily with changing threats of the pandemic, poses a significant cybersecurity challenge. These institutions must now secure a vastly expanded and ever-shifting environment. And unlike most K-12 schools, colleges and universities must safeguard a treasure trove of sensitive personal data related to students, campus residents, faculty, administration, financial information and campus infrastructure.

Higher education institutions have leveraged federal aid to help tackle these security issues. In March 2020, Congress passed the CARES Act, a $2.2 trillion stimulus bill intended to jumpstart the economy. State and local governments received more than $150 billion of this money to help respond to greater demand for public services. In December, Congress passed another stimulus bill. Though this bill didn't provide additional funding specifically for state and local governments, it did extend the deadline for recipients to use their original CARES Act funding. This extension is critical because our research indicates state, local and county governments still have billions of dollars left to spend.

Over the past year, the Center for Digital Education has tracked several CARES Act federal funding streams, including the Coronavirus Relief Fund, the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund and the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund.

Our research indicates governments and education institutions have applied federal funding — particularly from the Coronavirus Relief Fund and Education Stabilization Fund — to address several cybersecurity challenges in higher education institutions. However, with a substantial amount of money remaining, funding recipients may need more guidance for how they can effectively use federal aid to address the security challenges associated with distance learning and to combat cybersecurity threats going forward.

This brief provides an overview of remaining federal funding streams, details how higher education institutions have already used available funding and relays key information education leaders need to know to take full advantage of any remaining federal aid this year.

CARES ACT APPROPRIATIONS FOR CYBERSECURITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF)

How much funding is left: According to oversight data reported to the federal government in February and tracked by the Center for Digital Education, $26 billion remains in this fund across 48 states. The states with the most funding remaining include:[1]

1.	**California:**	$5.5 billion
2.	**Texas:**	$2.6 billion
3.	**North Carolina:**	$1.9 billion
4.	**Oregon:**	$1.5 billion
5.	**Florida:**	$1.2 billion

Allowable uses: Federal data indicates education needs have accounted for 763 CRF expenditures out of the nearly 20,000 expenditures reported so far. Telecommunications and networking-related expenses have accounted for 1,389 of these expenditures, though all these expenses aren't specifically related to education.[2]

CARES Act federal guidance is broad and allows funding recipients to use this money in several ways for education, including:

- **Broadband access**: State and local governments can significantly expand broadband capacity to facilitate distance learning as a result of the pandemic.[3] (Note: The federal government has specific rules around the types of broadband projects that can be funded with CRF money.)
- **Equipment purchases:** Expenses incurred for distance learning, including laptops and other digital devices for students, faculty and staff.
- **Staffing and training-related costs:** The costs of redeploying educational support staff or faculty for duties that are not part of their traditional job responsibilities, including developing online learning capabilities and providing technical support.
- **Technology needs:** Expenses to facilitate distance learning, including technological improvements related to campus closures and maintaining compliance with COVID-19 precautions.

Next steps: Award recipients have until Dec. 31, 2021, to use these funds. Primary recipients of this funding — generally, state and local governments with populations of at least 500,000 — may have additional guidelines for how sub-recipients can use their allocation. Therefore, sub-recipients should follow up with their awarding agencies for more information on the application process and specific guidance as they decide where to invest these funds.

Education Stabilization Fund (ESF)

This fund, which also was established under the CARES Act, is divided into three separate funding streams: The Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF), the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER) and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER). For higher education, HEERF and GEER are the two relevant funds.

Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF)

How much funding is left: The CARES Act originally appropriated $14 billion for this fund to help states provide assistance to colleges and universities regarding coronavirus disruptions. As of October, most states have spent between 50 percent and 80 percent of their HEERF Funds. Hawaii is on the low end of this spectrum and has spent just 29.5 percent of its allocation, while New Jersey has spent the most — 88 percent.

Allowable uses: Expenses related to preventing, preparing for and responding to COVID-19, including expanding schools' technology capabilities to facilitate secure distance learning, staff training and other educational needs related to the pandemic.[4]

Next steps: Higher education institutions have one year from the date of their award to use these funds. The money can be used to cover expenses dating back to March 13, 2020.

Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER)

Governors have discretion to dedicate these resources to schools and higher education organizations "that have been most significantly impacted by coronavirus."

How much funding is left: Congress allotted $3 billion for this fund. According to the most recent federal data from early October, most states have barely spent any of these funds. In fact, 32 states have spent less than 1 percent of their GEER allocation. States were awarded between $4.4 million (Vermont) and $355 million (California).[5]

Allowable uses: Governors can use these funds for COVID-19 response and mitigation efforts. However, colleges and universities may be able to leverage GEER funds for several purposes, including purchasing secure distance learning technologies and communications technologies to support the dissemination of public health information to students, faculty and administration.

Next steps: Governors must award funds to sub-recipients by June 2021. They then have until Sept. 30, 2022, to use the money.[6]

HOW GOVERNMENTS AND SCHOOLS ARE USING CARES ACT FUNDING

State and local governments and institutions of higher learning are deploying CARES Act funding for a variety of cybersecurity and technology needs.

Some recipients, especially in rural and underserved parts of the country, are expanding broadband capacity.[7] Many others are strengthening their technology infrastructure for distance learning, including leveraging access management solutions to give authorized users access to e-learning systems, and cloud-based collaboration solutions to improve data availability and system performance.

The University of Texas at El Paso, for example, is using $115,000 of federal aid on cybersecurity technologies. The Idaho State Board of Education recently announced it plans to use its appropriation to fund a $1 million statewide cybersecurity initiative.[8] The University of Michigan-Flint's University Center for Community and Economic Development received a $300,000 grant to implement cybersecurity-focused community and workforce development programs,[9] while the State Board of Community Colleges in North Carolina has allocated $250,000 for cybersecurity awareness training for community colleges.[10]

Pandemic-related federal funding gives higher education institutions the chance to build a more robust and secure technology infrastructure that will help them effectively execute distance learning programs and safeguard all the valuable private data they collect from students, faculty, staff and partners. These organizations have an invaluable opportunity to make strategic investments that will serve them well not just during the current pandemic, but also far into the future.

Endnotes

1. CDE Research: CRF Spending Data - Summary Tables
2. CDE Research: CRF Spending Data - Spending Categories
3. https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/CRF-Guidance-Federal-Register_2021-00827.pdf, pg. 9
4. https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/01/Final_ESSERII_Factsheet_1.5.21.pdf
5. CDG Research: CARES ACT Education Spending - States
6. https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/01/FINAL_-GEER_FactSheet_1.8.211.pdf
7. CDG Research: CRF Spending Data
8. https://www.idahocountyfreepress.com/news/everything-done-for-idaho-students----that-has-been-the-goal-education-week/article_87bad5f0-64c3-11eb-bce4-0b39a95e8f00.html
9. https://www.eda.gov/news/press-releases/2020/07/31/university-centers.htm
10. https://www.ednc.org/state-board-of-community-colleges-begins-spending-covid-19-funds/

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