# 2SHB 1893
# STUDENT EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE GRANT (SEAG) PROGRAM LEGISLATIVE REPORT

*December 1, 2021*

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# Student Emergency Assistance Grant (SEAG) Program

The Washington State Legislature established the Student Emergency Assistance Grant (SEAG) Program through passage of 2SHB 1893 during the 2019 legislative session. The SEAG Program, administered by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), allows community and technical colleges (colleges) to provide monetary assistance to students experiencing unforeseen emergencies or situations that affect the student's ability to remain enrolled in their classes.

In order to be eligible for SEAG Program funding, colleges were required to demonstrate student need during a competitive application process held fall 2019. All Washington state community and technical colleges were encouraged to apply. Twenty-eight colleges requested funding and 16 colleges received funding from Dec. 1, 2019 through June 30, 2021. A list of colleges that applied, the amounts they requested, and the amounts they were granted are provided in Appendix A.

Additionally, all colleges selected to administer SEAG Program funding were required to submit plans of operations that detailed how they would:

- ensure that students' access to emergency aid funds will be as low barrier as possible and will not require the student to have to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to receive emergency funds;

- allow flexibility in who may apply for funds and include students who may not necessarily meet the RCW 28B.92.030 definition of "student with financial need" but who may be experiencing emergency situations, and;

- indicate how the colleges will prioritize the disbursement of emergency aid funds.

The SBCTC is required to submit this report to the appropriate committees of the Legislature beginning Dec. 1, 2020 and each Dec. 1, thereafter. Because the SEAG Program was first launched in December 2019, this report will begin with a brief overview of community and technical college students' basic needs in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting emergency assistance available to support postsecondary students in Washington state. Then, SEAG Program data related to students served and the emergency assistance requested and received will be followed by a compilation of colleges' formative evaluation findings regarding SEAG program delivery. Student and staff voice are included throughout the report to underscore the impact of the SEAG Program during such a critical time of systemic crises. Finally, the report will conclude by summarizing the most prominent findings and recommendations for next steps.

# Emergency Assistance for Community and Technical College Students in Washington State

## Washington community and technical college students

The most recent full year of data shows that there was a total of 337,618 students enrolled in Washington's community and technical colleges during the 2019-20 academic year. During that same year, 48,390 students or 39% of those in an aid-eligible program received need-based aid, 47% of students were employed and 25% of students had children or other dependents. Additionally, 29,681 or 30% of Washington college students were enrolled in one of the following student support programs: Basic Food and Employment Training (BFET), Early Achievers Grant (EAG), Opportunity Grant (OG), Passport for Foster Youth Promise Program, TRiO, WorkFirst, or Worker Retraining (WRT).[4]

## Washington community and technical college students' basic needs insecurity

Recent research shows an expanded population of students, particularly low-income students and students of color, impacted by the sustained public health and economic crises. Yet, long before the coronavirus pandemic, it was apparent that basic needs insecurity was an increasing barrier to postsecondary students' success.[5]

In fall 2019, 28 of Washington state's 34 community and technical colleges participated in the #RealCollege Survey created and conducted by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University. The results from this survey are the most recent statewide needs assessment of community and technical college students. Of the 13,550 community and technical college students who responded to the 2019 #RealCollege Survey, 62% reported experiencing some form of housing or food insecurity.[6]

Since then, many colleges continued to survey students about their needs. These surveys helped colleges rapidly respond to vastly changed conditions faced by students due to COVID-19-related campus closures and remote learning requirements. SEAG Program data provided a sample of the unmet needs of students attending the 16 SEAG-funded community and technical colleges during the FY20-21 biennium. While this sample is only representative of a small portion of aid administered by just under half of Washington's community and technical colleges, the data presented in this report illuminates some of students' most pressing and emergent needs.

To help better understand the types and extent of students' unmet needs, Washington's public and private colleges and universities made great strides during the last two and a half years to improve postsecondary basic needs data available at the state and regional level. In the spring of 2021, a workgroup of these college and university representatives met to design a basic needs assessment tool that can be implemented at all public and private higher education institutions in Washington state. The resulting data collection instrument is aligned with the previously administered

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[4] SBCTC Data Warehouse
[5] Basic Needs Insecurity during the Ongoing Pandemic
[6] Washington State Community and Technical Colleges #RealCollege Survey

#RealCollege Survey and can be fielded as a standalone survey or integrated into existing institutional research efforts. Colleges and universities are preparing for statewide implementation during fall 2022 and some early adopter institutions have already begun testing the instrument during the 2021-22 academic year. [7]

## Federal and state-funded emergency assistance for postsecondary students in Washington state during the COVID-19 pandemic

Fortunately, unprecedented student need during the pandemic was met with unparalleled federal and state investments in emergency aid. The community and technical colleges in Washington received a system total of $593,221,068 from the Higher Education Emergency Relief (HEER) Fund as reported by the U.S. Department of Education.[8] The HEER Fund includes awards made through federal legislative appropriations under the CARES, CRRSA and ARP acts. The portion of the HEER Fund dedicated to student emergency aid is $249,377,879, and, as of Aug. 31, 2021, $82,262,947 of this portion was expended. The conditions of these federal relief funds were to make grants available to students, including those enrolled exclusively in distance education, for any component of the student's cost of attendance or for emergency costs such as food, housing, healthcare, and childcare that occurred due to the pandemic.[9]

Additional investments made by federal and state governments to support postsecondary students in Washington state included:

1. $5,000,000 of the general fund—federal appropriation (CRF) was authorized through the passage of HB 1368 to be provided solely for undocumented student relief grants authorized under the authority provided due to the declaration of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic[10]

2. The Legislature authorized an additional $8,000,000 Section 1 of HB 1893 regarding the emergency assistance grant program (SEAG) over the 2021-23 biennium. This allowed SBCTC to expand the SEAG program from 16 to 27 community and technical colleges beginning July 1, 2021.

While the SBCTC is eager to share the impacts of increased funding and additional colleges participating in the SEAG Program during FY22-23, this report will focus on FY21, the latest complete year available, and compare to the partial-year data from the SEAG Program's inaugural year of FY20, when appropriate.

# Students Served

The SEAG Program is centered in responding to students' immediate emergencies and connecting them with additional resources that will support their continued persistence in their educational programs. Because the SEAG Program is intended to be as low barrier as possible, colleges focused

[7] Basic Needs Data Overview for partners
[8] Higher Education Emergency Relief (HEER) in Washington State
[9] Supplemental Grant Funds for Students Agreement
[10] HB 1368 – Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic through state actions supported by federal funding.

on improving student access and providing the specific kinds of support students needed. Of the 2,321 students who requested SEAG assistance in FY20, 820 or 35% received SEAG funding, and of the 2,573 students who requested SEAG assistance in FY21, 1,060 or 41% received SEAG funding. Many of the students who did not receive SEAG funding received funding through other programs and/or received referrals to other supportive services. More details about requests that were and were not funded through the SEAG Program may be found in the Emergency Assistance Requested and Received section of this report.

Students who received emergency aid through the SEAG Program completed credits in the quarter of aid, and they either completed credits or their credential in the following quarter at very high percentage rates: 93% for FY20 and 91% for FY21.
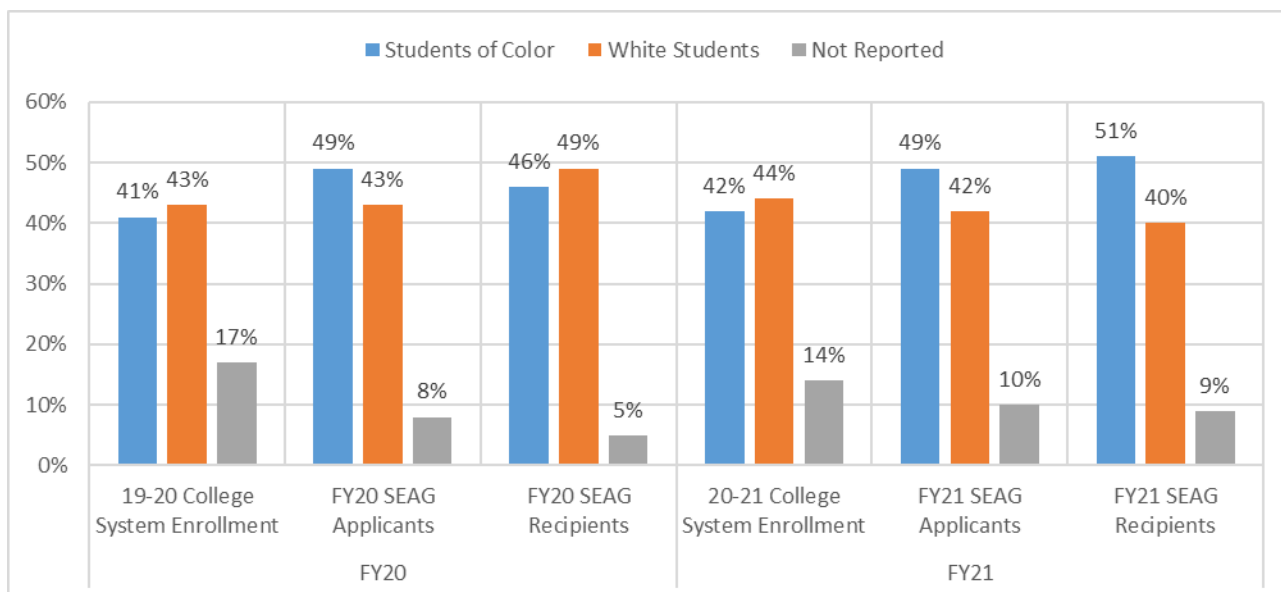
> *I would have had to quit school and would have been sleeping on the streets with no laptop or resources. I used it to pay bills and secure resources and abilities to continue my education.*
> *~Student*

# SEAG recipient demographics

As previously cited in this report, students of color saw disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. SEAG Program race/ethnicity data shows this impact with students of color more likely to apply for SEAG Program assistance. Chart 1 shows 49% of SEAG Applicants in FY20 were students of color versus 41% students of color enrolled at all community and technical colleges. In FY21, 49% of SEAG applicants were students of color versus 42% students of color enrolled in the college system.

*Chart 1: Comparison of students of color and white SEAG applicants versus recipients*



Digging into the details, Black/African-American students applied at a percentage rate more than twice the percentage of Black/African-American students enrolled in the college system (14% in FY20 and 13% in FY21 versus 6% of students enrolled systemwide). Asian students also applied at a slightly greater percentage rate: 13% for FY20 and FY21 versus a systemwide enrollment rate of

11% in FY20 and 10% in FY21. Students who identified as 2+ Races applied at a lower rate of 10% for FY20 and FY21, compared to a systemwide enrollment of 12% in FY20 and 13% in FY21. Students who did not report their race applied at a lower rate compared to students enrolled systemwide who did not report their race in both FY20 and FY21.
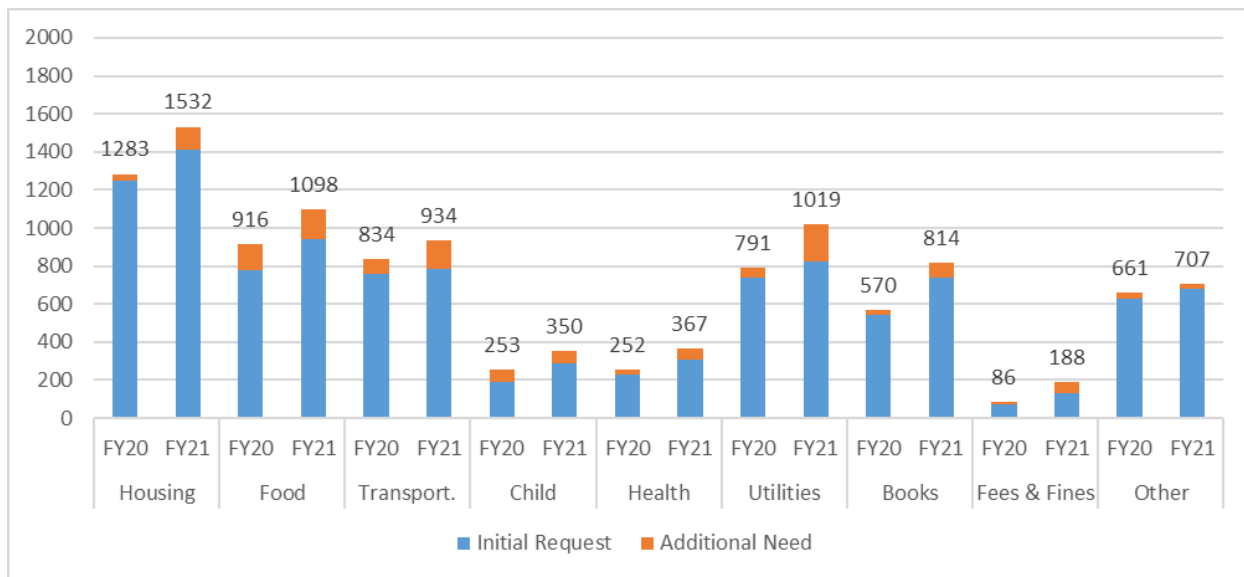
When comparing students who applied for SEAG Program assistance to students who received SEAG Program assistance, we saw notable differences between FY20 and FY21. Although students of color represented 49% of students who applied for SEAG Program assistance in FY20, those students received SEAG Program assistance at a lower rate of 46%. White students, however, were funded at a higher rate of 49% versus only representing 43% of SEAG Program applicants that same year.

Recognizing application and review processes may have unintentionally created barriers to funding for students of color, colleges reported making multiple adjustments that seem to have addressed some of the barriers. As shown in Chart 1, students of color applied at the same percentage rate of applications for FY20 and FY21 of 49%. Instead of being funded at a lower rate as was the case in FY20, students of color were funded at a greater rate of 51% for FY21. Black/African American, Asian and Native American/Alaskan Native students were funded at the same percentage rate as those who applied, while Hispanic and students that identified as 2+ races were funded at 1% higher each than those that applied in FY21. Students who did not report their race were only funded at a rate 1% lower for FY21 as compared to 3% lower in FY20. Many colleges indicated prioritizing SEAG Program funds for students who were not eligible for federal relief funds and other supports, which may be one of the reasons for the slight shift in demographics.

Analysis of age, gender, and dependents provides additional insight into who applies for and receives SEAG Program funding. Students in the 20-29 and 30-39 age groups accessed the SEAG Program at a much higher rate in comparison to system data than the Under 20 age group. The percentage of students aged 40 or above who accessed the SEAG Program was relatively comparable to the number of students in that age group enrolled in the college system. Students who identified as female applied for and were granted SEAG Program assistance at a much greater rate than students who identified as male. Of the total requests received for SEAG Program assistance for both FY20 and FY21, 41% were from students that indicated having at least one dependent.

# Emergency Assistance Requested and Received
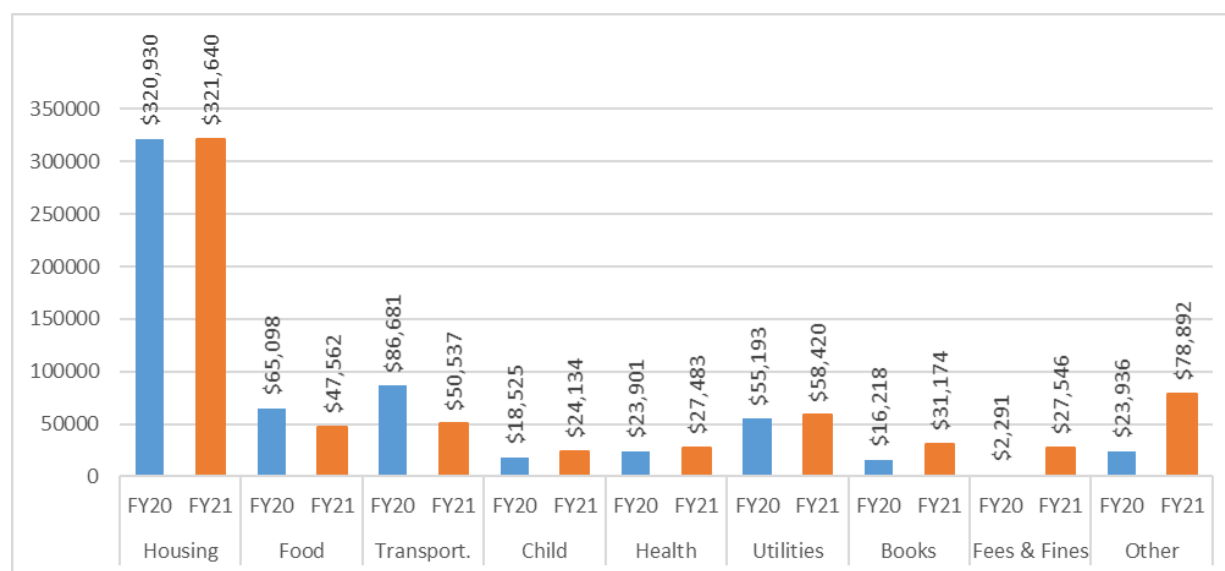
*Chart 2: SEAG requests by types of emergency expenses*



Colles received requests for emergency assistance for a variety of non-tuition allowable expenses. Chart 2 presents these requests and the following section describes these in detail. As seen in the above chart, emergency assistance requests increased across all categories from FY20 to FY21. Housing, food, transportation, and utilities continued to be the most frequently requested emergency expenses with books and "other" expenses also representing a significant portion of requests in numbers.

Often, college staff discovered through communication with students that although they had requested assistance for one or two types of expenses, they had additional emergency funding needs not identified in their original request. For reporting purposes, those additional emergency expenses were tracked separately and marked as "additional need." Total numbers described below refer to initial requests plus additional needs unless otherwise stated.

When the total number of requests were compared to the total amounts awarded by type, housing eclipsed all other expenses for both FY20 and FY21. In FY20, housing accounted for 23% of the requests and 52% of the total amount awarded. Chart 3 shows the total amount awarded for each request. In FY21, housing accounted for 22% of the number of requests and 48% of the total amount awarded. This data suggests that student housing warrants immediate further investigation and investments.

## Housing

The housing category refers to any expenses related to housing or shelter, which may include paying for a hotel room, rent, or mortgage if the student is at-risk of foreclosure and without resources to remain housed. As noted above, housing represented the most frequently requested and largest amount awarded emergency expense that students faced for FY20 at 1,279 requests and $320,930 total awarded. This increased for FY21 to 1,532 requests and $321,640 total awarded.

## Food

The food category refers to any food and nutrition-related expenses. Food was the second most frequently experienced student emergency and was under requested by students for both years, shown by the orange portion of the stacking bar in Chart 2. In fact, college staff were able to identify 137 applicants in FY20 and 155 applicants in FY21 who had the additional need for food assistance even though the students had not initially requested the assistance. Although the number of food requests increased from 916 in FY20 to 1,098 in FY21, the total amount awarded for food requests reduced from $65,098 in FY20 to $47,562 in FY21. The number of SEAG Program applicants who were referred to other supportive programs increased significantly from FY20 and FY21, which may have resulted in some of these requests being triaged to other food-based supports.

## Transportation

The transportation category refers to any travel expenses related to remaining enrolled in classes, which most often included public transportation, gas, and auto repair costs. Transportation remained one of the most pressing emergency expenses for students at 834 for FY20 and growing to 934 in FY21. Even with virtual classes being the predominant learning modality starting spring quarter 2020, some professional-technical classes required in-person components requiring transportation to campus. Additionally, students often needed transportation to access employment opportunities and basic needs supports like grocery stores/food pantries, childcare and health care. Much like

food, the increased number of requests did not translate to an increased amount awarded with $86,681 in FY20 and $50,537 in FY21.

## Childcare

The childcare category refers to any child-related expense including childcare provider payments, emergency care, or child healthcare. There was a rising need for assistance with childcare in FY21 at 349 requests compared to 253 requests in FY20 despite other available resources and supports. The amount awarded for childcare rose modestly from $18,525 FY20 to $24,134 in FY21.

## Health care

The health care category refers to any health-related expense or bills including medical, dental, or vision. Requests for health-related emergencies increased from 252 requests in FY20 to 367 requests in FY21. However, the amount requested was not much greater for the second year: FY20 equaled $23,901 and FY21 equaled $27,483.

## Utilities

The utilities category refers to any expenses specifically related to electricity, water, sewer, or garbage services. There was a slight increase in student requests for utilities in FY21 over the previous year. However, college staff frequently discovered that students needed assistance with utilities even if they had not requested it. As a result, when students' additional need was factored into the total number, utilities saw the largest increase in number of requests between the two fiscal years with 791 for FY20 and 1,019 for FY21. That being said, the increased requests translated to a slight increase in total amount awarded from $55,193 in FY20 to $58,420 in FY21.

## Books

The book category covers printed and online books, access codes, study and exam costs, and other course materials including tool and supplies as long as all other funding sources have been exhausted. The total number of requests and amount awarded for books increased from 570 and $16,218 in FY20 to 814 and $31,174 in FY21.

## Fees and fines

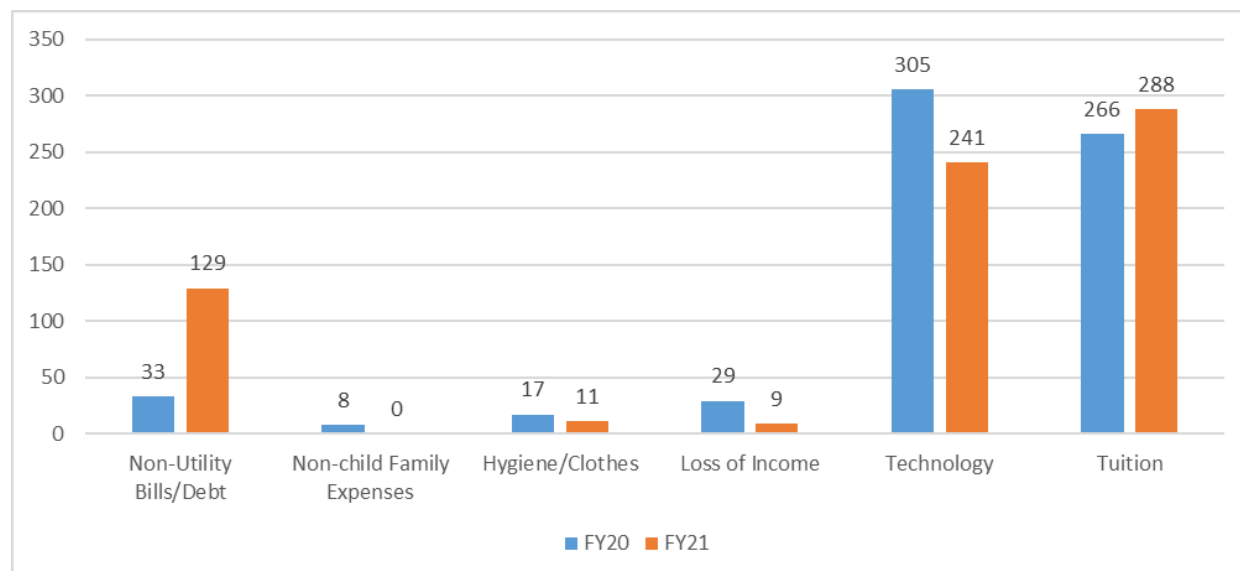The fees and fines category refer to any non-tuition related fees and fines that inhibit the student's ability to continue in classes, including non-utility or non-housing related bills or debts. Fees and fines increased from 86 requests and $2,291 in FY20 to 188 requests and $27,546 in FY21. There was also an increased number of non-utility related bills or debts that were categorized as "other" (see below).

## Other

The "other" category was meant to collect any emergency expenses that did not fit into the defined categories[11]. As shown in Chart 4, for FY20-21, "other" expenses included non-utility bills or debt, non-child family expenses, hygiene and clothing, technology, and tuition.

*Chart 4: Other request types*



Technology and tuition continued to be the greatest "other" concerns for students. Technology expenses related to attending remote classes during campus closures were reduced during FY21 at 241 versus 305 during FY20. Technology expenses included computer, cell phone, Wi-Fi connection and devices, printer, headphones, cables and cords, or other expenses necessary to access online classes.

Although not an allowable SEAG Program expense, students requested tuition assistance at a slightly higher rate during FY21 at 288 over 266 in FY20. In FY21, there was also a growing need for emergency relief with non-utility bills and debt. While the data included little details about these expenses, colleges shared anecdotally that students needed to use credit cards to pay rent and other monthly expenses due to loss of income during the pandemic.

For FY22-23, Technology will be added to the official list of eligible expenses for the SEAG Program, and many of these "other" expenses will fit within existing categories. For example, non-utility bills or debt will be included in the Fees and Fines category and hygiene and clothes will be included in Books and Supplies category. Tuition will continue to not be an allowable SEAG expense due to other available federal and state funding.

## Requested funding and funding sources

The total amount of SEAG funding requested increased from $3,359,285 for the seven-month period of December 2019 to June 2020 to $5,458,782 for the full 12-month funding period from July 2020

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[11] During FY20, colleges received 82 unspecified "other" requests due to high number of incomplete applications. These were removed from this chart because it was not an issue to the same degree for FY21.
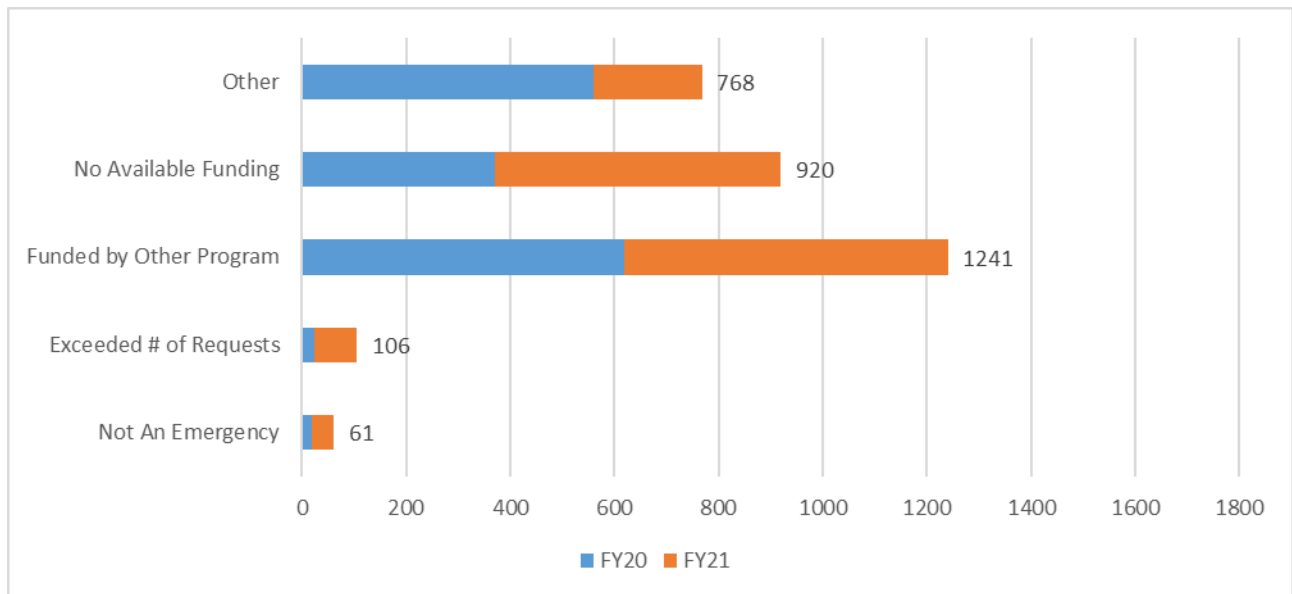
to June 2021. Not funded requests grew disproportionately when compared to the amount funded by SEAG and those funded by another program. At first glance, this would be expected since the total amount allocated to SEAG Program colleges only increased from $699,000 for FY20 to $723,000 in FY21. Similarly, the amount funded by another program would have also been expected to increase significantly with the influx of federal relief funding. However, colleges reported that certain student populations experienced barriers to accessing federal emergency assistance until eligibility requirements shifted under the Biden administration in spring 2021.

*Chart 5: Comparison of total amount requested, funded and not funded*



Further examination (see Chart 6) reveals that the number of requests funded by another program remained virtually unchanged from year to year. Yet, the number of requests denied due to no available funding increased from 371 in FY20 to 549 in FY21. "Other" requests that were not funded dropped from 561 in FY20 to 207 in FY21. This was due to a significant reduction in incomplete applications from 86 in FY20 to just three in FY21 and "unable to contact student" dropped from 196 in FY20 to just nine in FY21. These changes suggest that SEAG Program colleges worked quickly to implement improved processes for students to request assistance.
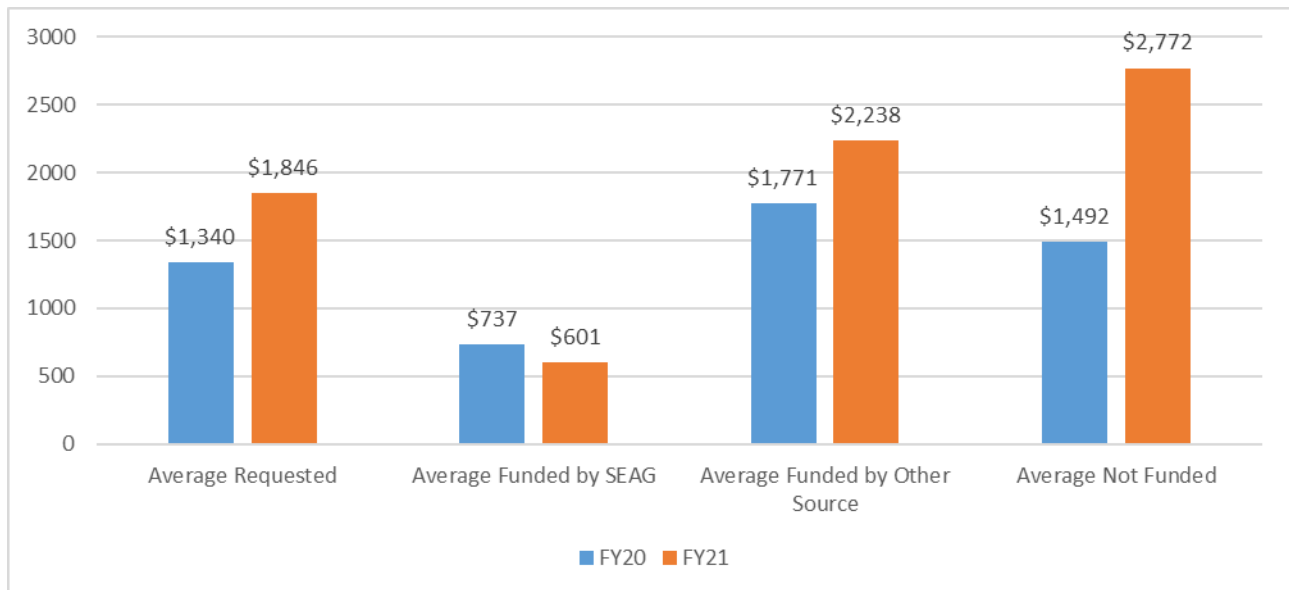
## Chart 6: Reasons requests were not funded



Another marked improvement was the decreased number of requests denied due to lack of documentation from 70 in FY20 to just two in FY21. Students are often required to provide a receipt, bill, copy of a lease, or some other documentation in order to receive supportive services, as is the case for emergency assistance funds managed through college foundations. However, SEAG Program guidelines state that students cannot be required to provide any additional proof or documentation of need other than their written request for assistance. This is in order to ensure students' access to emergency aid funds will be as low-barrier as possible.

Finally, college and SBCTC staff are monitoring how SEAG Program emergency assistance grants affect students' financial aid eligibility. This is to ensure a student's award does not go down if they receive a SEAG grant. One college reported that at least half of SEAG funding requests were denied due to lack of unmet need in the students' financial aid packages, yet only 22 requests in FY20 and 21 requests in FY21 were marked as "other" with the description of financial aid restriction.
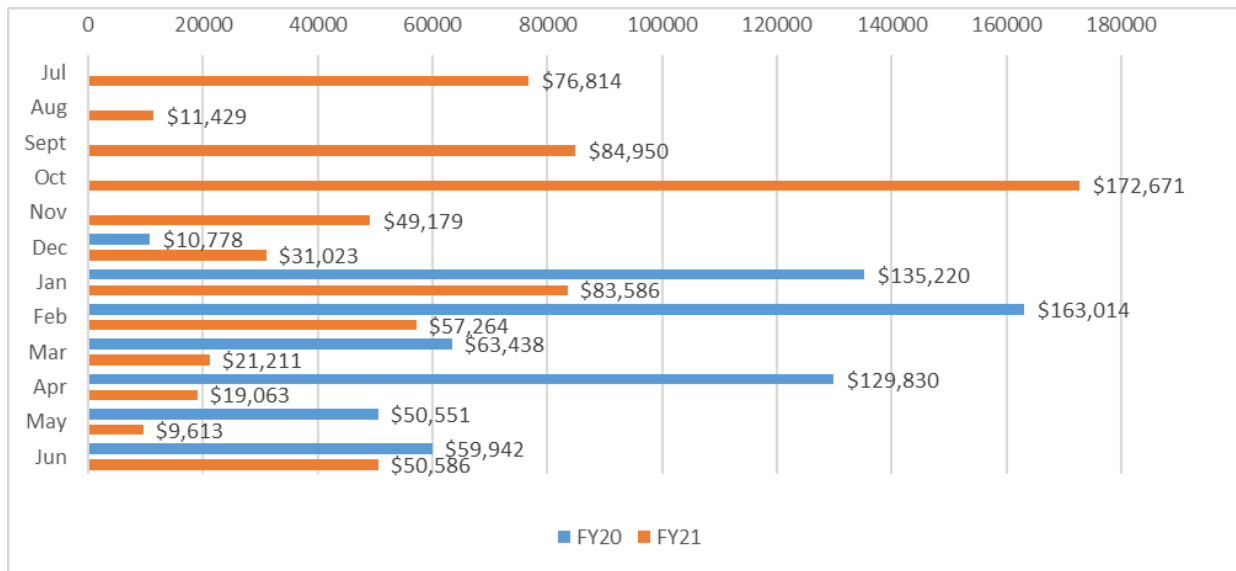
## Chart 7: Comparison of average dollar amounts requested, funded and not funded



SBCTC continues to refine methods for analyzing SEAG Program data in order to better understand students' needs for emergency assistance. After adjusting the formula for average requests funded by the SEAG Program to include partially funded by SEAG awards, the average funded by SEAG decreased to $737 for FY20 and $601 in FY21 (see Chart 7). The calculations for average SEAG Program awards are expected to be more precise in future reports because of new financial aid award codes that were fully implemented for FY22 and all future reporting periods.

Anecdotally, colleges reported during quarterly SEAG Program meetings and in formative evaluations that they had to make difficult decisions about how to best utilize SEAG Program funding in order to stretch their average annual SEAG Program allocations ($43,688 in FY20 and $45,188 in FY21). Fortunately, colleges received additional federal and local emergency assistance funds that enabled them to fund students' requests with larger average awards of $1,771 for FY20 and $2,238 for FY21. From the data, the amount requested appears to be a factor in whether a request was funded through the SEAG Program, another funding source, or denied entirely. For example, colleges often set maximum funding limits for SEAG Program requests below $1,000 while students often received larger amounts in federal relief dollars due to the greater level of available funding. Also, some students' requests were as large as or greater than $10,000, included tuition-related expenses, and therefore, were not funded with SEAG Program funding

Chart 8: Total dollar amounts awarded by month

| Month | FY21 | FY20 |
|-------|------|------|
| Jul | $76,814 | |
| Aug | $11,429 | |
| Sept | $84,950 | |
| Oct | $172,671 | |
| Nov | $49,179 | |
| Dec | $31,023 | $10,778 |
| Jan | $83,586 | $135,220 |
| Feb | $57,264 | $163,014 |
| Mar | $21,211 | $63,438 |
| Apr | $19,063 | $129,830 |
| May | $9,613 | $50,551 |
| Jun | $50,586 | $59,942 |

It is difficult to draw definitive conclusions comparing total amounts awarded per month between FY20 and FY21 (Chart 8). This is because, one, SEAG Program funding was first made available in December of 2019, making FY20 a partial year of data, and, two, COVID-19 mitigation measures resulted in acute job losses and financial hardship not normally seen. Despite the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, it appears that FY21 followed an award pattern that more closely resembles what could be expected throughout the academic year, with fall being the largest time of enrollment and therefore the greatest time of need for students. Notwithstanding any additional major crises, FY22 will provide the next best opportunity to analyze a full year of awards and determine if students' needs settle into a similar pattern.

# SEAG Program Evaluation

The SEAG Program delivery model served as the main framework for colleges' SEAG Program plan of operations and formative evaluations. The SEAG Program Delivery Model consists of the following components:

1. Widespread and Targeted Outreach

2. Accessible and Low-Barrier Request Process

3. Equitable Review and Decision Process

4. Timely Notifications

5. Efficient Disbursement

6. Personalized Follow-up and Referrals

A short description of each component and an analysis of colleges' evaluation findings at the end of FY21 are provided in this section of the report.

# Widespread and targeted outreach

Students will most likely approach a faculty member, academic advisor, or other staff when a crisis first occurs. Colleges must have a plan in place to create a student-centered, proactive "frontline" to identify and refer students to the SEAG Program. This "frontline" cannot be centralized into one role; multiple supportive staff across departments must be able to refer students to this program when there is potential for these funds to benefit them. Dedicated SEAG Program staff should be placed where they are best equipped to connect the student to additional college and community resources. Ideally, students will be connected with the appropriate office where they can receive services.

In addition to a frontline response plan, colleges must also develop and employ an outreach plan that includes both general and targeted efforts. General outreach includes such efforts as providing flyers or identifying the program on the college website. Targeted outreach includes identifying and notifying individual students who may need support in the future, including students already receiving other funding and direct service support, at a certain income level, or those experiencing food or housing insecurity, or homelessness.

## Evaluation findings

Colleges employed an array of marketing strategies that ranged from widespread to targeted outreach. Email to all students was the most common form of widespread outreach with Canvas, social media, and campus newsletters also utilized to increase awareness. Colleges also posted information about the SEAG Program on their websites. Some included links to SEAG Program information on the college's homepage, while many others posted information on a financial aid or resource webpage.

The majority of colleges ensured staff and faculty were well aware of the resource and how to assist students in applying. Often these same colleges relied on staff and faculty as points of contact to notify students about the SEAG program. There was also a fair amount of interdepartmental coordination and collaboration to get the word out about the availability of SEAG Program funds reported by colleges.

Overall, the SEAG Program appeared to gain visibility and awareness from FY20 to FY21. One college stressed the importance of the continuity of the program from one year to the next in increasing awareness and shared that the SEAG Program has become a trusted resource students can count on if they need assistance again.

> *Although it is only in its second year, it has become a "known" resource that students seek out and utilize to help them in being able to overcome temporary emergency situations.*
>
> *~ College staff*

Additionally, some careful consideration has been given to conducting outreach in multiple languages and applying standard accessibility practices during SEAG Program outreach communications. SEAG Program colleges reported conducting outreach to student populations engaged in other supportive programs and/or to students who have not been eligible for federal relief funds, i.e. DACA, International, Transitional and other Title IV ineligible students.

That said, many colleges reported being unsure whether SEAG Program outreach was reaching the students who needed it most. In some cases, where faculty advisors served as main point of contact

for students, it was difficult to know if all faculty were able to identify and assist students in accessing SEAG Program resources equitably. Colleges have begun to engage their Institutional Research departments to help identify additional students and/or student groups who could be better supported by SEAG Program assistance, but they provided limited details within their evaluative reports about the status and/or results from these efforts.

## Accessible and low-barrier request process

SEAG Program colleges must design an application process that is as low barrier for the student as possible. Multiple access points should be developed to increase equitable access to SEAG funds. Students should also be able to initiate and be supported through the process via in person (within the parameters of COVID-19 safety protocols) and/or phone conversation with staff. The application should be online and paper copies should be made available at on and off-campus locations.

### Evaluation findings

All SEAG Program colleges have worked to internally evaluate and/or incorporate student feedback into efforts to streamline application processes and improve accessibility. Some colleges have done so by combining their SEAG application with other emergency assistance funding sources, such as foundations and federal relief dollars. In these cases, the student is not faced with the difficult task of deciphering which funding source is right for them. Instead, colleges take on the responsibility of sorting through the complicated eligibility details behind the scenes. As a result, colleges reported that this sometimes increases processing time on their end, but for the most part, this process appears to simplify and reduce the request time for students as expressed in several student comments.

*The application was quick, and the response/relief was quicker!*

*~ Student*

Another impactful way SEAG Program colleges streamlined and simplified application processes was by removing the requirement for students to submit additional "proof" or documentation of need beyond their written request for assistance. In addition to this change resulting in increased access for students who may not have the ability to supply the required receipt, bill or copy of a lease, etc., college staff reported that removing this requirement also decreased processing time. Denials due to lack of documentation decreased from 70 in FY20 to just two in FY21, exemplifying SEAG Program colleges commitment to removing barriers.

Some colleges reported continued challenges related to processing and prioritizing such a high volume of applications beyond a first-come, first-served basis. Many colleges reported efforts to increase staffing to better respond to students' needs. However, some of the same colleges also experienced failed searches and difficulty onboarding new staff in a timely manner during remote operations. All colleges are implementing additional processes to understand the urgency and extent of students' emergencies in order to better prioritize funds in anticipation of reduced federal relief funding to respond to students' ongoing and in some cases, compounding needs.

## Equitable review and decision processes

The college must establish an application review process. The process must define who will make the decision (a single person or a committee), include a decision-making rubric or criteria, and

identify how often a student can reapply or any award limits. Emergencies can escalate quickly, so the review and decision process should ensure a timely response to students. This process should also not be hindered in the absence of key personnel, so a back-up plan is required.

## Evaluation findings

Several SEAG Program colleges reported adjusting their review and decision-making processes in order to quickly adapt to changing student needs and resources available to address those needs during the 2020-21 academic year. SEAG Program emergency assistance was most often prioritized for students who were not eligible for other funding sources. An increased number of students became eligible for federal relief funding during spring 2021, which resulted in SEAG Program colleges revising eligibility criteria mid-year. Despite the low-barrier intention of SEAG Program funds, some colleges implemented eligibility criteria including state residency and Satisfactory Academic Progress standards. The most common financial aid restriction applied to the SEAG Program decision-making process was whether a student was able to accept additional funding without impacting their financial aid package.

> *Thank you for your help. Whether the grant was enough to pay for all my needs or not, the support was very helpful to continue my studying. Personally, if I stopped studying because of financial matters, I would not have any opportunity to come back to school anymore.*
>
> *~Student*

Colleges often had to make difficult decisions about which requests would be prioritized for SEAG Program aid in order to make the funding available to assist a greater number of students. The most striking example of this is how two colleges reported applying very different approaches to processing housing requests. One college prioritized students experiencing homelessness because of the urgency and type of emergency. Another college elected to not fund housing requests through their SEAG Program because those requests would have exhausted funds too quickly and result in students with other needs not receiving assistance.

Ultimately, it was evident that colleges exercised a great deal of care and discernment in trying to respond to students increased needs during the COVID-19 public health and financial crises. These difficult decisions sometimes meant that students' requests were denied or only partially awarded with SEAG Program funds due to the type of request, other resources being available to address their needs, and/or exceeding the maximum number of requests allowed per year. Details about the types and amounts of requests processed, along with reasons why requests were not funded are provided in the Emergency Assistance Requested and Received section of this report.

## Timely notification

Students must be notified of SEAG funding approval or denial. Notifications must clearly identify next steps. If the student was not recommended for the SEAG funds, the notification must include an explanation of the decision and referrals and resources that may help alleviate the situation.

## Evaluation Findings

Colleges did not present much qualitative data regarding timely notification of award status. It appears that notification often happened by phone or email as part of the disbursement of funds

and primarily by email in the case of denied or not funded applications. In the case of partially awarded or denied requests, students often wanted to be provided additional information to help them understand why their application had not been fully funded. Some of this information was incorporated into notification emails, but students often also wanted to meet with staff to discuss the decision. This was became challenging due to staff capacity and increased volume of emergency assistance being processed.

## Efficient disbursement

Colleges must establish a disbursement process that ensures students will receive SEAG awards within a maximum of four business days of the submission of the application (a shorter timeframe is preferred and could be critical to addressing the emergency). Sample forms of disbursement included a check written directly to the student, a check written to a third-party vendor, or a gift card/pre-paid credit card.

## Evaluation findings

SEAG Program colleges worked to address several barriers to timely disbursement of funds. One of the most impactful ways colleges reduced barriers was allowing direct payment to students versus only allowing to third-party vendors, which often requires additional paperwork from the student, vendor, or both. In fact, colleges reported that the low-barrier nature of SEAG Program funding enabled them to fund students without requiring additional proof or documentation of need that is required for other funding sources therefore, dramatically improving student access and college processing times.

> *We have allowed for BankMobile deposits and are not requiring documentation. By doing this it has increased our response and award time, with the exception of financial aid issues and the transfer to ctcLink.*
>
> *~College staff*

Another way colleges improved processes was by utilizing and evaluating different forms of disbursement. SEAG Program colleges used a variety of methods for different circumstances. Prepaid cards for groceries, gas, and other expenses were used to disburse assistance to students very quickly and, in some cases, on-the-spot or the same day as the request was received. Checks were issued to third-party vendors and directly to students. Campus closures during the pandemic often required that checks to students were mailed, which created a delay in students receiving the funds. BankMobile accounts were also utilized for direct payments to students. However, this form of disbursement created confusion for students who received financial aid disbursements at the same time as emergency assistance.

Some of the greatest known barriers to timely disbursement of funds were related to financial aid delays. Besides the strain on staff capacity to process the increased volume of emergency assistance requests, the most common delay reported by colleges involved checking financial aid packages to ensure students had unmet need or "room" to be awarded additional funds without impacting their financial aid awards. Sometimes this barrier resulted in students not being able to receive SEAG Program funds, as reported in "other" reasons SEAG requests were not funded. Some colleges included communication at various stages of their emergency assistance request process

notifying students of the potential impacts to their financial aid packages if additional aid was accepted.

> *We then ask them [students] to confirm that they still want SEAG funds knowing the funds could affect financial aid packages. Those who check "yes" will then be asked for the amount they need as well as expense categories. These students can then be fast-tracked for funding to meet the 48-hour disbursement turnaround time.*
>
> *~College staff*

Lastly, colleges that have converted from the 35-year-old administrative system to the new ctcLink system for managing business processes and student information reported experiencing several issues related to disbursing emergency assistance funds to students. While many challenges seemed to stem from college staff learning to navigate a new system, SBCTC staff are working to research and resolve any issues in anticipation of all 34 community and technical colleges being transitioned to ctcLink by the end of FY22.

> *The timely disbursement of funds continues to be a huge barrier due to challenges with ctcLink and capacity of financial aid and business office staff.*
>
> *~College staff*

# Personalized follow-up and referrals

Colleges must follow up with the student recipient at least once within 10 days and then again within 45 days. Follow up should include a comprehensive referral to campus and community resources in addition to ensuring the student received their funds. A key aspect of this follow up is to collect information regarding whether or not the emergency was addressed and the funds alleviated the immediate barrier to college attendance.

If a student is not approved to receive an emergency grant, the office must still follow up within 10 days of sending the denial notification. This is a good time to refer the student to other programs within the college or in the community if those referrals were not already made.
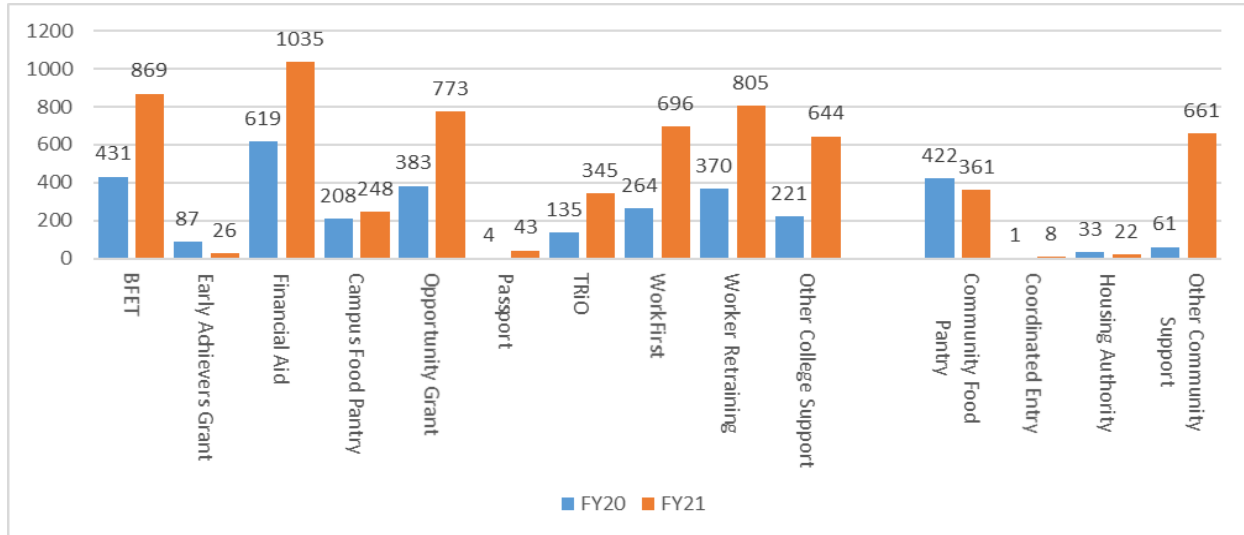
## Evaluation findings

Most colleges reported conducting some form of follow up with students that received SEAG funding. Many colleges also followed up with students that were denied or did not receive SEAG financial support. The follow up was conducted in a variety of ways including via email and phone calls that were either auto-generated and staff generated, generic and personalized referrals. Some colleges acknowledged low response rates and others employed multiple or adaptive forms of follow up if one form was unsuccessful in reaching students.

> *During such difficult times, it's nice to know we not only have someone on our side but people who care about our wellbeing and look out for our financial needs.*
>
> *~Student*

Several colleges expressed the need for case management and personalized referrals to wrap-around supports and services beyond just financial assistance for students. This is illustrated by the increased number of referrals to additional college and community supports during FY21 in Chart 9.

*Chart 9: SEAG applicants connected with additional college and community supports*



The number of referrals to college and community support doubled from FY20 to FY21, which affirms college staff commitment to connect students with both immediate and more long-term resources. Financial Aid, the Basic Food and Training (BFET) program, and the Worker Retraining program were the most frequent referrals to additional supports for both FY20 and FY21. Although referrals from the SEAG Program to food pantries were less frequent than some of the other referrals, campus food pantries often served as hubs and connection points for other basic needs supports like the SEAG Program. Counselors, advisors, and navigators established supportive relationships with students serving as one of the most consequential interventions for increased stress and social isolation students experienced during the pandemic.

# Conclusion

College reported data and quarterly SEAG Program meeting conversations revealed that the ongoing pandemic has increased students' basic needs insecurity in both quantity and severity. Even with unparalleled investments made by federal and state government, students' need for emergency assistance outpaced funding. Moreover, SEAG Program funds were pivotal in supporting students who were not eligible for the federal relief funds made available in FY20 and FY21. SEAG Program data also shows that students have continued to struggle with a variety of expenses that impact their ability to remain enrolled in classes. Housing eclipsed all other emergencies in number of requests and amount funded by the SEAG Program for both FY20 to FY21. Now that the state's eviction moratorium ended,[12] student aid for safe, stable, and affordable housing should continue to be prioritized.

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[12] EMERGENCY PROCLAMATION BY THE GOVERNOR AMENDING PROCLAMATIONS 20-05 and 21-09, et seq.

College and SBCTC staff acknowledged a number of necessary course corrections during this time last year as next steps:

1. identification and removal of barriers to emergency assistance

2. timeliness of review and disbursement process

3. targeted outreach to student populations

4. conducting meaningful follow up with students to ensure ongoing and holistic support

Although the time from application to disbursement increased overall for FY21, SEAG Program colleges made decisive progress in nearly all other areas of improvement. The SEAG Program is becoming a well-known and trusted source of support through widespread and targeted outreach, even for students who demographic groups are frequently excluded from other supports and/or reluctant to seek help.

The number of requests denied due to incomplete applications and inability to contact students diminished from 282 in FY20 to 12 in FY21, and unfunded requests because of lack of "proof" or documentation of need were almost entirely eliminated from 70 in FY20 to just two in FY21. Most, if not all, SEAG Program colleges are intensely engaged in crisis intervention and case management, as exhibited by the surge of referrals made to additional college and community supports.

Efficient processing of students' requests for assistance remains a major concern. The two factors that prevented timely disbursement of SEAG Program funds most significantly were related to the volume of requests overwhelming staff capacity to respond and time spent checking for unmet need in financial aid award packages. To begin to address some of these issues, the SBCTC allowed colleges to request funds during the FY22-23 SEAG Program application process to support staff time associated with disbursing SEAG Program funds to students and ensuring they are connected with additional resources. This will increase staffing capacity to a level that is more closely aligned with the magnitude of basic needs insecurity currently experienced by students.

The SBCTC is also evaluating whether a statute change could allow SEAG Program emergency assistance to be disbursed to students during the broader state of emergency without counting against students' financial aid packages, much like federal relief funds. This, however, would not address the broader issues related to disparities between students' financial aid awards and their actual needs. As colleges fully exhaust federal relief funds in the coming months, it will become even more imperative to identify additional sources of emergency assistance and supportive services while removing any remaining barriers preventing students from accessing the resources needed to remain enrolled in their educational and career pathways.

*Times have been hard with the virus and with the fires, and I didn't have a place to live and was worried about having to leave school. With that extra money, I was able to find a place to live while I attend school, and now I can concentrate on my schooling instead of worrying about where me and my family will live. Thank you.*

*~Student*

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# Appendix A: FY20-21 College Selection Process Results

SBCTC received 28 applications and was able to fund 16 community and technical colleges for the FY20-21 biennium. A full list of funding requests and funding awarded is included below. Funding amounts listed below are for Dec. 1, 2019 through June 30, 2021.

| College | Request | Funding |
|---|---|---|
| Bellevue College | $100,000 | $0 |
| Bellingham Technical College | $100,000 | $0 |
| Centralia College | $100,000 | $100,000 |
| Clark College | $100,000 | $100,000 |
| Clover Park Technical College | $100,000 | $0 |
| Columbia Basin College | $100,000 | $0 |
| Edmonds College | $100,000 | $96,000 |
| Everett Community College | $100,000 | $0 |
| Grays Harbor College | $100,000 | $82,000 |
| Green River College | $100,000 | $96,000 |
| Highline College | $100,000 | $0 |
| Lake Washington Institute of Technology | $100,000 | $100,000 |
| Lower Columbia College | $59,000 | $65,000 |
| Olympic College | $100,000 | $0 |
| Peninsula College | $100,000 | $100,000 |
| Pierce College District | $100,000 | $82,000 |
| Renton Technical College | $100,000 | $0 |
| Seattle Central College | $100,000 | $100,000 |
| North Seattle College | $100,000 | $62,000 |
| South Seattle College | $100,000 | $0 |
| Shoreline Community College | $100,000 | $100,000 |
| Skagit Valley College | $50,000 | $59,000 |
| South Puget Sound Community College | $100,000 | $0 |
| Spokane Community College | $100,000 | $0 |
| Spokane Falls Community College | $100,000 | $0 |
| Tacoma Community College | $100,000 | $100,000 |
| Walla Walla Community College | $85,000 | $90,000 |
| Whatcom Community College | $100,000 | $90,000 |
| Totals | $2,694,000 | $1,422,000 |