The impact of COVID-19 has been far-reaching on our campus. In a matter of days, we transitioned to online courses, closed our residence halls to the majority of students, and adapted our offices to telework processes. As our daily routines shifted, we also began to hear from numerous students how they were affected by the transitions. Part-time jobs were cut dramatically, with many students moving home to be with their families during our “shelter in place” timeframe but still needing to pay rent at their off-campus apartments. Their family incomes also decreased, and funds saved to pay for summer school, rent, or other needs got diverted to help keep their parents, siblings, and other family members afloat.

Within the Office of the Dean of Students, we are no strangers to economic challenges and the need for emergency funding. However, the uniqueness of the COVID-19 crisis is the broad sweep across our student population of those who need support. Undergrad and grad students from all different locations, majors, and backgrounds — the stories we’ve heard have been equally heart-breaking and frustrating as we’ve realized how many of our students are on the cusp of a financial crisis, and how many of the already-existing options are unable to assist.

Our campus has had an emergency and opportunity fund organization since 2013 called the Students’ Treasure Chest — quite appropriate, given we’re the Pirates. This student-led organization has been supported as a donor option by our university advancement and student affairs development teams and typically distributed between $8,000-$12,000 of funding per year to students’ requests. Many donors continue to give because they know the funds go directly to students in need, and as a part of our process, we review student applications and cross-reference the information with financial aid records, scholarship opportunities, and other campus services, to ensure students have access to as many resources as possible. These requests have included purchasing books, helping fund car repairs, providing travel for conference presentations, or even helping someone purchase a new interview outfit for their internship.

During the last few weeks, we’ve adapted an established process to meet the emergency needs of this situation, while continuing to include our advisors of this organization from the dean of students, university scholarships and financial aid, and added oversight from our vice-chancellor of administration and finance. Since the middle of March, our advancement team has done an excellent job of connecting donors with this cause, raising over $50,000 to support our Student
Emergency Fund. We have also received additional funding from our state university system office and the state Association of Student Governments to total close to $60,000.

We moved the previous application from our embedded website over to FormStack, with the help of university ITCS, to allow for single sign-on use to verify the student’s identity and not require printing/scanning. This has cut down on technology requirements that have been challenging for some students, with many admitting they are trying to complete their coursework from phones or tablets. The linked form was sent out to all students about a month following our campus closure, timed to the point where we received the CARES Act Funding.

While we have recently received the CARES funds and are just beginning to tap into those monies, we are so appreciative that we still have use of other funds which can be utilized depending on the situation. Donor-related funds, remaining grants, and the other funds from our system office can be considered at our financial aid director’s discretion. The limitations of who can receive the CARES Acts funding (distance education, DACA, and international students are not allowed) as well as situations like remaining tuition balances (also not permitted for CARES funds) have led us to select these other funds when needed. Once approved by the financial aid director, the awards are sent to our cashier’s office for disbursement, and students receive notification from the other advisors who help manage the applications. We have also created specific fund codes for the CARES money to track the requests based on need — housing/food, technology, and lost wages, knowing there will be reports required for the CARES funds after the first 45 days and every 30 days following.

Currently, we have just over 1,400 applications going through processing within a two-week time frame. Almost 90% of our applications are requesting support related to lost wages, with about 48% specifically needing assistance with rent and groceries. We are considering all students, regardless of previous FAFSA history or even those who may have maxed out on financial aid. Likewise, our administrators and staff are working diligently to stay on top of changes, recommendations, and guidance which are being issued daily from our system office, the federal government, and other agencies.

So, we are now three weeks into the fully operational process — what have we learned from other campuses? And what can other universities learn from our experiences? We learned early on it was important to know our student population while also trying not to compare ourselves too much to sister institutions. We had colleagues sharing what other larger universities were doing, and while it was helpful in some respects, we also couldn’t let their numbers distract us from what we were trying to accomplish.
Partnerships have also been key in accessing resources and supporting our students who don’t fall under the CARES provisions. Without the funds from the advancement office, student affairs development office, and university system, we would be unable to provide financial support for some of our most vulnerable populations. Likewise, we have tried to connect students with other resources on campus, like our food pantry, loaner computers from the university library, and online textbooks through a partnership with our bookstore. Having this information centralized where students can easily find and access these opportunities is key!

And finally, we have learned the stories are the most effective means for educating donors and our campus community. We have alumni, community members, and parents who want to help — providing compelling narratives about their donation and impact on others is essential! Our advancement staff has been using the “ThankView” software for donor engagement, which has allowed students to create their own videos, upload to the website, and share with our advancement team as they choose to participate. These “snapshots” of student experience have also kept our administrators and faculty members informed of how students have been affected by the COVID-19 crisis, which has assisted them in policy and decision-making for academic regulations.

As this financial crisis continues — and it will, as we anticipate long-term ramifications on family financial information and their FAFSA applications — we plan to maintain our strong relationship with advancement, student affairs development, and our campus resources. By building a strong foundation for focused support, we have created a network of offices, departments, and programs which allow for ongoing persistence and overall student success. Advocate for your students by asking about how your university’s CARES funds are going through, what’s being done to support the populations left out of this federal funding, and how you can use your own experience with philanthropy or fundraising to support emergency funds during this time.

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Lauren Thorn received her BSW and MSW from East Carolina University as part of the EC Scholars program. After receiving her LCSW, she returned to ECU as a staff counselor/outreach coordinator in the Counseling Center. She later joined the Dean of Students office as an associate dean, where she focuses on student advocacy and programming related to resiliency, food insecurity, and civility on campus. She is passionate about supporting students, connecting them to resources, and continuing to promote student success.