

5 Ways to Craft College Financial Policies with Empathy

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Approaching college financial policies with compassion can make your institution stronger—here's how

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit higher education hard. Balancing fluctuating enrollment and increasing operational expenditures has been a challenge. It's a fundamental reality: revenue streams are vital for healthy institutions.

We should not lose sight of one trait that should be an integral part of our planning: empathy.

Compassion exists in service of—not opposition to—your financial goals. When your approach is shaped by empathy, students respond with increased performance and loyalty. They know they are not just an enrollment statistic to you—they are a member of your community. Successfully weathering the pandemic and its aftershocks lies in your ability to make a robust, healthy community. If your school is to prosper, you need to balance the real and pressing urgencies of today with the long-term challenges—and opportunities—of the years ahead.

Empathy in college financial policies and practices is like elasticity. If you stretch a string on an instrument too taut, it's more fragile and vulnerable to breaking—particularly in the event of a shock. If the string is too lax, it can't perform its function. To tune an instrument, you have to get the tension just right to play the proper note. If your students are financially stretched to a breaking point, they will not perform well. If your college financial policies are overly loose, you cannot function.

How can you give your college financial policies the elasticity of empathy? Here are five guidelines:

1. You can't offer solutions when you don't know the problem. It is vital that [front-line employees](#) are having conversations with the students who enroll in your institution—as well as those who decide not to. The pandemic may require more resourcefulness in order to have those conversations. Students are not congregating in high school gyms for college fairs. You

will likely need to pick up the phone to have quality dialogue with potential students as well as those who have chosen not to return to your institution. Understand the obstacles and pressures they face.

2. Recognize student sacrifices. At Valencia College, a community college in Orlando, Florida, any student who failed a course in the spring semester of 2020 when instruction shifted online received a \$500 scholarship to retake that or another class. This gesture, along with other strategic efforts, allowed Valencia College to make up a 20 percent deficit in enrollment, according to [reporting done by National Public Radio](#). Understand where students experience hardships and respond accordingly.

3. Be transparent with your own costs. We've all heard too many examples of students petitioning or refusing to pay for on-campus services they were not able to access due to pandemic restrictions. The idea that colleges are getting fat on student fees during the pandemic couldn't be further from the truth, especially as schools have incurred increased costs to serve students remotely and reimagine every aspect of student and employee life. Helping students understand what their tuition and fees fund—and how that enhances their education—can be time well spent.

4. Provide flexibility. The annual or bi-annual billing cycle simply isn't feasible for many students. One recent survey found that the pandemic has resulted in nearly two-thirds of Americans living paycheck-to-paycheck. Offering monthly payment plans as an alternative to a semester schedule opens access to education for many worthy students. Compassionate billing is a principle that also applies well between vendors and organizations.

5. Be intentional with incentives. Financial policies operate with carrots and sticks. In addition to softening overly punitive policies, you can encourage student behavior that is in the best interest of the student and the institution through incentives. For example, scholarships for students who commit early to their institution help both parties. Colleges are able to plan their budgets with a clear picture of the incoming class. Students are able to get connected early to resources that will help them throughout their transition.

Incorporating empathy into your college financial policies and practices is a key way to connect your institutional values to your day-to-day practices. As the example of Valencia College illustrates, along with many others who are reimagining ways to meet students where they are with strategic, compassionate policies can strengthen your college community and your fiscal solvency.