

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

48 Hours Inside a Student Emergency-Aid Experiment

A small-grant program in Milwaukee offers hope, \$275 at a time, against a torrent of needs.



CALEB SANTIAGO ALVARADO FOR THE CHRONICLE

By *Eric Hoover*

MAY 19, 2023

On a Tuesday morning, Liz Franczyk sat in a windowless office at Milwaukee Area Technical College, holding her cellphone up to her chin. A student had just called seeking help: She needed to take an anatomy course this summer so that she could enroll in nursing classes during the fall. But she couldn't register until she paid a third of her outstanding balance at the college. She needed \$291 — money that she just didn't have.

It was late April, and pre-nursing courses were filling up fast. The student sounded anxious. "I'm out of work right now," she told Franczyk. "I'm living with my mom, she helps a little bit, but ..."

"I hear ya," Franczyk said reassuringly.

Franczyk isn't a financial-aid officer, nor does she disburse institutional dollars. She's an adjunct Spanish instructor at MATC's downtown campus and executive director of the FAST Fund, which stands for Faculty and Students Together. The independently financed small-grant program began seven years ago as an experiment designed to get MATC students out of a jam without hassle or delay.

Franczyk, a warm, straight-talking 41-year-old, has a way of putting people at ease. She told the woman to go online and fill out the FAST Fund's emergency-aid application, a brief form. After receiving the application, Franczyk told the student, she would walk a check for \$300 down to the mailroom, contact the Student Accounting office, and ask that they remove the hold from the woman's account, enabling her to register.

The student's voice softened in relief: "Thank you so much, Liz. I really appreciate it."

"Not a problem," Franczyk said.



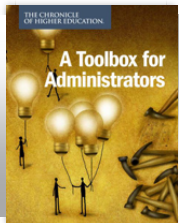
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Liz Franczyk answers calls in her office on the MATC downtown campus in Milwaukee.

The FAST Fund's average grant amount is \$275, and each day, Franczyk saw firsthand what research has shown: Just a few hundred bucks can spell the difference between dropping out and staying enrolled, between having an apartment and having nowhere to sleep, between hope and game over. But each day she confronted deeply rooted problems that no grant could ever fix. She spoke with applicant after applicant struggling to free themselves from the grip of

generational poverty.

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It was 10:42 a.m. Franczyk peeled a banana and pulled up the next application, among dozens waiting in the FAST Fund's inbox. They offered keyhole glimpses into the lives of students who are often overlooked. Students who are one blown tire, one sick child, one lost job away from a crisis. Students clinging to the narrow ledge of college.

The experiment was unprecedented, even subversive. How else would you describe putting faculty and staff members in charge of a student-aid fund?

But the idea made perfect sense to the FAST Fund's creators. After all, it drew on a core dynamic in higher education: Instructors are often well-positioned to develop relationships with students, to understand the hardships they experience, and this is especially true at two-year colleges. But those instructors are seldom empowered to help students solve outside-the-classroom challenges.

Sara Goldrick-Rab saw this as a problem — and an opportunity. In 2016, she founded a national organization called Believe in Students to help college students experiencing basic-needs insecurity. The group invested \$5,000 to develop the FAST Fund model at MATC. Back then, many colleges lacked emergency-aid programs. Those that did have them typically required lengthy applications with

sluggish approval processes. At the time, MATC's two-year-old emergency-grant program had numerous restrictions that limited its usefulness (the grants could not be used to pay rent, for instance).

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Goldrick-Rab, a prominent researcher and advocate for low-income students, was then a professor of higher-education policy and sociology at Temple University. She worked closely with Michael Rosen, a longtime economics professor at MATC, to develop a plan for getting money to students within 24-48 hours, the way a friend might throw another some cash. The transactions would happen outside institutional bureaucracy; the money wouldn't affect a student's financial-aid package.

Franczyk gives out her personal cell number, which students pass along to friends in need. Day and night the calls keep coming.

The FAST Fund model was meant to fill the void between what colleges have traditionally provided and what the most vulnerable students need, but transferring money wasn't the only goal. Another was to create a more caring campus culture by

bringing students and faculty closer together. The goal: To help instructors put concern for the well-being of those they teach at the center of their work.

Rosen was renowned for his devotion to students. Like many instructors at MATC, he knew that day-to-day expenses, such as gas, food, and utility bills, force low-income students into making tough decisions. Buy groceries or buy this textbook? Pay the rent or stay enrolled? He had seen such emergencies derail many promising students. When he retired, in 2017, he asked colleagues to contribute to the FAST Fund in lieu of gifts. He raised more than \$20,000 at his retirement party and then became the program's unpaid director.

Fundraising took off. Goldrick-Rab donated the proceeds of a \$100,000 prize to expand the FAST Fund at MATC and a handful of other institutions. The program eventually would come to dozens of two- and four-year institutions, including Compton College, Miami Dade College, the Community College of Philadelphia, Northeastern Illinois University, and the University of Montana.

Rosen had long served as president of the American Federation of Teachers Local 212, the union representing faculty and staff at the college. The organization provided free office space and administrative support, helping the FAST Fund become a sustainable operation. Though the program and Local 212 would remain separate entities, union backing helped build support for the cause among faculty members and retirees who knew what many students were up against. And the union helped bring in contributions from Milwaukee's professional sports teams and local businesses.

Franczyk started volunteering for the FAST Fund in 2020. By then the Milwaukee native had been teaching Spanish part-time at MATC for almost a decade while working other jobs. She had first seen educational inequities up close as a teenager

studying in Honduras. There, she attended a high school where nearly all the students couldn't afford books, paper, or pencils, so they sat listening to teachers read from textbooks, absorbing what they could.

Franczyk saw similar disadvantages and determination among MATC students she met. Many of those who took her Spanish classes seemed more engaged and invested than the affluent teenagers she previously taught at a private four-year college. Her students' commitment made her want to become a better teacher and advocate.



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Liz Franczyk works with students in her Spanish class at MATC.

In 2022 Rosen hired Franczyk to replace him as the leader of MATC's FAST Fund. Substantial donations, plus a \$2-million endowment established by the family of a former MATC employee, enabled the organization to become a nonprofit and pay its new executive director a salary. Franczyk, assisted by one part-time employee and a few volunteers — all retired MATC employees — works 50-60 hours a week for FAST Fund. But it often feels insufficient.

Franczyk gives out her personal cell number, which students pass along to friends in need. Day and night the calls keep coming.

Frustration. Worry. Fear. Franczyk hears many emotions in students' voices. But their dedication often comes through loud and clear, too. They want to become accountants and hair stylists and nurses and mechanics and paralegals. They want to get out of debt, secure good jobs, and provide for their families. But as she's often reminded, determination isn't necessarily enough.

From 2000 to 2021, the average unmet financial need of college students receiving aid in Wisconsin increased by 135.6 percent, adjusted for inflation, according to a recent [report](#) from the Wisconsin Policy Forum. Students attending the state's technical colleges have an average unmet need of more than \$8,000 a year.

MATC has been confronting this reality in various ways. Recently, the college announced its first-ever [full-ride scholarship](#) for low-income students, thanks to a \$5-million pledge by local philanthropists. About 350 students have already received the last-dollar scholarships, which cover tuition, as well as everyday expenses such as child care, food, and housing.

In Franczyk's office, though, the torrent of needs never stops. That Tuesday morning, she spoke on the phone with a woman who was trying to re-enroll at

MATC. She had a bill stating that she owed the college \$1,000, but she said it was a mistake. “I’m 27 years old, I just had a baby,” she said as her newborn chirped loudly. “I’m not lucky and rich. I’ve tried to do this so many times, and I’ve never succeeded.”

Franczyk advised her to file an appeal with the financial-aid office. She told her about MATC ReStart, which provides scholarships for returning students to pay off up to \$1,500 of a past-due balance for tuition, books, and other fees. And she promised to help her navigate it all: “I’m gonna be, like, your teammate here for the next week. Let’s work together, me and you, to try to get some answers.” The student sounded encouraged.

Later, Franczyk spoke with a student at the college’s West Allis campus. Her voice shook as she described her predicament. “Um ... so ... my car payment is, like, an urgent need,” she said. “Right now, I’m like three months behind on it.”

“Yikes,” Franczyk said. “What is your monthly car payment?”

“\$352.”

“OK. Are they threatening to repossess your vehicle at this point or what?”

“Yes. They are.”

Milwaukee’s beleaguered public-transit system has long frustrated its residents. Many students must rely on cars to get to and from campus.

“How much do they need,” Franczyk asked, “in order to not repossess it?”

“At least two payments.”

“So we’re talking \$700. Are you able to contribute any of that amount?”

“Yes, but I don’t get paid until Thursday. I could make one payment.”

“OK. I can do the other one for you then, OK?”

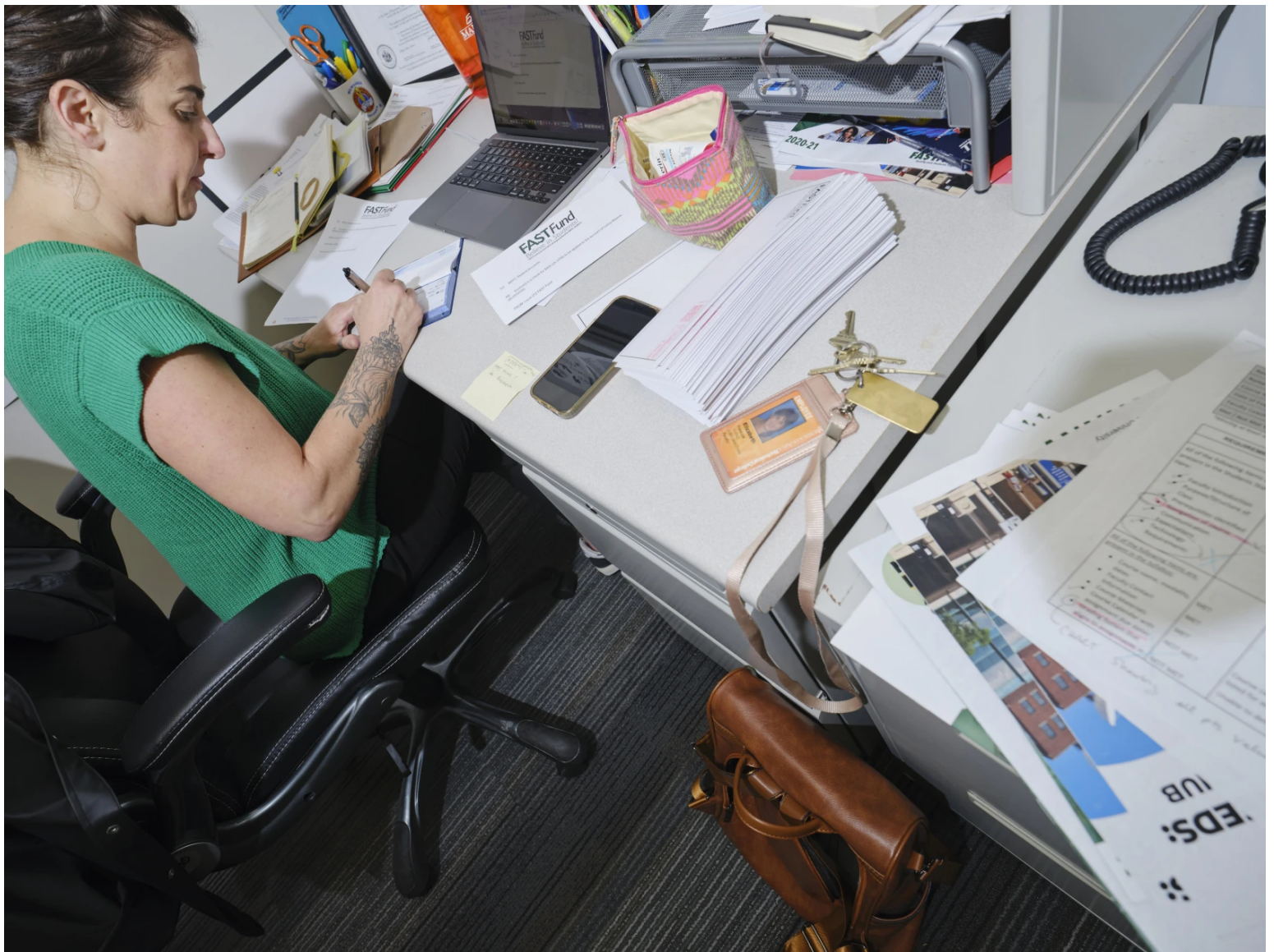
After the call, Franczyk took a deep breath and downed some water.

Minutes later, MacKenzie Corbitt stopped by, sporting a sweatshirt that read “I Don’t F— With People Who Don’t Support Free College.”

Franczyk greeted the student by name.

Corbitt was there to pick up a check for \$497.75 to pay the mechanic for some car repairs. The student was on the verge of graduating: “I’m just trying to find a stable job and get back in a position where I can pay my debt down low enough where it can be manageable, raise my credit score.”

Franczyk squinted at a copy of the bill. “Sorry, um, I’m writing this out to ... Kenny?”



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Liz Franczyk writes a check for a FAST Fund recipient in her office.

The FAST Fund is based largely on trust, though it also asks for proof of need. Applicants must provide some documentation of their emergency, such as a car note, utility bill, or eviction notice. They're also asked to state their income and other sources of funding, such as federal aid and scholarships. MATC's own emergency-aid fund is open to students with a 2.0 grade-point average who've attended the college for more than a semester; the FAST Fund has no such requirements.

The latter's application asks students to list an instructor as a reference, someone

who can speak to their commitment to education. Franczyk and her colleagues talk with instructors to learn whatever they can. And they follow up with students to ask how much money they need, and determine if there's really an emergency. Then they quickly decide how much to give. Without any hard-and-fast rules, they must use their judgment. Would \$250 really help? \$400?

Sometimes, the FAST Fund decides that an emergency requires more money to resolve than it can give. A few hundred dollars won't help, say, a student who owes their landlord \$2,500 and will likely get evicted anyway. In such cases, Franczyk tries to help by connecting them with free legal aid, or an advocate who can help find long-term solutions.

The FAST Fund pays each third party directly on a student's behalf. As of late April, the program had given about \$340,000 to help more than 1,300 students during the 2022-23 academic year. It put about 400 others on an "inactive" list, either because they didn't respond, were no longer enrolled, or instructors gave them a poor reference. (In 2021-22, MATC approved 291 emergency grants, totaling \$140,000).

Many applicants seek help paying for course materials. The FAST Fund, Franczyk says, has sent about \$40,000 this academic year to the MATC bookstore to pay for books and supplies — an expense that the college's own emergency-grant program doesn't cover. (An MATC spokesman says that books are "an expected and necessary expense," and not an unexpected hardship).

Some programs require costly purchases. A man had requested help paying for thousands of dollars worth of tools for his automotive-maintenance program. The FAST Fund couldn't cover them all, so Franczyk told him to log into the Matco Tools website, select the items he needed most, and email his account information to her. Then she logged in and completed the \$429 transaction using a credit card.

Franczyk read the order aloud: “He’s getting a dual-action sander, an air-blow gun, and some kind of cutting tool.” Would that get him through the nine-month program?

Around 12:30 p.m., Franczyk was halfway through an egg-salad sandwich when her cellphone rang. A student whom she had already been in touch with owed \$575 in rent. She said she had just \$75.

“So I’ll text you my email address, and you’ll have to email me your lease,” Franczyk said, “and then I’ll send a check directly to your landlord. And then the other thing is, I know you said you’re looking for jobs, right? So I just want to make sure you have a longer-term plan here so that this doesn’t happen again. OK? OK, cool. Have a good day.”

Franczyk reflected on the conversation. “We function under the mantra ‘Believe in students,’” she said. “I’m not going to sit here and make her prove it by sending me her pay stubs, and asking her why she only has \$75. That’s just, like, a bitch.”

The breathless afternoon required some manual labor. The FAST Fund has a partnership with a local nonprofit that refurbishes computers, which MATC students can later pick up for free. In between calls, Franczyk went downstairs to receive a delivery of 35 laptops, which she hauled back up to her eighth-floor office on a cart.

During one especially tense conversation, Franczyk spoke with a student who needed \$990 for an emergency, but he had just \$400. She told him the FAST Fund could contribute \$500: “Could you and your fiancée find \$90 somewhere?”

“Yes, ma’am. We could try and get it from her mom.”

“I’m going to be real straightforward with you. This will probably be the last time we can help you since we just helped you with rent in October.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Have you been finding any jobs out there?”

“I’ll hopefully be starting next week.”

Franczyk loves the job, but it requires her to absorb students’ hardships. Sometimes, they express anger that the program can’t do more to meet their vast needs. And she understands it. She could patch cracks in the dam, but she couldn’t push back the river. Many afternoons, she drives home and cries.

Still, Franczyk had seen a small grant become one piece of a successful student’s story. She knew that such help can bestow something intangible, something greater than just money. And the man with the lion’s-head necklace knew it, too.

Jermaine House understood the weight of small things. On that Tuesday afternoon, he walked into MATC’s Student Resource Center and browsed the well-stocked food pantry. He took some ground beef from a fridge, a tin of nacho cheese from a shelf. He smiled when he spotted a few cans of mandarin oranges and mangoes. “My favorites,” he said. The items he carried home would ease his worries about stretching his food stamps to feed his family, helping him concentrate on wrapping up the last of his assignments and preparing for finals.

Around 4:30, House sat down at a table inside a public library where he sometimes studies. Huge windows drenched the quiet room in light.

House, thoughtful and serene, looked younger than his 38 years, save for the flecks of gray on his chin. He was fixing to graduate in May. He first enrolled back in 2007. The years in between brought many setbacks, including the death of one of his five children, the death of a grandmother with whom he was close, and struggles with bipolar disorder.



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Jermaine House, an MATC student, says the FAST Fund offers hope and motivation to students in need.

There were legal issues, too: After graduating from high school, House spent six months in prison for selling marijuana. He then bounced in and out of incarceration for years. All of those circumstances help explain why he defaulted on his federal student loans — and why it took him more than 15 years to finish a two-

year degree in business management.

House, who has been boxing since he was a teenager, took a lesson from the ring. “If you get hit hard, it’s OK to cry,” he said. “But then you’ve got to push it in and just get back in there.”

Years ago, House experienced what he calls an awakening: One morning, after a long stretch of feeling down, he woke up feeling hopeful, certain that he could get his life together. He felt powerful, like he was roaring. So he bought a black-metal lion’s-head necklace and a matching ring. He wears them almost every day, as reminders to believe in himself.

House, who grew up in a low-income home, always felt happiest in school. Early on, he resolved to become the first man on either side of his family to graduate from college. But simply getting to and from MATC is difficult. House lives on the north side of Milwaukee, seven miles from the college. He doesn’t own a car, so he relies on city buses to get there. Depending on traffic and the route he chooses, the one-way trip takes an hour, sometimes 90 minutes.

“When your plate is already full, just the smallest thing can throw everything off.”

Still, though House has in-person classes only one day a week, he comes to MATC on most days, just to catch up with his advisers, attend meetings, or, as he says, “absorb campus energy.” And he has advocated on behalf of his classmates and their basic needs as part of a paid fellowship for Believe in Students. After the termination of an MATC program that had provided free Chromebooks and hot spots to students during the pandemic, House attended a meeting of the college’s board members, where he spoke eloquently about how, in an era when many

classes were still virtual, plenty of low-income students had limited access to technology. (Though MATC did not reinstate the program, it rents Chromebooks and hot spots to students.)

House has gallons of determination and a long list of supporters who work at MATC. Still, on three occasions over the last year, financial crises threatened to derail him.

The first was last fall, when he and the mother of his two young boys fell behind on rent after surgery kept her out of work for a bit. House, who then managed rental properties here and there for money, had no one to borrow from. Fearing eviction, he devised a plan to rake leaves for \$20 a yard, hoping to earn just enough to tide over the landlord. He looked into donating blood but was told that it could exacerbate his bipolar disorder. He considered dropping out of MATC.

But then help arrived. As a recipient of the [PepsiCo Foundation Uplift Scholarship program](#) at MATC, which provides \$2,000 scholarships to Black and Latino/a students, House learned that he was eligible for an emergency grant. He got \$1,000 just in time to pay the rent he owed.

Not long after that, someone stole House's laptop. Unable to afford a new one, he went to a public library, which had a limited supply to lend, and for just a couple weeks at a time. Often, House couldn't get the laptops he checked out to connect to the internet. MATC has a computer lab, but it was open only from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. He was falling behind on assignments. Then he contacted Franczyk, who gave him one of the FAST Fund's free laptops after he submitted an application. He carried it home in relief.

Early in the spring semester, House used a temporary code to access an e-book

required for his “Math of Business” class. Then one day, the code expired. He didn’t have \$111.66 to buy the book. Daily assignments kept coming. He became anxious, worried that his instructor would think he was making excuses for falling behind. He again sought help from the FAST Fund, which paid for the book.

What was the weight of those small things? House put his hands together and rested his chin on his knuckles. He described how modest grants restored his confidence and rekindled his purpose.

“When your plate is already full,” he said, “just the smallest thing can throw everything off. But if you give somebody just a little bit of breathing room, then they can take another five to ten steps, or even one to two steps. They develop more strength to hold on just a little bit more. There’s hope you’re giving them, encouragement you’re giving them.”

But this was more than mere charity. Each grant House received strengthened his resolve to make good on those investments. “I feel accountable because I got so much help. Now, I can’t let these people down. It’s a good pressure. Like, man, I have to keep going because I don’t want their help to be for naught.”

House, who’s earning all A’s this semester, expects to graduate with at least a 2.4 grade-point average. He’s applying to prominent four-year colleges in Wisconsin. He aspires to earn a doctorate and become a businessman, a social entrepreneur who helps revitalize predominantly Black neighborhoods like his own. He imagines wearing custom-tailored suits, schmoozing with fellow CEOs, talking about philanthropy. But first he must apply for a slew of internships, scholarships, and fellowships.

Around 6:30 p.m., House glanced out the library window just as a brand-new

Corvette stopped at an intersection. Its burnt-orange paint sparkled in the early-evening sun. “See,” he said. “That’s going to be me in the next few years.”

Wednesday morning began with an especially urgent call. A student behind on rent had just received a five-day notice from her landlord. She had just that long to either pay up or move out.

“Are you at Berrada?” Franczyk asked.

“Yes.”

Berrada Properties Management, Inc., which owns more than 8,000 properties in Milwaukee and Racine, is known for its aggressive-eviction tactics, which prompted a [recent lawsuit](#) by the state’s Department of Justice (the company has vigorously disputed the lawsuit’s claims). Many MATC students who seek emergency aid rent properties from the company.

“How much do you owe in back rent?”

“\$1,700.”

It was more than the FAST Fund could give. So Franczyk told the student to contact a personal friend of hers at Eviction Free MKE, a group that provides free legal aid to renters. And she said that she would nudge the county’s Social Development Commission, known as SDC, which was reviewing the student’s application for financial assistance.

Franczyk dashed off an email to SDC and read it aloud. “I’ve contacted you about this student once before,” it began. “She told me that her SDC application that she

filled out in December currently is in supervisor review and has been for about a month, and that when she spoke with someone there in late February, she was told that SDC would be able to cover her back rent and future rent through June. She feels like it's moving forward, but is really anxious to find out the status of the check disbursement."

A moment later, she hit send.

Sometimes, requests for the smallest sums of money affect Franczyk the most. Like the man who asked for \$54 to pay his internet bill, or the young woman who said just \$20 would allow her to pay an electric bill.

Franczyk glanced at her computer screen and cursed. Shyanne Washington, a student in her 10 a.m. Spanish class, had just emailed to say she couldn't make it today because her car was almost out of gas and she had to take her son to day care. She had written 48 hours earlier that she had no money to fill her tank, so Franczyk had mailed her one of the prepaid \$50 Shell gas cards that the FAST Fund keeps on hand. Apparently, it hadn't arrived yet.

Franczyk winced, wishing that she had just dropped it off on her way home from work.

Washington wrote back a moment later with good news: "I'll be there my mom sent me \$10 to put a little gas in the car to get to school."

"YAYAYYYYYYYY!!!!" Franczyk replied. "See you soon!"

Franczyk felt a connection with Washington, who was excelling in her "Spanish I" course. After graduating from high school, in 2019, she took out a \$4,000 loan to

help pay for a cosmetology program, but dropped out after deciding it wasn't for her. She enrolled in MATC's medical-assistant program before deciding to study psychology. Washington, soft-spoken and reflective, wanted to understand why one person falls in love with another, why someone harms someone else. She daydreamed about having the money to travel to Bora Bora one day.

Above all, she thought about her father, a mechanic who loved her but was often tough on her. She wanted to make him proud by earning a degree, finding a career, and providing for herself.

But money was always tight. Washington had a part-time job at American Eagle, the clothing store, but couldn't work that many hours while taking three courses and caring for her two-year-old son, Landon, by herself. Sometimes she delivered food for DoorDash after class, wheeling her 2006 Hyundai Elantra with 219,000 miles on it for \$2 here, \$6 there (most customers didn't tip). Sometimes, she wondered: "Is it worth two dollars to drive this mile?"

Washington contacted the FAST Fund last winter after falling behind on her bills — gas, electric, phone, internet, all of them. She received help applying for Cares Act funding through MATC, which allowed her to catch up on her payments. And she received \$433.80 from the FAST Fund to pay for child-care expenses.

On Wednesday morning, after receiving the \$10 via Cash App, Washington got some gas and drove her son to day care. She was a bit late to Franczyk's class, but she excelled in each discussion exercise.

"Me gusta el libro ... me gustan los libros."

Franczyk exuded enthusiasm, praising students for correct answers ("That's baller! I

love it!”) and gently teasing a few who made small errors (“No, you ding-dong!”). She laughed a lot. Though she had always taken an interest in her students, she had grown more confident in her ability to put them at ease and let them know that she cares about them.

Earlier this spring, Franczyk saw that one of her students had been crying, so she asked to speak with her in the hall. The student said she was depressed but reluctant to seek help. Franczyk told her there was no shame in it, describing her own experiences with anxiety and depression, for which she takes prescription medication. “Really?” the student said. Later, the student told Franczyk she was getting help. “I’m proud of you,” the instructor told her, “for recognizing a problem and finding a solution.”

After class, Franczyk checked in with Washington. She was about to start a new job driving a truck for Amazon, which would require her to deliver 190 packages a day, four days a week. She wasn’t sure how she would fit her shifts in with classes, but the money would ease her burdens. Franczyk handed her a \$50 gas card. “Just in case the other one didn’t arrive in the mail,” she said.

Washington planned to study before picking up her son from day care. She knew he would be bursting with energy, hungry for mac-n-cheese, ready to sing *SpongeBob SquarePants* songs. She would study some more after he went to bed.

After class, Franczyk walked back to her office, where a woman stopping by to pick up a free laptop said that she needed a hard copy of a Microsoft Office manual. A six-week course she was taking required her to learn the program, the student explained in Spanish, but she couldn’t access the online version of the book available for free through MATC: She didn’t have internet service at home.

Was that an emergency? For the student — who was on her way to the class — it was. So Franczyk wrote her a note to take to the bookstore stating that the FAST Fund would buy her the \$40 manual. Minutes later, the student had it in her hands.



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A sign directs students to the college's FAST Fund office.

Such small moments point to larger questions about the extent to which emergency-aid programs help students stay in college and graduate. A 2021 [survey](#) of nearly 500 FAST Fund recipients at MATC found that 93 percent were still enrolled, had graduated, or had transferred to another institution. A recent [analysis](#) found that Compton College students who had received small amounts of emergency aid were twice as likely to graduate as comparable students who didn't receive such aid.

And a 2022 [study](#) found that students who had received emergency aid from the State University of New York were significantly more likely to persist, seek out campus resources, and feel a stronger sense of belonging. Moreover, participating SUNY campuses “greatly increased their awareness and understanding of the breadth and depth of challenges students face,” underscoring the need for broader, more holistic student-support services.

“There are many things that can’t be solved with an emergency-aid program. But that’s where faculty can come in and advocate, and say to the college, ‘OK, what is our systemic solution?’”

Those findings echo an important idea: An emergency-grant program can provide a window into the barriers students are experiencing, which might underscore the need to make larger changes. A new [report](#) on the impact of the FAST Fund — currently active at 28 colleges — describes how the program’s leaders at Compton saw a surge in requests from low-income students who couldn’t afford the medical kits they needed for their courses. Though the FAST Fund there couldn’t cover all those costs, its director initiated a conversation with administrators about possible solutions.

At the University of Montana, a surge in transportation-related requests for aid sparked conversations between the FAST Fund’s director and the head of the campus’s basic-needs office. Now they track application trends and share them with administrators, making data-driven arguments for institutional changes.

“There are many things that can’t be solved with an emergency-aid program,” says Traci Kirtley, executive director of Believe in Students, which oversees the FAST Fund. “But that’s where faculty can come in and advocate, and say to the college, ‘OK, what is our systemic solution?’”

That can lead to changes — and cause tensions. Each FAST Fund chapter, by design, represents a kind of challenge to the status quo on its campus. Colleges tend to be territorial. And institutions with layers of bureaucracy often don’t move as quickly as activists such as Franczyk do.

A while back, a survey of students at MATC revealed a widespread need for diapers and baby products, which many said they wanted to see stocked in campus food pantries. Franczyk had put the FAST Fund on a waitlist to partner with a nonprofit called the Milwaukee Diaper Mission. When the organization said it could provide 5,000 diapers a month, she contacted the coordinator of the Student Resource Center, who was all for it.

But first Franczyk had to get official approval. After meeting with administrators this spring, she says, the FAST Fund received verbal permission to put the items in the food pantry — for one month. By mid-May, a large supply of free diapers, baby wipes, and period products would be available in the food pantry at MATC’s downtown campus, but she would still be waiting for written permission to make it a permanent arrangement.



CALEB SANTIAGO ALVARADO FOR THE CHRONICLE.

Liz Franczyk and Jermaine House chat in Franczyk's office, where students seek help from the FAST Fund program.

Franczyk wasn't content to stop there. As that Wednesday afternoon wound down, she was making plans for an on-campus rally that would kick off a drive to get toiletries and personal-hygiene products into the food pantries. Jermaine House, the business-management major, stopped by her office to discuss the details of the event. He had already lined up a band to play.

While Franczyk chatted with another student, House sat in a chair reading *212: The Extra Degree: Extraordinary Results Begin with One Small Change*. At 211 degrees

Fahrenheit, water is hot; at 212, it boils. He appreciated the metaphor, a reminder that one small increment of change can make a big difference in the lives of students. To get a hold of one essential textbook could mean the difference between passing and failing. To carry home one free can of Chef Boyardee ravioli could mean the difference between hunger and fullness. To unwrap one donated bar of soap could mean the difference between dignity and despair.

The next morning, five more applications were waiting in the FAST Fund inbox. One student couldn't afford a laptop. A single father needed a car to get to and from MATC. A student on the verge of eviction had nowhere else to stay: "I do not have any family out here. ... My only other option is to go back to Chicago, but I don't want to do that because I want to finish school."

Just before 9 a.m., Franczyk made her first call of the day. Tiffany Boyd picked up. The student said she had applied for help after receiving some unexpected news: She would have to pay back a \$1,000 scholarship she had received last year.

The reason, Boyd said, was that she had withdrawn from two courses after her daughter was born prematurely last fall. That put her below the minimum number of credits required to maintain the scholarship. She was worried about paying for child care, which came to about \$400 a month. The accounting major, who worked full-time at a law firm, prided herself on financial responsibility. She had a little money saved up, but she was reluctant to spend it.

Franczyk asked Boyd to send her a copy of a child-care bill. After receiving it, she said, she would send her a check. It would be made out to the day-care provider for \$348.60. Boyd thanked her, feeling a surge of relief. She appreciated that she hadn't needed to answer numerous questions, that someone who didn't even know her had helped. Just like that, she had one less thing to worry about.

After the call ended, Boyd did what she always does when something good happens. She took a deep breath and said quietly, to no one in particular, “Thank you.”

By then, Franczyk had moved on to the next emergency.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

STUDENT SUCCESS

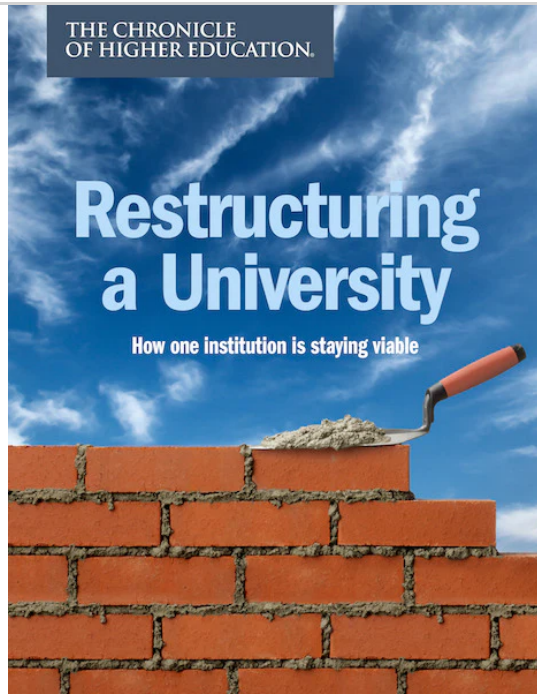
FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS



Eric Hoover

Eric Hoover writes about the challenges of getting to, and through, college. Follow him on Twitter [@erichoov](#), or email him, at eric.hoover@chronicle.com.

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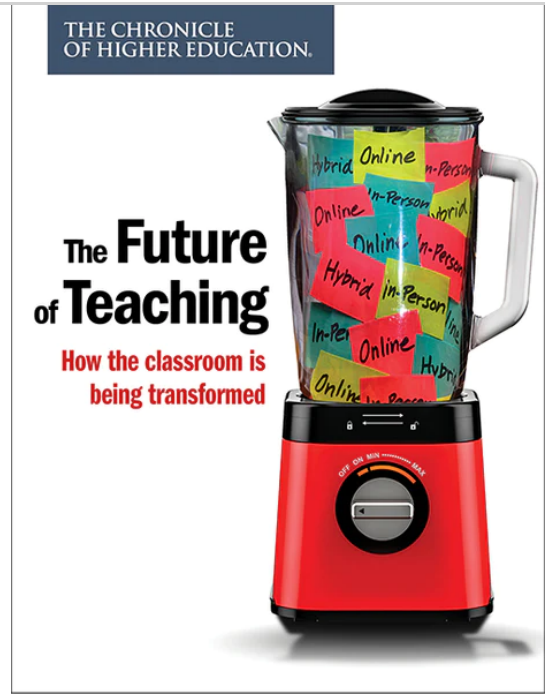


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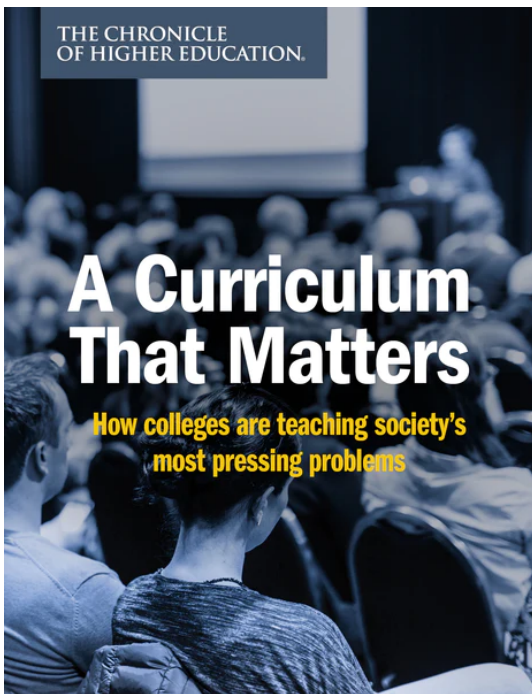


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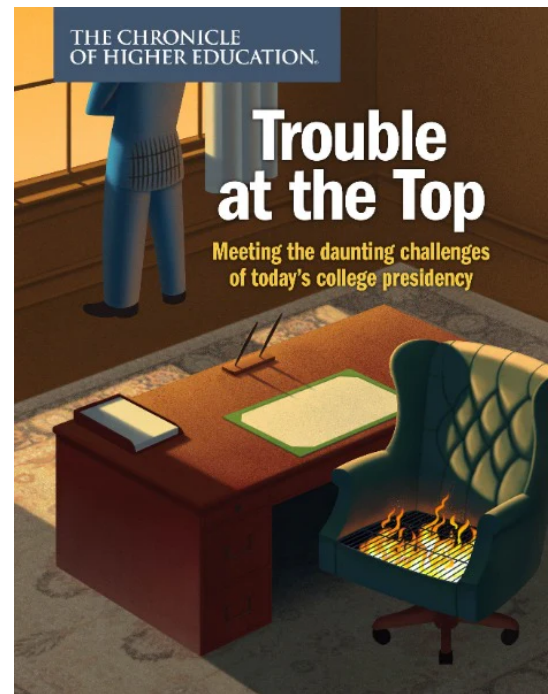


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