

The Potential Shortcomings of the Proposed Sunshine Scholarship: Analysis of College Promise

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Abstract

College promise programs are a new solution that states and cities in the United States are implementing to increase access to higher education. In the 2020 Florida Legislative Session, a bill was proposed to establish the Sunshine Scholarship Program in the hopes of increasing vocational education in the state. This college promise program would have provided full tuition and fees to Florida residents who are part of a household with less than a \$125,000 income in exchange for residing and working in the state after graduation. The characteristics of the program had several shortcomings including only covering tuition and fees, having a “last-dollar” structure, excluding part-time students in the eligibility pool, and having a lenient income criterion. All of these factors would have negatively impacted whether students of low-income backgrounds received the scholarship and actually attended college for vocational education as intended. This paper will review college promise programs in the United States and spotlight the potential limitations of the Sunshine Scholarship Program. Finally, it will provide recommendations to eliminate the limitations of this promise program and promote the potential of student recipients from low-income backgrounds in the state of Florida.

Keywords: college promise programs, college attainment, vocational education, low-income

Introduction

The Florida College System (FCS), comprising 28 public and community colleges, is regarded as the most affordably priced higher education option for Florida residents. Sixty-three percent of the state’s high school graduates pursue higher education by enrolling in an FCS institution. Within that group, the average age is 25. Additionally, over half of these students qualify for Pell Grants and identify as first-generation college students (Florida Department of Education, 2017).

Even though Florida is one of the most affordable states to attend college, the average student loan debt is rising. From 2015–2019, there was an estimated 27.9% increase in the state’s student loan debt (Tatham, 2019). One possible reason for this is that the tuition rates of universities in Florida increased by over 60% between 2008 and 2017 (Mitchell et al., 2017). Another possibility is the increase in standardized test score requirements to qualify for the state’s Bright Futures scholarship, which took effect in 2014. While recipients of the merit-based scholarship are less likely to take out loans than those who do not receive it (Beal et al., 2019), the number of students who qualify for the scholarship decreased by 54% from 2014 to 2018. This change has negatively affected students from a low socioeconomic status (SES) at a disproportionate rate (Dunkelberger, 2019b; McGlade & Travis, 2016).

Student loan debt has increased across the United States over the years (Friedman, 2019). Traditional financial aid awards like the Pell Grant have not been able to keep up with rising rates of tuition and fees in the country (Seltzer, 2017). At the same time, public institutions and community colleges have continued to see an annual decrease in enrollment over the last decade (Fain, 2019).

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These trends run counter to Governor Ron DeSantis' stated goal of making Florida "the number one state in the nation for workforce education by 2030" (Haughey, 2020, para. 4). Across the country, a solution that has rapidly gained popularity to mitigate lower enrollment rates and increasing student debt numbers is college promise programs. Perna and Leigh (2019) defined these programs as policies that have four main criteria: the intention to increase higher education attainment, offering scholarships with financial benefits beyond existing federal and state financial aid, having a type of "place-based" eligibility requirement where a student needs to reside in a specific area, and potentially having a need-based or merit-based requirement. There are many other names that these programs are referred to including "free college," "tuition free," and "debt-free" (Hinds, 2019). Over 400 types of these programs exist today across 44 states with differing goals, structures, and approaches (Perna & Leigh, 2017). In Florida, there were seven college promise programs as of 2019 (Perna & Leigh, 2019).

Governor DeSantis' goal led to several bills proposed in the 2020 Florida Legislative Session attempting to promote vocational education. This included House Bill 55, introduced by Democratic Representative Shevrin Jones, which sought to create the Sunshine Scholarship Program (Haughey, 2020). The proposed college promise program would help to fully fund the tuition and fees of Florida residents pursuing an associate degree or career certification from an eligible state college, school district career center, or charter technical career center. While this bill was unanimously supported by the Higher Education & Career Readiness Subcommittee, it was indefinitely withdrawn from consideration by the Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee in March 2020 (Florida House of Representatives, 2020). Specific reasoning for the decision to withdraw consideration could not be found. It appears likely due to the end of the 2020 regular legislative session since it was withdrawn after the last day along with dozens of other bills.

Although the bill was not successfully passed in 2020, a similar state college promise program is likely to be proposed again in the future. The purpose of this paper is to highlight what the likely shortcomings of the program would have been if it was implemented. Specifically, I will focus on what the potential impacts would have been for students from low SES backgrounds in Florida. Based on programmatic limitations described in this manuscript, I will make recommendations for future statewide promise programs to consider with the focus on increasing college completion for students from low SES backgrounds. This group is more likely to participate in vocational education than those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Levesque et al., 1995). Therefore, it is in the state's best interest to make sure a promise program promotes college attainment and completion for students from low SES backgrounds.

For the purposes of this paper, a low-income background in Florida refers to a student who is a member of a household that makes about \$60,000 or less. The U.S. Department of Education (2020) defines low income as household income that does not exceed 150% of the poverty line. In 2020, a family of three would be considered low income if their income was no more than \$32,580 whereas a family of six would be considered low income if the amount was less than \$52,740. Given that I did not control for family size, year of analysis, or have knowledge of how my sources defined low income, I believe that \$60,000 provides a threshold that retains focus on the population of interest while leaving some room for error.

Because the Sunshine Scholarship program was inspired by existing programs from other states and is unlike those that exist in Florida, I draw most of my information from sources that discuss other existing college promise programs, especially those with similarities to the Sunshine Scholarship. Given that there are over 400 of these programs in the country with differing approaches, I first give some general background on the programs relative to traditional financial aid. I then discuss how college choice and the programmatic structures play a role in achieving goals of college completion. After this foundational knowledge, I go specifically into the reasons

why I think the proposed scholarship would not greatly benefit students from low SES backgrounds and how to improve the program. Throughout the manuscript, I cite peer-reviewed journals as well as news articles. It is important to incorporate the voice of the media in this paper given the popularity of college promise programs and how often they are discussed in political and policy spaces.

Background on College Promise Programs

It is helpful to understand why college promise programs have emerged as a popular solution for college attainment and the various ways they can be implemented. All promise programs have some form of a place-based component to benefit their local constituents. Millett et al. (2018) distinguished these location-bound requirements by three geographic labels: (a) local or citywide, which includes school districts; (b) countywide; and (c) statewide. By using a location boundary, these programs can affect the local community more directly (Iriti et al., 2017). Enrolling in and completing college provides a mutual benefit for graduates and their local area because it leads to less reliance on welfare programs, reduction of crime rates, and greater engagement in the community (Ma et al., 2016). Florida experienced the second highest decrease in state college enrollment from fall 2018 to fall 2019 (NSC, 2019). In the United States, the responsibility of promoting higher education attainment largely falls on the states (Perna & Finney, 2014) and these governments are interested in having as many residents attend college locally as possible. This interest of college attainment is evident in Governor DeSantis' goal of increasing vocational education in Florida.

The pursuit of promoting college attainment in the United States has been illustrated with several initiatives to reduce cost. The collective perspective across the federal and state governments has been that by reducing or eliminating tuition, more students will enroll in and eventually graduate from college (Deming, 2019). Federal financial aid plays a major role in reducing tuition. The largest government program for aid is the Pell Grant, which has a maximum award of just over \$6,000 as of 2020. Not only have college costs risen at a faster rate than Pell Grants (Seltzer, 2017), a previous study found that receiving Pell Grant aid does not increase college enrollment or graduation (Marx & Turner, 2018). This flat effect on college enrollment is partially due to students with financial need like those of lower-income backgrounds not knowing how much they will pay for college until after they have already decided whether or not to apply and have been admitted (Deming, 2019). Without the financial information beforehand, they are likely to experience unexpected expenses that will contribute to them dropping out of college (Heller, 1997). Additionally, Pell Grants often do not cover the full cost of attendance and many students still have unmet financial need (Ma et al., 2020).

In addition to federal funding, there is state aid for students. Most states have had a form of need-based financial aid for years, including Florida with its Student Assistance Grant program. While the funding for that program is provided to students based on need and may cover tuition, applicant eligibility and the award amount is determined by each participating university (Florida Department of Education, 2019). Therefore, a student will not know whether they are eligible to receive funding or how much they will receive until after they make a decision for college but before enrollment. Furthermore, there is the possibility that the state runs out of funding for students. In 2017, over 900,000 eligible students from low-income backgrounds across the United States went through the steps of applying and did not receive any state aid (Kolodner, 2018).

College Choice for Promise Programs

It is also important to understand how prospective college students ultimately decide on whether or not to enroll in higher education. They evaluate their options based on the available information they have regarding costs and benefits (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005). Their

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decisions of college attendance vary depending on the type of aid received. Labels such as “grant” or “scholarship” influence their behavioral responses even if the dollar amount is the same (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Heller, 1997). Many students do not have a substantial understanding of financial aid. Creating a system that appears straightforward like many college promise programs advertise will help reduce uncertainty and increase college applications.

Beyond the varying eligibility requirements which can prevent students in need from applying (Billings, 2018), promise scholarships typically can only be used at a limited number of local institutions. A student’s preferences of where they would like to attend college plays a role in their decision to enroll (Perna & Leigh, 2018). However, several college promise programs only allow attendance to a select number of local institutions or even restrict aid funding to a specific type of institution (e.g., community college or four-year public university; Miller-Adams, 2015). County-level programs are more likely to even have requirements for which major of study the student must have in college (Millett et al., 2018). The proposed Sunshine Scholarship Program would have only covered students seeking an associate’s degree or career certification (Haughey, 2020), so there would be limitations in college choice. Therefore, it is even more important that the scholarship is accessible to the students most likely to attend an FCS school and go into vocational education.

Programmatic Designs of Promise Programs

The various funding and programmatic designs are a key characteristic of college promise programs (Kanter et al., 2016). As noted earlier, these programs differ in the timing of their financial aid distribution. If college promise funding is regarded as “last-dollar,” it means that it will vary in amount and be distributed after a student has received traditional state and federal aid. “First-dollar” programs distribute funding before a student is notified of additional aid and typically remains consistent in amount and timing (Deming, 2019). College promise programs are much more likely to be structured as last-dollar because it allows for funding to be more widely distributed, and it is thought to be more reflective of each individual student’s financial needs (Deming, 2019).

The main features of the proposed Sunshine Scholarship Program draw inspiration from New York’s Excelsior Scholarship. Introduced in 2017, this program seeks to cover college tuition for state residents whose family income is below a certain threshold and who plan to attend a university in the SUNY (State University of New York) or CUNY (City University of New York) systems (Nguyen, 2019). This ambitious promise program was the first to apply to nearly all 4-year public universities in a state. While the scholarship caps at \$5,500, the in-state tuition is meant to be covered by other financial aid and credit from the universities. The scholarship is structured as last-dollar and is applied after other aid is distributed. With the income cap for eligibility (started at \$100,000 in 2017 and has increased incrementally), the scholarship seeks to specifically target lower- and middle-class students. A student who receives the award needs to live and work in the state for the number of years that they were funded. If they do not do so, their award will be converted to a loan (Nguyen, 2019).

Statewide College Promise Programs in Florida

The two statewide aid programs in Florida that are open to prospective college students are the Bright Futures Scholarship (BFS) and the Florida Student Assistance Grant. Bright Futures was implemented in 1997 as a merit-based scholarship funded by the state lottery (McKinney, 2009). There are differing requirements for a student to receive award funding depending on the type of BFS. Generally, considered factors include high school grade point average, college entrance exam scores (ACTs/SATs), and service hours (Office of Student Financial Assistance, 2020). The Florida Academic Scholars tier of BFS is intended to cover 100% of tuition and fees, while the

Medallion tier covers 75% (Dunkelberger, 2019a). The program has become very popular, with the number of qualified students growing by thousands each year (Dunkelberger, 2019a). It has been found that Bright Futures increases the likelihood that Florida students attend a college in the state (Zhang et al., 2016). However, given funding limitations, the state had to increase minimum score requirements in 2014 which disproportionately affected students from low-income households (McGlade & Travis, 2016). Score requirements for ACT/SAT exams were increased again in 2019 for implementation in 2021 (Dunkelberger, 2019a). This change will likely reduce the number of students from low SES backgrounds who qualify for the funding even further. The structure of the Bright Futures Scholarship has already received past criticism with the bulk of its recipients being students from higher-income households (Mckinney, 2009). The added strictness of eligibility will only serve to exacerbate that outcome.

The Florida Student Assistance Grant (FSAG) is technically not considered a college promise program under the definition of Perna and Leigh (2019), but it has similar characteristics. The FSAG program was established in 1972 and awarded to students based on expected family contribution (EFC) as outlined from their FAFSA application. In 2019–2020, the maximum award amount was \$2,610, which has been the case since 2013 (The Committee on Appropriations, 2020). Castleman and Long (2013) found the FSAG has a positive effect on student persistence and degree completion. However, while students are eligible to receive the grant after their first year of college, only 36% receive it again in their second year. It is possible for a student to receive a Pell Grant, Bright Futures Scholarship, and the Florida Student Assistance Grant. However, given the increase in state student debt, there is room for improvement in financially supporting college students from low SES backgrounds.

The Sunshine Scholarship Program proposal would: (a) cover 100% of tuition and fees from one of the eligible FCS institutions or career centers, (b) be distributed as last-dollar (after federal and state aid has been credited), (c) restrict eligibility to full-time students who come from households with total annual incomes equal to or less than \$125,000, and (d) require that students must reside and work in Florida after completion of study for the same period of time as the received scholarship funding (Florida House of Representatives, 2020). I will draw attention to the shortcomings that would come from only covering tuition and fees, the last-dollar structure, the exclusion of part-time students, and the lenient financial requirement. All of these factors would negatively impact students from low SES backgrounds and impede on the goal of advancing vocational education.

Shortcomings of Sunshine Scholarship Program

Thus far, this paper has highlighted the diverse structures of college promise programs including those in Florida. While it would be ideal for these initiatives to cover full college costs and provide support services, the reality is that state funding is limited (Deming, 2019). Many of the choices made for the characteristics of each promise program is related to the goals as well as what is feasible (Perna & Leigh, 2017). However, while local government must ensure that programs are financially sustainable, the programmatic goals are limited when its structure has shortcomings. This would likely happen to the Sunshine Scholarship Program unless the limitations are addressed.

While this proposed promise program would fully cover tuition and fees for Florida students, there are other financial responsibilities that affect college persistence like housing, food, books, and transportation costs (Miller-Adams, 2015). By still requiring students to pay for these additional costs, the cost burden of college is still felt—especially for those from low-income backgrounds. Broton and Goldrick-Rab (2016) illustrated that food and housing insecurity are higher among college students than the general public, and even with college promise scholarships, families are asked to pay thousands of dollars for their students' schooling.

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These financial limitations are especially true when the scholarships are last-dollar like Florida's proposed Sunshine Scholarship. Other established statewide promise programs have this structure, including the Tennessee Promise and New York's Excelsior Scholarship. Thus far, New York has seen a minimal effect in college enrollment from the program (Nguyen, 2019), while many students from low SES backgrounds through the Tennessee Promise have not had their financial needs met (Smith, 2018). Because students coming from low-income households have substantial financial need, most if not all of their college tuition is typically covered by the Pell Grant (Smith, 2018) and other aid like the FSAG. Therefore, even if Florida students were to qualify for the last-dollar scholarship, they would not receive much benefit from it. Higher-income students who do not typically receive aid from Pell Grants would gain more funding from this promise scholarship as has been the case elsewhere (Smith, 2018).

A positive characteristic touted of college promise programs compared to traditional financial aid is the additional insight they give prospective students (Deming, 2019). The programs have the potential to offer college applicants a better understanding of how much they should expect to pay for college tuition before they are admitted. If the Sunshine Scholarship were implemented, it would likely be heavily advertised and eventually become known by school districts across the state. However, since last-dollar scholarships are distributed after other forms of aid, they lose some benefit. Many students apply for these last-dollar programs expecting to receive the scholarship, but are denied instead (Zinshteyn, 2019). Therefore, promise programs can end up causing additional barriers for students from low SES backgrounds who may not have all of the eligibility information.

In the case of students from low-income households, the notion of free college is appealing enough to get them to attend college. However, they may not plan for the hidden costs of attendance like housing or food. Without the finances to reduce these burdens and the shock of the additional costs, dropout is more likely (Zinshteyn, 2019). If Florida did have a last-dollar, need-based promise program, student populations from low SES backgrounds would likely not benefit much.

Another aspect that would limit the scholarship's benefit for students from low SES backgrounds is the restriction of eligibility for part-time enrollment. As noted earlier in this manuscript, individuals from low-income backgrounds are more likely than those from higher-income to engage in vocational education (Levesque et al., 1995). It is likely that a sizable portion of part-time college students in Florida are low-income since they likely hold full-time jobs or have familial responsibilities. Like the Sunshine Scholarship, very few college promise programs are open to non-traditional students of any kind (Jones & Berger, 2018). While some programs like Hawaii Promise do allow part-time students to receive funding and Tennessee Promise now has the Reconnect Program for older students, the programs typically require students to have full-time, continuous enrollment in college right after high school (Jones & Berger, 2018). Around 40% of the total undergraduate student population in the United States is made up of individuals who did not begin attending college immediately after high school (Jones & Berger, 2018). A majority of students attending FCS schools are older and likely attend part-time (Florida Department of Education, 2017). The reality is that many students, especially from low-income backgrounds, can only enroll part-time or end up "stopping out" (leaving school with the intent of returning) of college due to familial needs (Whistle & Hiler, 2019). For students from low SES backgrounds interested in vocational education, several may only be able to enroll part-time and would not be eligible for the Sunshine Scholarship.

The last shortcoming of the promise program is its generous family income requirement. Students must come from a household that does not make more than \$125,000 a year (Florida House of Representatives, 2020). The median family income for the 28 schools in the Florida College System is generally between \$40,000 and \$60,000 (Chetty et al., 2017). Therefore, very few

students attending the schools in which this scholarship is designed would need the income requirement to be that lenient. Instead, this program characteristic would likely attract students who would not normally attend these institutions, specifically those from middle-income backgrounds. Many in this income bracket may not be eligible for Pell Grants, but still cannot afford to pay for college without loans. These students can be very averse to taking out loans and may prefer to enroll in a community college through a college promise program rather than a four-year university (Smith Jaggars, 2020). However, compared to peers with similar characteristics, students who first enter a community college can have lower rates of persistence and completion towards a bachelor's degree (Smith Jaggars et al., 2019). Therefore, the Sunshine Scholarship's income criterion may not only serve as a shortcoming for students from low-income backgrounds, but also those from middle-income as well.

Recommendations

I have highlighted the complexity that comes with trying to create large-scale college promise programs. Florida would face similar challenges with the Sunshine Scholarship Program, but the state must prioritize a programmatic structure that provides equitable access to students from low SES backgrounds. Focusing on catering the scholarship for this population would help achieve Governor DeSantis' goal of increasing vocational education in the state. Therefore, if a similar college promise program is proposed again in the future, there are several feasible recommendations that should be considered.

Flexible Use of Scholarship Funding

The primary focus of college promise programs is to eliminate the cost of college tuition. The proposed Sunshine Scholarship would have sought to do the same. While this idea markets well and directly appears to address rising tuition rates, it does not mediate a student's full college cost. Furthermore, existing federal and state financial aid often already takes care of a student's tuition costs, especially if they are low-income. Therefore, the program should consider targeting another contributor to a student's cost of attendance as opposed to tuition.

Other financial contributions could be room and board, a campus meal plan, transportation, or books. Since the scholarships are place-based, it is reasonably possible to determine rough estimates of what these costs would look like for a student based on where they attend college. Currently, the main way that a student can pay for these items is through external scholarships or loans. There are some examples of a promise program that Florida should review as a model to cover other expenses. The Pittsburgh Promise program has a partnership with specific local universities referred to as preferred college partners. If a promise scholarship recipient chooses to go to a preferred school, the institution provides funding for room and board and offers academic support services (Iriti & Page, 2018).

Different Models of Funding Distribution within a Promise Program

Last-dollar scholarships tend to allocate fewer financial resources to students from low-income backgrounds than their peers from wealthier households who have less of their tuition covered by traditional financial aid (Whistle & Hiler, 2019). Since the funding is distributed late in the application process, these students may expect the scholarships to reduce college costs further than they actually do (Whistle & Hiler, 2019). If Florida has the ability and funding to handle it, the Sunshine Scholarship should include both last-dollar and first-dollar distributions. First-dollar scholarships would be given to students from low SES backgrounds, which would provide a more consistent amount to each student and would be given before they complete the college admission

process. Last-dollar scholarships would be provided to students of higher-income backgrounds based on remaining funds. This aid distribution would still allow all students to receive funding based on need, but there is a bit more equity with financial awareness.

There are two promise programs (San Francisco Promise and Oregon Promise) that are described as middle-dollar (Perna & Leigh, 2019). The state program in Oregon provides last-dollar coverage, but then gives a minimum of \$1,000 towards college costs outside of tuition if a student's tuition is already covered by traditional financial aid (HECC, 2018). Similar to other programs, a middle-dollar program increases college enrollment (Fain, 2017). If the Sunshine Scholarship is unable to have multiple models of distribution, the middle-dollar approach seems to promote financial equity more than last-dollar structures. Further research should be conducted to assess middle-dollar programs and their effect on student graduation rates.

Reduce Income Eligibility

While having a broader financial criterion for eligibility may appear to increase accessibility of the Sunshine Scholarship, it would likely hurt the chances of students from low SES backgrounds to receive the funding. With an income requirement of \$125,000 a year or less, it will attract many middle-class students who would likely be attending college regardless (Smith Jaggars, 2020), and may have less interest in vocational education. Reducing the income eligibility to \$60,000 would align with the income makeup of the students who attend FCS schools and would place the focus on supporting students from lower income backgrounds (Chetty et al., 2017; Florida Department of Education, 2017).

This would also greatly diminish the number of students eligible for the Sunshine Scholarship. I would hope that this move would allow for enough available funding to open the scholarship up to part-time students. Part-time students are twice as likely to be employed while they are attending college compared to their full-time peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Many of them are also low-income, so opening up eligibility for them would positively benefit students from low SES backgrounds in the state and promote the goal of increasing vocational education.

Conclusion

It is exciting that a need-based state college promise program was proposed by Florida's House of Representatives. These promise programs are an emerging solution to resolve several problems concerning trends in higher education, such as rising tuition prices and student debt, both of which affect Florida. However, modeling the Sunshine Scholarship after programs like New York's Excelsior Program will likely lead to similar results of minimal college enrollment growth and financial needs not being met for many students from low SES backgrounds (Nguyen, 2019; Smith, 2018). Overall, increasing vocational education requires the prioritization of these students' needs. By expanding how students could use the scholarship funding, shifting to a middle-dollar approach, and reducing the income eligibility, the scholarship will have a structure with a higher possibility of benefiting students from low SES backgrounds and promoting vocational education in Florida.

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