Abstract

The Florida Student Assistance Grant (FSAG) is a state funded need-based grant that is available to "degree-seeking, resident, undergraduate students who demonstrate substantial financial need" (FDOE, OFSA Fact Sheet, 2014-2015). FSAG is open to students who attend Florida public universities and colleges. The goal of this case study is to examine the theoretical reasons for and practical analysis of FSAG. In addition, this case study attempts to analyze the current issues with retention of FSAG, particularly the success and or failures of the program in initial funding and renewal of funding for low-income college students. An evaluation of these current problems is provided, as well as recommendations to alleviate current funding issues and provide financial aid to a larger population. It is the hope that through the progress of these recommendations that more low-income students will have the opportunity to attend and graduate college, producing ample positive effects on the financial status of low-income students, the state's economy, and the socioeconomic climate of the U.S.

Background & Rationale

In "Aid and Advocacy: Why Community College Transfer Students Do Not Apply for Financial Aid and How Counselors Can Help Them Get in the Game" Handel (2008) outlines the current landscape of financial aid for students and points out the problems facing college bound students today: "While many more students are attending college, the cost of attendance is going up. In the last 10 years, tuition and fees have increased an average of 5.6 percent per year at private institutions and 7.1 percent per year at public institutions" (Handel, p. 10). The rising costs of attending college not only affect student decisions regarding attending college, including decisions on the nature of the institution to attend, i.e., public, private, community colleges, trade school, distance learning, etc., but also impact the decision on location, on whether to attend in-state or out-of-state institutions. Consequentially, Bridget Long (2008) examines the efficacy of financial aid programs and policy and their impact on student decisions with the goal of improving college access and affordability (p. iii). Not restricted only to the student population, however, the aforementioned considerations and the implications of financial aid policies on college attendance and enrollment decisions also impact a family's ability to afford and pay for education, too.

Further, on the rising cost of college, Castleman and Long (2012) indicate: "Since the 1970s, the cost of college has risen at a much faster rate than have median family wages, meaning that tuition—as a share of family income—has increased steadily (ACSFA, 2010)" (p. 1). While the rising cost of tuition is alarming for families, it's even more so for low-income families, who must contribute a significantly larger proportion of their income to putting their children through college (Carnvale & Rose, 2004; as cited in Handel, 2008, p. 10). Castleman and Long elaborate on the discussion of financial aid programs that help low-income students particularly and address gaps in access, enrollment, and ultimately, educational success and attainment, between low-income youth and families and their middle and upper class counterparts: "The college attendance rates of youth from low-income families continue to lag behind those of their middle- and upper-income peers" (Castleman & Long, p.1). Castleman and Long note one explanation for the persistent gaps is "the lack of college affordability for low-income students" (Castleman & Long, p. 1). Castleman and Long report that federal and state governments' response to the problem of rising cost of college is need-based financial grants, for example, “the federal Pell Grant, which is a need-based grant awarded to low-and moderate-income students” (Castleman & Long, p. 1).

Briefly summarizing the history of financial aid programs in Doyle (2010) details particular advantages of need-based aid programs that improve college attendance of low-income students,

> As decades of research have shown, lowering the price of higher education results in higher levels of attendance. Low-income students are more price-responsive than their peers, and so programs that focus on lowering the price for these students will induce more students to attend than other forms of financial aid. As a result of their focus on the most needy students, these programs are efficient. This efficiency means that these programs are more affordable for the state as a whole than other, more broad-based subsidies (Doyle, p. 399).

In “Financial Aid Through a Bourdieu-ian Lens: Inequality Perpetuated or an Opportunity for Change?” Gieser (2012) acknowledges the inherent complexity of financial aid and notes that terms, *need* and *merit,* concepts central to financial aid policy, require definition and clarity, as they have become increasingly blurry and should be fully fleshed out to enable careful considerations for institutions that pass policy for financial aid programs (Gieser, pg. 9). On need, for example, Geiser assesses: “Defining and determining need is not a straight-forward procedure. In the world of financial aid, simplistic answers are quite likely the wrong ones” (Gieser, pg. 9). Moreover, William Doyle (2010) delineates salient differences between state aid programs and merit-aid state programs.

Doyle notes that prior to the advent of merit-aid (aid provided to students who meet some form of academic achievement criteria), the vast majority of state aid was provided on a need-based basis (Doyle, p. 397). Doyle outlines the history of need-based state aid programs:

> "The majority of modern need-based state aid programs began with the establishment of the State Student Incentive Grant (SSIG) program in the 1960s and 1970s. Before the federal government created SSIG, only 16 states had a need-based program. Within 20 years all states in the nation had some form of need-based aid" (Doyle, p. 398).

Further, state legislation and financial aid policies began to shift from need-based state aid programs to merit-based state aid programs in 1993 with Georgia's HOPE (Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally) scholarship (Heller, p. 6; Dolye 2010b, p. 400). Doyle points out: "Since Georgia's foray into broad based aid, 22 other states have also adopted some form of a merit aid program. The rapid growth of these programs in the 1990s has slowed in the last few years" (Doyle, pg. 400). But, "as of 2007, 16 states had adopted broad-based merit aid programs" (Doyle, pg. 398). Important here are not only the fundamental differences between need-based and merit-based aid because of implications for students (notions of need versus merit), but also for higher education administrators and policy makers.

Indeed, Doyle (2010; 2012), among others, including Gieser (2012) and Brown (2007), question whether merit-based state aid drains the resources of state funding. Specifically referencing Heller's 2004 article, "The Changing Nature of Financial Aid," Gieser (2010) notes: "Some argue that the increased use of merit-based financial aid drains resources from those students who most need them" (Gieser, pg. 9). Gieser advances this point: "Research suggests that merit-based aid programs award aid disproportionately to affluent, white students who would have attended college even without financial assistance" (Dynarski 2004, Heller 2002). In essence the increased focus on merit-based aid programs since the 1990s robs Peter to pay Paul" (Gieser, pg. 9-10). Moreover, as Toutkoushian and Shafiq (2010) indicate: "Evidence suggests that colleges are using an increasing share of state appropriations for providing merit-based aid rather than reducing the cost for all students or underrepresented and low-income students" (Toutkoushian & Shafiq, 2010).

For our purposes here, Castleman and Long's study importantly advances existing literature on the debate on the effectiveness of financial aid programs and policies yet pushes beyond just access, affordability, and enrollment, to shift the focus to the impact of aid on persistence and degree completion with a particular financial aid program: the Florida Student Access Grant (FSAG) (Castleman & Long).

The Florida Student Assistance Grant (FSAG) is a state funded need-based grant that is available to "degree-seeking, resident, undergraduate students who demonstrate substantial financial need" (FDOE, OFSA Face Sheet, 2014-15). FSAG is open to students who attend Florida public universities and colleges. FSAG funding is prioritized for those that qualify for the "Talented Twenty Program." The Talented Twenty provides priority funding for high schools students that graduate in the top 20% of their high school class.

Castleman and Long find that:

> FSAG eligibility had a positive impact on a host of short-, medium-, and long-term college outcomes. The additional $1,300 in grant aid eligibility (in 2000 dollars) increased the probability of immediate enrollment at a public, four-year university by 3.2 percentage points while also increasing the probability of staying continuously enrolled

through the spring semester of students' freshman year by 4.3 percentage points. Most importantly, the additional $1,300 in aid eligibility increased the probability of earning a bachelor's degree within six years by 4.6 percentage points, or 22 percent (Castleman & Long, p. 3).

Criteria for FSAG

- Be a Florida resident and a U.S. citizen or eligible non-citizen.
- Not owe a repayment or be in default under any state or federal grant, loan, or scholarship program unless satisfactory arrangements to repay have been made.
- Not have previously received a baccalaureate degree.
- Enroll for a minimum of 12 credit hours per term, or the equivalent, in an associate or baccalaureate degree program at an eligible institution to participate in the FSAG Public, FSAG Private, or FSAG Postsecondary programs.
- Meet state academic progress standards for renewal of FSAG.
- Have a minimum 2.0 GPA.
- Have a family contribution less than amount required by the Florida Office of Student Financial Assistance.
- Meet College-Level Academic Skills (CLAST) requirements.

Renewal of FSAG

- A renewal applicant must have earned a minimum institutional cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 on a 4.0 scale and earn the following for each term an award was received during the academic year for the programs listed below:.

- Florida Private and Postsecondary Student Assistance Grants, 12 credit hours for each term the award was received.
- Eligibility for renewal is determined at the end of the second semester or third quarter of each academic year. Credit hours earned during the previous summer can be counted toward the total number of credit hours required.
- A student should consult the postsecondary institution for renewal requirements established by the institution.
- Demonstrate financial need by completing an error free FAFSA each academic year by the deadline specified by the institution

Problem

Castleman and Long state that "Only 36 percent of students who got FSAG in their first year of college also receive it in their second year. By four years after high school, only 21 percent of eligible students receive the grant" (p. 25).

Of the $44,132,419.55 disbursed to 4 year public state universities, 42,633 were eligible with only 12,101 students initially receiving an average grant amount of $1,458.83 in 2012-2013. At the University of Florida, $6,308,939.80 were disbursed in 2012-2013. Of the 5,947 eligible students, 1,537 initially received the grant with 3,669 students of the 5,947 eligible. The average award amount was $1,719.53. UF Student Financial Affairs stated that this grant is awarded on a "first come first serve" basis. Almost 15% of the UF undergraduate student population qualifies for the FSAG based on parental income (must be less than $30,000/year).

The research on FSAG is limited, however, we've identified two potential problem areas for further exploration. The problem here is defined in two parts,

I) Funding for eligible UF students

II) Retention of funding from year to year

Part I of the problem focuses on UF's funding of eligible FSAG students. As seen in the chart below, the University of Florida funds 3,669 of the 9, 616 students that are eligible (unfunded plus total number of awards disbursed).

FLORIDA STUDENT ASSISTANCE GRANT PUBLIC (FSAGPU)

4 YEAR PUBLIC STATE UNIVERSITY							
Code	Institution	Total Dollars Disbursed	Unfunded Eligible Students	Initial Students Disbursed	Renewal Students Disbursed	All Students Disbursed	Average Award Amount
376	FLORIDA A & M UNIVERSITY	$3,096,582.00	47	730	563	1,293	$2,394.88
501	FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY	$2,747,194.00	7,243	547	758	1,305	$2,105.13
361	FLORIDA GULF COAST UNIVERSITY	$750,977.00	4,301	85	348	433	$1,734.36
131	FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY	$7,755,402.00	12,945	927	3,716	4,643	$1,670.34
371	FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY	$4,147,681.75	0	1,389	1,114	2,503	$1,657.08
867	NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA	$131,274.00	1	48	58	106	$1,238.43
481	UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA	$7,262,849.00	2,863	3,504	4,942	8,446	$859.92
011	UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA	$6,308,939.80	5,947	1,537	2,132	3,669	$1,719.53
161	UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA	$2,289,676.00	4,519	497	804	1,301	$1,759.94
291	UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA	$7,574,396.00	1,888	2,376	3,208	5,584	$1,356.45
171	UNIVERSITY OF WEST FLORIDA	$2,067,448.00	2,879	461	508	969	$2,133.59
Sector Total:		**$44,132,419.55**	**42,633**	**12,101**	**18,151**	**30,252**	**$1,458.83**

(FSAG Program Fact Sheet, Florida DOE, 2012-2013)

Of the $44,132,419.55 disbursed to 4 year public state universities, 42,633 were eligible with only 12,101 Florida students initially receiving an average grant amount of $1,458.83 in 2012-2013. At the University of Florida, $6,308,939.80 were disbursed in 2012-2013. Of the 9,616 (unfunded eligible + awarded) eligible students, 1,537 initially received the grant with 3,669 students of the 9,616 eligible. The average award amount was $1,719.53.

UF Student Financial Affairs stated that this grant is awarded on a "first come first serve" basis. Almost 15% of the UF undergraduate student population qualifies for the FSAG based on parental income (must be less than $30,000/year). By funding 3,669 students UF provides FSAG to 38% of eligible students. Compared to other 4-year public institutions UF falls somewhere in the middle of the pack. As evident, Florida State University has a 100% funding rate, while institutions like Florida International University has a 26% rate and Florida Atlantic University a 15% rate.

Parental Median Income of Students

Year	Median Income	%<$20,000	%>30,000	%>$50,000	%>$100,000
Fall 2012	$100,000-104,999	8.43	85.51	74.23	50.70

(University of Florida, Student Financial Affairs Factbook 2012-2013)

Part II of the problem focuses on award retention from year to year. Castleman and Long (2012) state that "Only 36 percent of students who got FSAG in their first year of college also receive it in their second year. By four years after high school, only 21 percent of eligible students receive the grant" (p. 25). The renewal criteria for this award is as follows:

- A renewal applicant must have earned a minimum institutional cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 on a 4.0 scale and earn the following for each term an award was received during the academic year for the programs listed below:.
- Florida Private and Postsecondary Student Assistance Grants, 12 credit hours for each term the award was received.
- Eligibility for renewal is determined at the end of the second semester or third quarter of each academic year. Credit hours earned during the previous summer can be counted toward the total number of credit hours required.
- A student should consult the postsecondary institution for renewal requirements

established by the institution.

- Demonstrate financial need by completing an error free FAFSA each academic year by the deadline specified by the institution. (FSAG Program Fact Sheet, Florida DOE).

Castleman and Long's last bullet point, "…completing an error free FAFSA each academic year by the deadline specified by the institution" is often the piece of the renewal process that students with which students struggle.

A family's income and expected family contribution (EFC) determines a student's financial aid eligibility as calculated in two methodologies: federal methodology, which allocates federal funds such as Pell Grants to students based on family income, assets, expenses, family size, and other factors that impact a family's ability to pay for college; and institutional methodology, which uses institutional measurables uncontrolled by the government, to determine aid eligibility for its students (Handel). Using the federal methodology, however, students who want aid must complete the FAFSA. Kantrowitz (2009) suggests that, "Of the students who did not apply for financial from any source, almost all (95.3%) gave at least one of five reasons for not applying: thought ineligible (60.7%), no financial need (50.6%), did not want to take on the debt (40.2%), no information on how to apply (22.9%), and forms were too much work (18.9%). The first three reasons accounted for 92.2% of the non-applicants."

The FAFSA could be one reason why the first year renewal rate is so low. In an email with Donna Kolb, Senior Associate Director for UF's Student Financial Affairs, when asked about FAFSA outreach/support programs for FSAG recipients specifically, Kolb replied "We have 8 full-time financial aid advisors available to assist students with FAFSA as well as any other questions the student might have about their financial aid eligibility" (personal correspondence, 2014).

Recommendations

As with the problem laid out above, the recommendations are presented in two parts.

Part I: Increase percentage of eligible students who receive FSAG award to 50%

UF spends $6,309,937 of the $6,308,939.80 disbursement with an average award amount of $1,719.53 (AY 12-13). Lowering the award amount will allow for more eligible students to receive award. We recommend that UF aim to fund 50% of eligible students. The 12% increase from 38% to 50% would not cost the University any more money, but will allow for more students to receive an award. If UF covered 50% of eligible students, a total of 4,808 students (2012-2013 numbers) would receive need based aid through FSAG. The individual award amount would average $1,312, roughly $407 less than the $1,719 average award given to 2012-2013 FSAG recipients. While $400 is a significant amount for low income students, the reduction in award is less than the increase in amount the 12% of students who had not previously received the award will now have factored into their financial aid package.

Part II: Provide FAFSA support

As outlined in the problem above, FSAG recipients are students from low income backgrounds and are at higher risk for transition issues and less institutional knowledge. We recommend that FSAG recipients be targeted for intentional FAFSA support. Part of the renewal process requires an *error free* FAFSA submitted by the institutional deadline. Research shows that the FAFSA is a complicated form that requires financial aid knowledge. By not providing support for students with less financial aid literacy, the institution is privileging those students whose background has provided them with the financial literacy to complete a FAFSA. We also recommend that further research be done on how UF FSAG recipients fare during the college experience. The little research that has been done has proven to show that the FSAG improves retention, with only 38% of the FSAG eligible population funded, it is in the interest of the university to understand how other students from low income backgrounds are performing without the FSAG grant. Thus, if UF can retain more FSAG recipients by tracking recipients, supporting FSAG students year over year through graduation, implementing outreach programs to ensure error-free FAFSA applications and to raise awareness of the life of the grant and to facilitate renewal of the grant, short-, medium, and long-term positive impacts may be actualized.

Costs

The total amount of state disbursement is out of the control of UF, therefore, the economic cost to the institution will not change. Those that are covering the cost of this shift in percentage is the students themselves. A lower funding percentage would allow for a higher average award amount for those receiving the award. Our recommendation of funding more students requires a lower award amount because the institution is still working with the same pot of money. The second recommendation requires more people power than it does economic cost, because the institution already finances financial officers, the cost of shifting more of their time to focus on FAFSA outreach and FSAG tracking would come at the cost of other duties. If this population continues to take up more of the officer’s time, an additional staff person might be needed to cover the workload.

Impacts: Direct and Indirect Impact of FSAG Retention

According to “An Unequal State of America: A Reuters Series” the wage gap has continued to steadily increase in 49 of 50 states since 1989 (Nelson and OJha). As higher education becomes more crucial in the job market, income inequality and education inequality are feeding off each other, creating a continuously widening gap in wealth. (Rhode, Cooke and Ojha). Need-based aid programs, like FSAG, attempt to correct these inequalities by providing low-income students financial help to attend college. According to Castleman and Long’s study, research indicates that students who are FSAG eligible showed an increased probability of immediate attendance at a four-year public university, a higher probability of continued enrollment throughout the first year of college, and a higher probability of graduating with a bachelor’s degree within six years (Castleman and Long).

According to Demos, the national policy center, in-depth research study on the negative effects of cutting investment and financial aid funds in higher education on Florida’s state economy, in conjunction with Florida International University Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy, “while the percentage of students who enroll and ultimately graduate from two-year schools [in Florida] is among the highest in the nation, the majority of two-year students [in Florida] don’t graduate.” The study attributes this low graduation rate to several factors, largely due to Florida’s decrease in financial support of university in investment and decrease in financial aid retention to students.

Student retention of FSAG maintains a closer possibility of weakening income and education inequalities by making college more affordable for low-income students (Castleman and Long). For many low-income students, retention of FSAG is only one of few ways that they can financially afford to attend, persist, and succeed in higher education. Without FSAG retention, low-income students have a higher likelihood of dropping out of college due to financial burden, taking full-time jobs during college (which significantly increase a student's probability of dropping out), or incurring financial debt on an already low-income family (Lumina Foundation). The additional aid also provides these students with more time to focus on their education, rather than taking on more hours at a part-time job or a full-time position in order to pay for their education (Demos and FIU Research Institute).

In the United States, higher education attainment is a critical force that stimulates economic mobility and socioeconomic advancement (U.S. Treasury Report). According to the 2012 Bureau of Labor Statistics, "median weekly earnings of a full-time, bachelor's degree holder in 2011 were 64 percent higher than those of a high school graduate ($1,053 compared to $638)," thus showing that obtaining education is a substantial factor in increasing earnings.

While the economic benefits of education attainment are common knowledge in the U.S., these material gains explain part of the reason why attendance has continued to increase over the last several decades. A college graduate in 1980 earned 50% more than a high school graduate at that time. By 2008, college graduates in the U.S., on average, earned 200% more than those with only a high school diploma (Acemoglu & Autor). The 2012 Bureau of Labor statistics further suggests that "the earnings differential underestimates the economic benefits of higher education since college-educated workers are less likely to be unemployed and more likely to have jobs that provide additional non-wage compensation," such as paid vacation and employer-provided health insurance. The U.S. Treasury Report also links attainment of a bachelor's degree to further continuation of study and thus an additional increase in earnings later in life.

In addition, economic analysts directly relate the recent housing market recession to the dramatic increases in student loan debt of recent graduates over the last decades (Korkki, New York Times). The New York Times calls this age group of recent graduates in their 20s and 30s the “grow-up” economy group, in which they greatly stimulate the economy in large purchasing sections, such as the first house, car, houseware items, and furniture. These recent graduates are unable to afford monthly mortgage payments due to their monthly student loan payments. (Irwin, New York Times) An increase in financial aid and thus a decrease in student loan debt would allow many recent graduates the financial opportunity to afford these large-item purchases and commitments, especially those from a low-income situation already (Irwin, New York Times).

The economy and stability of Florida, which the university immediately serves, will benefit from having more low-income students renewing their FSAG. According to the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) 2013 Economic Impact Return Report, the state government realized almost a ten percent rate of return on investment into the Florida College System. Many Florida companies work directly with or sell the vast majority of their goods to the Florida College System, and FLDOE suggests an increase in vendor employment and sale of goods with an increase in college attendance. The universities themselves may see an increase in employment in faculty, staff, and administrative positions.

Increases in attendance and graduation also contribute to lessening costs throughout the state budget. College education produces a decline in applications for state welfare and unemployment benefits, such as food stamps, Supplemental Security Income, child care services, and Medicaid (Florida Department of Education). It also decreases the costs associated with installation and maintenance of state and county prisons and the Florida Criminal Court system, due to a decrease in crime rates. The Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) research has linked college attendance and degree attainment to a lower rate of crime in the State of Florida. The FLDOE evaluated the inmate population currently by education level throughout state and federal prisons, showing decreasing scale, in which the number of inmates decreases per level of education from some high school to master's and doctorate degrees. This decrease in incarceration leads to a decrease in financial and emotional costs to the victims as well as to the state judicial system. FLDOE also attributes an economic gain due to the increased employment of those who otherwise may have committed crimes and been incarcerated.

The University of Florida's Admissions office states that the university's annual economic impact exceeds $8.76 billion, with every state dollar appropriated to the university resulting in a $15 return on investment. The admissions office also proudly cites that currently the university generates an estimated 106,118 state-wide jobs. With an increase in continuing education and college affordability for students through FSAG retention, it is probable that the university will see an increase in annual economic impact and production of jobs.

College attendance and degree attainment also foster a more intelligent and skilled workforce and increases work productivity. Workers with higher skill set tend to produce good and complete service tasks at a faster and more efficient rate than their counterparts. FLDOE contributes a higher-skilled workforce to a direct increase in capital in the state market. "According to projections, 59 percent of all jobs in Florida will require postsecondary education by 2018, but only 43 percent of Floridians are projected to hold a college degree by 2025" (Demos and FIU Research Institute, citing the Lumina Foundation). According to the Lumina Foundation's research, in order for the state of Florida to reach 60% of the adult population with a college degree and build Florida's economy for the future, it is vital that Florida increase college success among the fast-growing groups of the state's population, including low-income, racial minority, and first-generation students.

Business analysts from the leading business news and research facilities, as well as the FLDOE, confirm an increase of the creation and growth of small businesses. Financial aid programs, such as FSAG, incentivize many recent graduates to open small businesses, due to the lack of financial burden from student debt loans producing an increase in personal capital or loan possibility. This opportunity and stability to open small businesses, thereby produces more employment opportunities into the market for other college graduates. The New York Times attributes small businesses to producing almost 60% of new jobs in the last several years.

The financial benefits of earning a college degree have been heavily researched over the last several decades, new research also shows the non-financial benefits to the U.S. economy and welfare of citizens. Studies show that college graduates are more likely to have a sense of emotional and mental stability and are less likely to seek help from any social or government safety net. According to FLDOE research, college graduates tend to save more money per year on average. College graduates also tend to remain in better health and have lower mortality rates due to a variety of factors (Summarized in Baum, Ma, and Payea (2010)). Furthermore, research indicates that those with a college degree are more likely to seek higher civic engagement, remain diligently informed in U.S. and world events, and provide new insight into the modern socioeconomic discussion (U.S. Treasury Report).

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