

The History and Effects of the Florida Resident Access Grant

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Government financial support for Higher Education in America has been declining over the last few decades. Higher Education in Florida is no exception to this trend. Annually, higher education budgets have been contemplated, discussed, and subsequently lowered in the recent years. The State of Florida offers a number of direct and indirect funding options to their public and private universities. Private universities receive substantially less funding than their state supported counterparts, but their students depend on this funding. One grant the State of Florida offers is the Florida Resident Access Grant (FRAG). This grant is given to Florida residents who attend private, not-for-profit institutions in the state of Florida.

Before 1905, the State had chartered a large number of small state universities. However, the state legislature found it very difficult to fund these many institutions. That year, they passed the Buckman Act of 1905, which merged all institutions into four: one for white men, one for white women, one for black students, and the last for the deaf and blind (Mabley, 2008). The all-female white institution, now Florida State University, and the institution for black students, now Florida A&M University, were both located in Tallahassee (Mabley, 2008). The all-male white institution, now the University of Florida, was located in Gainesville (Mabley, 2008).

Because of the locations of the few state institutions, they could only educate those students with the funds to relocate for postsecondary education. In order to serve the local populations, private institutions of higher learning began to open, such as Stetson University in Central Florida and the University of Miami in South Florida (Stetson University, n.d.; University of Miami, 2015).

Today, private colleges and universities play many roles in Florida's higher education landscape. First, the institutions relieve the burden on public institutions of higher education,

enrolling a combined 120,000 students each year (Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida, 2005). More importantly, these institutions provide a type of education that is specific to private higher education. Students are in small classes by instructors who model a “teaching first” philosophy (Docking, 2015). Many students who thrive in private institutions are the types of students that fail in larger, state universities (Docking, 2015).

However successful these institutions are when it comes to educating their students, they are also tuition driven and dependent on enrollment. These institutions do not receive large state subsidies to finance their operating costs, as their public counterparts do. They rely on other revenue sources, such as donations, endowments, and tuition and fees. Private, liberal arts colleges are struggling in this post-recession era, which has been well documented. Institutions are making drastic budget cuts, and some are even closing their doors (Docking, 2015). Many students need the teaching that private institutions provide, however, “when there is no money, there is no college” (Docking, 2015, p. 4)

The William L. Boyd Florida Resident Access Grant is a tuition assistance program designed to help Florida residents who are attending private, not-for-profit institutions in the State of Florida (The William L. Boyd Act, 2014, §1009.89). The requirements to receive this grant are: the student be a Florida Resident, the student be seeking his or her first undergraduate degree, the student be enrolled in at least 12 credit hours each semester, the student be attending a private, not-for-profit, SACS accredited institution in the state of Florida, and the student must maintain at least a 2.0 GPA (Florida Department of Education, 2014). Each year, an eligible student receives about \$3,000 in FRAG monies (Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida, 2009).

Literature Review

The Florida Resident Access Grant began in 1979, though at the time it was called the State Tuition Voucher Fund (Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida, 2009). The requirements for eligibility for FRAG have not changed since its inception 36 years ago. In 1998, the Florida legislature voted to rename the program the William L. Boyd Florida Resident Access Grant (Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida, 2009).

The goals of FRAG are three-fold. The first is to create more post-secondary education choices for Florida's students (Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida, 2009). The second goal is to support diversity in Florida's higher education (Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida, 2009). The last goal, which has helped in the continued support of FRAG, is "to reduce the tax burdens on the citizens of the state" (Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida, 2009, p. 3).

Private institutions in Florida receive less than three percent of the state's higher education budget through FRAG, however, they produce more than a quarter of the state's bachelor's degrees (Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida, 2009). Today, 28 universities qualify as FRAG recipients. As part of the legislation, each institution maintains their own applications and credentials for FRAG. This cuts down on the maintenance costs by the state. The institution is responsible for determining who is eligible for FRAG, and processing each application to send to the state (Florida Department of Education, 2014).

In the decade leading up to the passage of FRAG, the average cost of tuition at a private school was only around \$1,000 more than a public school annually. That number doubled in the mid-1970's, with the increases in private institutions skyrocketing (NCES, 2007, Table 320). The first year that FRAG was implemented, in 1979, the voucher was no more than \$1,000 per

student, and the student could only be eligible for four years (State Tuition Voucher Fund, 1979). Almost twenty years later, in 1997, FRAG covered 30% of the state tuition, which was about \$2,200, and in 1999 it covered 40% of state tuition, which was just under \$3,000 (Florida Resident Access Grant, 1997; NCES, 2007, Table 320).

Before FRAG, students could have paid for a private college education simply by working hard at a part time job during the year and over the summer, supplemented by meager savings. However, in the few years leading up to FRAG, as well as the years following, tuition rose drastically. Because of this, Florida was losing many of their brightest students to out-of-state institutions, and these students were not returning. In order to encourage students to stay in Florida, and contribute to the educated population, the state implemented programs such as their merit based scholarship, Bright Futures, and increased the amount of FRAG (Hickman, 2009). Scholars have studied the trend in college educated Floridians staying in the state for higher education, as well as remaining after graduation. The studies show that when education is subsidized by the state, which in this case is a combination of Bright Futures and FRAG, the student is more likely to go to college in the state and then remain in the state post-graduation (Hickman, 2009).

Though studies show exclusively positive results from FRAG, the Florida Legislature has proposed cuts to this program every year since 2005. There is no published literature regarding the reasoning of cutting or lower FRAG, other than as a generic cost saving measure. In response, the Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida have fiercely defended the grant, putting out publications of their own in defense of FRAG, as well as stirring up local and statewide media. Every few years, they publish a booklet of student success stories touting FRAG as the reason they could afford a great education (Independent Colleges and Universities,

2005; Independent Colleges and Universities, 2009). They also cite newspaper support, with quotes such as, “With so much going for it, it’s unfortunate that FRAG has to fight simply to stay even each year” from the Lakeland Ledger, published in January of 2005 (as cited in Independent Colleges and Universities, 2005, p. 27).

Implications

When the Florida Resident Access Grant was created, it had three aims. These three aims remain in place today, and FRAG continues to provide for the students of Florida. Through the creation and continuation of the Florida Resident Access Grant, the Florida Legislature has created more educational choices for post-secondary students, supported diversity in Florida’s higher education, and reduced the burden of financing higher education on Florida’s taxpayers.

More Choices

Private institutions of higher education are vital to the higher education landscape. These institutions provide an educational service that cannot be mimicked at larger, state funded institutions. At most private institutions, class sizes are small and are exclusively taught by professors. This allows students to get to know their professors, and learn in a smaller, more intimate setting. Students who may not be successful in a large auditorium classroom perform at a phenomenal level at a private college. Giving students the opportunity to be a “big fish in a small pond” creates unique opportunities for leadership and learning that are not as available elsewhere. By continuing to support FRAG, the Florida Legislature is investing in our private institutions and the students they serve. They are allowing these students to choose an atmosphere success.

Private institutions offer students more choices in academic program, as well as physical location. Private institutions were originally created to serve students in their local populations.

Today, there are still a number of private institutions that fill a large geographical gap in which there are no public universities (Marshall, Leonard, Porter, & Watson, 2003).

Private institutions offer educational experiences that are more conducive to the learning style of certain students. These students get a chance to not only excel academically, but also participate on campus, and step into leadership roles that are much sparser at a public institution. The Florida Resident Access Grant aids students in this path toward achievement.

Diversity in Higher Education

“Independent education is crucial to the maintenance of diversity and choice in postsecondary education in Florida” (Postsecondary Education Planning Commission, 2000, p. 1). The students who enroll at private schools are similar in academic indicators, gender, ethnicity, and family income as those in public institutions (Marshall et al., 2003). Private institutions provide an alternative to large state schools for high demand fields such as education and nursing (Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida, 2005). These same high achieving students, having received their education in Florida, tend to remain in Florida and contribute to the State’s educated workforce (Hickman, 2009). Private colleges and universities can offer similar programs in a completely different way. An early childhood education classroom at a private institution may only have five to ten students in it. This is a fraction of the class size at a state institution.

Private schools and state schools also have articulation agreements, which create an even more diverse academic offering. For example, Jacksonville University has a 3-2 Engineering program, in which students take three years of coursework at Jacksonville University, and then transfer into another institution to finish their engineering degree. They can transfer to a number of institutions, both public, like the University of Florida, or private, like the University of

Miami. Upon completion, they will get degrees from both JU and the transfer institution (Jacksonville University, 2014). The continuation of the Florida Resident Access grant ensures the success of these students. They have the opportunity to take the more difficult, “weed out” courses for a program such as engineering in a smaller, more intimate setting. This strong knowledge base helps them be successful in the later years of the engineering program.

In addition, private institutions are quicker to respond to the needs of the community, because they do not belong to a larger board of regents. They can create and establish state-of-the-art programs that would take years to receive approval at University System institutions. Such was the case at Unity College, who developed an entire curriculum surrounding the health concerns of the local lake (Cortese, 2003). Nongovernmental institutions are making the most effort to advance education in things like sustainability (Cortese, 2003).

Reducing Burden on Taxpayers

State institutions are funded primarily through state subsidies, while independent colleges and universities are primarily tuition driven. According to the Florida General Appropriations Act of 2014, the state allotted about \$112 million dollars to the Florida Resident Access Grant. That is the equivalent to six percent of state spending to public higher education in Florida, solely in institutional appropriations (General Appropriations Act, 2014). That does not include the Bright Futures scholarship or any need-based aid given to the students at these public institutions. In all, private colleges and universities receive about three percent of the state’s higher education budget annually (Independent Colleges and Universities, 2005). Even with that small amount of funding, the Independent Colleges in Florida award about 26% of the Bachelor’s degrees, 38% of the Master’s degrees, and 36% of the Doctoral degrees in the state

(Marshall et al., 2003). Private colleges produce real educational results in the state of Florida for a fraction of the cost to taxpayers.

The State of Florida spends less than half of the amount on their Florida Resident Access Grant than they do on their merit-based award, Bright Futures. This merit award is also available to students who attend private institutions in the State of Florida. The amount budgeted for FRAG pales in comparison to the amounts the state spends in higher education each year. Cutting FRAG would free up very little funds for other priorities, causing little gain. Conversely, if the State got rid of FRAG, as has been suggested annually for the last decade, thousands of students would be forced to take out more loans, attend a public institution, or in some cases, not attend post-secondary education at all. The financial rewards are great, while the cost is minimal.

Conclusion

It can be surprising that such a small award could make such a big difference. Altogether, FRAG only covers, on average, seven percent of tuition, fees, room, and board at a private institution (NCES, 2007, Table 320; The William L. Boyd Act, 2014, §1009.89). However, if the student were to attend the private institution for four years, that student would be taking out \$12,000 less in loans over the course of their degree with the Florida Resident Access Grant award. FRAG does not allow students to go to a private institution free, but it allows the student a small reprieve from the burden of excessive student loans.

FRAG takes up less than three percent of the higher education budget, but educates a large population of Florida residents (Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida, 2005). Even though it makes a very small impact on the state budget, it provides incentives for students to attend private institutions, which lessens the burden on public institutions. Additionally, it

provides quality education for students who graduate and remain in Florida, like teachers and nurses (Hickman, 2009).

According to the Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida (2005), if all 20 private, not-for-profit institutions were one university, it would educate more than 120,000 students each year, in class sizes less than 30, graduating, on average, in 4.1 years. This is accomplished with about \$112 million annually given from the state. Private institutions accomplish much with a fraction of the finances appropriated to state institutions. The Florida Resident Access Grant will surely come up for debate again this year and the next. The numbers speak for themselves: FRAG is a low-cost, high reward program that is vital to the proliferation of higher education in Florida.

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