**Southern Scholarship Evaluation – What impact does housing have on near-homeless students?**

Lara Perez-Felkner, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Christine Baker-Smith

February 2022

**Executive Summary**

**Introduction**

PARAGRAPH ON HOUSING AND IMPORTANCE TO ACADEMICS

PARAGRAPH ON WELL-BEING: belongingness, mental health, fiscal well-ness. (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, and Kinsley, 2017), self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 2001; Lent & Brown, 1996; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), and validated measures of stress, depression, and anxiety.

Because it is difficult and often impossible to fully measure the many pre-college and college-year factors which may contribute to student outcomes, RCT is a preferred “gold standard” for evaluation studies (e.g., Castleman, Owen and Page 2015), notably for college completion (Arnold Foundation 2018). Triangulated data include admissions application information, a base-year survey at the time of application (response rate: 81%), and a follow-up survey and stratified random sample of interview respondents.

 Understanding this, we conduct this analysis with these questions in mind:

1. Does this scholarship have an influence on student well-being as measured by belongingness, mental health and/or financial wellness?
2. Does the provision of a housing scholarship have an impact on student retention or completion?

**Setting and Intervention**

*Intervention.* The aim of the evaluation is to assess the “education for life” housing intervention model: rent-free housing + community living on students who receive the scholarship, carefully isolating the effect of housing in comparison to eligible applicants who do not move into this scholarship housing community. The program draws unevenly from across the state of Florida and likely in some ways that work against equity. Program advertising should be increased and students encouraged to apply early. In interviews, program applicants expressed a desire to know more about paying for college, including about the availability of the SSF.

To accurately estimate how the rent-free housing intervention affects student outcomes, a randomized control trial (RCT) experimental design study began Fall 2018. Using an already extant process, the Florida-based scholarship housing program (SSF) reviews applicants for move-in the following term based on available slots at Y locations. Of note, this process included both a waitlist and the allowance for students to re-apply in a subsequent term if they were denied in a previous term – these students are treated with exception throughout the analysis.

Students may not have heard of or applied to SSF if it was not for someone else letting them know about it. This shows the importance that others played in educating the students about the scholarship, but also that SSF is a known entity that has a strong network and reputation. It also indicates that students are either not looking for or applying for scholarships on their own even when there is a clear financial need, as we observed in the students’ qualitative and quantitative responses to the application, surveys, and interviews. Throughout the intervention, we worked with SSF to expand and refine recruitment efforts to ensure the maximum possible number of students were aware of the program.

*Sample****.*** This is a highly and inter-sectionally diverse, primarily first-generation and female student population. SSF students have high financial need (mostly under $5,000 Expected Family Contribution on FAFSA) and come from diverse backgrounds across the state of Florida. As shown in Table X below, half of the students self-identify as Black, non-Hispanic, 23.6% identify as Latinx (many of whom also identify with other identities), 0.5% identify as Indigenous, 4.9% identify as Multiracial, not including Latinx. 74.4% report being the first generation to attend college.

INSERT BASELINE EQUIV TABLE (SHORT VERSION)

**Methodology**

*Randomization.* We conducted randomization cycles as planned and had statistical balance between treatment and control on key indicators. As shown in Table Y below, we identified Z students as eligible[[1]](#endnote-1) and randomly assigned students to receive or not receive a housing scholarship. Given the limited number of spots available at each of the locations, we conducted this randomization across 5 cycles resulting in Y students randomly assigned to receive housing. As noted above, we were able to balance the treatment and control groups based on several student characteristics[[2]](#endnote-2).

INSERT TABLE Y HERE – CYCLES AND RANDOMIZATION COUNTS

There are no major problems with crossover post-randomization from control group to treatment group, across both the fall and spring randomizations[[3]](#endnote-3). Given the challenges noted over a three-year period, this is an accomplishment. There was, however, movement between waitlist and treatment than in previous cycles, as students - particularly in the larger spring pool – did not accept the scholarship award as noted above, necessitating the use of the randomly assigned waitlist pool. This reduces the potential impact on the treatment group as fewer students assigned to treatment actually experienced the treatment than anticipated. Some of this movement may affect our impact estimates as it is possible that students that re-apply are receiving a different type of “treatment” than those that secured housing after only one application. Our analysis will explore this possibility. Waitlist students are not categorized as treated.

*Analysis.* We employed multiple methodologies in the evaluation. This includes qualitative methodology (interviews) as well as a series of quantitative analyses of administrative, academic, and survey data[[4]](#endnote-4). The evaluation team drew a stratified random sample from the eligible applicants who participated in the interview, balanced evenly between treatment and control. We sorted on gender race/ethnicity, campus, institution type, and treatment/control. We used a semi-structured questionnaire specific to the treatment or control group, which had been reviewed by multiple members of the evaluation team as well as an undergraduate research mentee, for thematic alignment, clarity, and flow.

To examine the impact of the housing scholarship on student achievement, we collected admissions application information, a base-year survey at the time of application, administrative data on placement from the Southern Scholarship Foundation, academic follow-up data from the National Student Clearinghouse repository, and a follow-up survey administered after students several months after assignment to treatment or control. The survey data allow us to examine moderation and mediation on the academic impacts identified through administrative data.

INSERT TABLE ON TOTAL SURVEY RESPONSE RATES BY C/T AND INTERVIEWS BY C/T

*Limitations.* The project encountered complications due to the COVID pandemic between October 1, 2020 and September 31, 2021. The volume of applications declined for the Spring 2021 recruitment cycle because of students’ uncertainties about the pandemic and university policies about in-person learning. Southern Scholarship Foundation also designated one room in each scholarship house for COVID recovery, reducing capacity to 90%. This also reduced the number of scholarships available. Many selected students also deferred their move in for Fall 2020 to Spring 2021, further reducing the number of available spaces for new residents.

**Results**

**ADD SOME FIGURES INTO RESULTS**

 We use interview and survey data to examine additional measures of student success such as health, financial and basic needs security. In a subsequent report, we will provide a full examination of academic impacts of the SSF housing scholarship. There is strong evidence that having one’s basic needs met is a precursor to academic success and we thus examine the influence of the housing scholarship on these factors first.

*Sense of Belonging USE STUFF FM SSF REPORT*

*Health and Mental Health*

SFF applicants operate under a great deal of pressure to gain a better economic footing. This is evidenced by their tendency to select majors that are vocational and career-focused in nature; this is increasingly common among low-income and first generation students. Forty-one percent of students selected STEM majors, not including additional students selecting Nursing (12%), Pharmacy (2%), or Pre-Medical (under 1%) majors. Careers are a central focus of their college studies. For some, that means financial sacrifices to accept unpaid internships. The interview data suggest that students are consciously thinking about and planning for careers and the post-college stability associated with them, even when their career plans may otherwise appear haphazard or not fully informed. For example, one woman admitted to the SSF program said,

“I know that I want to do an internship while I'm in school, so that I can put my feet in the front door as soon as I graduate, so I can have a little job in front of me, so I don't have to be scurrying around looking for a job.”

Students worry that even with the plans in place, internships may still not lead to jobs. A man in the SSF program who is studying engineering explained:

“I hope, right now, with these internships, hopefully one at Lockheed and, right after college, hope to get a job somewhere with a decent salary pay, with something I enjoy doing I guess, not just tedious tasks over and over again. But, that is what I want to happen, but I feel like it might not even happen that way. It might just take a crazy turn. I feel like something never goes your way.”

The baseline survey revealed high rates of anxiety and negative affect among SSF program applicants. Stunningly, more than 60% of students in the Fall 2018 cycle indicated thoughts and behaviors associated with suicidality (this triggered additional support from the evaluation team). Almost 60% of students are bothered by worries, and about 60% report feeling down, depressed, or hopeless. Notably, about 1 in 10 students said that they feel this way nearly every day.

*Financial Security,*

 Access to financial resources varies substantially for students in Florida State’s University system. College fees, utilities, and rent were cited by students as reasons they needed loans. Many limited opportunities for scholarships or financial aid, especially if they are not U.S. citizens – a common issue in Florida. Students also need help coping with the timing of bills and financial aid (CITE OTHER STUDIES).

A majority of students interviewed captured financial aid from two or more sources. Some students had access to work-study, housing assistance, and FSU’s CARE program, while other students qualified for the Pell Grant but then became ineligible with no additional support. For example, a student in Cohort 1 (white, female, STEM) qualified for Pell Grant but then lost eligibility and did not qualify for any other scholarships or loans. Another student (Hispanic/Latinx, male, STEM) qualified for Pell Grant, two university sponsored grants for academic costs, and both un/subsidized loans to cover rent. From the treatment group in Cohort 1, one student (Hispanic/Latinx, female, non-STEM) qualified for the CARE grant, work-study, and some university sponsored scholarships to cover on-campus housing. Another student (Black/African American, male, STEM) relied solely on the SSF scholarship. Four students acquired student loan debt to balance costs if they did not have access to another sizeable award like the Florida Bright Futures Program, SSF, or a similarly comprehensive scholarship.

We also probed the scholarship and financial aid search in the interviews to better understand how students became aware of SSF as a financial resource. They portrayed a largely haphazard nature to the financial aid search it seems, for these low-income students, consistent with past research on haphazard college search models among low-income prospective college students (Enriquez 2011; McDonough 1997). Some students talked matter-of-factly about “Googling scholarships” or “Florida scholarships,” while others discussed one or more significant others that connected them to SSF or another scholarship opportunity. For many, that connector was [FSU’s CARE program](https://care.fsu.edu/about-care), a major, high-touch intervention program based at Florida State University which offers its own benefits. It would be advantageous to have a similar series of connectors and synergistic support structures at other campuses, including in particular the community college sites. Most students did not apply for scholarships other than SSF nor receive help on their college/FAFSA applications. These patterns are reflected in the interview and application data, where on average 59.6% report either a counselor, friend, SSF alum or current resident, or other personal referral to the program.

*Housing Security (decide if this is useful or not)*

Some had prior traumatic experiences with scarcity, for example experiencing homelessness during childhood or immediately prior to college.

**Discussion**

We followed this work with the collection of local Florida resources for basic needs support, by county, and sharing the [information and website](https://perezfelkner.com/realcollegefl/resources/) with SSF. Correspondingly, they developed and posted [resources by campus](https://www.southernscholarship.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Updated-Student-Resources.pdf), linked to their program website. As noted in the main report, SSF added multiple trainings for their house management staff following the findings in our report. These program enhancements may prove timely to help the program serve the needs of a student population undergoing a pandemic depression that affects their career preparation and searching as well as, more immediately, their well-being and learning as college students.

Our interviews provided deeper understandings of students’ emotional well-being as well. Even with SSF’s support, students express the need for additional help. The SSF team has incorporated our findings to date into their training materials with student affairs staff, as well as campus relationships and lobbying for greater mental health and well-being support.The SSF team responded promptly this past fall to our reporting and formative assessment feedback about student stress and health.

1. Eligibility was determined based on a number of criteria already in place by the program. FILL IN HERE [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Where balance is between 0.05 and 0.25 we control for the characteristic in all analytic models according to What Works Clearinghouse standards. ADD CITATION [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Two students changed categories early on: one from control received treatment in a later round. Another had a more minor change off the waitlist but was not housed. This is expected to have a negligible impact on the larger study, with 1,120 eligible applicants experiencing random assignment, and 553 in the assigned treatment and control categories. Otherwise, there was compliance across the treatment and control categories. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Study is registered in OpenScience registry here: [↑](#endnote-ref-4)