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Program Evaluation • Consultation • Market Research

# **Evaluation of *Ford Scholars Program***

## **Executive Summary**

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### **SUBMITTED TO**

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The Ford Scholars Program was initiated in 1994 by Kenneth Ford to address the problem of capable students in Oregon being denied the opportunity of a college education because they lacked the ability to pay. The program encourages high school seniors and community college transfer students from Oregon or Siskiyou County, California to attend any accredited college or university in their home state, if they otherwise would not be able to afford it.

In March 2011, The Ford Family Foundation contracted with Goodman Research Group, Inc. (GRG) to conduct an outcome evaluation of the Ford Scholars Program. **The primary purpose was to retrospectively assess the impact of the scholarship on the Ford Scholars from 1994 through 2010.** GRG addressed each of the Foundation's five guiding questions, which focused on (1) key outcomes, (2) contribution of the scholarship to successful citizenry, (3) whether the outcomes were worth the investment, (4) usefulness of scholarship enhancements, and (5) whether the recruitment and selection process attracted desired applicants and scholarship recipients.

GRG used a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design, the cornerstone of which was an extensive online survey of Scholars and Finalists. The final response rate was 73% of the 1994-2010 Scholars (1326 out of 1814), 43% of the Finalists from 2002-2010 (330 out of 770), and 26% of Scholars who left the program prematurely (LFTs) (26 out of 99). Response rates were higher for more recent classes of Scholars than for earlier classes.<sup>1</sup> On key variables, the Scholar sample was representative of the entire Scholar population.

In addition to fielding the survey, GRG reviewed existing Foundation data on Scholars and Finalists; conducted three focus groups at the 2011 Recognition Conference; reviewed program expenses; conducted interviews with members of the Board of Directors, the President, and the current and past Scholarship Directors; and conducted a review of similar scholarships.

### **WHAT ARE THE KEY FORD SCHOLARS PROGRAM OUTCOMES?**

The Foundation was interested in outcomes regarding college retention, bachelor's degree attainment, indebtedness, employment, and citizenry.

#### **A significantly higher percentage of Scholars graduated from a four-year institution of higher education than did Finalists.**

Of the respondents who were not still in college, a significantly higher percentage of Scholars (97%) than Finalists (87%) graduated from a four-year college or university.<sup>2</sup> For Scholars across all cohorts, graduation rate is 97%. Scholars and Finalists took approximately the same amount of time to complete college, with just under 60% of each group graduating in four years, and a fifth to a quarter graduating in less than four years (as a result of transferring from community colleges).

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<sup>1</sup> The Foundation separated classes into four cohorts: (1) 1994-96 (11-13 years out of college), (2) 1997-2001 (6-10 years out), (3) 2002-06 (1-5 years out), and (4) 2007-10 (in college or just graduated at the time of the survey).

<sup>2</sup> The comparison was made only for Cohort 3 of the sample because that is the sole cohort in which there are both Scholars and Finalists who are not still in college.

**The Ford Scholarship positively influenced college choice, attendance, and retention.**

A significantly higher percentage of Scholars than Finalists went to the college of their choice, attended a more expensive school than they could have afforded, stayed in college, and finished college without having to take a leave of absence to work.

Of note is that 80% of Finalists did receive another scholarship. They were asked about the importance of their scholarship in relation to a number of variables. On several of these, Ford Scholars gave significantly higher ratings to the importance of the Ford scholarship than Finalists gave to other scholarships they received.

College grades were marginally better for Cohort 3 Scholars than for Cohort 3 Finalists. There were no significant differences between the two groups in their college majors, with the top choices communication/journalism, education/psychology, and biological sciences.

**The Ford Scholarship was an important financial asset; Scholars had less financial stress and lower personal debt than did Finalists.**

The Ford Scholarship had a large influence on the financial situation of the Scholars. Compared to Finalists, a significantly higher percentage of Scholars:

- experienced less stress about paying tuition and paying for rent, books, or living expenses during college.
- did not perceive living expenses as a potential barrier while applying for college.
- incurred significantly lower personal debt as they financed their bachelor's degree.
- did not have to ask their parent or other family member to take out loans to finance their bachelor's degree.

In addition to the ratings, over half of Scholars indicated, in their own words, that they would have faced a lot of financial hardships if they had not won the scholarship. They were grateful to the Foundation for the monetary assistance that resulted in reduction in their stress and anxiety during their college years and also allowed them to gather varied experiences.

**Non-monetary outcomes related to receiving the scholarship favored Scholars over Finalists.**

The reduced financial burden on the Scholars has other related benefits. Many believed the Ford Scholarship will allow them to achieve more than they otherwise could have. Moreover, non-monetary outcomes of the scholarship were better for Scholars than for Finalists. A significantly higher percentage of Scholars than Finalists rated the benefit of the Ford Scholarship positively (compared to Finalists' other scholarships) in:

- promoting confidence about succeeding in college,
- making their graduate school applications stronger,
- making their job resumes stronger,
- influencing their career paths, and
- promoting leadership skills.

### **Scholars outpaced Finalists in the Study Abroad experience.**

Study abroad was an important activity for Scholars. There was a significant difference between Scholars (81%) and Finalists (70%) in the percentage of students who considered studying abroad and who actually did so (55% Scholars vs. 18% Finalists). The greater proportion of Scholars who were able to fulfill their ambition of studying abroad is additional evidence of the scholarship's extended benefits.

### **Scholars and Finalists did not differ in terms of work during college or in extra-curricular participation during college.**

Scholars articulated how the Ford Scholarship gave them the time and resources to become leaders and to reach out to their own and other communities. However, there were no differences between them and Finalists in the level of participation in extra-curricular activities (e.g., clubs) during college, nor in the number of hours worked during college or reasons they chose to work. Scholars chose to work to earn spending money and pay expenses not covered by the scholarship.

### **After graduation, Scholars are employed for a significantly higher number of hours per week than are Finalists.**

Post-college comparisons between Scholars and Finalists were made for Classes of 2002-2006. While the Scholars' post-college weekly work hours were higher than were Finalists', there is no difference in the types of fields in which the Finalists and the Scholars worked. The most common areas of employment for Scholars working at least 30 hours per week were: education 20%, health care/medicine 14%, science/technology/engineering 10 %, and human/social services 6%. Various other fields are each less than 6% of the sample.

Thirty-eight percent of all Scholars earned at least one graduate degree. This is slightly better than the national average (36%) of Americans aged 25-64 with at least a Bachelor's degree who go on to earn a graduate degree. Since the oldest Scholars are typically in their 30s, the percentage going on to earn degrees is likely to increase in the next 30 years.

### **HOW DID RECEIVING THE SCHOLARSHIP CONTRIBUTE TO FORD SCHOLARS BEING SUCCESSFUL CITIZENS AND CREATING VITAL COMMUNITIES?**

The Foundation views the scholarship as a step in recipients becoming successful citizens in their communities and helping create and sustain vital communities.

### **Scholars are more involved in their communities than are Finalists, and older classes of Scholars are more involved than more recent ones.**

We created a composite score for each respondent based on responses to several questions about community involvement and engagement, citizenship, volunteerism, and leadership. Scholars are more involved in their communities than are Finalists. Moreover, older classes of Scholars are significantly more involved in their community than are the recent classes, having had more time to earn money and achieve stability in order to "give back" to their community.

All Directors agreed that a key feature of a successful Scholar is one who **has a commitment to and is engaged in their community**. “Paying it forward” was mentioned by several Directors as part of this involvement. Resonant with survey data, Directors indicated that this may take five to ten years, though, before one can see the fruits of the Foundation’s investment.

In response to the survey prompt, “*Without the Ford Scholarship, I ...*,” the most number of Scholars (N=273) mentioned **emotional/ motivational/ inspirational support. Confidence building/leadership enhancement** was mentioned by 160 Scholars. Scholars have reported that the scholarship has allowed them to achieve in ways they didn’t think possible. Focus group participants cited both types of support as encouraging them to play important roles in their community.

### **WHAT EVIDENCE IS AVAILABLE TO SHOW THAT THE OUTCOMES WERE WORTH THE INVESTMENT?**

The current annual per-Scholar cost is \$1,824 for administration and \$10,661 in direct Scholar assistance, for a total average expenditure of \$47,567 per Scholar over an average of 3.81 years (weighted to include 4-year and 2-year Scholars). On the benefit side, contributing to the attainment of a Bachelor’s degree helps Scholars annually earn more than twice what they would without that degree. The national salary average is \$49,194 for college graduates compared to \$22,656 for those who do not graduate from college.

### **WHAT SCHOLARSHIP ENHANCEMENTS WERE MOST MEANINGFUL TO THE SCHOLARS AND HOW DID THEY ENRICH THEIR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE?**

Non-monetary scholarship enhancements are summer conferences, counseling, director letters, yearly planners, on-campus receptions, and alumni meetings.

#### **All of the Ford Scholarship resources are deemed useful, with summer conferences rated as the most valuable.**

An overwhelming majority of Scholars (84%) are *very* or *extremely* satisfied with the support and advising provided by The Ford Family Foundation staff, and 64% rated the scholarship enhancements as *very* or *extremely* useful. Of all the resources, the summer conferences were rated as the most *used* and the most *useful* resource; 90% had attended between one and four of them. The summer conferences promote a sense of community among Scholars and provide social networking opportunities. Scholars also found beneficial the information they gained from the presentations and workshops.

#### **There are benefits for the 40% of alumni who have attended Alumni Association events.**

Membership in the Alumni Association encourages a sense of community among the attendees, yet only 40% of Scholars count themselves as members, and an even smaller percent participate on committees. Older alumni participate more than do younger ones. Interestingly, those Scholars who attend events had significantly higher scores on the community involvement index. Facebook has a stronger presence than the Association; 55% of Scholars visited the Foundation’s Facebook pages.

## **TO WHAT EXTENT HAS THE RECRUITMENT/SELECTION PROCESS ATTRACTED DESIRED APPLICANTS AND SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS?**

The Foundation is interested in knowing whether the recruitment and selection process has fulfilled the original guidelines for the program.

### **Finalists and Scholars both met the primary criteria established in the original Ford Scholars Program guidelines.**

On the key quantitative variables such as GPAs, SAT/ACT scores, work during high school, urbanicity, and parental education, the Scholars and Finalists were fairly similar to each other and met the program guidelines. On other more qualitative criteria such as potential return on investment (ROI) and character, the basis for decisions by readers and interviewers about applicants is subjective.

### **The scholarship is not serving enough young men.**

Not enough young men are applying to or becoming recipients of the Ford scholarship, a concern articulated by all Directors. However, it should be noted that underrepresentation of men is not just an issue for Ford Scholars; it is endemic among scholarship programs in general and in college enrollment in Oregon and across the U.S.

## **COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE EXPLORATION**

Most Board members and senior staff believe the program is operating smoothly and just needs some “tweaks.” The most pressing areas for discussion among the Board and senior staff are:

- Visibility of the program, including to young men and to students whose parents have not attended college, is an important priority, so that the scholarship attracts candidates most in need. Scholars tend to learn about the scholarship only through schools and families, and many students do not have college access support mechanisms such as ASPIRE and GEAR UP, two programs that advertise the Ford Scholars Program.
- The composition of reading and interview selection teams was problematic for some Directors. All agreed that the teams need revisiting.
- There is disagreement on the Board as to whether or not the scholarship should have any restrictions regarding Scholars’ majors and/or preparation for certain careers.
- All Directors believe that the requirement for Scholars to have paid work during their scholarship is good; some endorse a more stringent requirement.
- Some Directors believe that Scholars need more assistance preparing for the world of work. Providing more of this type of support during college may address this issue. Emphasizing community service and/or service learning in college is another strategy that other foundations have found to be successful.
- Funding more graduate school scholarships is an area for discussion.

Answers to the five evaluation questions provide strong evidence of both short- and longer-term benefits of the Ford Scholars Program. GRG recommends that The Ford Family Foundation Board and senior staff focus on enhancing an already robust program.

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