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# *Fixing Our Future*

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In times of crisis humans inherently look towards the future in hopes of brighter times. This current economic downturn has been no exception. Though Americans, and, more specifically, Floridians, are facing one of the worst housing and job crises in recent history, their hope in attaining a brighter future is stronger than ever. As our state slowly starts to recover from this recession, we must turn our attention to an issue that is pertinent to ensuring a brighter future not only for Florida, but for the whole of our nation. Fittingly, the issue we must look at is the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program.

Like it or not, the program is heading toward a seemingly inevitable halt, and some form of action must be taken to stop this from occurring. Florida politicians have avoided this issue because they have been unable to come up with a solution which would not cost them votes. The truth is that an easy solution does not exist. Sustaining Bright Futures is a complex problem and thus requires a complex solution that corrects the program on several different levels—a solution that will not be instituted unless our state's citizens speak out to the legislatures. To ensure that Bright Futures will continue providing countless students the means to reach the next level of education, it will be necessary to institute a 50% scholarship, raise the standards for the existing scholarships, establish a Bright Futures Tax, and possibly expand the Florida lottery to include the nearby U.S. commonwealths.

A substantial amount of background knowledge on the program is necessary in order to understand what exactly the problem is and why these solutions are necessary and valid. On a basic level, the Florida Bright Futures Program is a merit-based, self-sustaining, statewide scholarship that is valid at any college or university in the state of Florida. According to the Florida Home Education Foundation, the program was established in 1989 as the Florida Undergraduates Scholars' Fund and became the Bright Futures Academic Scholarship Program in 1997 ("History"). Originally, there existed only a 100% scholarship called the Florida Academic Scholars Award, but with the new name in 1997 came two new additions to the program: the Florida Medallion Scholars Award, a 75% award, and the Gold Seal Vocational Scholars award ("History"). All of these scholarships are strictly merit-based, meaning they disregard financial standing and only reward students based on scholastic achievement. As of now, the current academic requirements, as stated in the Florida Legislative Statutes, are a 3.5 cumulative grade point average and a 1280 or better on SAT or a 28 or better on the ACT for the Florida Academic Scholars Award, and a 3.0 GPA and a 970 on the SAT or a 19 or better on the ACT for the Medallion Scholars and Vocational awards ("2009").

The reason Bright Futures is so unique is that it is completely self-sustaining. The program was established along with the Florida Lottery and acquires all of the funds needed for the scholarships from the Lottery's profits. According to the Florida Department of Education, "In 1986, Florida voters authorized a lottery through a constitutional amendment," making it the first state to do so ("Florida"). With the help of the lottery, Florida Bright Futures has helped send over 1.3 million students to institutions of higher learning over the past decade ("Florida"). Obviously, though, this great program comes at a great monetary cost. With its inception in 1997, 70 million dollars in scholarships were awarded, which, in comparison to lottery earnings for the year, was

very manageable (“Florida”). However, Bright Futures has been expanding at an alarming rate, costing over 429 million dollars in the 2008-2009 school year alone. Clearly, the program is expanding too quickly. With an average increased cost of about 18% per year, the Florida lottery has undoubtedly had trouble keeping up, since its annual increase in profits has slowed down to about 5% (“History”). According to the Florida Department of Education, Bright Futures needs to be changed in order to survive (“Florida”).

In an attempt to start repairing the problem, Bright Futures has finally been given something that should have been added a long time ago, something that will actually do a great deal of good in saving the program—a cap. If you are currently dependent on Bright Futures or know someone who is, you have most likely been complaining or complained to about the recent changes to the program. The biggest change is that, instead of covering 100% or 75%, Bright Futures now provides an actual dollar amount per credit hour (“Florida”). This was essential because it greatly reduces the expansion of Bright Futures by stopping the scholarship amount from going up with tuition costs. Though the students will, of course, dislike this, the adjustment will definitely help keep Bright Futures afloat. However, this alone is just one step of the proverbial staircase we must climb in order to assure Bright Futures’ stability.

The proposed plan in this essay will work—the question is whether or not the citizenry wants it to. Though the program is largely popular among Floridians, there still exist those who believe Bright Futures is not the right way to go about helping students attend college. The main argument against Bright Futures is based on the fact that it is a merit based scholarship. This solely comes down to a person’s moral beliefs. It brings up the question of who deserves the help—those who need it, or those who have earned it. Whether you’re biased toward one or the other, this much can surely be said: Bright Futures has drastically contributed to the improvement of Florida’s educational system by allowing more of our residents access to higher education and encouraging some of our brightest minds to stay in our universities. The Florida Legislature Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability is a government entity whose sole duty is evaluating state-funded programs such as Bright Futures. From their in-depth analysis, they have concluded that “[Bright Futures] contributes to improved college preparation, affordability, and enrollment” (Fletcher 2). Some of the key statistics they gathered include a 9% increase in high school graduates continuing onto college, a 13% increase in the number of top-grade graduates staying in Florida, and a 22% disparity between Bright Futures recipients and non-recipients in graduating from college on time (9). The 9% increase in high school graduate college attendance speaks for itself, and the 22% difference between recipients and non-recipients for graduating college shows that Bright Futures also helps motivate students to get better grades for fear of losing their funding. The 13% increase in top-graduates staying in Florida is especially important because it ensures that some of the finest minds our nation has to offer will contribute to our state’s future.

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This data alone does a great deal to prove Bright Futures’ worth in regards to Florida, but there is one more statistic that provides an even stronger argument for the program. OPPAGA also reports that since the program’s inception, there has been a staggering 15% increase in students who receive free lunch—or need-based students—continuing onto to college (7). This huge increase means that, while Bright Futures is a merit-based scholarship, it has helped an incredible amount of otherwise need-based students attend college.

Now that the value of saving Bright Futures has been established, it is time to move onto the proposed plan, starting with the most pivotal step. There is no way around it; the current standards for Bright Futures are just too low for the program to sustain itself. At this point, the unspoken bare minimum for getting into most Florida universities is a 3.0 GPA. This means that almost every

student who attends a university will be rewarded with the medallion 75% scholarship. As unpopular as it might be, it is necessary to make some changes to the program itself. However, removing the 75% scholarship or altering its requirements drastically with no substitute, as some people have suggested, is not the correct course of action. This would make it so 87% of the otherwise need based scholars, along with many borderline scholars, would not get any funding, and in turn drastically lower college attendance (Fletcher 7).

What I suggest doing is adding a 50% scholarship bracket at the current 3.0 standards of the Medallion Scholars award. While 50% is still ample motivation and support for students to attend college, this 25% reduction will already save \$98,329,609 a year, when compared to last year's expenditures ("Florida"). That is already a 22% cut back on the total costs of Bright Futures. Of course, with the addition of the 50% award, the Medallion and Academic Scholars Awards will need to raise their requirements. For the Medallion Scholarship, a 3.4 GPA would be a suitable increase considering how drastically the average GPA has changed since the program's inception. For the Academic Scholars Award, a 3.65 GPA is a high enough increase to effectively increase the standards for what constitutes a top level student.

While these changes to the program's policy will do a great deal in stabilizing it, they alone do not ensure a bright future for Bright Futures. In order to truly guarantee Bright Futures long-term survival, its revenue must also be increased. The quickest and easiest way of doing so is establishing a tax to help the program. Because a mere mention of the word "tax" instantly brings up the blood pressure of most Americans, I have come up with a tax solution that is already supported by the majority of Floridians and will benefit our state in more than one way. A cigarette

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tax might be the one and only tax supported by the general population. According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, 72% of Floridians support a \$1 increase in the state cigarette tax (Klas). So since voters are already more than willing to increase that tax, why not contribute the income to such a needing and deserving cause as Bright Futures? For the smokers in the audience, please be aware that according to the Federal Tax Administration, Florida's cigarette tax is currently in 46th place out of all the states, at a meager \$.339—barely one-eighth the amount of the first place \$2.72 New Jersey cigarette tax ("State"). A one dollar increase on the tax will just about put us at the national average of \$1.43. This same increase is expected to generate over \$800 million per year, which in itself is more than enough to keep Bright Futures going even if the program only receives 25% of this extra income (Klas).

Even though a cigarette tax would ultimately provide enough funding to keep Bright Futures afloat, there could still be some trouble with the fact that smoking and education are not completely interrelated. But this is just a possible counterargument. If the will of the people is strong enough, this solution will pass. However, in the rare case that it does not gain enough popularity with the general public, there is one more possible out-of-the-box solution for increasing funding. Instead of finding a completely new source of revenue, another option is increasing the amount of money brought in by the Florida Lottery. But a moderate increase in revenue brought about from better sales techniques will not do. In order to generate a significant increase in profit, the Florida Lottery needs to expand significantly and geographically. The idea of expanding the "Florida" Lottery might seem strange at first, but Florida is in the perfect political and demographic position to do so. This is because we are right next to a very populous and friendly U.S. commonwealth. According to the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress Database, the combined population of Puerto Rico is just over 4.4 million (Meditz and Hanratty 23). Since Florida's population is roughly 18 million, this means that an expansion would bring about a whopping 24% increase in the Lottery's possible customers. In return for allowing the expansion, we would offer in-state tuition prices for top level Puerto-Rican students to go to school in Florida,

along with the Academic Scholars Award. This would not only help save Bright Futures, but also provide Puerto Rico with a more educated population, and, in turn, a mutually-assured, brighter future. And since only the Academic Scholars Award would be offered, a large profit margin is still to be expected.

The plan is clear; the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program can be saved by adding a 50% bracket while raising the standards, putting a cigarette tax in place that will contribute to the program, and expanding the Florida Lottery to include Puerto Rico. So, change the program and increase standards—it is that simple. However, these changes will not happen by themselves or by the will of politicians alone. As citizens of this great state and great nation, it is not only our right to have a voice, but our responsibility to use it. Elie Wiesel writes, “It may well be that our means are fairly limited and our possibilities restricted when it comes to applying pressure on our government. But is this a reason to do nothing? Despair is not an answer. Neither is resignation. Resignation only leads to indifference, which is not merely a sin but a punishment.” On that note, citizens of Florida, do not be apathetic. Let your voices be heard. Call your local congressman and senators; send in letters to Governor Charlie Crist—let them know about this solution. The greatest changes in history are made one voice at a time.

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