

Critique of “Pell Grants as Performance-Based Scholarships? An Examination of Satisfactory Academic Progress Requirements in the Nation’s Largest Need-Based Aid Program”

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Introduction

Schudde and Scott-Clayton (2016) published “Pell Grants as Performance-Based Scholarships? An Examination of Satisfactory Academic Progress Requirements in the Nation’s Largest Need-Based Aid Program” in *Research in Higher Education*. According to the American Psychological Association (2020), the title “should summarize the main idea of the paper simply and, if possible, in a way that is engaging for readers” (p. 31). The title is both clear and direct while also being unique in the way it is presenting Pell Grants as both performance-based and need-based. Within the introduction of their paper, the authors explain both their rationale for developing this study and the main conclusions they identified.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that there are five necessary components of writing a good introduction: establishing the problem leading to the study, reviewing the literature about the problem, identifying deficiencies in the literature about the problem, targeting an audience and noting the significance of the problem for this audience, and identifying the purpose of the proposed study (p. 101). The authors meet each of these requirements within their introductory paragraphs. They establish the problem as the connection between Pell recipients losing funding and student outcomes and then perform a brief overview of the literature they plan to discuss. The authors explain the gap in the literature and clearly state how they will contribute by stating “To our knowledge, this is the first empirical examination of SAP policy since the 1980s and the first to use multi institutional data” (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2016, p. 945). The authors reiterate the value of their study with “a purpose statement that establishes the intent of the entire research study. It is the most important statement in the entire study, and it needs to be clear, specific, and informative” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 117). For this paper, the purpose statement spans multiple sentences in order to accomplish this goal. Schudde and Scott-Clayton

(2016) write:

First, we clearly outline the federal guidelines for SAP evaluation by postsecondary institutions receiving federal financial aid and describe how evaluation is implemented in a state community college system. Second, we theorize how SAP policy may impact student outcomes, drawing from prior research on performance-based aid and academic probation. Third, we provide empirical evidence regarding the prevalence and consequences of SAP failure in a statewide community college system. (p. 945)

As they cover a large amount of material within their paper and propose multiple evidence-based conclusions based on their unique research, it is appropriate and necessary to be as clear, specific, and informative as possible with their purpose statements.

Literature Review

A literature review “helps to determine whether the topic is worth studying, and it provides insight into ways in which the researcher can limit the scope to a needed area of inquiry” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 23). The authors reiterate that there is no previous literature specifically focused on their research topic, but they state that they “gain helpful insights from related work examining how students respond to academic probation policies, performance-based financial aid, and financial aid receipt in general” (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2016, p. 947). This is clear in the variety of research sources that the authors use throughout their paper, specifically within the literature review section. The literature review for this paper is divided using multiple headings and subheadings. These include a discussion on policy backgrounds with “Origins of Satisfactory Academic Progress and Federal/Institutional Roles,” an introduction to the applicable theoretical perspectives, and the previous literature divided by

the headings of “Academic Probation,” “Performance-Based Aid,” and “Need-Based Financial Aid.”

Despite having 45 sources in their reference list, Schudde and Scott-Clayton are not overly reliant on these sources or direct quotations. Writers should not simply gather sources or introduce quotations without an accompanying discussion, and Schudde and Scott-Clayton make sure to utilize the sources to support their argument. Booth et al. (2016) explain that readers “want *your* analysis, not a summary of your sources” (p. 184). The authors introduce topics in a logical manner, starting with fundamental discussions of financial aid policies and building their discussion into a targeted analysis of academic probation and the impact of aid distribution. Schudde and Scott-Clayton build an effective literature review by collecting related sources and combining them as the basis for their unique study.

Being published in 2016, Schudde and Scott-Clayton should have followed APA 6th edition guidelines for formatting and citations. The reference list is alphabetical, uses title case throughout the list, and includes all necessary information for that edition of the publication manual (American Psychological Association, 2020, p. 281). Unfortunately, the in-text citations are incorrect as the 6th edition of APA, like the updated 7th edition, requires a comma between the author’s last name and the year of publication and the authors do not include that in any of their in-text references (Purdue University, n.d.). Although this is an error, the authors are consistent in their formatting and it does not change the meaning of anything they have written. Other than that minor issue, the literature review is well formatted and includes pertinent background information that readers need to know before moving into the research questions and methodology sections.

Methodology

Schudde and Scott-Clayton developed a quantitative study utilizing data from a state community college system (SCCS). They narrowed their focus from 58 institutions to 49 colleges based on equivalent SAP policies, and their final dataset included “147,380 first-time students, 42,835 of whom received Pell Grants” (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2016, p. 950). The authors provide a variety of additional details surrounding the data they utilized, the aspects of student persistence they were analyzing, and the descriptive statistics, all of which are necessary to provide the reader with the appropriate context for the analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 173; Salkind, 2020, p. 8). The authors explain that the data was “derived from three sources: SCCS data with student information on demographics, transcripts, and financial aid; National Student Clearinghouse graduation data; and Employment Security Commission earnings data” (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2016, p. 950). It is unclear what ethical considerations were made as there was no direct interaction with those who were studied, but there is no identifying information present within the study. Despite not outwardly discussing the ethics of collecting and analyzing the data, the authors still present their research and findings in an appropriate manner. When developing and implementing a research project, particularly when human subjects are involved, every decision and choice about “data collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation has moral dimensions” (Rallis & Rossman, 2012, p. 61). By excluding identifying data, Schudde and Scott-Clayton can preserve anonymity while still presenting the important findings of their research.

The study itself is a statistical analysis consisting of a regression discontinuity design (RD) to compare “Pell recipients directly above and below the cutoff” (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2016, p. 952). The authors also use a difference-in-differences (DD) statistical analysis

that compares the “effects of falling above and below the cutoff between those with and without federal aid” (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2016, p. 952). Both of these consist of “an interrelated set of constructs (or variables) formed into propositions, or hypotheses, that specify the relationship among variables” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 52). The statistical analyses performed by the authors relates back to the three research questions they developed, all focusing on the relationship between variables. The methods are appropriate when considering the vast amount of data the authors have to work with and the variety of options available for analysis. As the authors are specifically exploring impacts and effects of SAP failure and achievement, as well as outcomes, the statistics-based approach allows for extensive amounts of information to be compared and analyzed.

Findings

The findings for the paper are organized by research question and are presented clearly with supplemental figures and tables to highlight the discussion. Schudde and Scott-Clayton return back to their main argument which is, as Booth et al. (2016) explains, “at the core of every research argument (p. 111). By bringing the findings directly back to their research questions, the authors build a strong connection from their proposed examinations to their tangible findings. They answer the questions clearly and directly, and “back up that claim with two kinds of support: reasons and evidence” (Booth et al., 2016, p. 111). There is an appropriate amount of analysis completed for each research question, and it is communicated effectively through the discussion of the findings and the details that are cited.

This structured format can be seen throughout each research question, and one example is how the third research question is presented and answered within the paper. Research question three asks “Does failing the GPA standard affect the outcomes of Pell recipients differently

compared to students with the same GPAs who are not subject to the standards (i.e., non-aid recipients)?" (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2016, p. 949). When the authors respond to this research question, they clearly and methodically introduce the data in tables and figures and explain how the results can be interpreted. Despite the clear and precise discussion of the statistical findings, the analysis is presented in a manner that assumes the reader is at least somewhat familiar with the terminology and the evaluation of statistical analysis. This is beneficial for both the reader and the researcher, as "accumulated knowledge from research findings improves practice because it builds practitioners' insights into the principles behind their procedures" (Rallis & Rossman, 2012, p. 158). While writing for a broader audience could be an area of improvement for the authors if they wish to reach more individuals, including key terms and concepts will add to the pool of practitioners. Schudde and Scott Clayton stated from the beginning of the paper that there would be statistical analysis so the reader would know before reading through the methodology and findings that there would be a discussion of percentages, p-values, and null or significant effects, and including visuals allows them to make the information as simple as the data allows (Booth et al., 2016, p. 217).

Overall Critique

The article written by Schudde and Scott-Clayton is a well-developed and unique addition to the conversation surrounding academic progress, financial aid policies, and student outcomes. When writing a scholarly article, "sound organizational structure is the key to clear, precise, and logical communication" (American Psychological Association, 2020, p. 47). Each section of Schudde and Scott-Clayton's article is presented in a logical and concise manner, with ideas being fully developed before moving on to the next point. Since the research and the inquiry project are both unique to this particular paper, the organization needed to be particularly

strong with the authors employing precise and clear language supporting their discussion and analysis. Despite the in-text citation concerns, the remainder of the paper is free from any grammar or language issues. Overall, Schudde and Scott-Clayton proposed a unique selection of research questions, performed and interpreted a variety of statistical analyses, and presented their findings in a well-structured and fully developed article.

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