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ABSTRACT

The effect of Rutgers University's merit-based scholarship program on attracting talented students, students' experiences at the university, and the provision of high quality education was studied. The university merit awards fell into four categories: Rutgers Presidential Scholar Award, five National Merit and five National Achievement Scholarships, and College Scholar Awards. A total of 204 scholarship recipients during 1980-1983, of whom 179 were still enrolled at Rutgers in spring 1984, were contacted, and a response rate of 73% was achieved. For 69% of the respondents, the scholarship offer was a very important or an extremely important factor in the decision to attend the university. The offer also had a favorable effect on the scholars' attitude toward the university. The majority of scholarship recipients had applied and been admitted to at least one other institution besides Rutgers. In general, the scholars were satisfied with their experiences at the university and more than half indicated that their opinion of Rutgers' academic quality had improved since enrollment. Differences in responses among the four types of scholarship recipients are also considered. (SW)

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A Survey of Rutgers University Scholarship Recipients

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Ann K. Dickey, Chair  
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### Abstract

This study considered the effectiveness of Rutgers University's merit-based scholarship program both in terms of attracting high-ability students and in terms of the students' experiences at the University. For 69% of the respondents, the scholarship offer was a Very Important or an Extremely Important factor in the decision to attend the University. In addition, the offer had a favorable effect on the Scholars' attitude toward Rutgers. In general, the Scholars were satisfied with their experiences at the University and more than half indicated that their opinion of Rutgers' academic quality had improved since enrollment.

### A Survey of Rutgers University Scholarship Recipients

So-called no need scholarships have for about ten years been the subject of a somewhat strange debate: philosophers versus the weight of evidence. Those who oppose no need awards write detailed and cogent arguments (e.g., Haines, 1984; Sidar, 1976). Surveys of various kinds (Huff, 1984; Leider, 1982; Porter and McCulloch, 1982; Porter and McCulloch, 1984; Van Dusen and Higginbotham, 1984) indicate, however, that colleges and universities continue to offer no need scholarships despite the arguments against them.

There is no doubt as to whether students accept the awards. There is, however, some question as to whether such a scholarship affects a student's decision to attend the institution offering it (Engelau, 1984; Fritz, Sciame, Logan, and Naugle, 1977; Huff, 1975). Freeman (unpublished) found that for students who did not apply for or did not qualify for financial aid, it was the less tangible, "symbolic" aspects and benefits of no need scholarships that made the difference in a student's enrollment decision. Such things as Honors programs or meeting the president of the institution, which represent an institution's "courtship" efforts, carried much more weight than the monetary value of the award.

In contrast, for students with low-to-moderate financial need, the cash value of the award and the ultimate cost of the student's education were much more important than the institution's level of courtship. For these students, \$500 or \$1000 in outright gift could well weight the balance in favor of the school making the offer. Freeman also found that for students with high financial need, neither the scholarship nor the level of courtship made a significant difference in the enrollment

decision; perhaps because such students were eligible for sufficient aid of various kinds from all sources (including the government).

Although Freeman's study was limited to a sample of private liberal arts colleges in seven midwestern states, Porter's (1984) case study of no need academic scholarship recipients at Pittsburgh supports some of his conclusions. Over half the respondents in Porter's study indicated that the scholarship was the influencing factor in deciding where to attend, and that the influence of the award increased with its amount. Porter also found that the likelihood of a student's attending Pittsburgh without the scholarship decreased as family income increased. She suggests:

It may be that these families, by virtue of higher income and educational and occupational status, are aware of more options and opportunities and have the time to research and explore more educational alternatives. (Porter, 1984, p. 129)

While Rutgers University does not consider itself to be "buying" students, its scholarships are definitely used for recruitment purposes. The brochure, A Place for Scholars, states that "In 1980, Rutgers established the Rutgers Scholars Program to encourage New Jersey's brightest and most talented students to pursue their undergraduate education at their state university." (One of New Jersey's educational claims to fame has long been the highest student outmigration rate.) Outside the state of New Jersey, Rutgers is considered to be an Ivy League school but to New Jersey's own students--and guidance counselors--it's a safety school.

Rutgers' problem seems to be getting the good students in the door. Because Rutgers, as a public university, has a relatively low tuition for

in-state students, its cost is not a barrier as much as is its image. It is a good school which can offer students a high quality education; many of its doctoral programs were highly rated in a recent study of graduate education.

The University is certainly not contemplating eliminating its merit scholarships. Indeed, the six-year old Scholars Program, privately funded, has expanded slightly since its inception. In addition, in an effort to improve declining minority enrollments, Rutgers and the State have jointly funded a program to begin this year, which will offer 50 \$4000 scholarships a year to academically talented minority students.

#### Background

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the Merit Awards program was effective, both in terms of attracting talented students to Rutgers, and in terms of providing them a high quality education after they enrolled. The University Merit Awards considered here fell into four categories:

1) Rutgers Presidential Scholar Awards ranged from \$2000 a year for a commuting student to \$4000 a year for a residential student. Up to twelve were awarded annually, and could be used at any undergraduate college of the University.

2) and 3) Five National Merit and five National Achievement Scholarships (for Black students) of at least \$1000 annually were awarded each year to finalists who designated an undergraduate division of Rutgers as the college of their first choice.

4) College Scholar Awards of \$1000 were offered by each of the ten day undergraduate colleges of the University. These awards could only be used

at the college offering them.

New Jersey high school juniors who ranked first in their class were invited by the University to participate in a Scholars Day at the New Brunswick campus. All participants were designated Rutgers Scholars and competed for the Presidential Scholars Awards; they were also given preference for the College Scholar awards. Students attending Scholars Day were guaranteed housing and admission to the college of their choice at the University.

#### Method

Because the number of University Merit Awards given in any one year was quite limited, and because of the qualitative aspects of the study, all Scholarship recipients from the years 1980 through 1983 were surveyed. The population of interest consisted of 204 Scholarship recipients, of whom 179 were still enrolled at Rutgers in the spring of 1984. The 73% combined response rate from the original mailing and follow-up was considered very good. The group of respondents was fairly representative of all the Scholars who were sent questionnaires, although women were slightly overrepresented in the responding group.

The survey instrument contained both multiple-choice and open-ended items. Where many comments were obtained, they were coded into multi-category or dichotomous variables, as appropriate. Because there was no sampling involved, significance tests were not applicable.

#### Results

##### Effect of Scholarship offer on enrollment decision

For some of the questions there were considerable differences between the four award groups (Presidential Scholars, National Merit Scholars,

National Achievement Scholars, and College Scholars). For example, 69% of all respondents applied to at least one other institution besides Rutgers. This included 15 (88%) of the Presidential Scholars, but only 6 (55%) of each of the National Merit and National Achievement groups, and 66% of the College Scholars. Academic factors were cited most frequently as reasons for applying only to Rutgers, followed by financial and then personal reasons. Only 14% mentioned the Scholarship or the Honors program.

The students who had not applied to Rutgers alone were asked to list up to three other institutions to which they had applied, and then to indicate whether or not they were offered admission at each. Finally, they were asked to rank all the institutions, including Rutgers, in order of their preference at the time of application. Eighty-seven percent of the Presidential Scholars who had applied elsewhere were admitted to at least one other institution, as were all of the National Merit and National Achievement Scholars and 88% of the College Scholars.

Three-quarters (77%) of the other acceptances received by Presidential Scholars were from institutions rated as more competitive (i.e., whose freshman profiles were better) than their chosen Rutgers unit, and, in fact, more competitive than any college at Rutgers University. Fifty-eight percent of the National Merit Scholars' acceptances were from institutions more competitive than their college at Rutgers, as were 36% of the National Achievement Scholars' acceptances, and only 31% of the acceptances received by College Scholars.

Students who were accepted elsewhere were asked to give the name of the institution they would most likely have attended if they had not chosen Rutgers. Again, the institutions named were of high quality: 85% of the

Presidential Scholars who were accepted elsewhere would have gone to a more competitive institution than their college at Rutgers. The same held true for 60% of the National Merit Scholars who were accepted at another institution, only one National Achievement Scholar (17%), and 34% of the College Scholars.

Thirty-eight percent of the students who were accepted elsewhere would have attended the other institution if they had not received a Rutgers scholarship; conversely, 61% would still have attended Rutgers if they had not received the scholarship. Fifty-one percent said they would have attended the other school if its cost had been equal to Rutgers', but the Presidential Scholars were the only group of which this was true of the majority (85%):

As Table 1 shows, the net cost of attending Rutgers and the Scholarship offer were very important factors in the enrollment decision--but so were most of the other factors listed. In fact, only three of the nine factors were rated Extremely or Very important by fewer than half of all the respondents.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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There were marked differences between the four award groups in the mean importance of the specified factors in the enrollment decision (Table 1): The Presidential Scholars gave a mean rating of 3.7 (where 4 = Extremely Important) to the Rutgers University Scholarship offer, for example, while the next highest rating, that of the National Achievement Scholars, was 2.9. Similarly, the overall mean importance attached to the

Table 1: Importance of Selected Factors in Making the Decision to Attend Rutgers

by Award Type

| Rating                                     | Presidential |      | Nat. Merit |      | Nat. Achieve. |      | College  |      | Total    |      |
|--|--------------|------|------------|------|---------------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
|  | 4,3<br>%     | Mean | 4,3<br>%   | Mean | 4,3<br>%      | Mean | 4,3<br>% | Mean | 4,3<br>% | Mean |
| Rutgers University scholarship offer       | 94           | 3.7  | 55         | 2.7  | 72            | 2.9  | 65       | 2.8  | 69       | 2.9  |
| Net cost of attending Rutgers              | 94           | 3.6  | 80         | 3.4  | 72            | 3.0  | 81       | 3.2  | 82       | 3.3  |
| Quality of the faculty                     | 71           | 2.9  | 46         | 2.4  | 36            | 2.1  | 51       | 2.5  | 53       | 2.5  |
| Availability of specific academic programs | 59           | 2.5  | 72         | 3.2  | 36            | 2.5  | 73       | 3.0  | 68       | 2.9  |
| Availability of Honors programs            | 77           | 2.8  | 36         | 2.0  | 27            | 1.7  | 35       | 2.0  | 40       | 2.0  |
| Quality of student life                    | 47           | 2.1  | 54         | 2.6  | 18            | 1.6  | 33       | 1.9  | 35       | 2.0  |
| Overall University prestige                | 35           | 2.3  | 64         | 2.7  | 55            | 2.0  | 55       | 2.5  | 53       | 2.5  |
| Academic quality of other students         | 41           | 2.2  | 18         | 1.9  | 9             | 1.4  | 30       | 1.9  | 28       | 1.9  |
| Geographic Location                        | 34           | 2.1  | 73         | 2.7  | 36            | 2.2  | 62       | 2.9  | 57       | 2.7  |
| N  | 17           |      | 11         |      | 11            |      | 89       |      | 128      |      |

4=Extremely Important 3=Very Important 2=Important 1=Somewhat Important 0=Not at all Important

availability of Honors Programs was rated at 2.0, but the Presidential Scholars gave this item a rating of 2.8.

Asked to describe how the Scholarship offer influenced their decision to enroll, 15 of the 17 Presidential Scholars felt that the Scholarship offer was the deciding factor in their decision to attend Rutgers. Several of them commented that they would never have considered Rutgers were it not for the award. Many of the Scholarship recipients in all four groups appreciated the honor of the award, even though they indicated that they would have attended Rutgers without it.

Compared with the other three award groups, Presidential Scholars were much more interested in the availability of Honors programs and were more concerned about the quality of both the faculty and other students. National Merit Scholars were more concerned about the quality of student life and overall University prestige than were any of the other three groups. The College Scholars were the group most concerned with Rutgers' geographic location and with the availability of specific major programs.

The National Achievement Scholars provided data that were somewhat ambiguous. Six of the respondents in this category (55%) considered the Scholarship offer to have been the deciding factor, and it was rated Extremely Important or Very Important by eight students (78%), but all of the respondents who were accepted to another institution would still have attended Rutgers without the Scholarship. This group of Scholars rated the importance of the net cost of attending Rutgers higher than any of the other eight factors (3.0, or Very Important), but this rating was lower than the same item's rating by any of the other three groups. The mean importance rating of the Scholarship offer (2.9) was second only to that of

the Presidential Scholars. The impression left by the comments of the National Achievement Scholars was that Rutgers was a reluctant choice, that financial considerations would eventually have tipped the scale in favor of Rutgers, and that the Scholarship offer simply made the decision more definite and more palatable.

The respondents were also asked to offer suggestions for improvements in either the University admissions procedures or the Scholarship granting process. The single most frequently mentioned suggestion was to clarify the Scholarship procedures and their requirements with respect to the Honors Program. Other suggestions covered such areas as publicizing the Merit Awards program better so as to attract more high ability students; making more merit awards available; and keeping the scholarship application procedures separate from financial aid.

In summary, the majority of the Scholarship recipients had applied and been admitted to at least one other institution besides Rutgers University. Many of the institutions to which they had been admitted may be considered more competitive than the Rutgers college they chose to attend. Most of the survey respondents felt that the Scholarship offer was a determining factor in their decision to enroll at Rutgers. Some of the students would have enrolled anyway, but appreciated the honor of the award.

The Presidential Scholars seem to have been the group most influenced by the Scholarship offer. More than half (53%) chose Rutgers over an institution rated Most Competitive, and 82% of those accepted elsewhere would have attended the other school if they had not received a Rutgers University Scholarship. Eighty-eight percent considered the award the deciding factor in their enrollment decision. The Rutgers University

Scholarship was thus instrumental in attracting these high ability students to Rutgers, but its influence was not merely financial.

#### Experiences at Rutgers

The students were asked to indicate their degree of satisfaction with certain aspects of their academic experience at Rutgers. In general, all the Scholarship recipients were quite satisfied with their experiences at Rutgers, or at least those aspects of Rutgers evaluated in this question. All four award groups gave a mean rating of 3.0 (Satisfied) or better to four of the nine items, and a rating below 3.0 to two (Table 2).

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Insert Table 2 about here

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The Presidential Scholars gave the highest mean satisfaction rating of the award groups to three of the items, and tied for the highest rating on two others. The National Achievement Scholars, on the other hand, showed the lowest mean satisfaction on six items, and gave mean ratings of less than 3.0 to five items. These two groups seem to represent the two extremes: the Presidential Scholars were generally the most satisfied group, and the National Achievement Scholars were the least satisfied. The ratings of the Presidential Scholars were very encouraging, given the quality of the Presidential Scholars, the institutions they turned down for Rutgers, and the initial doubts some of the students had about this University's quality.

Most of the respondents had enrolled in at least one Honors course, and many were pleased with their experiences. The most frequent negative comment concerned a perceived lack of organization in the Honors program.

Table 2: Mean Satisfaction with Selected Aspects of Rutgers University

by Award Type

|  | Presi-<br>dential | National<br>Merit | National<br>Achieve | College | Total |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------|-------|
| Variety of courses offered                                 | 3.7               | 3.5               | 3.3                 | 3.4     | 3.4   |
| Overall quality of teaching                                | 3.1               | 3.1               | 2.5                 | 2.9     | 2.9   |
| Academic quality of<br>students in general                 | 3.1               | 2.9               | 2.9                 | 3.0     | 3.0   |
| Academic quality of other<br>Scholars/Honors students      | 3.4               | 3.3               | 3.3                 | 3.4     | 3.4   |
| Degree of intellectual<br>stimulation: general courses     | 3.2               | 3.4               | 3.0                 | 3.1     | 3.1   |
| Degree of intellectual<br>stimulation: Honors courses      | 3.5               | 3.0               | 3.1                 | 3.2     | 3.2   |
| Availability of desired majors                             | 3.5               | 2.7               | 2.6                 | 3.3     | 3.3   |
| Academic advisement  | 2.6               | 2.7               | 2.3                 | 2.6     | 2.6   |
| Facilities for specialized<br>study, e.g., computers, labs | 2.8               | 2.9               | 2.6                 | 2.9     | 2.9   |
| N  | 17                | 11                | 11                  | 89      | 128   |

4=Very Satisfied 3=Satisfied 2=Dissatisfied 1=Very Dissatisfied

This covered both uncertainties about the requirements for the program as a whole and problems with particular courses. The students appreciated the interdisciplinary nature of the honors seminars, and were grateful for exposure to other fields of study.

#### Evaluating Rutgers as a whole

The survey asked students to indicate their prior perception of Rutgers University's academic quality, on a scale of 1 Outstanding to 5 Poor. The respondents were then asked whether their opinion of the University's academic quality had changed since their enrollment. More than half (53%) of all the Scholars had felt the academic quality of Rutgers to be very good or outstanding before they attended the University (Table 3). However, only three (18%) of the Presidential Scholars had considered Rutgers' academic quality to be very good, and none had considered it outstanding.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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On the other hand, 58% of all the Scholars felt that their opinion of Rutgers' academic quality had improved since they had enrolled. This figure included over 70% of the National Scholars and Presidential Scholars (the latter group also had the largest proportion of people whose opinion had improved greatly -- 41%), but barely half the College Scholars and National Achievement group. These results were consistent with the students' comments about the influence of the Scholarship offer on their enrollment decision, and about their reactions to the University.

Table 3: Prior Opinion of Rutgers Compared to Current Opinion

Percentage Distribution by Award Type

Has your opinion of Rutgers' academic quality changed?

What was your opinion of Rutgers' academic quality?

|                       | Presidential<br>(N=17) |      |   | Nat Merit<br>(N=11) |    |    | Nat Achievement<br>(N=10) |    |    | College<br>(N=88) |     |     | Total<br>(N=126) |     |     |
|-----------------------|------------------------|------|---|---------------------|----|----|---------------------------|----|----|-------------------|-----|-----|------------------|-----|-----|
|                       | +                      | 0    | - | +                   | 0  | -  | +                         | 0  | -  | +                 | 0   | -   | +                | 0   | -   |
| Outstanding<br>(N=10) |                        |      |   | 100%                |    |    | 100%                      |    |    | 25%               | 63% | 13% | 30%              | 60% | 10% |
|                       |                        |      |   | (1)                 |    |    | (1)                       |    |    | (8)               |     |     |                  |     |     |
| Very Good<br>(N=57)   | 67                     | 33   |   | 50                  | 33 | 17 | 33                        |    | 67 | 47                | 38  | 16  | 47               | 35  | 18  |
|                       |                        | (3)  |   | (6)                 |    |    | (3)                       |    |    | (45)              |     |     |                  |     |     |
| Good<br>(N=45)        | 75                     | 17   | 8 | 100                 |    |    | 60                        | 40 |    | 65                | 31  | 4   | 69               | 27  | 4   |
|                       |                        | (12) |   | (2)                 |    |    | (5)                       |    |    | (26)              |     |     |                  |     |     |
| Fair<br>(N=12)        | 100                    |      |   | 100                 |    |    | 100                       |    |    | 88                |     | 13  | 83               | 8   | 8   |
|                       |                        | (1)  |   | (2)                 |    |    | (1)                       |    |    | (8)               |     |     |                  |     |     |
| Poor<br>(N=2)         | 100                    |      |   |                     |    |    |                           |    |    | 100               |     |     | 100              |     |     |
|                       |                        | (1)  |   |                     |    |    |                           |    |    | (1)               |     |     |                  |     |     |

71 24 6 73 18 9 50 30 20 55 34 11 58 31 11

Legend: + = Improved a great deal, Improved somewhat  
 0 = Not changed  
 - = Declined somewhat, Declined a great deal

Finally, the respondents were asked whether they would recommend Rutgers University to other students of high ability, and were then requested to comment on how well their experiences at the University had met their expectations. Ninety-five percent of the students would recommend Rutgers to other students of high ability. One comment made both by students who would recommend Rutgers and by those who would not was that while Rutgers is a good school, any student who could afford to go to a more prestigious University should do so. For one thing, as several Presidential Scholars commented, the average Rutgers student seemed not to contribute to a stimulating academic environment.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming impression conveyed by the Scholars was that their experience at Rutgers had been challenging, stimulating, rewarding, and even fun. Few of the students seemed to feel that the academic program at Rutgers failed to match their expectations, although there were more complaints about Honors courses than about the general curriculum, perhaps because the expectations of the Scholarship recipients were higher in regard to the Honors program.

#### Conclusions

This survey shows that the offer of a Rutgers University Scholarship was influential in many a student's decision to attend Rutgers. However, it also indicated that there is a group of students for whom the honor of the award and the subsequent low cost of Rutgers just don't outweigh the prestige of a real Ivy League institution. This conclusion is supported by a 1983 Rutgers Admissions Office survey of students who did not accept the Scholarship offer. The present study does not consider the question of characteristic differences between students who do accept the awards and

those who would not come to Rutgers. At the very least, however, its evidence indicates that the University's efforts to attract high ability students do have positive effects.

The enrolling Scholars themselves offered some suggestions for making Rutgers more attractive. Most of the suggestions could be classified under the general heading of improving communication: with the high school (especially to improve Rutgers' image among guidance counselors and to publicize the Scholarships more widely); during the recruitment/admissions stage (providing better information about the scholarship program itself); and after the Scholar enrolls.

Since several of the survey respondents indicated that the existence of the scholarship-related Honors programs (one of Freeman's heavily weighted courtship activities) was an important incentive to their enrollment at Rutgers, the colleges should take the Scholars' suggestions and criticisms of these programs seriously. As a direction for further work, there seems to be a need to consider whether the Honors programs should be required for all Scholarship recipients. National Achievement Scholars often have academic credentials that are quite a bit lower than those of Scholars in the other three groups, although they may compare favorably with the general student population. Should such students be required to participate in intense Honors programs geared to Scholars with higher credentials?

It would seem that the Rutgers Merit Awards program is indeed successful, both in attracting good students and in providing them with a satisfying educational experience. Presidential Scholars, with the highest academic credentials, were the group most influenced by the Scholarship

offer, as well as the group most demanding of a high quality education. Undoubtedly all the Scholarship recipients were eager for stimulation and intellectual growth. There is also no doubt but that most of them felt they could find it at Rutgers. If Rutgers, using the Scholarship program as one strategy, can build up a "critical mass" of talented students, perhaps its image within the state will be as positive as that it projects outside New Jersey. Rutgers feels that the Merit Awards program is ultimately of mutual benefit to both the Scholars and the University.

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