

Background

In 2008, Greater Texas Foundation (GTF) examined how scholarship funders, including GTF, could design scholarship programs to improve postsecondary persistence and completion, in addition to improving access. The research resulted in two reports, available at www.greatertexasfoundation.org:

- Dollars for Degrees: Structuring postsecondary scholarship to increase student success¹
- Dollars for Degrees: Financial aid and its impact on postsecondary degree completion in Texas

The reports served as a springboard for the creation of the *Greater Texas Foundation Scholars Program*. In October 2011, the foundation made a financial commitment of more than \$3 million for the **GTF Scholars Program** to establish the state's first scholarship program designed specifically for the growing number of Early College High School (ECHS) graduates in Texas.

The intent is to increase the number of Texas ECHS graduates who successfully transition to and complete a baccalaureate degree. The GTF Scholars Program will eventually reach approximately 500 students with scholarships and non-financial support.

Why Early College High School Students?

The foundation is able to increase access to higher education for under-represented students by targeting ECHS students while also expediting degree completion and reducing debt for participants.

Students who attend Early College High Schools (ECHS) have the opportunity to earn college credits, and the possibility of earning their associate's degree, upon high school graduation. There are approximately 150 ECHSs in Texas and the majority of students who attend these schools are under-represented in higher education based on traits such as family income level, race or ethnicity. The foundation believes these students have the knowledge, skills and confidence to succeed at a four-year institution based on their rigorous ECHS experience.

¹ Cohen, J., Fox, L., Kutash, J. and Pandit, M. 2010. Dollars for degrees: Financial aid and its impact on post-secondary degree completion in Texas; and Cohen, J., Fox, L., Kutash, J. and Pandit, M. 2010. Dollars for degrees: Structuring post-secondary scholarships to increase student success

Scholarship Design Elements

GTF Scholars Program was based on the premise that the scholarship program should:

- Provide simple, transparent and predictable awards
- Make scholarships easy to monitor
- Avoid displacement of other grants and scholarships
- Avoid the need for loans
- Provide incentives for full time enrollment and timely completion of a baccalaureate degree

Scholarship Program Elements

GTF Scholars currently supports cohorts of 25-35 scholars each year at four institutions in Texas:²



The original program was designed to support five cohorts of scholars, for two years per cohort, through a mix of financial and non-financial supports. Based on feedback from the participating institutions, as well as findings from the evaluation, the foundation made a few key changes to the program to better serve students:

- Allowed funding to be used for summer scholarship support
- Offered a third year of funding for students at the four participating institutions, of which three accepted and now provide three years of financial and non-financial support
- Extended the evaluation of the program to include third-year student outcomes

Financial Support

Students receive annual scholarships ranging from \$500 to approximately \$4,000 at the discretion of their university. These scholarships are combined with other institutional and external sources of financial aid with the ultimate goal of loan avoidance.

Non-Financial Support

Although financial support is important, non-financial support is crucial to increase the likelihood that GTF Scholars graduate with a university credential. Most of the participants are the first in their family to attend college and the universities provide additional support services, such as:

- Academic Engagement Activities
- Social Engagement Activities
- Financial Guidance and Advising

² University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) participated in the first program year (2012-2013).

Fast Facts

- \$3 million for financial and non-financial support
- 4 institutions
- 339 students from 3 cohorts have been awarded
- 500 students, in 5 cohorts, over 8 years (anticipated)

- 72% of GTF Scholars are Latino or Hispanic Students
- 70% of GTF Scholars are first-generation students
- Average annual scholarship of \$1,915
- Average first-semester GPA of 2.93



Early Findings and Lessons Learned

The foundation invested in a third-party evaluation to span the planning year and seven years during which student awards will be made. The evaluation methodology includes qualitative and quantitative measures including a comparison group³. Early evaluation findings and general lessons learned include:

Academic

- GTF Scholars are STEM-focused with 57% of Cohort 1 and 49% of Cohort 2 having STEM backgrounds in high school and about half continuing with STEM majors at their university.
- About two-thirds of both cohorts of students – 66% of Cohort 1 and 64% of Cohort 2 – were “accelerated” students in high school meaning that they also earned their associate’s degree upon high school graduation.
- The program participants have high retention rates at their universities with 96% of Cohort 1 and 95% of Cohort 2 students completing their 1st program year and 87% of Cohort 1 and 90% of Cohort 2 returning for a 2nd year.
- About half of the scholars – 50% of Cohort 1 and 54% of Cohort 2 – earned a GPA of 3.0 or above in their first semester at their university. The first cohort’s full year cumulative GPA was 2.93 for the first year.
- There is a disparity in ECHS credits applied to degree: on average, 48 (73%) of 66 college-level credits earned at ECHSs for Cohorts 1 and 2 were applied to degree programs at their universities.
- Most students do not graduate in the originally offered two years of support, mainly due to credits earned that do not apply to chosen degree programs. In fact, of the 83 consenting Cohort 1 students from the four current

³ Comparison group data are not yet available for full analysis.

institutions, 7 earned their bachelor's degree by the end of the second year. This was the impetus for the foundation to extend the program to the third year.

- Earlier, more nuanced degree advising is essential at ECHS level to expedite time-to-degree and maximize credits earned.

Financial

- For the 2013-2014 academic year, GTF Scholarships ranged from \$500 to \$4,000 with an average of \$1,915 per student.
- The program is clearly helping the intended recipients—students at lower income levels. The average Pell Grant was \$3,558, and the average Expected Family Contribution, an indicator of income levels, was \$3,489 (mean). The median EFC was \$0.
- GTF Scholarships cover about 9% of the total cost of attendance; the average cost of attendance was \$21,239.
- Twelve percent (12%) of Cohort 2 students, at their own request, took out student loans.

Social and Support

- Non-financial supports are highly valued by participants – students want “more” of whatever is provided such as personal meetings with GTF advisors, student gatherings, and leadership retreats.
- According to participants and their GTF Scholars program advisors, the sense of community provided through GTF for these ECHS students eases the students' transition to 4-year campuses.
- Students, and the university representatives, acknowledge a condensed timeframe in which to gain internships, determine career plans, change majors, gain work experience, etc., and are using GTF as a microcosm for how to assist the wider ECHS student community with these issues.
- Being an ECHS graduate may cause issues of identity on campus where these unique students are questioning their “fit,” socially, if they belong to traditional freshmen groups, juniors or transfer students.
- GTF Scholars program staff at the universities identified “high expectations/ motivation” as the scholars' top asset.