



GREATER TEXAS FOUNDATION

Greater Texas Foundation Scholars Program 1.0

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT:
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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“It meant the world to me. This program epitomizes all of the hard work that I put in as an ECHS [Early College High School] student. I loved explaining the program to people, and it ultimately helped me discover my passion for higher education. In the future when I become a professor, I would like to work with these students to ensure that they are on the right track and that they don’t have the same issues that I have. This program truly opened up many doors for me, and I want to see its success through and through for years to come.”

– GTF SCHOLAR

“Other than financial support, the relationships that I’ve created have been the most valuable part of being in the GTF Scholars Program. I’ve met my fellow GTF Scholars and I have even had classes with some of them. The GTF Scholars Program feels like a small community within a larger community, which I consider to be its own kind of family.”

– GTF SCHOLAR

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Program Overview

In October 2011 Greater Texas Foundation (GTF) announced a financial commitment of more than \$3 million to establish the state's first scholarship program designed specifically for the growing number of Early College High School (ECHS) graduates in Texas. This initiative, the GTF Scholars Program, was created to increase the number of Texas ECHS graduates who successfully transition to and complete a baccalaureate degree. The foundation made grants to four public Texas universities to offer scholarships and other student supports and programming such as advising, peer mentoring, skill-building workshops and more. The universities were selected in a competitive process, and the participating institutions were Texas A&M University (TAMU), University of Houston (UH), University of North Texas (UNT), The University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB).¹

The GTF Scholars Program model focused on degree completion by combining a need-based scholarship with non-financial supports. The program model incorporated the following design elements at each of the participating universities:

- Supporting non-financial components such as academic engagement activities and financial guidance;
- Providing simple, transparent and predictable scholarship awards;

¹ In 2013, The University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB) was part of a restructuring of higher education institutions in Texas that resulted in the formation of a new entity, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). UTRGV was the first major public university in Texas formed in the 21st century.

- Continual monitoring and tracking of student academic performance and completion;
- Avoiding displacement of funding and the need for loans; and
- Providing incentives for full time enrollment and timely completion of a degree.

While each university's proposed program reflected all these core elements, the models of participating campuses also reflected their unique strengths, experience with other scholarship programs, existing strategies with ECHS graduates, and other factors. In addition to scholarship dollars, funding provided to the participating universities supported a program coordinator on each campus to manage student activities, provide individual guidance, make referrals to campus resources and participate in the evaluation.



Evaluation

Foundation staff, grantees and the evaluation team have collaborated to produce a rigorous quasi-experimental evaluation of the first five cohorts of the program. Independent evaluators Barbara Goldberg & Associates, LLC and Stezala Consulting, LLC were selected to conduct the evaluation. The evaluation design examines the GTF Scholars Program comprehensively, from overall design and implementation to assessment of student outcomes in the short and longer-term. The key research question for the evaluation is as follows:

Do GTF Scholars enrolled at participating universities, provided with an array of financial and non-financial support services, achieve significantly better academic and financial outcomes than a group of similarly attributed non-participating students?

Key Accomplishments

Key accomplishments, drawn from data analysis and from interviews, surveys and focus groups with principal investigators (PIs), coordinators, students, foundation staff and other stakeholders, are summarized below:

- **The large number of students served.** A total of 485 students who attended four different Texas universities received significant financial and non-financial support through the Greater Texas Foundation's GTF Scholars Program.
- **Success in recruiting and retaining the targeted population of diverse, first generation graduates of early college high schools.** Over 70% (72%) are first generation college students, and 69% identified as Hispanic/Latino, 11% Asian, and 10% Black/African American. In their first year of the program, 50% of GTF Scholars had a \$0 Expected Family Contribution (EFC).
- **Three-year graduation rates exceeding 40% for a vulnerable population.** Three-year graduation rates among GTF Scholars exceeded 40%, with 199 (41%) of the 485 GTF Scholars earning their degree within three years of beginning the program. *For context, 41% of full-time first-time college students nationally earn their bachelor's degree in four years.*
- **Based on National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data, a significantly higher completion rate for GTF Scholars when the three-year timeframe is extended.** More than 90% (91%) of GTF Scholars had earned their bachelor's degrees, based on NSC records that were



accessed after the program ended, with the average bachelor's degree earned in 3.21 years.

- **Better outcomes among GTF Scholars than similarly attributed groups of non-participating ECHS graduates.** Based on the results of an annual comparison group study undertaken in cooperation with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THEBC), all 5 cohorts of GTF Scholars consistently achieved significantly better outcomes than a matched comparison group on several core variables including: 1) persistence, 2) graduation rates, and 3) accumulated loan debt.
- **High levels of satisfaction among participating students, as expressed in focus groups and surveys.** Participants appreciated the financial support that the GTF scholarship had provided, but also felt that the non-financial aspects of the program had led to more involvement in campus life and a greater sense of belonging on campus.
- **New and strengthened relationships with Texas's early college high schools; greater awareness about the program at ECHSs.** Principal investigators reported that one outcome of the project has been to change the way their university recruits, admits and enrolls the larger population of ECHS and dual credit students.
- **An expanded institutional focus on ECHS and dual credit students at participating universities.** As one PI suggested, the GTF Scholars Program serves as an "incubator" regarding how best to serve students with high quality, personalized services.
- **The creation of a strong "learning community" among foundation staff, principal investigators, program coordinators and other university administrators and the evaluation team as a result of the foundation's commitment to evaluation, institutional learning and dissemination.** The evaluation model includes high levels of participation from the foundation, university administrators and students, with an emphasis on dissemination.

Key Challenges

Through surveys, interviews, and focus groups of PIs, program coordinators and students, the evaluation shed light on programmatic challenges as well as broader challenges with the ECHS to university transition.

- **Lack of credit-to-degree alignment.** Similar to transition challenges faced by traditional transfer students, many GTF Scholars identified the challenge of credits earned at the ECHS not applying to their degrees at the university. Students described a lack of congruence between requirements for graduation from high school and what is required for their university's core curriculum.
- **Student financial needs that extend beyond tuition and fees.** Some GTF Scholars reported worrying about financial issues in spite of scholarship and financial aid support. Although the GTF Scholars Program was originally intended to eliminate the need for students to borrow for college, a minority of students still take out loans in order to complete their degree.
- **Personal difficulties that students face.** Some scholars report difficulties in meeting academic demands, particularly in upper level courses and in STEM disciplines. They also may face cultural difficulties in living away from home for the first time, especially if they are the first generation in their family to attend college.
- **Students not completing their bachelor's degree within the targeted three-year time frame.** This target can mean that some GTF Scholars have to compress several challenging courses into one semester, which may negatively impact workloads and grades. Some students also report that they feel they are missing out on opportunities to engage in campus activities, work-based learning and special programming because they feel rushed to finish their degrees. In some cases, they are purposely staying enrolled to gain additional majors, minors or internships.



- **Limited staff capacity at some ECHSs.** Students, PIs and coordinators identify the need for expanded, more nuanced advising about credits and majors during the high school years. In addition, limited class selection at ECHSs and options for fields of study at some schools may negatively affect student choices. The structure of the ECHS can also sometimes prompt early and possibly premature decisions about college majors and careers.
- **Structural and leadership changes at the participating universities.** Over the eight-year span of the GTF Scholars Program grant there have been extensive changes in leadership at both the university and program level.
- **Difficulties at universities in adapting to the unique needs of ECHS graduates.** While PIs and program coordinators report positive changes at their universities, campuses still have some difficulty in adapting to the unique needs and trajectories of ECHS graduates. Because of the GTF Scholars Program, there is more of a campus-wide recognition of the special status of all ECHS graduates at the university.
- **Finding the resources to maintain the financial commitment to cover full cost of attendance for GTF Scholars in order to fulfill the contractual obligations of the grant.**

Conclusion

Neither the foundation staff nor the evaluation team are aware of such a large-scale, long term scholarship program design targeting ECHS graduates in Texas or elsewhere in the country. The scope of both the program design and the accompanying evaluation have offered a rich opportunity for both positive, measurable impact on participating students and institutions and, also on the scholarship field and beyond. Greater Texas Foundation is contributing to the national conversation about early college high schools and about best practices for serving ECHS graduates.

Perhaps most importantly there is ample evidence of successful outcomes for GTF Scholars. The three-year graduation rate among GTF Scholars was 41%. They are graduating significantly earlier than full-time first-time college students nationally, of whom 41% earn their bachelor's degree within four years.

The GTF Scholars' graduation rate increased significantly when the three-year time frame is extended. At the time NSC data was accessed 3.5 years after the last cohort enrolled, 91% of GTF Scholars had earned their bachelor's degrees. GTF

Scholars earned their bachelor's degrees in an average of 3.21 years.

In addition, GTF Scholars had statistically significantly better outcomes than a matched comparison group. All five cohorts of GTF Scholars achieved statistically significant higher persistence and graduation rates, and statistically significant lower accumulated loan debt. For example, Cohort 1 GTF Scholars had significantly less accumulated loan debt upon completion (\$2,116 vs. \$13,186) than the comparison group.

The GTF Scholars Program is increasing the number of Texas ECHS graduates who successfully transition to and complete a baccalaureate degree. The program is reaching a diverse group of ECHS graduates who have unmet financial need and is unequivocally increasing student persistence, expediting degree completion and reducing student loan debt. GTF Scholars consistently rate the program highly and feel that the program is meeting the unique needs of the ECHS population. They have provided abundant examples, over multiple years, of how the scholarship and accompanying academic and social support, along with financial guidance and peer interaction, are all having a positive impact on their college experience.

