



MORE THAN DOLLARS FOR SCHOLARS

The Impact of the **Dell Scholars Program** on College Access, Persistence and Degree Attainment

LOW-INCOME AND FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES CONTINUE TO COMPLETE COLLEGE AT MUCH LOWER RATES THAN THEIR HIGHER-INCOME PEERS.

These students face complex challenges on the path between initial enrollment and bachelor's degree attainment—from academic and financial challenges to home life challenges like juggling family responsibilities, managing stress, or getting out of debt.

While many programs support low-income and first-generation college students in getting *to* college, few offer them sustained, comprehensive support—academic, financial and social-emotional—to help them successfully make it *through* college. The Dell Scholars Program does exactly that. This executive summary highlights findings from the program's first-ever external research evaluation. Existing research suggests that college success initiatives that provide *either* academic *or* financial support have less impact than those that provide *both*. Through rigorous quantitative and qualitative analysis, the report authors found the Dell Scholars Program had **substantial impact** on students' persistence and bachelor's degree attainment, as well as on students' loan borrowing behavior, course performance and college credit accrual. These findings have important implications for efforts to expand college success in this country: Nearly one-third of low-income college goers in the US are first in their family to attend, based on data from the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics.

Since 2004, the Dell Scholars Program has supported up to 400 new students a year, serving a total of more than 3,500 students across hundreds of colleges and universities in almost all 50 states. The program gives low-income, overwhelmingly first-generation college students a \$20,000 college scholarship, a laptop, textbook and tutoring credits, and ongoing, individualized support to navigate life challenges that may prevent them from finishing college. With students on multiple campuses across multiple states, the program uses a sophisticated and adaptable student data management system to track individual scholar progress and flag risk

indicators. Yet, the evaluation found that the program staff retain “high touch” support for students who need it.

This external evaluation helps fill a gap in the still-nascent body of thorough research on the cause and effect impact of comprehensive college success interventions. The evaluation analyzes the Dell Scholars Program from 2009-2012, both to ensure maximum data quality and to enable the tracking of student cohorts through at least four years of college. To best isolate the effects of the Dell Scholars Program on persistence and degree attainment, the analysis compares students selected as Dell Scholars with students selected as finalists, as the two groups’ demographic and academic achievement profiles are similar, especially just at the cutoff for being selected into the program. The analysis also compares scholars with socioeconomically, demographically and academically similar students attending the same college type (e.g., public versus private, highly selective versus less selective) drawn from a nationally representative sample of nearly 16,700 first-time beginning U.S. college students. (The National Center for Education Statistics Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey 2004/2009, known as BPS.)

Dell Scholars are compared with program finalists and the matched BPS sample on college persistence and degree attainment outcomes; due to data availability, they are compared with just the matched BPS sample on other key indicators of students’ college experience.

The evaluation finds that compared to students like them who *do not* have the support of the Dell Scholars Program:

Dell Scholars are significantly more likely to finish college and get a degree—and do so more quickly.

- Dell Scholars overall are 23 percent more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree within four years; Dell Scholars attending a less selective institution are 53 percent more likely to earn their degree within four years.
- Dell Scholars overall are 20 percent more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree within six years; Dell Scholars attending a less selective institution are 32 percent more likely to earn their degree within six years.

Dell Scholars are more academically successful.

- They earn higher college GPAs, are less likely to fall into academic probation, have far lower rates of course failure, and are less likely to work a high number of hours compared to their matched counterparts.

Dell Scholars are likely better off financially after college: They are less likely to take on loans in the first year of college.

- Dell Scholars are 63 percent less likely to take on private loans.
- Dell Scholars are 60 percent less likely to take on the more financially burdensome Parent PLUS loans. (These carry higher interest rates than other federal loans, require immediate repayment, and are more utilized by underrepresented students at colleges with limited institutional aid.)
- Dell Scholars are 52 percent less likely to take on other federal loans.

Researchers identified **four key program components** that contribute to Dell Scholars Program success, as illustrated in the statistics above. Given the program's comprehensive and flexible design, researchers could not pinpoint which program elements drove which impacts and outcomes.

1. A proactive, data-informed support system (known as the admin tool, now available as [GradSnapp](#)) that is highly responsive to indicators that students are at risk for not persisting;
2. A flexible, student-centered program with student-focused policies and practices that help staff meet students where they are so they can best meet students' diverse needs;
3. A program staff whose life and college experiences mirror those of the students they serve and who work in a highly collaborative environment via collective case management;
4. A continuous quality improvement strategy that permeates all aspects of the program.

The study found the Dell Scholars Program had a bigger impact on persistence and degree attainment for scholars in *less* selective schools and a bigger impact on college-financing outcomes for students in *more* selective institutions, where attendance costs are often higher. This is important because it is predominantly less selective institutions that have seen increased enrollment of low-income and first-generation college students. Policy and program efforts aiming to close the college completion gap need to be particularly attuned to interventions that effectively support low-income and first-generation college students where they tend to enroll. About half of Dell finalists and scholars studied attended less selective institutions (as defined by Barron's Profile of American Colleges selectivity ratings). The report authors suggest that the Dell Scholars Program effectively provides scholars with access to critical support services that are no longer, or were never offered, on those less selective campuses, where resources can be especially scarce.

While this research report is not a "how to" guide, it may be useful for others interested in comprehensively supporting low-income and first-generation students so they can successfully complete college. As evidenced in this report, such support can promote more equitable postsecondary outcomes for some of the nation's most vulnerable students. The authors point to the recent release of GradSnapp, a cloud-based, low-cost data tracking and advising tool modeled on the Dell Scholars Program administrative tool, as an opportunity to support replication of similar program models across the country without having to reinvent the wheel.

Cost is a consideration for launching, or sustaining, any successful program. Notably, although the Dell Scholars Program wrap-around services have grown since the program's inception in 2004, the amount of the annual scholarship (at \$20,000) has not. The program costs \$25,000 per student served, with approximately 90 percent of dollars going directly to the students and 10 percent supporting the program's operations and support services (beyond the scholarship award). Conducting a back-of-the-envelope analysis to assess whether the substantial increases in college completion are sufficient to merit the Dell Scholars

Program investment, the report researchers suggest that the program investment has a positive rate of return. This considers solely the benefits in earnings that scholars are likely to enjoy as college graduates, not the many other types of benefits, public and private, that a college education can bestow.

Through analyses of program notes on scholars as well as through individual stories that unfold through in-depth, at times deeply personal interviews with more than half a dozen scholars, the report paints a clear picture of the extraordinary adversity the typical scholar overcomes both prior to and after enrollment in college. As the research report reveals, the Dell Scholars Program's role in a scholar's persistence is defined by the scholar's individual needs. The Dell Scholars Program's impact is clear: for all scholars, and particularly for those in less-selective institutions that may have sparse or low-quality support services, the program's integrated financial, academic and social resources can be a lifeline that proves critical for college success.



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