

Ron Brown Scholar Program Evaluation summary

The Ron Brown Scholar Program aims to be a major force in producing our nation’s next generation of leaders by providing academic scholarships, service opportunities, and leadership experiences to exemplary young African Americans.

The program honors Ronald H. Brown, the first African American Secretary of Commerce, who left a legacy of leadership, intelligence, and commitment to public service. Along with financial assistance, the program offers an extensive support network that mentors, nurtures, and motivates students to flourish in college and beyond. The program was founded and is privately funded by the CAP Charitable Foundation with additional support from partner organizations and individual donors. In 2009, the Ron Brown Scholar Fund received an advance ruling by the IRS which allows it to operate as a public 501(c)3 charity.

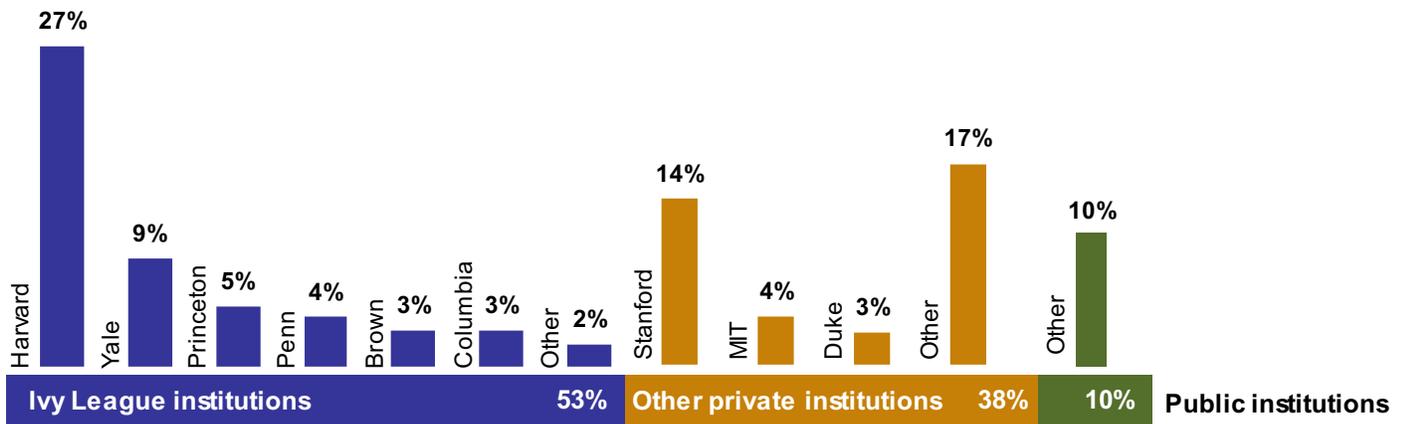
The Ron Brown Scholar Program began awarding 20 scholarships per year to outstanding African American students in 1997. By 2008, the program had awarded 241 scholarships of \$40,000 each (\$10,000 per year) to help cover educational

expenses at a four-year college or university of the recipient’s choice.

The program is highly selective, with several hundred applicants per scholarship awarded. Students are selected based on their academic achievement, leadership ability, communication skills, school and community involvement, and financial need. They come from a variety of family, community, and socio-economic backgrounds. While many have overcome difficult experiences and challenging circumstances including poverty, homelessness, and severe family problems, successful applicants excel academically, and show the intellect and drive to achieve great things.

Wilder Research conducted an independent evaluation of the program to measure the activities and accomplishments of the scholars, the influence and impact of the program on the scholars’ success, and the effectiveness of program elements, and also to identify ideas for improvement. The primary method used in the evaluation was a web-based survey of current and alumni Ron Brown Scholars. The evaluation also drew on information about the scholars from program records.

SCHOLARS’ UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTION



* Due to rounding, chart totals may not add to 100%

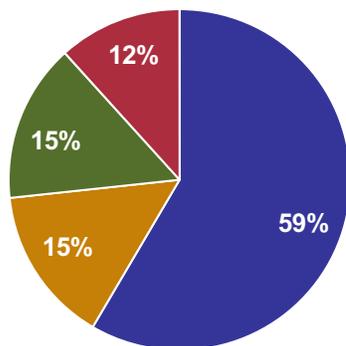
Results

Academic

Most scholars attended top colleges and universities with the majority attending Ivy League institutions. Seven in 10 scholars said the Ron Brown scholarship enabled them to attend their first-choice college. They most frequently majored in the social sciences, biological sciences, engineering, and area or ethnic studies.

Almost all scholars complete their undergraduate education in four years, and the majority go on to graduate or professional school at outstanding universities. Among those who completed their undergraduate education five or more years ago (scholarship award cohort years 1997-2000), 59 percent had obtained an advanced degree. Another 15 percent were attending or did attend graduate or professional school but had not yet obtained a degree yet. Master's degrees were the most frequently obtained degrees, followed by professional degrees in law and medicine.

GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND INTENTIONS (AWARD YEARS 1997-2000)



- Attended graduate/professional school and obtained a degree
- Attended or attending graduate/professional school, but have not obtained a degree
- Have not attended graduate/professional school, but intend to within the next two years
- Have not attended graduate/professional school and do not intend to within the next two years

Employment

Eight in 10 employed alumni scholars have positions categorized as managerial or professional specialty occupations. This includes such positions as executive, administrator, manager, consultant, analyst, investment banker, writer, doctor, teacher, lawyer, engineer, and scientist. Besides their main occupation, about 4 in 10 alumni Scholars (39%) reported that they have other business ventures or projects that they are currently pursuing.

I am writing a novel and getting ready to go to Guatemala for 7 months to work as a human rights observer.

I'm an aspiring musician. I have nearly two dozen original songs, and I'm working on a symphony/song cycle for solo guitar and voice performance.

[I am] helping to start "eHealth Global," [an] online telemedicine management system to facilitate provision of healthcare by physicians in the Diaspora to patients in developing countries through videoconferencing.

Most scholars had pre-professional internships or similar experiences; many received help from the program in identifying the opportunity or providing financial assistance. Scholars found these experiences helpful in developing their skills and clarifying goals and interests, and felt more prepared for the competitive application process of graduate school and sought-after professional opportunities.

Over half of Ron Brown Scholars studied, served, or traveled abroad while in college or shortly after, adding to their skills and deepening their understanding of other cultures and their ability to work with people from different backgrounds. Scholars commonly reported that the experience helped clarify their career plans:

[It] helped me to understand how I want to serve in the future and more specifically to gain hands-on experience working with underserved populations, which are the populations I hope to work with in my future medical career. This program solidified my desire to be a doctor.

Aside from helping to develop my language skills, the program was my first experience of being fully integrated into another culture, and helped peak my interest in a career in international law.

The program helped to make this possible for over half of the scholars who traveled abroad by providing financial assistance.

Leadership and community service

All current scholars have been involved in their campus community this past school year, and most (85%) have participated in a student group or club. Seven in 10 reported having held a leadership position on campus and just over one-quarter reported having held a leadership position off campus. Among alumni scholars, almost two-thirds indicated having held a leadership position in the past year in graduate/professional school, at work, or in their community.

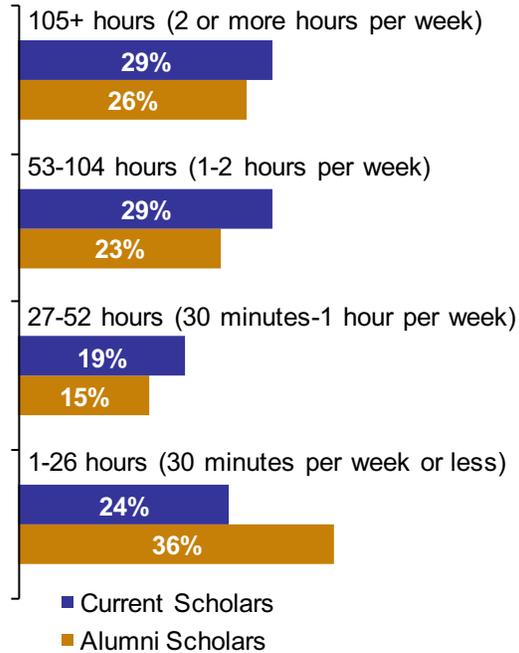
Last year, I won the award for "Sophomore Leader of the Year."

[I] developed [a] web intervention to facilitate [the] flow of emergency information between service providers and [the] public with the Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Team.

I was president of the Harvard Black Students Association where I created an annual scholarship and corporate sponsorship program; I was a founding member and Alumni Affairs Chair for the Harvard Black Alumni Society.

Eight in 10 scholars reported doing community service work in the past year, engaging in a variety of service activities ranging from helping inner city youth prepare college applications, to media outreach for socially conscious films, to volunteering at a prison. The amount of time scholars devoted to community service varied widely with about half of the scholars estimating that they spent one hour or more per week on such activities in the past year.

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF HOURS SCHOLARS SPENT ON COMMUNITY SERVICE WORK IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS



Program impact on scholars

Scholars indicated that the program had a major influence on their goals and aspirations, motivation, commitment to community service, support system, educational opportunities, and pre-professional and career opportunities. Many described it as life-changing in several ways:

- Life-changing with regard to becoming part of the Ron Brown family, a unique network of supportive relationships
- Life-changing with regard to how they view themselves and their potential
- Life-changing with regard to the doors that have been opened to them

These scholars' comments sum up common themes:

This program is unquestionably value-added in the lives of scholars and opens doors for highly qualified students that just need resources and access. This program changes lives.

[This program provides] the feeling of having a support network, should you need it, and the fact that Ron Brown Scholars have more doors open to them simply because they are Ron Brown Scholars.

Scholars indicated that the program, and especially the successes of other scholars, has inspired them to put aside any doubts and pursue their dreams and passions:

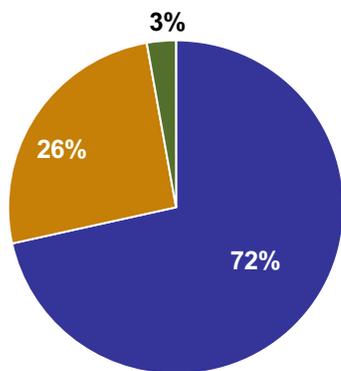
When I see the incredible things that other Scholars have done (and are doing), I'm encouraged to broaden my focus and consider what I can do. I am inspired [by] our successes despite the difficulties of our lives before college.

I have come to see the value in my heritage where, for a time, I had only seen it as a handicap.

Being a Ron Brown Scholar has shown me that there are talented, motivated young Black people working hard to positively influence the world. They're not just on television and in the newspaper, they're a part of my life.

Most scholars reported the scholarship funds made it possible to attend their first-choice of college or university.

RON BROWN SCHOLARSHIP FUNDS IMPACT ON FIRST-CHOICE COLLEGE ATTENDANCE



- Ron Brown scholarship made it possible to attend first-choice college
- Would have been able to attend first-choice college even without Ron Brown scholarship
- Unable to attend first-choice college, even with Ron Brown scholarship

Support System

While the scholarship funds were critical, becoming part of the Ron Brown Scholar Program community or family – a supportive network of scholars, staff, friends, and partners of the program – was equally important to scholars. Through access to this community, scholars reported they were able to develop close ties, sometimes for the first time, with other young, talented, and ambitious African Americans like themselves. More broadly, scholars felt the support, guidance, opportunities, and long-term friendship provided by members of this community had a large impact on their own progress and success, helping to shape and sometimes alter the trajectory of their lives. In short, this community is a unique, “value-added” component that sets the Ron Brown Scholar Program apart from other scholarship programs:

It really is phenomenal. The money isn't even the greatest part for me. The staff is encouraging, genuine, and helpful. They have made a scholarship foundation into a family.

I love the program and its leaders. The idea behind the program to create a connected group of motivated leaders to help tackle current and future issues is starting to take shape. I look forward to the successful collaborations in the future!

Community Service

The legacy of Ronald H. Brown and the corresponding emphasis of the program on community service reinforced service values among the scholars. Their comments indicate that it fostered a desire to serve others, a sense of responsibility (“to whom much is given, much is expected”), and a heightened awareness of inequality that requires an ethical or just response:

[The Ron Brown Scholar Program] allowed me to focus on serving my community in New York City in a way I didn't think possible. I helped address a critical need for African Americans in New York City, a role that was fulfilling and very much in line with all [that the Ron Brown Scholar Program] has taught me.

I always want to give back, and [the] Ron Brown [Scholar Program] has made this such a central tenant of the program that it continually reminds me and motivates me to serve my community.

Pre-professional service

Scholars who participated in meaningful pre-professional experiences with the assistance of the program found the opportunity helpful in developing their skill set as well as in identifying future goals and interests.

This internship led to other opportunities and now I am completing my MD/PhD. I would not be on this path had it not been for the [Ron Brown Scholar] Program leading me to my first internship.

I interned at the Institute of Human Virology conducting HIV/AIDS research. This opportunity actually helped me realize that I did not want to pursue a career in medical research. [Alternatively,] my internship with the Ron Brown Scholar Program taught me the behind-the-scenes of a non-profit organization and I think it has equipped me with the tools to successfully run my own non-profit.

I traveled with a design/build team from MIT's Department of Architecture. We completed a project where we designed and built a plaza for an elementary school in Perquin, El Salvador.

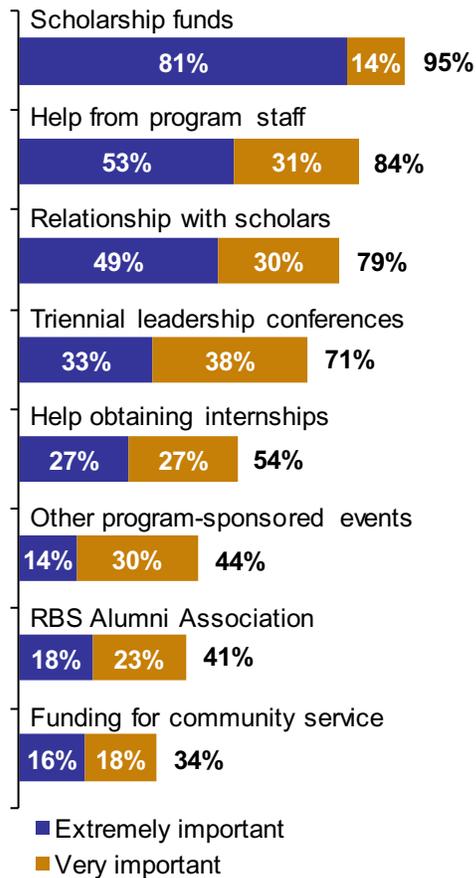
[I] interned at Botswana International Financial Services Centre, won [the] Seltzer Research Award, [and] won [the] JPMorgan Launching Leaders Scholarship and Internship.

Effectiveness of program elements

Scholars found value in all of the program elements, rating scholarship funds and program staff as most valuable, followed closely by their relationships with other scholars.

In addition to reporting on the effectiveness of individual program elements, scholars provided suggestions on how program elements might be strengthened or improved.

SCHOLARS' VIEWS OF IMPORTANCE OF PROGRAM ELEMENTS



Program staff

Scholars had high praise for the program staff, appreciating their extraordinary attention and dedication to the scholars' success and well-being. The staff maintained regular contact with scholars and were accessible to them. Scholars reported that staff were especially helpful in: providing assistance in obtaining internship opportunities; providing academic and career guidance and support; linking them with professionals, mentors, and each other; and providing guidance and support on personal matters.

[Staff] helped me to find my first job out of college; gave me advice on academic and job-related matters; connected me with people in the [Ron Brown Scholar] network (scholars, alumni, friends) who have been helpful with a range of issues with which I needed advice/help.

They have guided me through every academic step I've taken, and they have also supported me through personal issues. The Program staff is my haven for intellectual inspiration, support and personal strength, and encouragement.

Some scholars offered suggestions on how staff might further develop or improve the program. The most frequent suggestions were creating an online database and networking site, doing more to facilitate the mentoring of scholars, and providing more frequent check-ins and updates to scholars. Steps have been taken to respond to these suggestions with the creation of RBSnet, a new online service.

Some scholars mentioned that the staff may be over-extending themselves when it comes to meeting scholars' needs. As the program continues to grow, providing a high level of service to all scholars is quickly becoming an issue of concern. Program staff will likely need to prioritize and delegate responsibilities to members of the program community or hire additional staff in the near future.

Scholars' relationships and mentoring

Most scholars have formed close relationships with multiple other scholars and keep in regular contact with them.

In addition to meeting great professional contacts, I have developed strong friendships that I will cherish for years to come. I also love that the program is about action and collaboration, serving as a vehicle through which we can pool our resources and talents together to achieve a greater good.

Furthermore, most have been mentored informally by another scholar or friend of the program (in addition to being mentored by program staff). About 6 in 10 (62%) scholars reported mentoring at least one other scholar during the past year, and 36 percent have guided or advised two or more scholars during that time. Scholars highly value this mentoring and indicated that they received help in a variety of areas including career planning, internships, graduate school decisions, and leadership opportunities.

Scholars were asked if they had suggestions for improving mentoring or strengthening connections among scholars. Some scholars expressed a desire for a more formal mentoring system with clearer expectations and greater accountability. Others wanted more program-sponsored events that provide opportunities to connect and network with each other.

Program events

Most current and alumni scholars attend program events at least once per year. Over 80 percent of current scholars and about half of the alumni scholars attended the 2008 Triennial Leadership Conference. This triennial event is an opportunity for current and alumni scholars, program staff, friends, and partners of the program to connect, network, learn, and be inspired by each other.

Scholars find program events valuable, especially as opportunities to connect and network with other scholars and members of the Ron Brown Scholar Program community, gain inspiration, and learn about new topics and initiatives.

Re-connecting with Scholars and being inspired about what they are doing/working on. We are now getting to the point where people have significant careers and are able to really start collaborating to make change happen.

Engaging in the series of invigorating lectures, networking with the community of scholars and prominent supporters of the program [were valuable]. I consider everyone involved in the program to be my family.

When asked for suggestions, many scholars recommended more events. Many also suggested having fewer speakers at the triennial leadership conference and more time for interacting and networking, and for discussion sessions. Some scholars also suggested making the conference more appealing to the interests of alumni scholars by diversifying programming or inviting alumni scholars to present or lead sessions.

Alumni Association

Most alumni scholars have attended Alumni Association meetings. They participate in the Association to stay connected with fellow alumni, mentor other scholars, support philanthropic and social causes, and give back to the program.

The number of alumni scholars is already twice that of current scholars, and this group will only continue to grow. To foster life-long connections with scholars, the program may have to give more attention to alumni scholars' unique and varying needs in comparison to those of current scholars. The program staff and the Alumni Association might work together to address this issue.

Community Service Foundation

Most scholars expressed a belief in the importance of community service work, and expressed an interest in doing community service. However, one in five scholars reported that they had not done any community service in the past 12 months, likely falling short of program expectations. The newly-formed Community Service Foundation could be a key resource for helping scholars translate their beliefs and ideas about service into action.

Some suggestions to enhance this new program feature include: increase its visibility; encourage and facilitate collaboration on community service projects; give more assistance in service project design; strengthen the accountability system for funded projects; and provide more information about funded projects to scholars.

Communications and connections

Some scholars expressed a desire for more communication and contact from the program; they want more email check-ins and updates, in-person visits, events, and online opportunities to search for people and pre-professional experiences. A number of scholars indicated a desire to feel more connected to the program and for more opportunities for connecting and networking with each other. Some suggested that further communication and contact from the program and more program-sponsored events with opportunities to network would be helpful.

Ensuring inclusivity

While not a major theme in any area, there seems to be an underlying current regarding the inclusivity of the program. Whether it is in terms of college or university attended, geographical residence, field of study or work, or political affiliation, there is a small group of scholars who perceive that they are not receiving the same level of services or opportunities as the mainstream group. The program should be aware of these concerns and continue to reach out to all scholars.

Conclusion

Overall, the program appears to be very successful. Scholars indicated that it provides them with the support, guidance, and opportunities to achieve ambitious goals. They also offered ideas for improvement or development. Program leaders may want to consider these ideas as the program continues to grow and adapt to meet scholars' changing needs.



CLOSING GAPS: HIGHER EDUCATION, CAREER, AND LEADERSHIP

The Ron Brown Scholar Program has shown remarkable success in helping high-potential African American students, often from low-income families or challenging circumstances, flourish in college and beyond. A distinguishing feature in its success is the strong network of alumni scholars, staff, friends, and partner support to guide scholars' progress through college and into successful careers and leadership positions. Other programs, even those that do not serve such a highly motivated and high-achieving group, might also benefit from support networks, especially programs serving youth who lack resources and connections commonly available to those from more privileged backgrounds.

Elements to consider when developing a support network include:

- Building connections and relationships among network members through regular program events with ample time for networking, plus facilitating electronic communication
- Getting new participants engaged in the network early so that they can gain maximum benefit from it
- Recruiting to the network prominent community members who can help youth access key opportunities and experiences
- Extending participants' access to the network after program participation so that they can continue to benefit from it as well as give back by helping others in the network
- Strongly encouraging successful program alumni to actively participate in the network, serving as role models and mentors to current participants
- Helping participants find other network members like themselves for friendship, support, and pursuing common interests

In addition to the support network, other Ron Brown Scholar Program features that other programs may find beneficial include: exposure to educational and career options; access to pre-professional opportunities and enrichment activities; motivation and inspiration to pursue ambitious goals; reinforcement of key values; and a dedicated staff.

MORE FROM WILDER RESEARCH:

Increasing postsecondary education access and success

Highlights evidence-based practices to raise enrollment and better prepare all students for postsecondary education.

Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative evaluation

This Initiative offers students from diverse, urban backgrounds a quality college education and leadership development, with a goal of also providing colleges with the diverse perspective the students bring to campus. The evaluation includes a framework for return-on-investment.

Power of YOU program evaluation

The Power of YOU aims to increase college enrollment and success of underrepresented students (e.g., low-income, racial/ethnic minorities) who graduated from Minneapolis and Saint Paul public high schools.

Building a data-sharing network of scholarship programs

This report describes how to create a data-sharing network and presents preliminary findings based on data collected in the pilot phase. Using the network's data, researchers hope to find evidence to determine which programs hold the most potential for helping young people from foster care succeed in college.

Find these reports and more:
www.wilderresearch.org

**Wilder
Research**

Information. Insight. Impact.

451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700; FAX 651-280-3700



For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Ron Brown Scholar Program evaluation*. For more information about this report, contact Katie Broton at Wilder Research, 651-280-2678.

Authors: Katie Broton, Dan Mueller
JUNE 2009