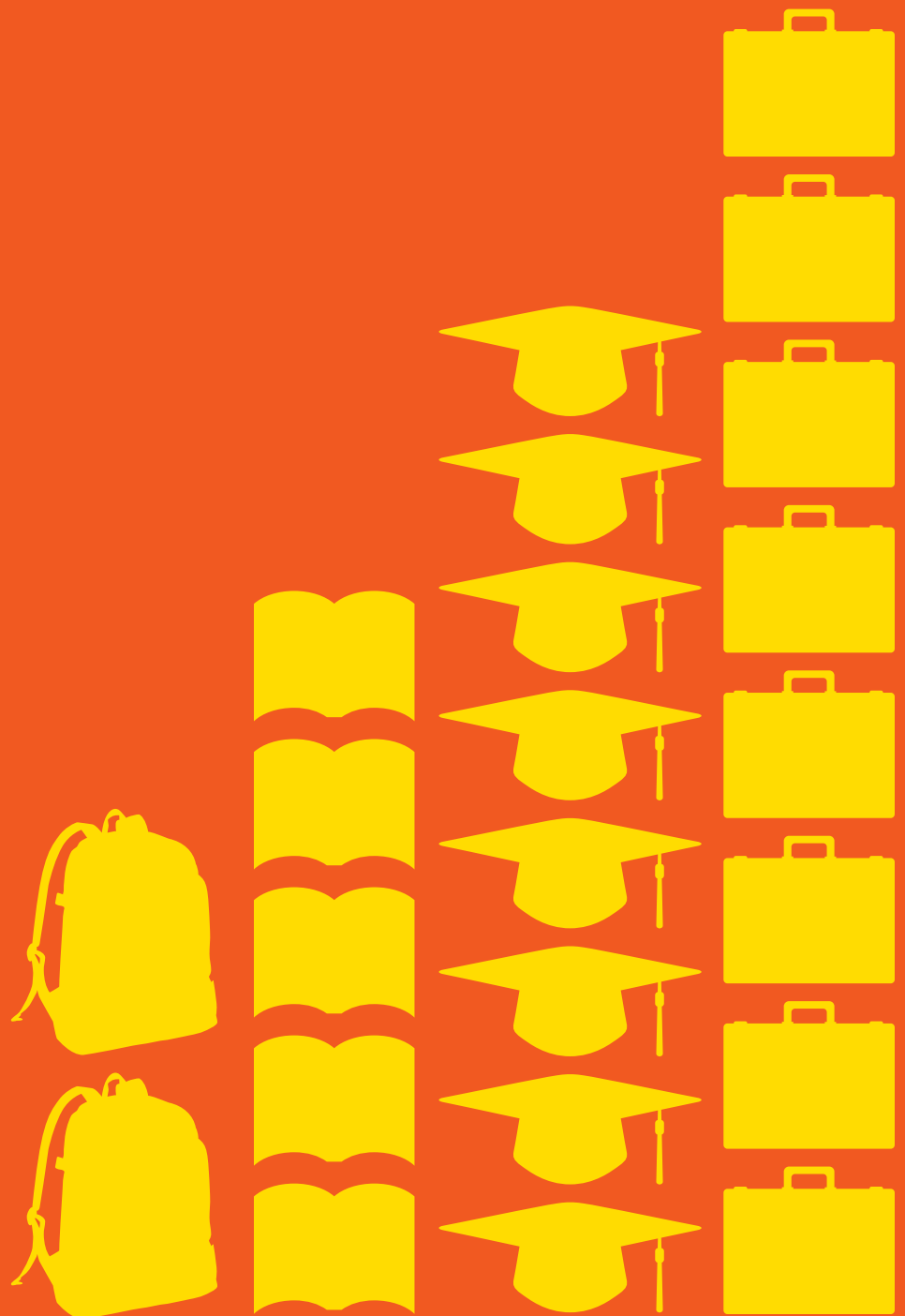


EXPANDING ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY

THE WASHINGTON STATE ACHIEVERS PROGRAM

BY THE INSTITUTE FOR
HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

MARCH
2010



The Institute for Higher Education Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan research organization whose mission is to foster access and success in post-secondary education through public policy research and other activities that inform and influence the policy making process. These activities include policy reports and studies, seminars and meetings, and capacity-building activities such as strategic planning. The primary audiences of the Institute are those who make or inform decisions about higher education: government policy makers, senior institutional leaders, researchers, funders, the media, and private sector leaders. For further information, please contact:



INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY
1320 19th Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036

202 861 8223 **TELEPHONE**
202 861 9307 **FACSIMILE**
www.ihep.org **WEB**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	02
INTRODUCTION	04
The Washington State Achievers Program	04
Becoming an Achiever	05
Program Components	06
Early College Awareness	06
Achievers High Schools and School Reform	06
Scholarships	06
Achievers College Experience	07
Mentoring	07
ACHIEVERS' CHARACTERISTICS	08
Demographic Background	08
MAJOR RESEARCH FINDINGS	10
Academic Preparation	10
Enrollment and Persistence	11
Financial Support and Loans	14
Mentoring Component	15
Overall Student Experience	15
Achievers after Graduation	16
CONCLUSION	18
PARTICIPATING RESEARCHERS	20

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS This report was prepared for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), and was written by Research Project Manager Jennifer Ramsey and former Research Intern Laura Gorgol. Additional content review and editing was provided at IHEP by Alisa Federico Cunningham, vice president of research and programs; Gregory Kienzl, Ph.D., director of research and evaluation; Tia T. Gordon, communications and marketing consultant; Anne Bowles, policy and outreach associate; and Katya Narozhnaya, graduate fellow. We would also like to acknowledge comments provided by Margaret Tyler, senior program officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; and Lorraine Solaegui, director of research and evaluation at the College Success Foundation.

The opinions and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

01 Throughout this report, the term "non-recipients" refers to students who applied for but did not receive the Achievers scholarship.

The Washington State Achievers (WSA) program is a unique partnership established in 2001 between the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the College Success Foundation, and 16 high schools throughout Washington State. Its mission is to prepare more students, particularly low-income students who are vulnerable to postsecondary barriers, for the academic, social, and financial aspects of postsecondary education. The partners use high school redesign, mentoring, and scholarships to achieve these goals. Research on the program shows some promise in improving outcomes, though some areas still have room for improvement. Specific outcomes are as follows:

Academic Preparation

- In 2006, after the high school reforms had been completed, the percentage of students graduating from Achievers high schools with the necessary courses to enter a four-year Washington State institution was higher than the number at comparison schools.
- Achievers were more likely to have taken International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), and college preparatory courses.
- Despite taking higher-level coursework, almost half the Achievers in cohort 5 still needed remedial coursework. However, they were less likely than non-recipients¹ to still be in remedial education in their second year of college.

Enrollment, Persistence, and Completion

- Achievers had higher enrollment rates than both non-recipients and students from the highest income brackets. Their persistence rates for the second semester were also higher than those of non-recipients, and only slightly lower than those of students from the highest income brackets.
- Achievers were much more likely to enroll in four-year institutions directly. Several Achievers enrolled directly in two-year institutions and typically had lower levels of academic preparation.
- Among Achievers beginning at four-year institutions, the college graduation rate was higher than the national average.

Financial Support

- Achievers received larger amounts of grant aid than non-recipients. Some of the difference can be explained by the higher costs associated with the institutions attended, but that does not account for the entire amount.
- Achievers graduated with less loan debt than non-recipients. Though they had less loan debt than the average student, most Achievers took out loans despite the expectation that the scholarship would cover the cost of their education.
- Despite high educational aspirations, Achievers were unlikely to have entered graduate school immediately upon receipt of their bachelor's degree. However, those who did were very likely to enter their first-choice program.

WSA's earliest results show promise in improving opportunities for low-income students and demonstrate that ability cannot always be measured purely by traditional academic tests. As future cohorts move through the educational pipeline, research to highlight aspects of the comprehensive program will further define the success of WSA. With the current national interest in finding innovative programs that show results, this is the perfect opportunity to invest in and assess programs such as WSA.

Mentoring

- Achievers reported that their mentors were very important to their ability to navigate the college atmosphere; mentors were particularly important for students who began at two-year institutions.
- However, not all students reported having a mentor, even though mentors are a key component of WSA.

After Graduation

- Two-thirds of Achievers who graduated from college and entered the workforce reported being satisfied with their job, and more than one-third made an annual income over \$30,000.



INTRODUCTION

In 2001, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched a 10-year, multi-million dollar initiative, the Washington State Achievers Program (WSA), to increase opportunities for low-income students to attend postsecondary institutions in Washington State. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation granted funds to the College Success Foundation (CSF), formerly the Washington Education Foundation, to execute a multifaceted strategy to address both the academic and financial barriers to postsecondary education and increase the numbers of students entering postsecondary education.

The program targeted 16 high schools in Washington that had large populations of low-income students. In addition to providing scholarships for students, the schools implemented school-level reforms by adjusting the curriculum to match the requirements for entrance to a four-year institution and creating smaller school communities. Each year, approximately 500 high school students (hereafter referred to as Achievers) were expected to receive financial support, one-on-one mentoring, and other assistance. To date, more than 5,000 students have received scholarships from the WSA program; by the program's end in 2016, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will have contributed nearly \$128.6 million in scholarship and school reform funding.

The WSA program has four primary goals:

- To encourage school redesign that facilitates high academic achievement and increased college enrollment among all students at the selected high schools;
- To identify and reduce financial barriers to college for

talented, low-income students who have overcome difficult circumstances and who are motivated to attend college;

- To provide mentoring to ensure that academic support is available to students once they are enrolled in college; and
- To develop a diverse cadre of college-educated citizens and leaders in Washington.

By establishing WSA, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation responded to critical problems of low postsecondary enrollment, insufficient college preparation, and lack of affordability.

THE WASHINGTON STATE ACHIEVERS PROGRAM

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's national report card, *Measuring Up 2006*, graded postsecondary education in Washington unfavorably. For example,



“WSA uses interventions that touch on all barriers low-income students encounter in their efforts to access and persist toward a baccalaureate degree.”

02 The first cohort of students (cohort 1) applied for the scholarship as seniors. They applied at the same time as the cohort 2 students, who applied as juniors.

03 Financial eligibility is based on family size and accounts for family assets such as business ownership and farm assets; the eligibility formula does not include home ownership or retirement assets. The income scale does take into account personal family circumstances such as the number of siblings in college and extenuating circumstances such as health issues, divorce, or death in the family.

over the past 10 years, the percentage of Washington students who earned high school diplomas has actually decreased. While college enrollment of young adults has improved slightly since the early 1990s, the state still enrolls substantially fewer students (29 percent) than the national average (34 percent). Furthermore, compared with top-performing states, students and families in Washington devote a larger share of family income (even after financial aid) to attend public two- and four-year institutions, which enroll more than 88 percent of Washington students. To address these problems, WSA has a dual focus of school reform and financial aid to both prepare students for college and reduce the costs of postsecondary education.

WSA uses interventions that touch on all barriers low-income students encounter in their efforts to access and persist toward a baccalaureate degree. The program continues to transform; as staff members identify new needs, additional programs are put in place to address them. In the early stages of the program, the high schools focused on reforming their structure and curriculum to ensure that all students were prepared to enter college upon graduation. Methods used included decreasing class size, creating a personalized learning environment, and adjusting teaching styles and curricular requirements.

Students meeting the income requirement had the opportunity to apply for the scholarship during their junior year.² Selected students were then assigned mentors in both high school and college to help them navigate the entire college-going process. In the third year of the program,

WSA created the Achievers College Experience (ACE) to further increase Achievers' knowledge about the college-going process. The following year, an additional component was added to provide early college awareness to middle school students in schools that feed into Achievers high schools. Overall, the original intention of providing school restructuring, scholarships, and mentoring continues to evolve to meet the needs of the students served.

Becoming an Achiever

To become Achievers, eligible low-income students must attend one of the participating high schools. Additionally, they must:

- Be actively working to prepare academically through a commitment to classroom work and assignments for admission to a postsecondary institution;
- Plan to obtain a bachelor's degree;
- Plan to attend an eligible public or independent college or university in Washington for at least the first two years of college; and
- Be from families who have and will continue to have an annual income level that is in the lowest third of the state's family income levels and has low or modest family assets.³

Interested students submit written applications that include personal essays and teacher recommendations. Evaluators read the applications and base their overall scores on noncognitive criteria (responses to life experiences, rigor of curriculum, and future goals). Selected applicants then participate in a day-long workshop with group and individual interviews. The students' interactions are observed and

FIGURE 1 LOCATION OF THE PARTICIPATING WSA HIGH SCHOOLS



★ LOCATION OF WSA HIGH SCHOOLS

SOURCE: KIENZL 2007

04 Named the Bial-Dale College Adaptability Index, the system utilizes large and small group activities and interviews to select students. The evaluators seek out students who are adept at facilitating discussion, mediating different points of view, and can take an idea, develop an action plan, and implement it.

analyzed using a system developed by Deborah Bial, the president and founder of the Posse Foundation.⁴

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

Early College Awareness

Middle school is a critical time to increase student awareness about and preparation for college. Recognizing this need, CSF added an early college awareness curriculum as a “bridge” for the WSA program. The program uses several strategies, including federal GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) funding, to support additional staff for college-preparatory programming to enhance college-going and success.

Another pipeline program, the Higher Education Readiness Opportunities (HERO) program, targets male students, particularly those of color. Established in 2005, the program aims to improve the academic motivation of these students by helping them develop strong study skills and take advantage of all available resources, such as tutoring. The program also uses peer groups to motivate students and increase educational expectations. Early college awareness programs such as these are important interventions for students to raise educational aspirations and college knowledge among students.

Achievers High Schools and School Reform

As noted earlier, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation selected 16 high schools that serve large numbers of low-income students to receive funding (FIGURE 1.) These schools received funding to convert into small learning communities of fewer than 400 students. High schools already serving fewer than 400 students implemented other structural reforms. The curriculum was also redeveloped to align with college entrance requirements. In addition to the physical and academic restructuring of the schools, the WSA program changed expectations of teachers. Teachers now focus on engaging students in an active learning process and providing regular and personalized assessments of each student. Most importantly, teachers are expected to challenge all students to perform at their highest level by encouraging enrollment in a challenging curriculum and college-level classes such as Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB).

Scholarships

The WSA scholarship component addresses financial need and provides early guarantees for students. The support provides funding for approximately 500 students each year and covers all tuition and fees at public institutions in state or a considerable amount toward the cost of a private university. Achievers are required to stay in state for college

05 Cohort 3 was the first to participate in ACE.

for the first two years after which they can use their award for an out of state university. The award is a last-dollar scholarship, meaning that each amount is granted after all other scholarship and grant monies are considered. The scholarship eliminated the college financial needs of most students. Students who achieve certain program milestones (i.e., earning passing grades and attending program activities) receive financial support for up to five years at an institution in Washington. This guarantee removes financial worry for students and allows selected high school juniors to begin their college application process without concern over possible financial barriers.

Achievers College Experience

Achievers College Experience (ACE) is a four-day summer workshop on a college campus for Achievers prior to their senior year of high school.⁵ ACE provides Achievers with the information and resources they will need to be successful seniors in high school and make the transition to college. Examples of topics covered in ACE workshops include college admissions, paying for college, and how best to use the mentoring components of the WSA program. Additionally, ACE provides Achievers with opportunities to interact with their peer counselors (current college students) in discussions on the counselors' experiences at college. Achievers also have the opportunity to attend a College Resource Fair to gather information and talk with admissions staff from four-year colleges and universities across Washington. ACE increases college awareness by providing information and resources while allowing students to experience life on a college campus.

Mentoring

One of the stated goals of WSA is to support students and ensure their preparation for college and the workforce. To achieve this goal, Achievers are assigned a hometown mentor both in high school and a college mentor for the first two years of college. Hometown mentors are adults from Achievers' local communities who value higher education and take an active role in supporting the success of youth. They provide a vital service to newly selected Achievers by encouraging them to view a college degree as a realistic, achievable goal. Hometown mentors are matched during the spring of the Achiever's junior year in high school. Achievers spend time with their mentors at monthly meetings, activities, and workshops designed to share information about admissions and financial aid. This mentoring relationship continues through the first two months of college.

During their first two years of college, Achievers participate in the College Mentor program on their respective campuses. Achievers are matched with upper class student mentors selected by CSF and are expected to meet with them monthly. These meetings help Achievers to ease the transition to college, with specific focus on campus culture and mission. College mentors also encourage Achievers to become involved in many different aspects of student life and leadership. Both the high school and college mentors provide Achievers with the knowledge and support important to entering and persisting in postsecondary education.

ACHIEVERS' CHARACTERISTICS

DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Achievers are a diverse group. Demographic data collected from Achievers paint a distinct picture of the program's participants. The racial/ethnic breakdown of Achievers is more diverse than other college students in Washington. For example, only 24 percent of students who enroll in a Washington college are a racial/ethnic minority, but two-thirds of Achievers are non-White (FIGURE 2.) Furthermore, approximately half of Achievers are first-generation college students.

When developing WSA, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation targeted schools with a high prevalence of low-income students and families, which is commonly measured by the percentage of students who participate in the federal free and reduced lunch program. In the WSA program, the percentage of students who received a free or reduced lunch ranged across schools from 30 percent at Stevenson High School to 83 percent at Mabton High School (TABLE 1.) The median family income for Achievers was \$25,284 for a family of four.



“The racial/ethnic breakdown of Achievers is more diverse than other college students in Washington.”

FIGURE 2 RACE/ETHNICITY OF ACHIEVERS IN THE FIRST FIVE COHORTS

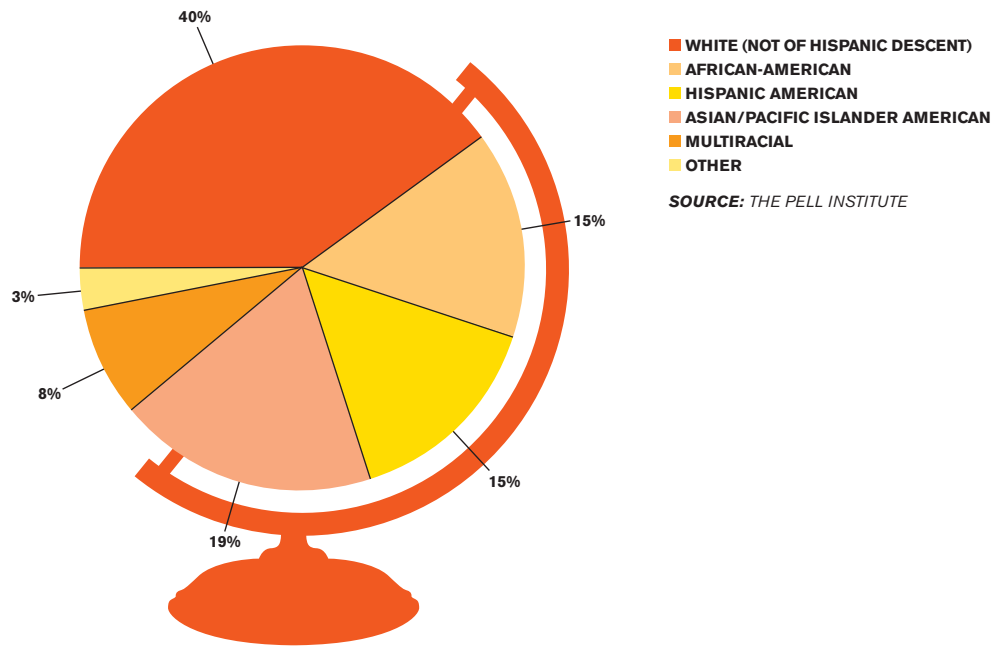


TABLE 1 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS RECEIVING FREE AND REDUCED LUNCH AT PARTICIPATING HIGH SCHOOLS

SOURCE: Common Core of Data 2001

HIGH SCHOOL	FREE AND REDUCED LUNCH
CLEVELAND HIGH SCHOOL	54%
CLOVER PARK HIGH SCHOOL	39%
DAVIS HIGH SCHOOL	40%
FOSS HIGH SCHOOL	36%
FOSTER HIGH SCHOOL	42%
KENT-MERIDIAN HIGH SCHOOL	38%
KITTITAS HIGH SCHOOL	37%
LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL	49%
MABTON HIGH SCHOOL	83%
MARINER HIGH SCHOOL	36%
MOUNT TAHOMA HIGH SCHOOL	47%
STEVENSON HIGH SCHOOL	30%
TONASKET HIGH SCHOOL	53%
TRUMAN HIGH SCHOOL	35%
WEST VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL	30%
YELM HIGH SCHOOL	31%

MAJOR RESEARCH FINDINGS

06 The surveys for cohort 1 did not track non-recipients.

07 The baseline survey occurs during the Achievers' first year after high school. The next follow-up survey occurs three years after the baseline survey, the second follow-up six years after the baseline, the third follow-up eight years after the baseline, and the fourth and final follow-up survey 13 years after high school graduation.

08 For a list of the participating researchers, see Appendix A.

09 An earlier report, *Expanding Access and Opportunity: The Washington State Achievers Scholarship*, can be found at <http://www.pellinstitute.org>.

10 Because these cohorts were at different stages in the survey design, and the surveys had changed as the program saw additional need, not all of the responses are comparable across cohorts. This report notes which cohorts are used for each research question. Also note that the dataset for cohort 1 did not include any non-recipients.

To understand the effects of the program and to further develop CSF's goal of meeting students' changing needs, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation commissions regular research and assessment of the program. The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago was contracted to conduct longitudinal studies of select cohorts in the WSA program. The surveys tracked Achievers and non-recipients with the latter serving as the comparison group.⁶ The research design was created to survey students at five time points, the last occurring approximately 13 years after high school graduation.⁷ The NORC data provide descriptive findings of the lives and experiences of the Achievers and non-recipients.

In addition to descriptive analyses, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation asked respected higher education researchers to perform rigorous statistical testing to illuminate the relationship between participation in the WSA program and the program's desired outcomes. Other researchers conducted interviews and focus groups to gain further insight into the Achievers' experiences and observations. These interviews provide important qualitative data to highlight Achievers' perceptions about the effects of the scholarship on their education.⁸

This report summarizes and synthesizes the latest research conducted on the WSA program by the individuals and organizations mentioned above.⁹ The report focuses specifically on Achievers who graduated high school in the spring of 2000, 2002, and 2004 (cohorts 1, 3, and 5, respectively). Each cohort was surveyed

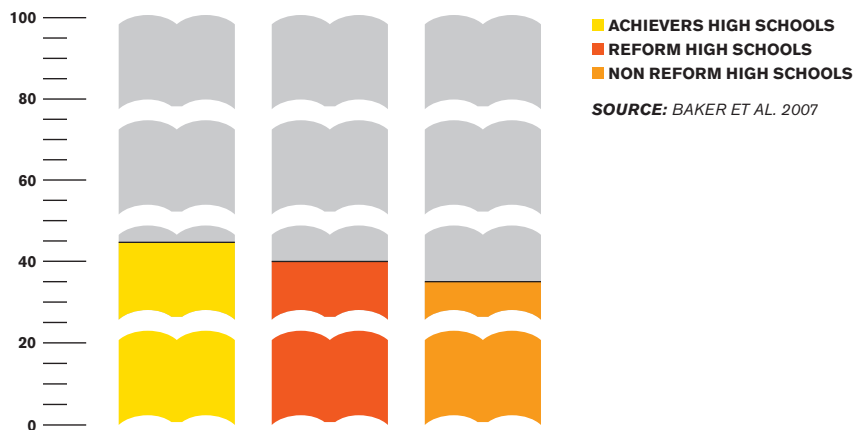
using the longitudinal design referenced in footnote 9, so none of the cohorts are at the same point in their college career. Students in cohort 1 were interviewed five years after high school; cohort 3, three years after; and cohort 5, one year after.¹⁰

ACADEMIC PREPARATION

WSA has a positive influence on students' academic preparation as Achievers take more rigorous courses.

Despite high odds, 45 percent of students at Achievers high schools met the admissions requirements to enroll at a four-year college in Washington. In comparison, 40 percent of students at non-WSA schools undergoing some type of reform met those requirements, and 35 percent of students from schools that did not undergo any type of reform did so (FIGURE 3.)

FIGURE 3 PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES MEETING COURSE REQUIREMENTS FOR ADMISSION TO A WASHINGTON STATE FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTION



11 Because of these findings, CSF implemented new interventions to address the continued need for remedial education. Now, students who are selected for the scholarship take an initial assessment, and those who test below grade level are funded to take summer courses to enhance their academic skills.

Taking more rigorous coursework during high school has been shown to affect a student's success in college, and the case for the Achievers is no different. Achievers in cohort 5 were more likely to report that they received college prep and had taken more AP exams and IB classes than non-recipients. Forty-one percent of Achievers had taken at least one AP exam and 33 percent had taken three or more exams. Almost a quarter of Achievers received AP credit at their college or university. They also took more math classes than non-recipients, even though both groups benefited from the high school reforms initiated by the WSA program. Each additional college awareness course taken increased the odds of ever having enrolled in college by 45 percent for Achievers. For each additional IB course, Achievers were more than three times as likely to enroll in postsecondary education, and each additional math course increased the odds by 55 percent.

Even though Achievers take more rigorous coursework, some still needed to take remedial courses, particularly math, upon entering postsecondary education. In fact, for cohort 5, the incidence of remedial education for Achievers in their first year of college was similar to that of non-recipients. However, by their second year, Achievers were taking fewer remedial courses than non-recipients,

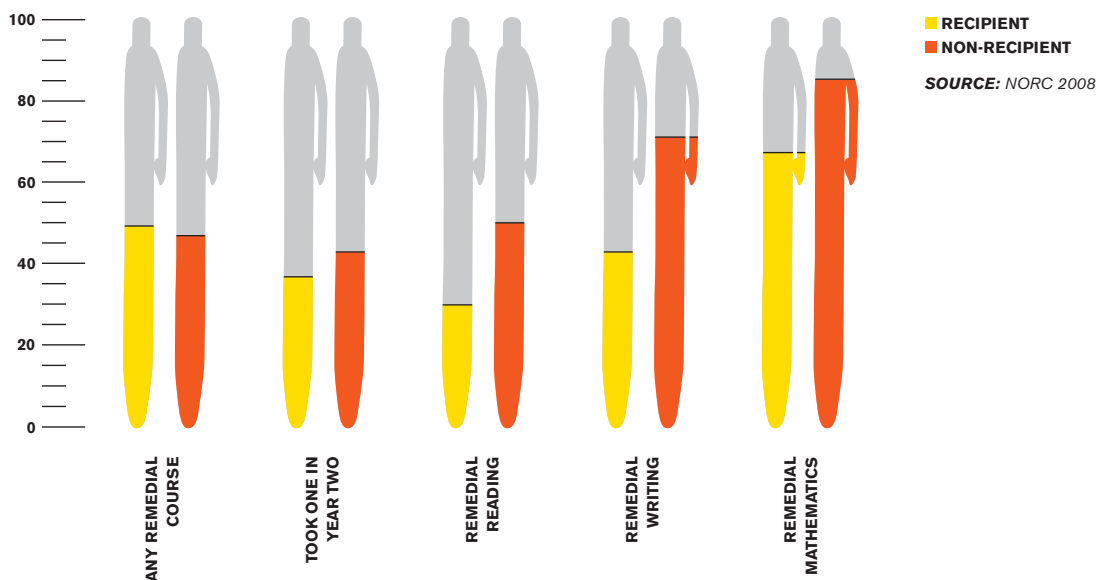
suggesting that they needed less total remediation. Almost half of the Achievers in cohort 5 reported taking at least one remedial course in college. Nearly one-third took a remedial reading course, 43 percent took a remedial writing course, and two-thirds took remedial mathematics courses (FIGURE 4).¹¹

ENROLLMENT AND PERSISTENCE

Students awarded the WSA scholarship are more likely to enroll and persist in college.

For cohort 5, receipt of the WSA scholarship had a positive effect on students' college-going rates. Ninety-seven percent of the Achievers enrolled in a postsecondary institution, compared with 71 percent of non-recipients. Furthermore, 86 percent of Achievers were still enrolled in college whereas less than half of non-recipients were still enrolled after their first year of college. Of those still enrolled, 66 percent of Achievers were in four-year institutions while only 17 percent of non-recipients were; the other students were in two-year institutions. In fact, receipt of the scholarship made students 14 times more likely to have ever enrolled in postsecondary education compared with their non-recipient peers. Furthermore, Achievers had enrollment rates higher than the national average for those in the highest income brackets. These

FIGURE 4 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WITH A NEED FOR REMEDIATION AMONG ACHIEVERS AND NON-RECIPIENTS IN COHORT 5



12 The measure of selectivity is based on ACT scores.

results reveal how reducing or eliminating the financial barriers to college can significantly improve educational access. However, academic preparation continues to affect students' persistence once in school.

Along with higher enrollment rates, Achievers were more likely to enroll in four-year colleges and universities. In cohort 5, nearly 56 percent enrolled in highly selective institutions¹² compared with 35 percent of non-recipients. In cohort 5, Achievers were 2.5 times more likely to attend a highly selective college or university than non-recipients.

The connection between school reform and enrollment in selective postsecondary institutions is also important. For example, Achievers in cohort 5 who reported taking college preparation courses were more than four times more likely to attend a highly selective institution than non-recipients. Non-recipients were more likely to enroll in moderately selective colleges or inclusive colleges, though the effect of college preparatory courses is lessened, with only IB courses affecting non-recipient enrollment in selective institutions.

Although WSA addresses financial and academic barriers for Achievers, some students enter a two-year institution after high school.

As stated above, Achievers as a whole were more likely than non-recipients to attend a four-year institution than a two-year college. However, some Achievers still elected to attend community colleges. There were no significant differences in the background characteristics of students who attended two-year institutions and those who attended four-year institutions while differences were observed in the degree of academic preparation. The students who attended four-year colleges took a larger number of advanced courses, had higher educational aspirations, and scored higher on the noncognitive assessment. Many of these differences can be attributed to middle and high school preparation.

13 Recently attained data demonstrate a higher degree attainment rate than reported using the NORC dataset. The College Success Foundation reports that 41 percent of cohort 1 Achievers starting at two-year institutions received a bachelor's degree in five years

BOX 1 THE OUTCOMES OF ACHIEVERS WHO STARTED AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Entering a two-year institution continues to be of concern in the effort to increase the number of baccalaureate degrees granted each year. While such institutions serve a meaningful purpose in reaching disadvantaged students, they continue to have less-than-desirable transfer rates. Studies often cite financial barriers and lack of student support as reasons why students do not transfer to four-year institutions.

Achievers who enter community colleges have somewhat higher transfer rates than the national average and nearly double the overall transfer rate of Washington students. Fifty percent of those who initially entered a two-year institution transferred within five years; the highest estimated national average is only 38 percent. In cohort 1, one-third of Achievers received an associate's degree within five years after graduation, and 29 percent graduated with a bachelor's degree.¹³

The Achievers are receiving full financial assistance, which should remove the financial barrier, but they still struggle to complete a four-year degree.

Because the program funds students for only five years and students may take several years to transfer to a four-year institution, Achievers may enter four-year institutions after their funding has ended. Suddenly, these students are faced with paying an average of \$6,000 a year to complete their degree when they had not been paying any out-of-pocket costs until that point.

WSA expects each Achiever to plan for a four-year degree, and almost all of them reported that they expected to earn at least a bachelor's degree. However, the allowance for students to enter a two-year institution initially is an unexpected barrier to that goal. On the positive side, the number of Achievers entering two-year institutions continues to decrease each year. The program has adjusted its interventions to address the academic preparedness of Achievers so that they are better prepared and qualified to enter a four-year institution directly out of high school.

FIGURE 5 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS INITIALLY ENTERING A FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTION HAVING GRADUATED IN SIX YEARS



¹⁴ This sentence refers to a select group of Achievers and non-recipients who had similar scores—near the cutoff point—on the noncognitive selection criteria.

¹⁵ This statement also refers to students closest to the noncognitive cutoff point.

Achievers graduate from college at higher rates and with solid academic grades.

In cohort 1, one-third of the Achievers who began at four-year institutions graduated on time. Moreover, the six-year graduation rate of Achievers was 69. percent, six percentage points higher than the national six-year graduation rate. Cohort 1 Achievers graduated with an average grade point average (GPA) of 3.20, which is higher than a B average. This demonstrates their strong academic achievements in college, even though some entered college with lower high school GPAs and needed remediation.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND LOANS

Achievers receive generous scholarships.

Only low-income students are eligible for the Achievers' scholarship, and the WSA program offers them considerable financial support. The financial award is expected to greatly impact the experiences of these students before, during, and after college. WSA scholarships provided Achievers in cohort 5, on average, \$5,853 of support in their freshman year of college; the median grant aid was \$6,532. Three-quarters of Achievers in cohort 1 received Pell Grants in addition to WSA scholarships. When comparing only students with a similar likelihood of receiving the scholarship, there was a significant difference in total grant

aid, which includes WSA money as well as other grants and scholarships.¹⁴ The average total amount received by Achievers in cohort 5 was \$11,369 for freshmen, while the average amount for non-recipients was \$2,419, a difference of nearly \$9,000. However, it is important to note that Achievers often attend institutions that are more expensive than non-recipients, which requires the WSA program to provide more grant aid to those students. Achievers attend colleges and universities with average yearly costs of \$13,398 versus \$7,602 for non-recipients, a difference of approximately \$5,800.

Receipt of the WSA scholarship lowers the average amount of student loan debt.

As expected, Achievers in cohort 5 had approximately \$4,500 less in loans after their freshman year compared with non-recipients.¹⁵ The concern over loans is a reality for many of these students. As one student stated, "I would've been taking out tens of thousands of dollars worth of loans every single year here. There's no way I would've been able to be here at all!" This finding demonstrates the importance of financial support from the WSA program in decreasing financial barriers to college. After graduation, Achievers also had considerably less student loan debt compared with the national average of \$23,186. Two years after graduation, more than 35 percent of

16 Achievers are also able to transfer to out-of-state institutions once they attain junior standing, but the financial support is capped at the maximum rate for attendance at a private institution in Washington State.

Achievers from cohort 1 had no student loan debt, and 72 percent had student loan debt of \$10,000 or less.

It is surprising that Achievers continue to take out loans during their undergraduate education. In fact, more than one-quarter had loan amounts greater than \$10,000. When asked why they took out loans, Achievers reported that the loans were for additional expenses such as books and supplies, room and board, extracurricular activities, or contributions to their family. Some Achievers may have opted to attend an out-of-state institution (which is not funded by the program) or a private institution, whose tuition was higher than the grant amounts allowed under the program.¹⁶ Though some circumstances may require a student to take out additional loans, this practice was discouraged. For every additional \$1,000 in loans students took out, they were 1 percent less likely to persist to year three than their peers who did not take additional loans; the quarter of Achievers who took out loans greater than \$10,000 were 10 percent less likely to persist. However, most Achievers graduated with little or no debt, which is regarded as a factor in both persistence and attainment.

MENTORING COMPONENT

Achievers do not always report having either a hometown mentor or a college mentor.

As part of the WSA program, students were supposed to be placed with mentors in high school as well as at college. This program component helps students understand the

requirements and procedures for college admission and adjust to the college atmosphere. However, not all Achievers reported having an assigned mentor in high school or college. One Achiever said that the mentoring component held the most value, though she did not have an official mentor. It is not clear why that would be during high school, but there are understandable reasons why they might not have a mentor in college. Some Achievers may have selected a private college, so they would not have been assigned a mentor. However, 78 percent of those eligible (i.e. attending a public institution in Washington state) did say they had an assigned mentor their first year of college with 81 percent reporting that they had a hometown mentor. Other Achievers might not have been aware of who their campus mentors were.

A majority of Achievers report positive experiences with their mentors.

Nearly three-quarters of cohort 5 Achievers placed some importance on their mentors. Almost half reported that their hometown mentor was very helpful in the college selection and admission process. However, Achievers had different experiences with their mentors based on type of institution. Achievers who initially entered a two-year institution more often reported that the mentors provided important support in comparison to Achievers who entered four-year institutions. Two-year institutions often lack the support services important to low-income and first-generation college students, a gap the mentors filled.



“Now that we have our college paid for, we’re able to put our time and money into other things, like volunteering.”

OVERALL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Lifting the financial burden to college is expected to offer students increased opportunities to engage in campus activities such as academic endeavors, social activities, community engagement, and leadership opportunities. Part of WSA’s mission is to shape Achievers into active student leaders. With a decreased need to earn money during college, Achievers who have already demonstrated an interest in community service are likely to have more time to be active in college life and to demonstrate higher levels of commitment to leadership, especially in their communities. As one Achiever noted, “Now that we have our college paid for, we’re able to put our time and money into other things, like volunteering.”

Nonetheless, Achievers continued to work despite the financial contributions of the WSA program. Fifty-nine percent of cohort 1 Achievers and 46 percent of cohort 3 Achievers worked for pay, but they worked fewer hours per week than non-recipients who worked. Even so, Achievers were more likely than non-recipients to be involved in extracurricular activities during college. This difference was largely due to Achievers’ participation in college athletics—intramural or varsity level—and in the performing arts. In other areas, the scholarship did not appear to affect student engagement.

ACHIEVERS AFTER GRADUATION

Postgraduation, Achievers gain employment.

Nearly all cohort 1 Achievers (95 percent) who did not immediately attend graduate school worked for pay after leaving college. Nearly 36 percent of them have earned more than \$30,000 annually, and two-thirds reported being satisfied with their jobs. In particular, Achievers were satisfied with benefits such as health insurance, paid vacation, and paid sick leave. When reflecting on why they made their career choice, Achievers reported that the ability to make a contribution to society was the most important factor.

Few Achievers immediately act on their high educational aspirations.

Though Achievers reported high educational aspirations and graduated with a lower debt burden than the national average, few applied for graduate school immediately. Only 13 percent of cohort 1 Achievers applied to graduate school within two years of college graduation. Two-thirds of those who applied were accepted into their first-choice graduate program, and more than one-third enrolled. The majority of those in graduate school are seeking a master’s degree, 22 percent are seeking a professional degree (e.g., J.D., M.D.), and 5 percent are seeking a doctoral degree (Ph.D. or Ed.D.).

Achievers are slightly more inclined than their peers to put emphasis on elections.

The program uses criteria to select students who exhibit leadership skills and a commitment to their community.

These criteria are expected to translate into Achievers continuing their active community involvement after college. Compared with non-recipients, Achievers demonstrated an interest in exercising their civic duty by engaging in both national and local elections.

Three-quarters of Achievers in cohort 1 were registered to vote, and 55 percent of all Achievers voted in the 2004 national election. For 18- to 24-year-olds nationally, only 51 percent are registered and 42 percent voted in the 2004 national election. Compared with their peers nationally who have some college education, however, Achievers were more likely to register to vote, but they were only equally likely to have voted in an election; 67 percent of the comparison group reported being registered to vote while 54 percent reported voting in the 2004 election. Achievers also reported being active in local and regional elections; 35 percent voted in either a local or state election in 2006. Such numbers demonstrate an active engagement with the electoral process and hold promise in motivating their peers to become more active.

Beyond college, Achievers remain active in their communities.

Along with being engaged in the electoral process, Achievers were active in their communities in other ways after graduation. Approximately a year after graduation, Achievers were more likely than non-recipients to report giving back to their communities, another goal of the WSA

program. Approximately half of the Achievers from cohort 1 participated in service activities. Twenty-eight percent reported spending 10 or more hours per month engaged in service activities. Even more surprising is the number of Achievers already reporting leadership positions in organizations; nearly 12 percent reported holding a leadership position in a cultural or religious group. Their community involvement included working with youth and mentoring and volunteering with neighborhood improvement organizations, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and hospitals.

Mentoring deserves particular attention as it is an important component of the WSA program. After graduation, several Achievers reported becoming mentors to students in their communities. Nineteen percent of Achievers mentored K–12 students; an additional 20 percent mentored college students. The continued engagement with WSA is also noteworthy. Some Achievers chose to mentor and serve in the WSA program; nearly 23 percent of Achievers from cohort 1 interacted with current Achievers. Not only does this finding speak to the Achievers' commitment to their communities, it also demonstrates an affinity for the program, as those with negative experiences would be unlikely to continue to engage with it after graduation. This finding shows that Achievers are active, engaged citizens and continue to support other Achievers even after they are no longer financially supported by the program.



CONCLUSION

The WSA program was formed to provide financial support to low-income students in selected schools with a high percentage of underprivileged students. While this aspect is often emphasized and may be the most visible piece of the program, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation had additional goals in mind. The foundation wanted to create a comprehensive program that would provide support to all students in those schools, not just the scholarship recipients. Though the final cohort of Achievers entered college this fall, CSF continues to improve the program's components. Current and ongoing research will provide CSF and the foundation with more information about where further improvements can be made.

It is clear from the earliest research that the Achievers have positive outcomes compared with non-recipients. Their outcomes put them on par with students from the highest socio-economic quartile nationally. They had fewer financial concerns, were more likely to attend selective institutions, and were actively engaged in their local and national communities after graduation.

During high school, Achievers reported taking more college preparatory classes and receiving additional support that enabled them to attend college. Taking more rigorous high school coursework is positively correlated with better postsecondary outcomes. To this point, Achievers took more AP and IB classes than non-recipients. Furthermore, the school reform process appeared to benefit all students in the schools, because the number of students who had taken the courses necessary for entry into a four-year

college continued to increase as schools implemented the reforms. On the other hand, almost half of the Achievers still needed remedial coursework upon entering college.

While in college, Achievers reported being more academically and civically engaged than their peers. This level of engagement stemmed from working fewer hours or not working at all, which afforded Achievers the opportunity to spend time on other activities.

Achievers also persisted and graduated at much higher rates than other low-income, minority students. After graduation, they still had high educational aspirations, but few immediately entered graduate school. The majority entered the workforce. After graduation, they remained active in their communities as leaders and mentors. Several reported remaining active with the Achievers' alumni program in varying capacities.

Some areas still need improvement or additional research in order to explain the various interactions. Despite Achievers high schools moving more toward a college-ready curriculum, students continued to enter college without the necessary skills for college-level coursework. Many Achievers needed to take remedial courses in college, which may delay their graduation past the length of the scholarship. CSF noted this trend and implemented a program to determine Achievers' skill levels and provide intensive academic support to those who need it. Because the program is still in its early stages, no research is available to assess its effectiveness. Future research should address this gap.

Another aspect of the program that has not been the subject of extensive exploration is the mentoring component. There is very little research on the effects of the hometown mentor portion, and even less on the college mentors. As mentoring is a key component of the WSA program, additional research is warranted to understand the specific supports mentors provide and to determine their effectiveness in reaching the most disadvantaged students. Furthermore, there were several students who reported not having a mentor, which is an area that requires more research. The program has continued to push the mentoring component forward, but it is important to understand whether that trend is continuing.

Finally, there is a dearth of research on what happens in the students' lives after graduation. It is surprising that with

such high educational aspirations, few students actually entered graduate school upon receipt of their bachelor's degree. There are many possible reasons for this finding—lack of financial means, desire to gain work experience, lack of support during the application process—but without looking at more cohorts, it is difficult to ascertain if there is a place for the program to provide additional support to help students realize their dreams. CSF might be able to provide career support to further assist Achiever alumni, but not enough time has passed to understand the postgraduation dynamics of Achievers.

As future cohorts move through the educational pipeline, research to highlight these aspects of the comprehensive program is welcomed. With the current national interest in finding innovative programs that show results, this is the perfect opportunity to invest in and assess programs such as WSA. The program's earliest results show promise in improving opportunities for low-income students and demonstrate that ability cannot always be measured purely by traditional academic tests.



PARTICIPATING RESEARCHERS

- Stephen L. DesJardins, University of Michigan
With Brian McCall
- Fouts and Associates, Bothell, WA
- Shouping Hu, Florida State University
- Tatiana Melguizo, University of Southern California
- Carrie B. Myers, Montana State University
With Doreen Brown and Michael Pavel
- National Opinion Research Center (NORC), Chicago, IL
- The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Washington, DC
- Gregory Wolniak, NORC

