



ACHIEVE
ATLANTA

2021 REPORT

A young woman with curly hair is sitting at a desk, looking down at papers. The image is overlaid with a blue tint and geometric line patterns.

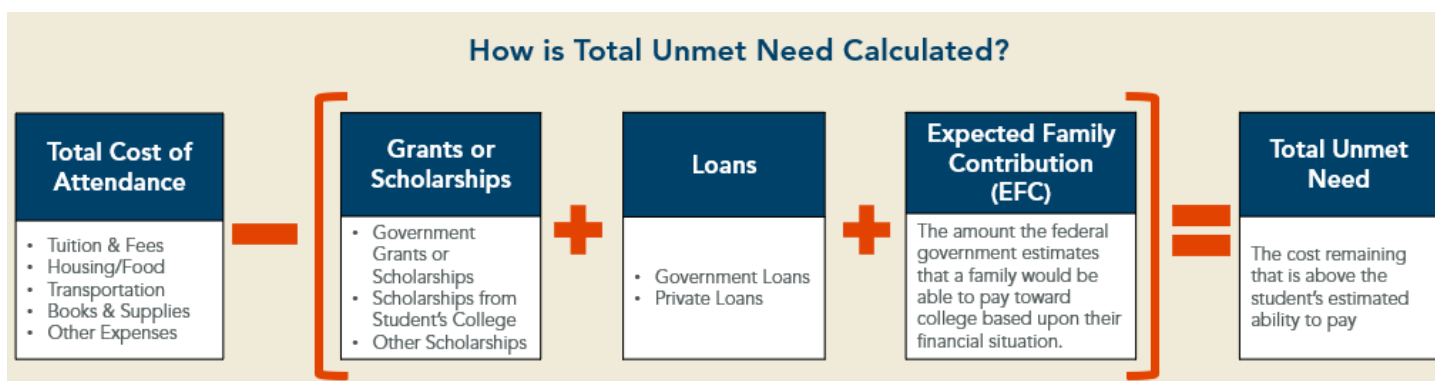
A SNAPSHOT OF ACHIEVE ATLANTA SCHOLARS' FINANCES

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March 2021

Introduction

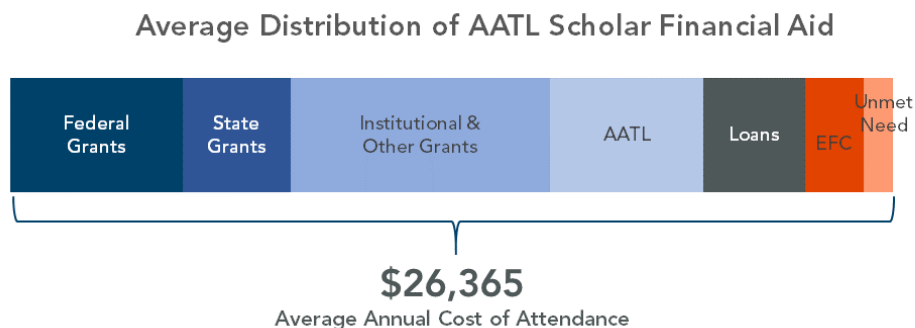
Since fall 2016, Achieve Atlanta (AATL) has provided need-based scholarships to Atlanta Public Schools' (APS) graduates. The scholarship amounts are \$2,500 per term in bachelor's programs and \$750 per term in associate and certificate/technical programs. Once students receive the scholarship, they are considered Achieve Atlanta Scholars (Scholars) for programmatic purposes. Georgia is one of [two U.S. states](#) that does not offer statewide need-based financial aid, and the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship is intended to help students close that gap.

Until last fall, we didn't have an overall picture of our Scholars' financial situation, limiting our ability to intervene strategically to reduce financial barriers that arise in college. Thus, we set out to gain a better understanding of Scholars' overall unmet need, defined as the cost remaining after grants, loans, and the federal government's estimate of their ability to pay are taken into account.¹



To start, we administered a survey to all Scholars that asked for information about their financial aid award packages and sought to understand their current financial situations. 160 Scholars responded, roughly 7% of Scholars receiving AATL scholarship funds in fall 2020. The sample was generally representative of various demographic factors.

The average Scholar's cost of attendance in the sample was \$26,365. Generally speaking, Scholars received funds from a range of sources to cover those costs, as seen in the figure below.



¹ The federal government calculates the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) from a student's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), but it often [overestimates students' actual ability to pay](#), especially in areas like Atlanta with higher cost of living.

Key Takeaways

- The Achieve Atlanta Scholarship, in combination with grants and federal loans, significantly reduces Scholars' unmet need. The median total unmet need among Scholars was only \$89, and the average was \$878.²
- Still, half of Scholars had at least some unmet need, and 23% faced total unmet need greater than \$5,000.
- Without the AATL Scholarship, 76% of Scholars would have had unmet need, with a median unmet amount of \$4,941.
- Nearly 40% of Scholars took out federal subsidized or unsubsidized loans. Few Scholars took out more expensive types of loans [e.g., Parent Loan for Undergraduate Students (PLUS) and/or private loans].
- Scholars who enrolled in out-of-state public institutions and those who lived on campus tended to have higher unmet need than other Scholars.
- Half of respondents reported struggling to cover school-related expenses. Half also struggled to cover unexpected expenses, pointing to the important role that Achieve Atlanta's [emergency grant program](#) plays to help keep Scholars on track.
- In the months ahead, we plan to provide Scholars and partners with additional resources about loans, work-study, and the cost/benefit of work hours.



² The average (mean) unmet need was higher than the median because several Scholars in the survey sample had very high unmet need, which biased the mean upward.

Survey Overview

- 160 Scholars provided either the financial aid award letter or the annual bill they received from their college, representing 7% of Scholars receiving the AATL scholarship in fall 2020.³
- In addition to sending documents, Scholars answered questions about their financial wellness and estimated other school-related expenses.⁴ To receive an AATL Scholarship, a Scholar must be enrolled full-time, which translates to 12 or more credits per term at most institutions.
- The sample distribution closely mirrored that of students receiving the AATL scholarship in fall 2020 in terms of scholarship cohort, institution type and degree type pursuing.⁵
- But, the sample differed in two notable ways:
 - The sample had slightly lower financial need (EFC) than all enrolled Scholars. However, this reduced need meant that they received a smaller or no Pell Grant, resulting in higher average unmet need than those with a full Pell Grant.⁶
 - The sample's average high school GPA was three points higher than fall 2020 Scholars, on a 100-point scale. This may mean that the sample is more likely to receive merit-based aid than the full Scholar population.⁷
- Students living off campus provided estimates of their monthly housing and food costs that were multiplied by 10 to convert into annual expenses.⁸ All students provided estimates for books and supplies, transportation and other living expenses that were included in the calculated cost of attendance.

Sample Comparison to All AATL Scholars		
	Sample (n=160)	Fall 2020 Scholarship Recipients (n=2,202)
Cohort		
2016	5%	5%
2017	16%	17%
2018	22%	19%
2019	26%	25%
2020	31%	34%
Institution Type		
University System of Georgia	72%	73%
Private	19%	19%
Out-of-State Public	6%	6%
Technical College System of Georgia	3%	2%
Degree Type		
4-Year	91%	90%
2-Year	6%	6%
Certificate	3%	4%
Need		
Avg. EFC*	\$1,741	\$1,050
Receiving Pell	87%	97%
Academic Profile		
Avg. High School GPA	91.2	88.5

*EFC=Expected Family Contribution, as calculated on the FAFSA to determine Pell Grant eligibility. The higher the EFC, the lower a student's financial need. Students must have EFC of \$5,711 or lower to receive a Pell Grant.

³ Five of the 160 were enrolled in college but without the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship for that term. Because these students had valid award information, they were included in the sample. 3 of 5 did not receive the scholarship because their Expected Family Contribution was greater than \$8,000, the eligibility threshold for receiving the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship; 1 of 5 enrolled part-time; and 1 of 5 initially planned to enroll but withdrew before the drop deadline.

⁴ After the survey closed, staff checked the documents against the values in the survey and made corrections where needed.

⁵ The distribution by institution type mirrored all Scholars, but that means only 10 out-of-state public and 5 technical college students completed survey. Thus, findings for these groups are subject to greater variability.

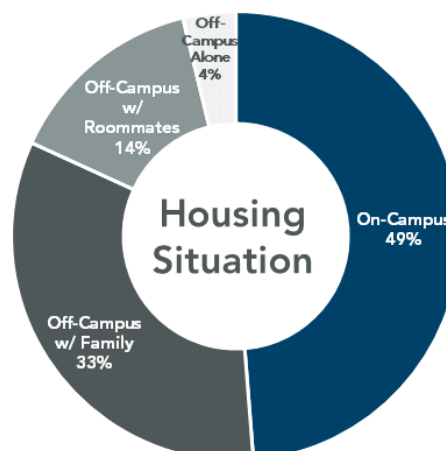
⁶ Roughly one-third of the difference in mean Expected Family Contribution is a result of the three inactive Scholars with EFCs > \$8,000 (\$9,013, \$16,904, and \$22,171).

⁷ The Georgia Student Finance Commission calculates a HOPE GPA to determine a student's eligibility for the HOPE and Zell Miller Scholarships. Achieve Atlanta does not have access to the HOPE GPA for all five cohorts to provide a closer comparison of HOPE eligibility between the sample and population.

⁸ The multiplier was set to 10 instead of 12 to account for summer months, which are often excluded from financial aid packages.

Housing Situation

- Nearly half of respondents lived in on-campus housing. A third lived with family.
- Few Scholars lived alone.
- On-Campus housing is generally more expensive than other housing options. Students in on-campus housing had an average total unmet need of \$2,454, while those living off-campus had average total unmet need of \$0.⁹



Employment Patterns

- 36% of surveyed Scholars (58 of 160) were employed. Of those, most were employed in non-work-study jobs.¹⁰
- First-year Scholars were much less likely to work (20%) than returning Scholars (44%).
- Only 9% of surveyed Scholars reported holding a work-study position.¹¹
- Employed Scholars worked on average 21 hours per week. Over half worked 16+ hours/week, the threshold that begins to have a negative effect on students' ability to remain enrolled.¹²
- Nearly three-fourths worked to pay school-related expenses. 60% reported helping their families.
- Most students also worked for extra spending money.
- Scholars not working or those working 16+ hours/week tended to have higher unmet need. On average, students working 1-15 hours per week did not have unmet need.

Employment (n=58)	
Overall Percent Employed	36%
Work-Study and Other Employment	2%
Work-Study Only	7%
Other Employment Only	27%
Average Hours Worked	21 hours
Distribution of Work Hours (of those employed)	
1-10 hours	26%
11-15 hours	19%
16-20 hours	16%
21+ hours	40%

Work Reasons	
To pay for school-related expenses	77%
To help my family	60%
To get extra spending money	78%

⁹ Some of this pattern could be a result of students underestimating actual housing and food costs throughout the year, whereas room and board costs for on-campus housing are all captured at one time.

¹⁰ We administered the survey during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we did not ask for students' reasons for not working, so this study does not provide insights into the extent to which COVID-19 may be affecting employment status.

¹¹ An earlier version of this report showed 10% for work-study. However, this was a rounding error and is now corrected to 9%.

¹² Our internal predictive analytics model finds that Scholars who work more than 15 hours per week have a lower likelihood of persisting to the next fall, taking into account various academic, social emotional, and demographic characteristics.

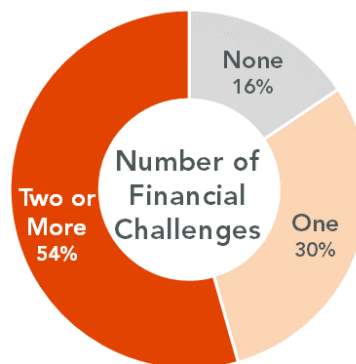
Financial Challenges Faced

- Roughly half of respondents struggled to cover school-related expenses. Half also struggled to cover unexpected expenses.
- 1 in 5 respondents lost scholarships they had previously received.
- Scholars with a college GPA below 2.5 had significantly larger unmet need than those with GPAs above 2.5, likely due to losing some financial aid.
- Over half had two or more financial challenges during the fall term.

Financial Challenges During Fall 2020 Term

Covering school-related expenses	50%
Covering unexpected expenses	53%
Helping family financially	25%
Working too much to cover other expenses	23%
Losing scholarships	19%
Other	4%

Students could select all reasons that applied.

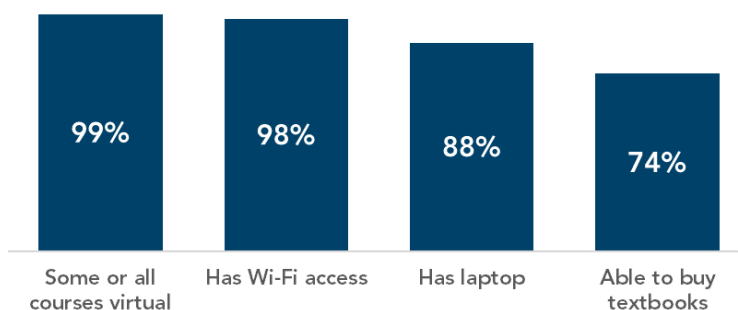


Technology and Course Information during COVID-19

- Nearly all had at least some courses that were virtual.
- One-fourth reported not being able to buy textbooks.
- 88% had a laptop, and nearly all had Wi-Fi access.



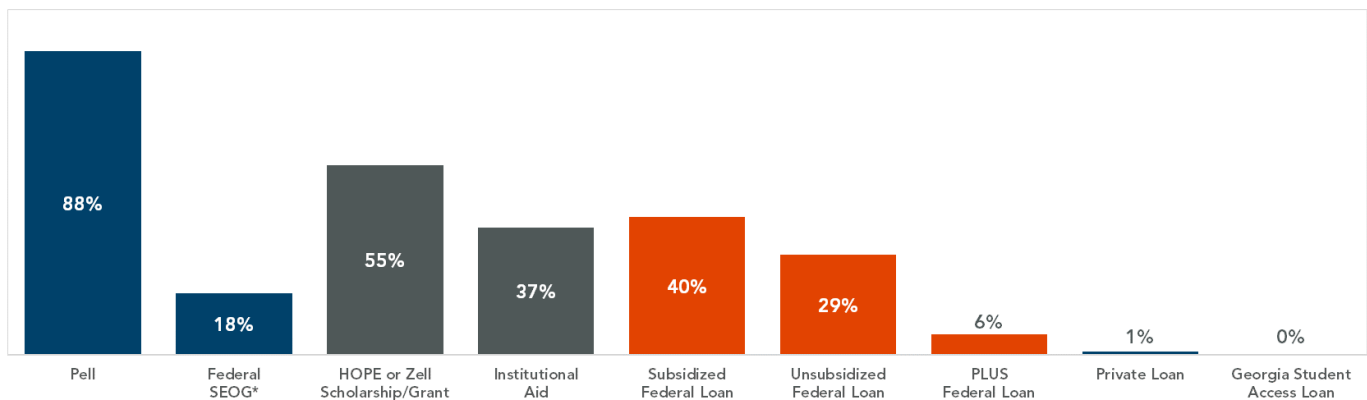
Technology and Course Information



Sources of Financial Aid

- Most Scholars received a Pell Grant, although a smaller portion of Scholars in the survey sample received Pell than in the full Scholar population – 88% of the sample population received Pell, compared to 97% of the overall Scholar population. Scholars not receiving a Pell Grant had larger unmet need on average.
- Nearly 1 in 5 received a Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (SEOG), a federal grant that institutions can offer to students with the greatest financial need.
- Over half of Scholars in the sample received some form of GPA-based state aid (HOPE or Zell Miller Scholarship/Grant). This amount may be higher than it is in the full Scholar population, given the sample had an average high school GPA that was higher than all Scholars enrolled in fall 2020.
- 37% received institutional aid.¹³
- Nearly 40% took out subsidized loans, and 29% took out unsubsidized loans. Very few Scholars took out either PLUS or Private Loans, which are generally more costly.
- No Scholars took out a Georgia Student Access Loan, a limited state loan program that institutions can offer students who have exhausted federal funding sources.

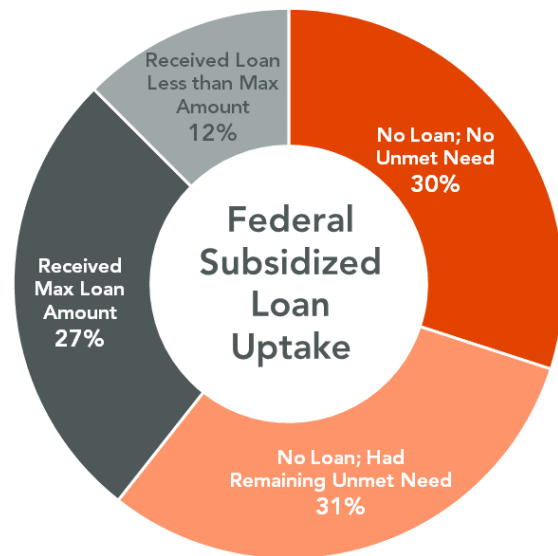
Additional Sources of Financial Aid for Achieve Atlanta Scholars



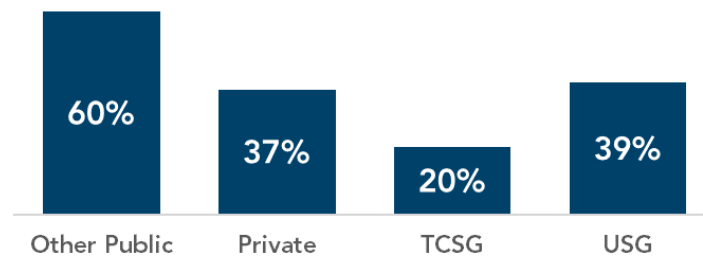
¹³ Many students at state public institutions received one-time CARES Act institutional aid, so this percentage would likely be lower in other years.

A Further Look at Student Loans

- 31% of the sample had remaining unmet need but did not take out any federal loans.¹⁴
- Of federal loan recipients (gray tones in chart), two-thirds took out the maximum subsidized loan amount. Thus, most Scholars either took out no loans (orange) or took out the maximum amount (dark gray), which may mean students could benefit from additional support in understanding the flexibility and tradeoffs of federal loans.
- 60% of Scholars attending out-of-state public institutions took out subsidized loans – a much higher rate than at other institution types.



Share of Scholars Taking Out Federal Loans by Institution Type



¹⁴ Students cannot take out unsubsidized loans unless they take out subsidized loans first, so only a chart of subsidized loans is shown. As part of the survey, Scholars either submitted financial aid award letters, which typically include loan offers, or their college's annual bill, which only includes loans accepted. 17% of the sample had remaining unmet need, were offered loans, but declined them. Of the remaining 14% with unmet need but no loans, we could not tell whether they declined loans offered or were not offered loans.

Total Unmet Need by Scholarship Cohort

- Students who were further into their college career took out higher amounts of public loans on average, despite their grant amounts not changing significantly. This pattern may reflect some students being more comfortable borrowing later in college to meet needs. Or, since the maximum allowable loan amount increases as students progress through college, it may also reflect some continuing to take out the maximum loan amount.

Aid Levels by Cohort (\$)				
Cohort*	Cost of Attendance	Total Grants	Total Public Loans	Total Unmet Need
2017	27,508	21,651	3,689	0
2018	24,084	18,703	2,642	0
2019	27,367	20,484	2,518	1,245
2020	27,926	22,572	1,981	1,998
Overall Average	26,365	20,451	2,721	878

*We excluded the 2016 Cohort from this table because it only had 8 respondents, all of whom were attending in-state University System of Georgia institutions, causing an outlier for cost of attendance and grants. However, the 2016 Cohort is included in the overall average at the bottom of the table.

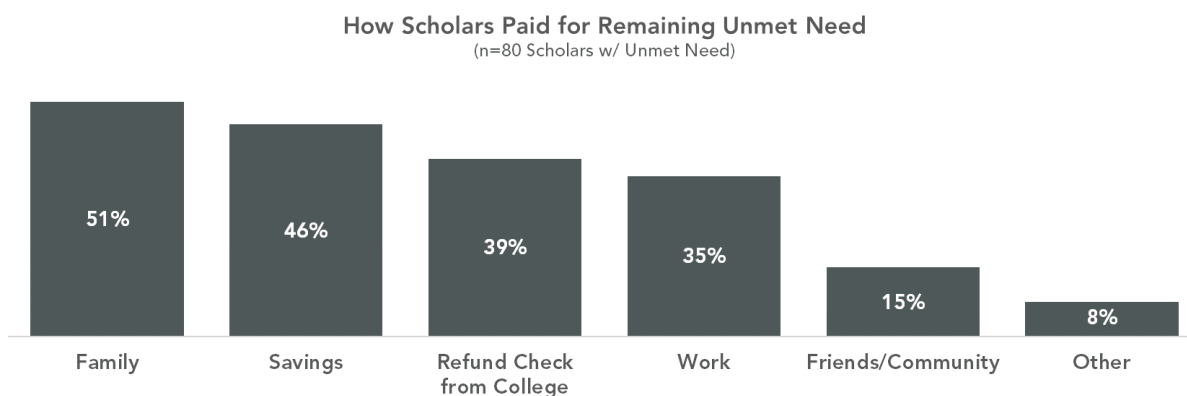
Total Unmet Need by Institution Type

- None of the five Scholars enrolled in technical colleges had unmet need, largely due to lower cost of attendance in the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG). In addition, all incoming Scholars in the TCSG receive the HOPE Grant, which they can maintain with a 2.0 GPA (compared to a 3.0 requirement for the HOPE Scholarship in associate or bachelor's programs). For comparison, only 33% of two-year Scholars in the University System of Georgia (USG) received the HOPE Scholarship or Grant.¹⁵
- More than half of Scholars enrolled in private colleges had no remaining need, and most also did not take out any federal loans. This is largely due to significant institutional aid that more than offset the higher cost of attendance compared to other institutions. Still, 20% of Scholars in private colleges had total unmet need greater than \$5,000, making it particularly important to examine aid packages at private colleges.
- Students attending out-of-state public institutions had much larger total unmet need (\$8,641) than those at all other institutions (an average of \$361 across other Scholars).

¹⁵ The HOPE Scholarship requires an incoming GPA of 3.0 in associate and bachelor's programs. The HOPE Grant is available at four USG institutions, but it is limited to students enrolled in diploma or certificate programs.

How Scholars Paid for Remaining Unmet Need

- Of those with unmet need, family and savings were the most common sources of funding to fill the gap.
- Most used funds from multiple sources, with nearly 30% pulling from three or more sources.



What's Next

These findings have informed actions we plan to take over the next year to improve Scholars' financial wellness. In particular:

- Given the low employment and federal loan uptake for students with unmet need, we will provide APS seniors and Achieve Atlanta Scholars with actionable information on the benefits and tradeoffs of loans and employment as ways to pay for college.
- To ensure students maximize and maintain their federal aid, we are posting financial wellness scenarios on our website related to FAFSA completion, verification and appeals.
- We plan to share these findings with College Access partners to help them coach students and families on the financial tradeoffs of various college choices.
- Given the reality that many Scholars face unexpected financial challenges, we are continuing our emergency grant program this spring and hope to do so even beyond this spring, so that emergency expenses do not force Scholars to withdraw from college.

As we plan our work for the next academic year, these findings provide important insight into how we can further support Scholars' financial wellness.

Given that Scholars' financial situations may be less predictable due to the pandemic, we plan to administer the survey again in fall 2021. In the next iteration of the survey, we will add questions to better understand how students are approaching decisions about taking out loans and work hours.