

BELIEVE EXPECT ACHIEVE

2021
IMPACT REPORT





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LETTER FROM TINA

I've had a word on my heart lately—restoration.

The common definition of restoration is to *return something to a former condition*, and a few weeks ago, many of us were preparing to return to offices or campuses. Unfortunately, that process has again been disrupted by the recent spike in COVID-19 infections. While some of us have pushed back our return, students and school teams are on campuses after more than a year. Few of us feel like we're going back to something familiar.

Fortunately, restoration can also be a *transformative process*—one where we get back more than we have lost.

We've all experienced loss during this season. Some of that loss has been painfully concrete, like the loss of a loved one, or of our health, or perhaps our financial stability. But some of the loss has been more abstract or internal. We've lost security. We've lost community.

Some of us have lost whatever trust we had in our systems to keep us safe, and some of us have lost trust in our own ability to discern real vs. perceived threats, or fact from fiction. For many of us who serve students, we've lost confidence in how to help our students thrive—how to adjust our practices to best meet their needs.

Yes, the last year exacted a tremendous toll. But when I think about our partners and the community we've built together over the last six years, I am inspired to believe that together, we will restore more than we've lost.

I know that it will not be easy. But if we set our eyes on our guiding north star, that all young people will have the chance to live lives filled with opportunity and choices, and if we lean on each other and start to feel and experience community again, we will be able to support our Scholars to achieve their dreams.

All we have to do is look at recent examples of how systemic barriers have been dismantled—things that people said weren't possible. Students are being provided with broadband service and devices, money has been freed up to provide emergency grants to the most financially vulnerable, and the application and verification process for federal financial aid has been simplified or even cancelled. Knowing what's possible, we can't settle anymore for half-measures.

This year's impact report will highlight our students' achievements and showcase how our community of partners has tapped into our collective strength during these difficult times. We'll share some insights about what keeps students engaged and on track academically. And we'll celebrate a few of the **617 Achieve Atlanta** graduates who have earned a degree!

Finally, we'll look ahead to what we will do in the coming year to restore our students. Let's believe and expect that our process of restoration will provide our young people and ourselves with more than we ever thought possible.

Onward!

Tina Fernandez
Executive Director
Achieve Atlanta



ABOUT US

Achieve Atlanta envisions an Atlanta where race and income no longer predict postsecondary success and upward mobility. In service of this vision, Achieve Atlanta's mission is to help Atlanta Public Schools students access, afford, and earn postsecondary credentials. Just as important as what we do is how we approach our work. Achieve Atlanta believes that to solve the complex problem of low degree attainment, we must work across organizations and sectors.

Therefore, Achieve Atlanta catalyzes and facilitates results-driven cross-sector collaboration by setting a vision, assembling teams, and creating conditions for success across a range of partners including Atlanta Public Schools, numerous colleges and universities, nonprofit and community organizations, and most importantly, students and families.

OUR CORE VALUES

UNWAVERING BELIEF

An unshakeable belief in our students is the inspiration and fuel for everything we do.

CHAMPION FOR STUDENTS

Our belief in students is backed by action. With their dreams as the foundation for our work, we break down systemic barriers, earn trust, and build capacity so that ultimately, students can be their own champions.

EXPECTATION OF EXCELLENCE

Excellence requires effort, tenacity, responsibility, and integrity that lead to high-quality work. It is the standard we set for ourselves and the model we demonstrate to students and our community of stakeholders.

INTENTIONAL COLLABORATION

We cannot achieve our vision alone. We deliberately build partnerships that work toward common goals and create sustainable growth and change.

CONTINUOUS INNOVATION

We are relentlessly curious and encourage thoughtful risk-taking. We must be nimble enough to pursue promising ideas, yet humble enough to learn from the outcomes.



RECOGNIZING THE IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted both our students and the way we do our work. Snapshots from the pandemic:



We collaborated with our College Access Partners to host virtual FAFSA clinics and provide virtual advising for Atlanta Public Schools (APS) seniors.



With significant safety protocols and planning, the 2021 Atlanta Public Schools graduation ceremonies were held in person.

2021 Decision Day was a virtual event where more than 400 APS seniors shared their college decisions with us on Instagram.





Some of our Scholars attended classes on college campuses, with mask mandates in place, while others attended classes virtually.

APS held classes virtually for the majority of the school year, but did give the option for some students to return to school in-person in the spring of 2021.



POSTSECONDARY ACCESS

College Access Working Group and College Access Teams

Achieve Atlanta facilitates the College Access Working Group (CAWG) to guide college access efforts across APS. CAWG includes representatives from Achieve Atlanta, Atlanta Public Schools, College Advising Corps, and OneGoal. During the 2020-21 school year, the group continued to meet virtually and collaborated on college advising strategies and interventions, data tracking, and professional development.

Achieve Atlanta also continued to help coordinate high school College Access Teams (CATs)—the school staff members involved in college access work in each APS high school and their nonprofit college advising partners. Thanks to the CAT structure that was already in place before the pandemic began, we had a solid foundation for collaborating and supporting students that could be adjusted as the pandemic created new challenges.

SAT School Day

Achieve Atlanta works with APS and the College Board to implement SAT School Day, whereby every junior in the district takes the SAT during the spring semester, at school, for free. This strategy removes barriers to college-test taking, such as test fees and transportation challenges, that often prevent students from participating in this college-going milestone. The pandemic presented a new challenge to this successful initiative, which had increased college test-taking significantly over the past few years in APS.

During the spring of 2021, when the test was to be administered, only a small percentage of APS students were attending school in-person. Rather than cancel, APS, with support from Achieve Atlanta and our partners, adjusted its building safety measures and logistics to accommodate an in-person testing administration for the junior class. Given the pandemic, students had to opt-in to the test—which required coming to the school building for the first time in a year for some students. Through effective communication strategies and the hard work of staff and schools, more than 1,000 juniors opted to take the SAT. This is a significant achievement given the circumstances. Achieve Atlanta will provide an additional SAT School Day administration for this class of students this fall, to ensure all who need an SAT test score for college admissions are able to test.

What We're Learning

The importance of match and fit advising in helping students make decisions about college.

Prior to the pandemic, Achieve Atlanta partnered with APS to design and implement a tool to help students understand which colleges would be a strong academic match and good financial, social, and personal fit. We launched the Match & Fit List Builder in February of 2020 to help students, starting their junior year, explore their options in a more structured way.

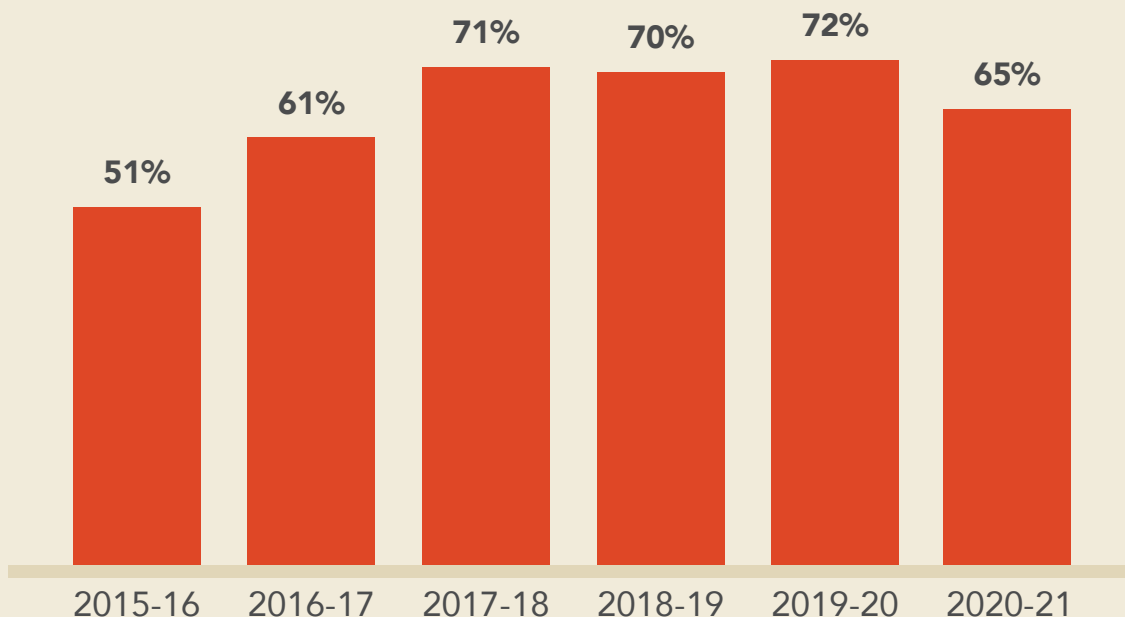
The effort was developed, in part, to prevent “undermatching” whereby students enroll in colleges where they are overqualified. Research shows undermatching creates a higher likelihood of students not completing a college credential. Over the past year, we learned how critical enrollment in “the right” college was for our Scholars as we saw a larger number of class of 2020 Scholars “stop out” before their spring semester. We hypothesize that fewer students made strong match and fit choices, which led to the decline in persistence. This school year we will renew our focus on match and fit to help students make smart college enrollment decisions.



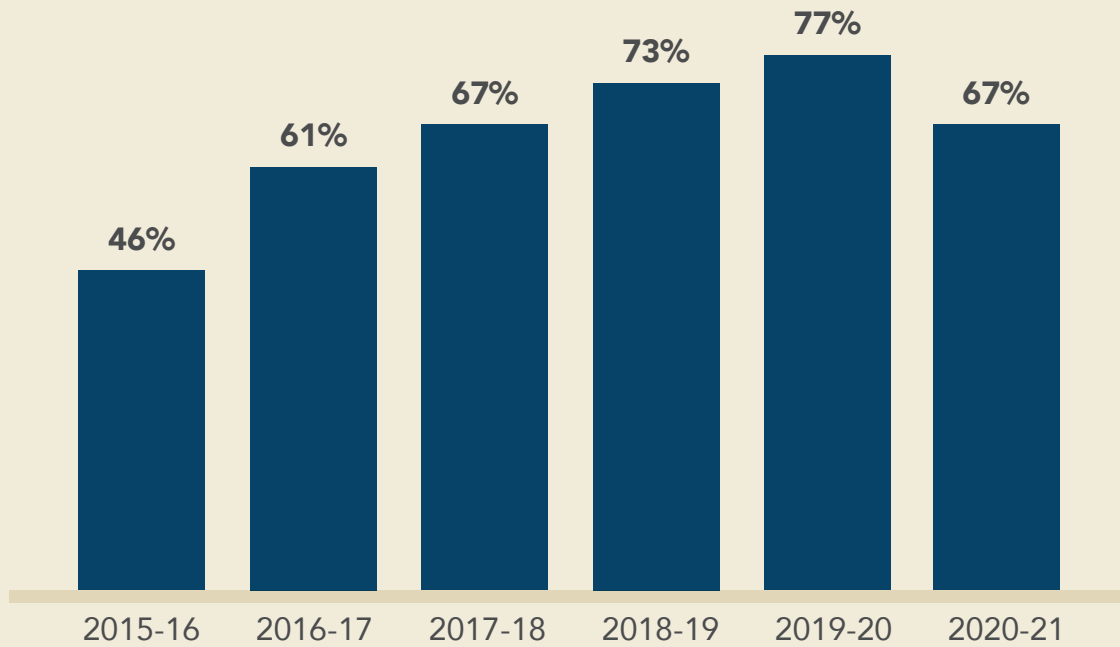
POSTSECONDARY ACCESS OUTCOMES

The health and economic repercussions of COVID-19, along with a year of remote schooling, negatively impacted college-going milestones during the 2020-21 school year. Organizations and schools across the country are seeing similar drops among low-income and first-generation college-going students. Achieve Atlanta, APS and our college access partners continue to support students from the class of 2021 who need assistance to enroll in college and are redoubling our efforts this academic year to ensure the class of 2022 receives quality college advising.

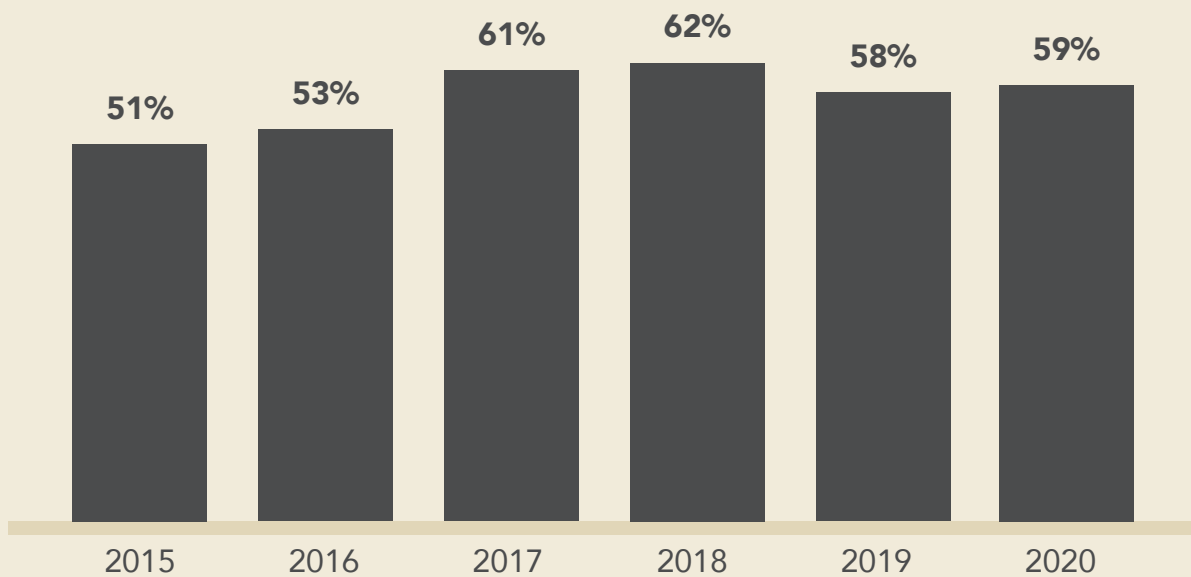
Seniors Completing the FAFSA



3+ College Applications Submitted



Seamless Enrollment



POSTSECONDARY AFFORDABILITY

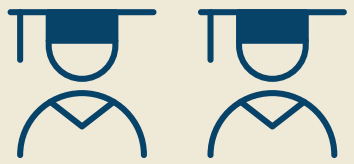
Achieve Atlanta Scholarship

The Achieve Atlanta Scholarship launched in 2016 with a cohort of about 600 Scholars. As of the spring 2021 term, Achieve Atlanta provided \$32.3 million in scholarships to 3,786 APS graduates attending 290 different postsecondary institutions across the country.

The Scholarship is a need-based award designed to support APS students pursuing various postsecondary education paths after high school. For students eligible for the four-year college scholarship, Achieve Atlanta awards \$5,000 per year (renewable for up to four years of school). The two-year or technical college scholarship award is \$1,500 per year (renewable for up to two years of school), and students can transition to the four-year scholarship upon completion of their degree.



OUR SCHOLARS




3,786
Scholars

More than
\$32 million 
in Achieve Atlanta Funding
(as of Spring 2021 payout)



1/3 of graduating
Atlanta Public
Schools seniors
become Scholars
(32% across the 4 years, 28% in 2020)

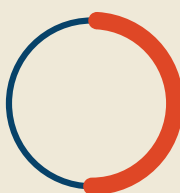
Attending
290 
different colleges



95%
of Scholars are
Black or Latinx



97%
eligible for
Pell Grants



51%
first-generation
college students

Our Scholars
are pursuing

- 76%** Bachelor's Degree
- 22%** Associate Degree
- 2%** Technical Degree

POSTSECONDARY AFFORDABILITY

Completion and Emergency Grant Programs

Our new completion and emergency grant programs continue to help students afford to earn a postsecondary degree.

This last academic year, our **emergency grant program** awarded over 200 grants to Scholars—totaling \$91,174 in emergency financial assistance. Nearly two-thirds of recipients cited loss of employment or reduction of work hours as the reason for their financial emergency, due to the detrimental impact of COVID-19. Housing-related expenses were the highest referenced financial need for our Scholars.

Through our **completion grant program**, we disbursed 121 grants, totaling \$248,576, to assist students who had reached their Scholarship limits but were one or two terms away from graduation. An early indicator of success is that 83% of fall 2020 completion grantees have earned their degree and all remaining recipients persisted into the next semester.

Both our completion and emergency grant programs are available this current academic year.

“The emergency grant is important because it has allowed me to have an easier transition from my college life—where I had housing and meals provided by scholarships—to my at-home life, where I no longer had a job due to COVID-19. Thanks to the emergency grant, I was able to get my car repaired so I could start working for Instacart delivering groceries.”

- Emergency Grant Recipient

What We're Learning

The Achieve Atlanta Scholarship, in combination with grants and federal loans, significantly reduces Scholars' unmet need.

Through a survey of Scholars, we learned that the median unmet need among our representative sample of Scholars was \$89, and the average was \$878; without the Scholarship, the median unmet need would be \$4,941. Still, half of the sample of Scholars have some unmet need, with 23% facing total unmet need greater than \$5,000. These findings and additional, more nuanced data, provide important initial insight into how to further support Scholars' financial wellness. This will be a programming focus this year.

POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

We continued to work toward our goal of increasing the number of APS students graduating from college and found new ways to collaborate with postsecondary institutions and college success experts to offer direct support and advising services to our Scholars.

Partnerships

Achieve Atlanta's College Success Team has spent the past five years creating and building partnerships. Today these collaborative relationships include 11 higher education institutions and three nonprofit organizations. Though COVID-19 created new challenges for the higher education system as a whole, Achieve Atlanta and our partners worked to create innovative solutions and support mechanisms for the new and pre-existing challenges our Scholars faced.

Achieve Atlanta Ambassadors

Achieve Atlanta supports Peer Ambassadors at all 11 postsecondary partner institutions. College Ambassadors provide guidance to other Scholars by helping them actively and emotionally engage with the people and activities on campus that best support their persistence and completion.

Innovation and Adaptation to Achieve Persistence

Last fall, Achieve Atlanta welcomed 761 Scholars who attended colleges across the country. During COVID-19, first-year Scholars remained enrolled for the spring term at lower rates than they had in prior years. This reality, along with other ways the pandemic forced students to adjust to virtual or modified classes, pushed our partners to rethink how they support Achieve Atlanta Scholars' journeys toward a college degree.

Some examples include:

- Georgia Tech recognized that facilitating student connection was vital for keeping students engaged and enrolled. With that in mind, staff set up large conversation tents at several outdoor locations on campus so that students could safely gather and talk.
- In October of 2020, Kennesaw State University President Pamela Whitten requested that the registrar's office divide up all 8,800 first-year students amongst herself and her 13 cabinet members. Cabinet members and their teams (some Cabinet members shared their student lists to meet the deadline) called the students on their list over a two-week period to check on how they were doing, broker resources, and encourage them to register for spring courses. The calls provided an unexpected personal touch for students and an opportunity for senior leaders to understand students' situations. During the spring term, the cabinet members and their teams called all first- and second-year students.

POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

- Achieve Atlanta coaches at Savannah State University created virtual game nights, including a virtual escape room, to engage in activities, and connect Scholars to each other.
- Scholars at the University of West Georgia asked their coaches to find ways to help them connect with each other and have fun during COVID-19. Coaches set up a series of events where Scholars could drop in, eat snacks, engage in activities, and take a deep breath from classes.

Looking toward the fall, partners are considering which practices to continue. Oglethorpe has created a cross-functional student success task force to better coordinate student support across university staff. *"The hope is that we will be proactive instead of reactive next year, to make sure students are on track earlier on,"* says Whitney Lewis, dean of admission and financial aid.

What We're Learning

Engagement and connection are an important subset of sense of belonging.

Trust has to exist in the relationships between Achieve Atlanta, our partners and our Scholars for connections to be meaningful. With many of our Scholars feeling detached from their academic and social lives, we learned how critical connections with our partners are for our Scholars. In light of the circumstances over the last year, it is even more important that partners increase their existing capacity to listen without judgment and find creative ways to foster human connection. It is this connection that helps students feel truly 'seen' which, in turn, fosters engagement



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Postsecondary
Institution Partners

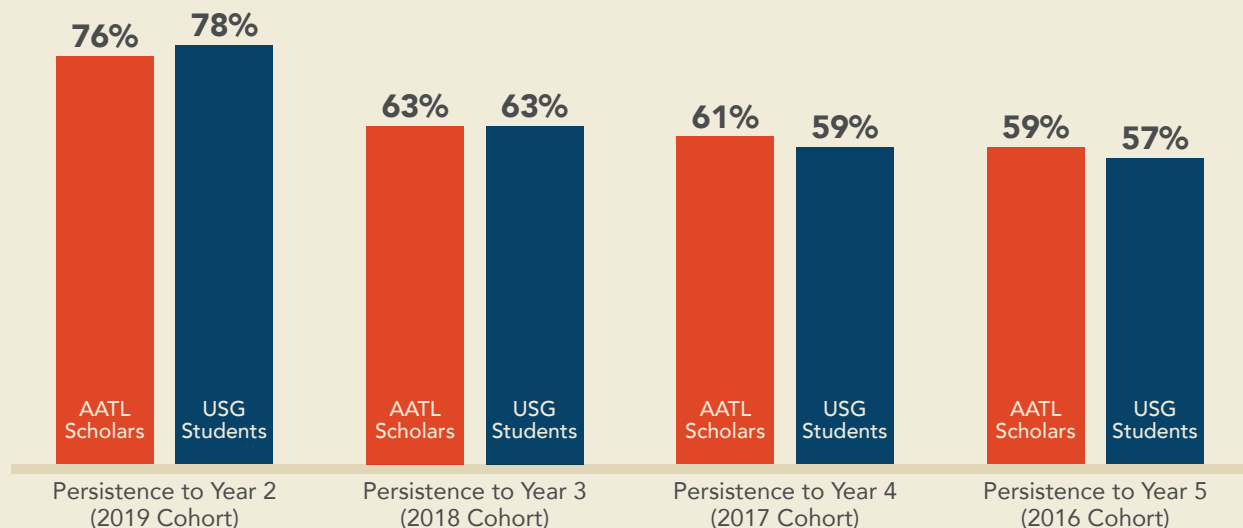


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Nonprofit
Partners

POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS OUTCOMES

As of fall 2020, Scholars enrolled in the University System of Georgia (USG) persisted at similar rates to all USG students, regardless of income status.



* 72% of Scholars attend USG institutions. USG persistence as of fall 2020 term for full-time, first-time students either retained or graduated in any USG institution. Rates by institution were weighted by the proportion of Achieve Atlanta Scholars attending each institution to calculate overall rate. Comparisons by socioeconomic status not publicly available. Source: *USG By the Numbers Retention Report, System-Wide Retention*, accessed March 2021.

2021 ACHIEVE ATLANTA GRADUATES

This year we celebrated our second cohort of four-year graduates. Our Achieve Atlanta Graduates have earned their postsecondary credentials during a very uncertain time, but have found some stability in knowing they are more prepared for their future careers.

 **617**
CONFIRMED
GRADUATES
AS OF 9/13/2021 (AND COUNTING!)

ACHIEVE ATLANTA GRADUATE SPOTLIGHT

APRIL RODRIGUEZ

Georgia State University, Class of 2021
North Atlanta High School, 2017 Cohort



April Rodriguez began her education at Bolton Academy in Atlanta Public Schools. From there, she continued her education journey at Sutton Middle School and graduated from North Atlanta High School in 2017. April knew that she wanted to go to college after graduating from high school, but she was not sure how she would pay for it.



APRIL RODRIGUEZ

Georgia State University, Class of 2021
North Atlanta High School, 2017 Cohort

"I would personally like to thank Achieve Atlanta for assisting me financially all four years with the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship. I'm more than grateful for all their guidance and assistance in times of need. I would also like to thank my hard-working Mexican parents who have always supported me through every trial and tribulation. My parents' work ethic and dedication rubbed off on me and I was taught to always work hard for the things I desired. Without them, I am nothing."

Earning the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship, April completed her bachelor's degree in political science and plans to earn her law degree next so that she can help others. She is the first woman on both sides of her family to graduate with a bachelor's degree.

To celebrate this exciting achievement, April's family had a Mexican *banda* perform after her graduation from Georgia State. April, her family members and friends, and several other Scholars enjoyed the momentous occasion by dancing together that day.



ACHIEVE ATLANTA GRADUATE PROFILES



KHALIYA BYNUM

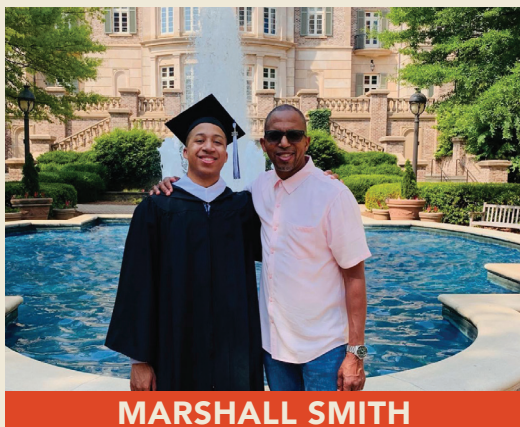
Albany State University, Class of 2021

Major: Psychology

APS High School: Benjamin E. Mays High School

Next steps: Attending graduate school at Valdosta State University to earn her masters in marriage and family therapy

"Thank you so much! Without Achieve Atlanta I wouldn't have had an opportunity to keep my debt low! Also, you kept my stress levels low because I didn't have to worry about my finances and could focus on meeting my grade requirements!"



MARSHALL SMITH

Brandeis University, Class of 2021

Major: Finance

APS High School: North Atlanta High School

Next steps: Working as an investment banking summer analyst with PNC Bank

"Thank you for everything! I'm truly grateful for this scholarship, as it was able to help me achieve my dream of graduating from college."



DONTAYVIA SCOTT

Albany State University, Class of 2021

Major: Social sciences

APS High School: Frederick Douglass High School

Next steps: Attending graduate school in the fall while working for the Clayton County Division of Family and Children Services

"Achieve Atlanta has been amazing! Thank y'all so much!! You are a part of the reason that I was able to complete school. The scholarship was extremely helpful!! I am so appreciative."



TINA SCOTT

Georgia State University, Class of 2021

Major: Psychology

APS High School: South Atlanta High School

Next steps: Applying to PA school to become a physician assistant / associate

"My experience at GSU was definitely one for the books! I crossed paths with so many amazing people, and working with the Achieve Atlanta team has to be one of the best highlights of my college career."



DARIUS FROST

University of West Georgia, Class of 2021

Major: Mass communications

APS High School: KIPP Atlanta Collegiate

Next steps: Finding a job in his field with dreams of having his own talk show one day

"While college has its high moments, there are times where things can get rough. When these rough times happen there is nothing you can do but persevere. College has taught me to not give up on yourself, push yourself to your limits, and if you have a dream or something you want to accomplish not to sit back and wait on it, but attack it head-on and put every ounce of blood, sweat, and tears into it. Thank you West Georgia for all the memories, all the bonds, friendships and relationships formed throughout my time there. I came in as a shy and timid teen and have grown into a mature, ambitious, hard-working, unselfish, and accomplished man."



NIA RILEY

Valdosta State University, Class of 2021

Major: Exercise physiology

APS High School: Drew Charter School

Next steps: Returning to school to earn a degree in nursing so that she can one day become a travel nurse

"College is not easy, but it's possible. Throughout these four years, I have worked extremely hard to get to graduation day! With the help and support of Achieve Atlanta and their amazing staff, they have made college an easier and smoother transition. I am forever grateful for the amazing scholarship coaches I have had and this amazing college experience!!"

COLLABORATING WITH OUR COMMUNITY

Because we know students—especially those who are first in their families to attend college—may face barriers completing postsecondary education, we have continued to mobilize a community of organizations to support students in a holistic way.

OUR PARTNERS



AFFORDABILITY PARTNERS



OUR FUNDERS

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The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Trees for Tuition
The Zeist Foundation
National College Attainment Network

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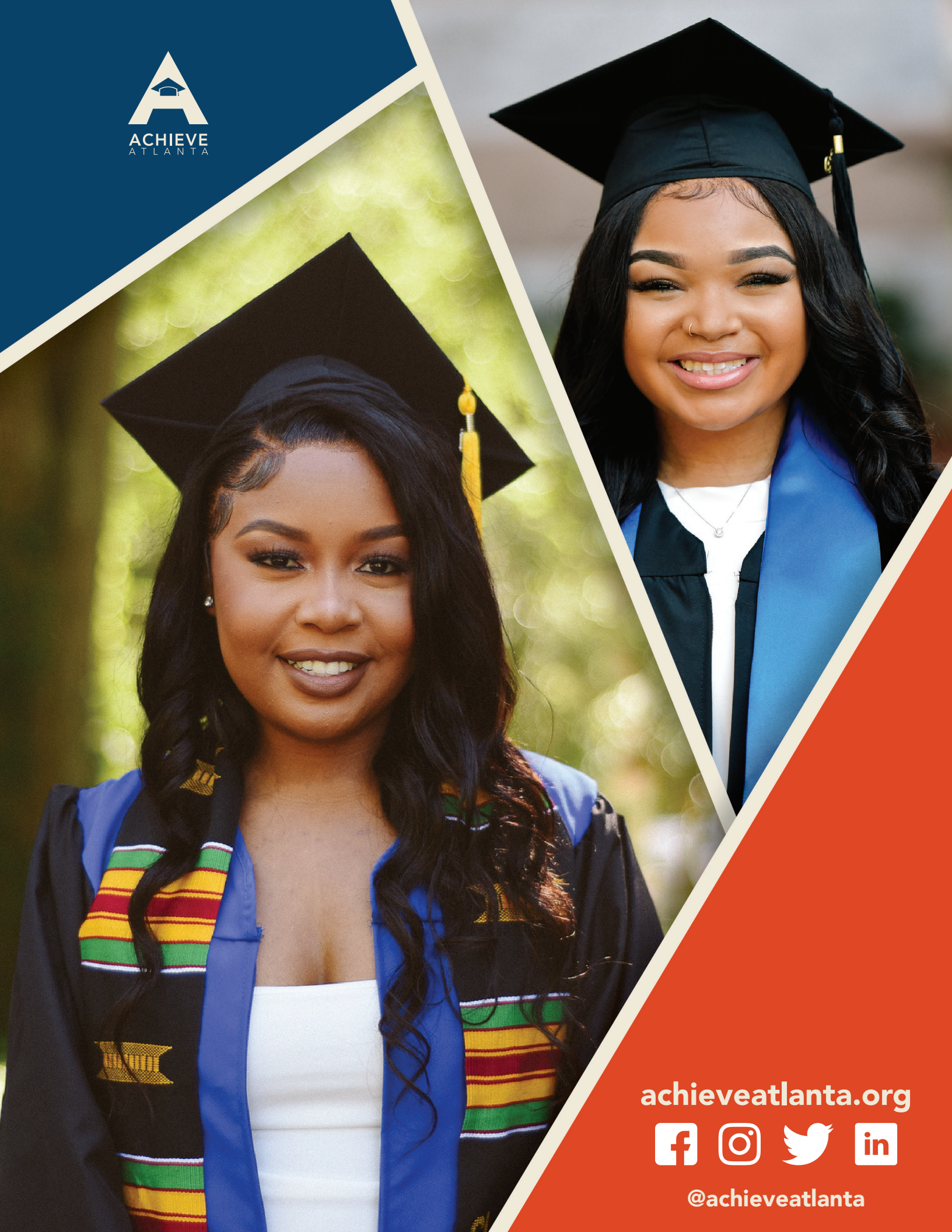
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