



Scholarship, Collaboration, and Support

How Achieve Atlanta's Scholarship and Services Substantially Increase College Persistence and Completion

Highlights from an Independent Evaluation Report

NOVEMBER 2022

Introduction

An independent evaluation of Achieve Atlanta's scholarship and supporting services found that **Achieve Atlanta Scholars persist and complete college at much higher rates than similar peers who did not receive the scholarship and services.** This impact begins during spring semester of a student's first year and continues at least through their fourth year of college. Additionally, these persistence effects are most concentrated among students with mid-range high school GPAs, many of whom are not eligible for Georgia's merit-based HOPE and Zell Miller Scholarships.

Founded in 2015, Achieve Atlanta is a nonprofit organization committed to helping Atlanta Public Schools (APS) students access, afford, and earn postsecondary credentials. Achieve Atlanta currently serves more than 7,000 students and believes the only way to solve the complex, multifaceted problem of low degree attainment is to work across organizations and sectors.

How Achieve Atlanta Supports Students

Achieve Atlanta catalyzes results-driven, cross-sector collaboration by setting a vision, assembling teams, and creating conditions for success across a range of partners—including APS, 10 colleges and universities, numerous nonprofit and community organizations, and, most importantly, students and families.

While students are in high school, that support includes ensuring all juniors can take the SAT during the school day at no cost and all seniors have quality college advising to help them navigate financial aid and college applications. For APS graduates attending college, Achieve Atlanta provides a need-based scholarship of \$5,000 per year for students pursuing a bachelor's degree and \$1,500 per year for those pursuing an associate or technical degree. To become an Achieve Atlanta Scholar, students must graduate with at least a high school GPA of 75, complete the FAFSA, meet our income requirements, and be enrolled in APS for their final two years of high school.

Once in college, Achieve Atlanta assigns each scholarship recipient a coach, either through one of its 10 partner colleges/universities or three nonprofit coaching providers. It also hires college ambassadors — peer leaders identified at each of its 10 partner campuses — to help new Achieve Atlanta Scholars adjust to campus, meet other Scholars, and connect with campus support resources. In addition, Scholars can apply for one-time emergency grants of up to \$500 to help them remain enrolled during unexpected financial challenges.

Now in its seventh year, Achieve Atlanta has served more than 5,100 Scholars, 94% of whom are Black or Latinx and all of whom experience low income. By the end of 2022, the organization will have 1,000 college graduates.

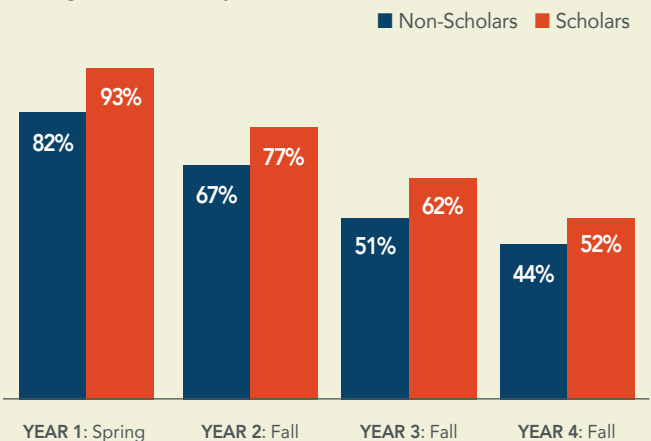
Achieve Atlanta Scholars Persist and Complete College At Higher Rates

Independent researchers in Georgia State University's Georgia Policy Labs (GPL) set out to answer this question: Does the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship and complementary support impact college persistence and completion? The answer is yes. Achieve Atlanta's scholarship and support significantly increase students' persistence through college. **Specifically, students who receive the scholarship and support are 11 percentage points more likely to persist to their second semester in college than their peers who are similar academically and demographically but did not receive the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship.** And, the improved persistence through college does not fade in subsequent semesters (Figure 1).

Further, Achieve Atlanta's first cohort of Scholars graduated at a rate nearly five percentage points higher than similar non-Scholars. Future years of data will provide additional insights on college graduation impacts.

Figure 1. Beginning 2nd semester of their first year, Achieve Atlanta Scholars persist well above similar non-Scholar APS graduates who enroll in college. These gains last through at least four years.

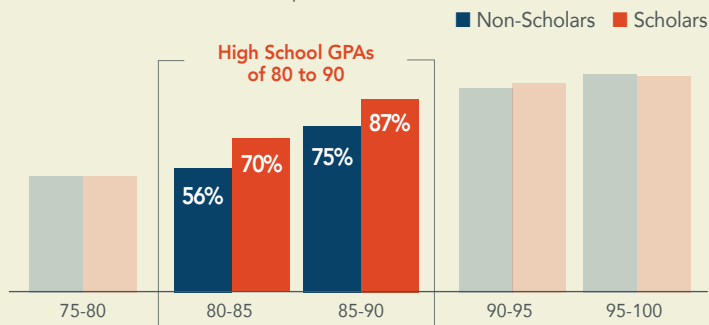
College Persistence By Year/Term



College persistence as reported from the National Student Clearinghouse. Retention of Achieve Atlanta Scholarship is not considered — only whether the student remained enrolled or earned a credential.

Figure 2. Increases in persistence are concentrated among students with GPAs of 80 to 90, who are more likely to not be eligible for the HOPE Scholarship.

Year 2 Fall Persistence Comparison between Scholars and Non-Scholars



Darker-colored bars = statistically significant difference between Non-Scholars and Scholars.
Lighter-colored bars = no statistically significant difference between Non-Scholars and Scholars.

Achieve Atlanta's Impact Is Concentrated in Students with Mid-Range High School GPAs

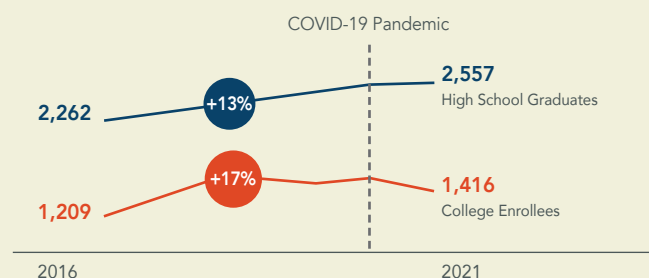
Researchers also examined whether the college persistence effects differ by students' high school GPAs. In fact, **the increases are most concentrated among students with high school GPAs between 80 and 90, representing two-thirds of Achieve Atlanta Scholars (Figure 2).** Many of these students' GPAs are not high enough to qualify for Georgia's merit-based HOPE or Zell Miller Scholarships.¹

Given the largest effects are for students just below the HOPE Scholarship threshold, these results provide policymakers with important data on the potential impact of broader need-based aid strategies in Georgia. While gains are less pronounced for students with GPAs lower than 80 and above 90, the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship still made college more affordable for these students, all of whom experience low income.

A Note on College Enrollment

Researchers also examined Achieve Atlanta's impact on initial college enrollment and did not find statistically significant changes to students' initial enrollment or college choices. This finding generally aligns with prior research on similar programs across the country. Still, the number of APS graduates enrolling in college has increased since Achieve Atlanta's founding, in conjunction with a district-wide increase in the number of high school graduates (Figure 3).

Figure 3. While researchers did not find that Achieve Atlanta's scholarship and supporting services increased enrollment, the number of APS graduates enrolling in college has increased since Achieve Atlanta's founding, in conjunction with a district-wide increase in the number of high school graduates.



Source: Georgia Department of Education annual graduation reports and National Student Clearinghouse. APS Graduates is the count of high school graduates by cohort. APS College Enrollees is the count of cohort graduates who enroll in college by the fall semester after graduation.

Recommendations & Future Research

These findings validate that Achieve Atlanta's scholarship, collaboration, and support are having a positive impact on Atlanta Public Schools students' college success. The report also includes recommendations for how Achieve Atlanta might strengthen this impact, such as adjusting certain eligibility criteria or the timing of scholarship notification. The Achieve Atlanta team is committed to continuous improvement and will review these recommendations internally and with partners.

In addition to monitoring these same measures in future years, Georgia Policy Labs will also expand its evaluation of Achieve Atlanta through a [research-practice partnership grant](#) received last spring. Over the next three years, GPL will evaluate Achieve Atlanta's impact on student financial wellness, involve Scholars in qualitative research on how they finance their college education, and test the impact of a financial counseling intervention.

About the Evaluation

This evaluation was conducted by [Jonathan Smith](#) of Georgia State University, [Lindsay Page](#) (Brown University), and [Carycruz Bueno](#) (Wesleyan University), in affiliation with Georgia State University's Georgia Policy Labs. They studied whether Achieve Atlanta's scholarship and support services impacted college enrollment, persistence, and completion from fall 2016 through fall 2020. To answer these questions, researchers used various statistical methods to measure impact using data from Atlanta Public Schools, Achieve Atlanta, and the National Student Clearinghouse. For persistence and completion results, they compared Achieve Atlanta Scholars to non-Achieve Atlanta Scholars who graduated from Atlanta Public Schools, enrolled in postsecondary education, and were academically and demographically similar. For a full description of research methods and findings, view the full evaluation report: [Assessing Atlanta's Place-Based College Scholarship \(2022\)](#).

¹ The study uses APS' weighted high school GPA because Achieve Atlanta uses that GPA to determine scholarship eligibility. This GPA includes all high school coursework on a 100-point scale, with weights for AP/IB and dual enrollment courses. The HOPE Scholarship GPA includes only core courses on a 4.0 scale, with no weights. Comparisons between the two scales are not straightforward, and researchers did not have access to HOPE GPA data. However, for the cohorts in this study, only 35% of all APS graduates were eligible for the HOPE scholarship.

Achieve Atlanta created this summary, not the report's authors. Achieve Atlanta provided GPL with partial funding, the necessary data, and feedback on the full report. However, it did not have editorial control of the report's contents.



@achieveatlanta
achieveatlanta.org