

How Scholarship America Created a Scholarship Program with Impact



In 2013, Scholarship America developed the kind of partnership all nonprofits dream of: journalist Katie Couric, inspired by our story and our founder, pledged to donate the profits from her first book to our organization.

Immediately, we knew we wanted to use Couric's gift to endow a new type of scholarship program—one that could make a real impact on a population of students that wasn't getting the help they needed, and one that we could hold up as an example of scholarship management best practices.

We researched [public](#) and [private](#) school statistics and [census data](#) and consulted with our experienced program designers, ultimately identifying a population in need: students who'd overcome adversity to get into college, but whose scholarships were only enough to help them pay for their freshman year.

These students, despite being talented and determined, were at risk of the worst-case scenario of dropping out before graduation, saddled with student loan debt and no degree. Pell Grants, the most generous federal aid for low-income students, only cover about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the average cost of college—making low-income and first-generation students four times more likely to drop out. We established the Scholarship America Dream Award to directly address and prevent this from happening.



"My biggest fear about going to college as a first-generation student was not about passing classes but rather being able to simply afford it. The Dream Award helped provide financial relief. It has lifted stress off my family's shoulders."

Michelle Nguyen, Dream Award Scholar

Increasing Access to Increase Impact

Because of the increasing diversity of the college student population, the Dream Award was built to have broad and easy-to-understand eligibility requirements. Any full-time student in an associate's or bachelor's degree program is welcome to apply, provided they have a 3.0 GPA and financial need.

This strategy has led to a uniquely diverse group of Dream Award Scholars: they are from widely varied ethnic backgrounds, pursuing an array of different degrees and fields of study at all kinds of colleges and universities. They are both citizens and DACA students, and they have divergent but ambitious goals.

The common element: they come from more challenging circumstances than most college students. **Nearly 70% of them are the first in their families to earn a bachelor's degree, and more than 90% of them rely on both scholarships and work to help pay for college.** What's more, 80% are responsible for contributing to their family's income, and 30% serve as caregivers at home.

Financial Support that Follows the Student

To serve this population, we knew that the Dream Award had to be renewable. Applicants had already experienced their financial aid drying up once—we had to be certain that it wouldn't happen again. To keep up with skyrocketing costs, we built growth into the program. Each Dream Award Scholar receives funds for up to four years, and the amount of their award grows by up to \$1,000 each year to account for cost of living increases.

This dedicated, ongoing support helps in two ways: eliminating financial stress and opening up new opportunities for resume-building activities like internships, studying abroad and volunteering—because college is more than what takes place in the classroom.

With an average total award of more than \$24,000, the Dream Award is a truly impactful scholarship, especially for the many Dream Award Scholars whose parents are unable to contribute financially to their education.

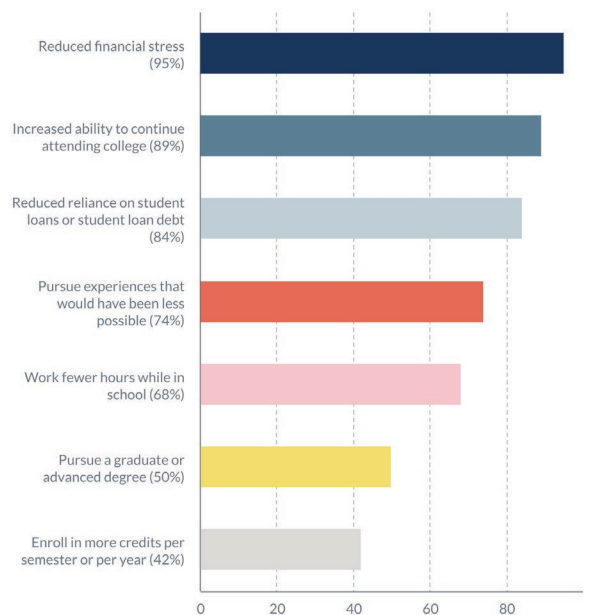
The financial impact goes beyond graduation, too: **60% of Dream Award Scholars reported graduating with no student loan debt, and 73% of Scholars still in college anticipate having \$10,000 or less in debt when they graduate.** That's significantly less than the [national average of \\$29,800 in student loan debt at the time of graduation.](#)

Support Beyond the Scholarship

In addition to the financial award, Dream Award Scholars are invited on an all-expenses-paid trip to Scholarship America's annual Dreams to Success celebration in Washington, DC. It's our opportunity to celebrate them—and it's their opportunity to meet one another, build their network, access important professional skills development and teach our supporters and partners what student life is like.

By adding this non-financial support to the program, we help bring our Dream Award cohorts together in a supportive environment where they can share their struggles and successes. Dream Award Scholars are invited to speak on panels directly addressing scholarship providers, and in addition to networking with one another, they get to spend time with scholarship supporters and mentors.

As one student reported: "The DC event made me feel empowered and that I deserved the scholarship. Networking with other winners ... also provided perspective on who the people are that believe in us - the donors and the Scholarship America employees."



Inspired by these connections, recipients have discovered further scholarship and fellowship opportunities to further their studies—and have given back by donating time, sharing advice and telling their own stories to inspire others.

Improving the Dream Award

While the Dream Award has made an indelible impact already – and will celebrate the 100-recipient milestone in 2020 – we continue to work on improving it.

Since the Dreams to Success event has become such a significant part of the scholarship, our students have expressed interest in more ongoing meet-up and networking opportunities. While they're from a generation that connects digitally, they also put a high value on face-to-face gatherings. We are working on ways to meet this need for present and future cohorts.

We're also still working on the best ways to include other non-scholarship support. The 2019 class of Dream Award Scholars were the first to receive a support and mentoring curriculum as part of the award, and while it provides valuable learning, it also adds more responsibilities to their already-busy lives. Striking a balance between helpful enrichment and demanding deadlines will be an ongoing challenge that we seek to solve.

Student-reported levels of engagement in deep learning were, on average, 11% higher for first generation students who took part in one to two high-impact activities like internships and study abroad compared to first generation students who did not.

(NACE, *The Impact Of Internships And Study Abroad On The Career Readiness Of First-Generation Students*)

Big Dreams, Bright Futures

Despite these areas for improvement, we believe the Dream Award is truly making an impact. Though we have only had five classes of Scholars so far, our discussions with them indicate the program is moving just where we'd hoped it would.

Scholars are graduating with all kinds of degrees in widely varied fields of study. They're following their passions, whether those are for science, language, social justice, entrepreneurship or public service.

And they're continuing their education: half of all recipients have said they're able to pursue a graduate or advanced degree thanks to the Dream Award. They've been able to take advantage of new opportunities to study and live abroad; to inspire younger family members; and to give back to their communities—one Dream Award Scholar is even working as a teacher in the elementary school where she grew up.

By providing needed support to students who are poised to do great things, the Scholarship America Dream Award is built to make a real impact. And we look forward to doing so for many years to come.

