

# Evaluation Report: Elevation Scholars

## An Evaluation of the Elevation Scholars Program

**Institute of Higher Education**  
College of Education  
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## **Background: Elevation Scholars**

Despite increased accessibility to higher education over the last several decades, significant completion gaps for low-income, first-generation, and minoritized students remain (Glass, 2023; Startz, 2022). Scholars attribute these disparities to overlapping barriers across the college-going pipeline, including resource and information gaps, competing financial demands, and inadequate social support (Cross et al., 2018; Engle, 2008; Falcon, 2015; Parnes et al., 2020). Research has shown that responsive pre- and in-college programs structured to remove these barriers are most impactful when they are comprehensive and multifaceted, combining both financial and mentorship support (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Perna, 2015).

Elevation Scholars is a five-year customized award program dedicated to supporting high-achieving, low-income first-generation students from central Florida in their journey towards a postsecondary degree. The program, characterized by a “to and through” approach, provides a combination of financial support, admissions assistance, and college success services. Founded in 2014, the organization serves approximately 18 students each year.

### **Part One: Peer Programs and Qualitative Analysis**

#### **“The First Time I Realized I Was Worth Something”: A Qualitative Evaluation of Elevation Scholars**

##### **I. Purpose and Deliverables**

In Part One, the University of Florida’s Institute of Higher Education (UF IHE) evaluation team provides a detailed breakdown of peer programs and important qualitative findings to better understand scholars’ experiences and provide important insight to the Elevation Scholars program. The qualitative component of the analysis is part of a larger, mixed-methods evaluation of Elevation Scholars.

##### **II. Research Design**

As a complement to the quantitative component of the evaluation, which allows us to understand descriptive patterns in admissions, enrollment, persistence, and graduation, this component employs qualitative methodologies to (1) gather detailed information pertaining to the capacity and mission of peer programs across the United States and (2) better understand programmatic components as they are experienced by program participants.

To gather comparative context for Elevation’s program offerings, we conducted a holistic, nationwide overview of peer programs using publicly available data gathered from organizational websites and annual reports. Our inclusion criteria were (1) designation as a college access or success program and (2) inclusion of financial support, mentorship support, or a combination of the two. We catalogued programs across 35 relevant dimensions, including mission statements, impact reports, and financial compensation (if a financial component was

included). All pertinent information was collated into a spreadsheet for comparative investigation. This deliverable will be included as the sole attachment included alongside this evaluation report.

To gather a more in-depth understanding of the Elevation Scholars program, we conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with program participants. Using a purposive sampling strategy, we recruited both current and alumni scholars of the program who represent a diverse array of “cohorts” (enrollment years) to understand students’ experiences over the life of the program. After creating a recruitment email with study details, Elevation Scholars staff emailed eligible students, connecting them with researchers from the IHE team. The researchers then sent a scheduling link for Zoom interviews to those who agreed to participate. To foster an open and flexible dialogue, we used an interview protocol containing 8 primary questions, with potential follow-up questions if more information was needed (see Appendix A). Each interview lasted between 25 and 45 minutes, was transcribed verbatim, and coded to allow the IHE team to create emergent themes (see Appendix B for example coding).

### **III. Key Findings**

#### **Overview of Peer Programs**

We identified 66 comparable peer programs in the United States, with approximately 62% operating from the local level. Among the most noteworthy components for comparison were whether a program included (1) college access support, such as ACT/SAT prep, college essay practice, FAFSA support, or scholarship help; (2) college retention services, such as peer mentoring or success coaching; and (3) a financial package intended to cover tuition, fees, or other college costs.

Approximately 98% of peer programs listed college access support on their website, with the majority of programs offering application assistance and ACT/SAT prep. Just under 87% offered college retention services and approximately 50% included a financial package. While the share of programs offering services across one or two dimensions of support was high, only 44% offered support across all three. Among programs that included a financial package, awards ranged from \$500-\$450,000. The median financial award across programs was \$12,600, approximately half the size of Elevation Scholars’ \$25,000 award. Among programs offering a financial component, Elevation Scholars ranks in the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile of award funding.

#### **Participant Interviews**

Following the coding process described above, the IHE team identified four emergent themes: (1) holistic and individualized support, (2) cultural competency and family engagement, (3) sustaining community, and (4) seeing students through their college degree.

##### *Holistic and Individualized Support*

Every scholar discussed how Elevation’s financial support both made college feel possible and

allowed them to focus on academics to ensure their success. They described their flexible and highly individualized financial contracts as “a lifted barrier” that “made [them] better student[s]” by funding previously unaffordable opportunities during their college searches, such as out-of-state visits, and alleviating the need for taking jobs during the school year that would distract from homework and campus activities once enrolled. Many scholars also spoke directly to the provision of the financial award, explaining that annual contract negotiation meetings allowed them to adjust their allocations as their financial needs changed—for example, re-purposing funds previously allocated for textbooks to cover post-graduate preparation costs such as LSAT study materials in their final year. They also valued these meetings as opportunities to play an active role in the construction of their budget. In its material support and manner of distribution, scholars felt the financial package assuaged significant stressors related to college costs.

Scholars also emphasized the importance of socioemotional support in their college-going journey, both during the high school/search and application phase and once on campus through dedicated success coaches. They described dedicated mentors as replacing the support overburdened high school counselors could not provide and assisting them in matching their personal interests with complementary programs and schools. Once on campus, scholars found this support in success coaches, who they described as affirmative and responsive, not only to their academic needs but also to their emotional and mental well-being. Scholars described this support as instrumental to their self-perception, goal setting, and ability to persist when things went wrong. Summarized by one scholar, “It was the first time I realized I was worth something.”

### *Cultural Competency and Family Engagement*

Scholars repeatedly acknowledged the importance of mentors and coaches who understood, represented, and spoke to their cultural context, whether through specific application and enrollment needs, culturally responsive family engagement, or organizational diversity. For many students, barriers to enrollment related to their being the first generation in their family to attend college were inflected by their other identities, including their race/ethnicity and citizenship status. These barriers made it more difficult for scholars to obtain college-going information, complete applications, and communicate the process to their parents, some of whom did not speak English. Scholars told stories of staff members speaking to their parents in their native languages to ease feelings of anxiety and exclusion, helping fund travel for immigration hearings, and working to help students reconcile personal goals with familial needs and parental expectations. Several also described a staff who visually reflected the identities of themselves and their families, which made them feel seen and understood. One scholar explained, “[t]hey tend to choose college coaches that look like us, so like you know, we’ll have one that’s Hispanic, one Asian and Black... and one that’s White... so just having that diversity—and you actually *see* that, it’s not like, a program façade and they’re not about helping others. It’s seeing people who was once in my position who looked like me and see how here they are...helping little old me...it’s really moving.”

### *Sustaining Community*

The phrases “community” and “like a family” surfaced in almost every participant interview, demonstrating the importance of connection for scholars as they navigated the journey from college applications to graduation. Scholars built and sustained connections with one another, former scholars, and Elevation staff through several different modes, including pre-college boot camps, the organization’s GroupMe, and social events. Many described these opportunities to connect as crucial to surviving the “brand new world” of college and considered them to be the most influential facet of the program. While connecting with fellow scholars allowed them to commiserate about their struggles, having accessible staff who were ready and willing to answer questions allowed them to obtain advice and resources. Scholars attending institutions out of state and away from their support networks felt it particularly useful to have a coach who was “always an email or phone call away.”

### *Seeing Students Through to Their College Degree*

Another theme that emerged was the importance of seeing scholars through the duration of their college degree. One scholar stated, “They spent a lot of their time making sure students, first gen students, you know, make it to college and get through the four years of college and that’s big in itself. Most programs don’t even, you know...they help students by giving them a scholarship, but they don’t really ride it out with them. They don’t really see it to the end.” This sentiment was repeated across several interviews, demonstrating scholars’ perceptions of their ongoing relationship with Elevation as essential to their persistence. In addition to benefits of accountability and support, several participants credited their decisions to pursue graduate school to their consistent and enduring relationship with Elevation.

Equally noteworthy, however, is that for as many scholars who felt they were supported all the way through their five-year scholar award, there were an equal number of scholars who felt they needed more. These participants, primarily concentrated in classes 4, 5, and 6, felt their communication with Elevation “trickled off” or became more “hands off” over time in ways that made them feel forgotten. These observations aligned with comments about the organization’s growth and capacity, with scholars reasoning that the organization still cared about them but did not have enough staff to attend to them in addition to incoming students. While some scholars considered this to be intentional and positive part of the program intended to make them more independent or self-directed, others used the language of “middle children” or being “lost in the shuffle” to describe the declining support.

## **IV. Concluding Note for Part One**

Part One of this report summarizes initial findings from our holistic overview of peer programs and participant interviews. We offer detailed descriptive information pertaining comparable peer programs and emergent themes to frame the context and direction of future work within the Elevation Scholars program. One key area for further examination by Elevation Scholars is the organization’s declining support model and its influence on student morale across class cohorts

over time. We will explore academic success outcomes, such as persistence and graduation, in Part Two of the Evaluation Report and offer recommendations based on our overall findings.

## **Part Two: Descriptive Quantitative Analysis**

### **I. Purpose, Data, and Research Design**

This part of the evaluation report uses a descriptive quantitative approach and cannot make inferential claims due to the low number of individuals included in the sample. The goal of this approach is to provide a broad overview of the outcomes of interest and does not purport to make causal claims. In other words, we are able to describe students' admissions decisions, enrollment outcomes, college GPAs (scholars only), college persistence, and graduation outcomes. We did not examine financial aid outcomes due to these data not being provided. We define average first-year GPA by taking the average GPA of scholars' first three semesters. Enrollment, persistence, and graduation outcomes include scholars and non-scholars, while others include only Elevation Scholars participants. For admissions decisions, we only received data from Elevation Scholars cohorts 5-9 and therefore can only report admissions decisions for those cohorts.

To conduct descriptive quantitative analyses, we used data provided by Elevation Scholars as well as National Student Clearinghouse data. We leverage National Student Clearinghouse to explore enrollment, persistence, and graduation outcomes among scholars and non-scholars. Although National Student Clearinghouse data represent the only way to conduct such analyses, 124 students from our query had no information available and could not be included in Part Two of this report. The missing data are due to students in the most recent cohort being too young, students blocking their data, the institutions not reporting to the National Student Clearinghouse, typographical errors, name changes, or students providing nicknames or partial names instead of full names. For example, the National Student Clearinghouse would not be able to find data for a student who declares their name to be "Nick Gomez" when their legal name is "Nicholas A. Hernandez-Gomez." Despite limitations associated with National Student Clearinghouse data, these data allow the IHE team to provide important descriptive evidence pertaining to the persistence and graduation outcomes for many Elevation Scholars participants and non-scholars who applied but were not selected to participate in the Elevation Scholars program.

### **II. Key Findings**

The first outcome of this evaluation explores where scholars applied, were admitted, we declined, and ultimately enrolled. Scholars applied to a total of 175 colleges and universities, with an average acceptance rate of about 52.4%. The majority of scholars identify as first-generation college students. Scholars who were first-generation college students had a lower average acceptance rate (48.5%) than their peers who did not identify as first-generation college students (72.7%). Among Elevation Scholars cohorts 5-9, the institutions that accepted the highest numbers of Elevation Scholars include the University of Central Florida (44), the University of Florida (38), Florida State University (37), Wake Forest University (25), and the University of South Florida (22). For those same cohorts, the institutions that declined the highest numbers of Elevation Scholars include Duke University (24), the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill (14), Stanford University (13), Columbia University (11), the University of Florida (11), Florida State University (10), and Wesleyan University (10). Finally, the institutions that enrolled the highest numbers of Elevation Scholars in those same cohorts include Wake Forest University (22), the University of Florida (18), Florida State University (14),

and the University of Central Florida (11).

We visualize application data in Figure 1. To simplify the figure, we focus specifically on institutions with 10 or more students in any of the application decision categories, including those capturing whether a student was accepted, not accepted, deferred, and/or waitlisted.

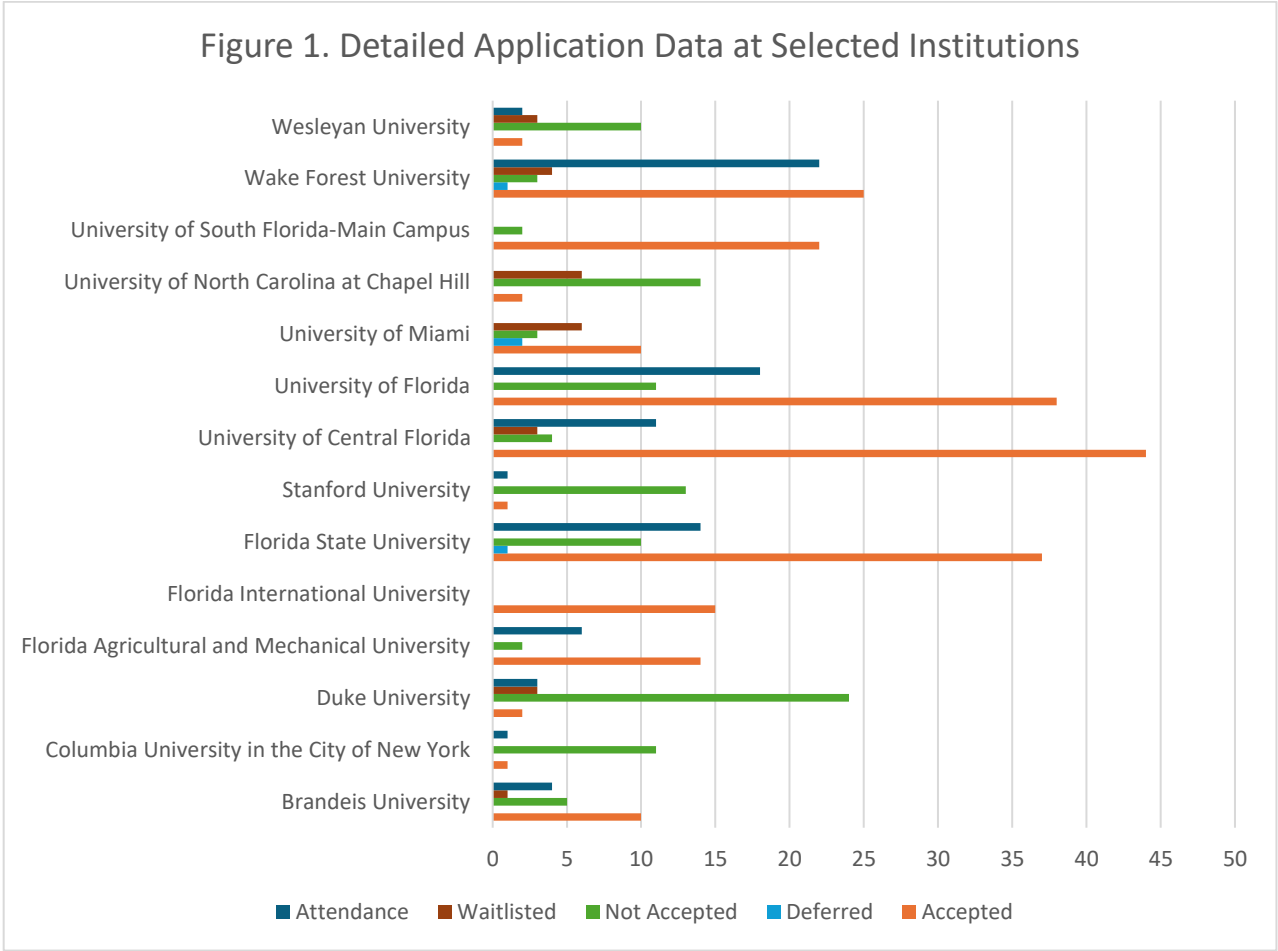


Figure 2, which is provided directly below, focuses on institutions with at least 10 students who were either accepted or not accepted to a given institutions to show the acceptance outcomes among Elevation Scholars at selected institutions.



Figure 2. Elevation Scholars Acceptance at Selected Institutions

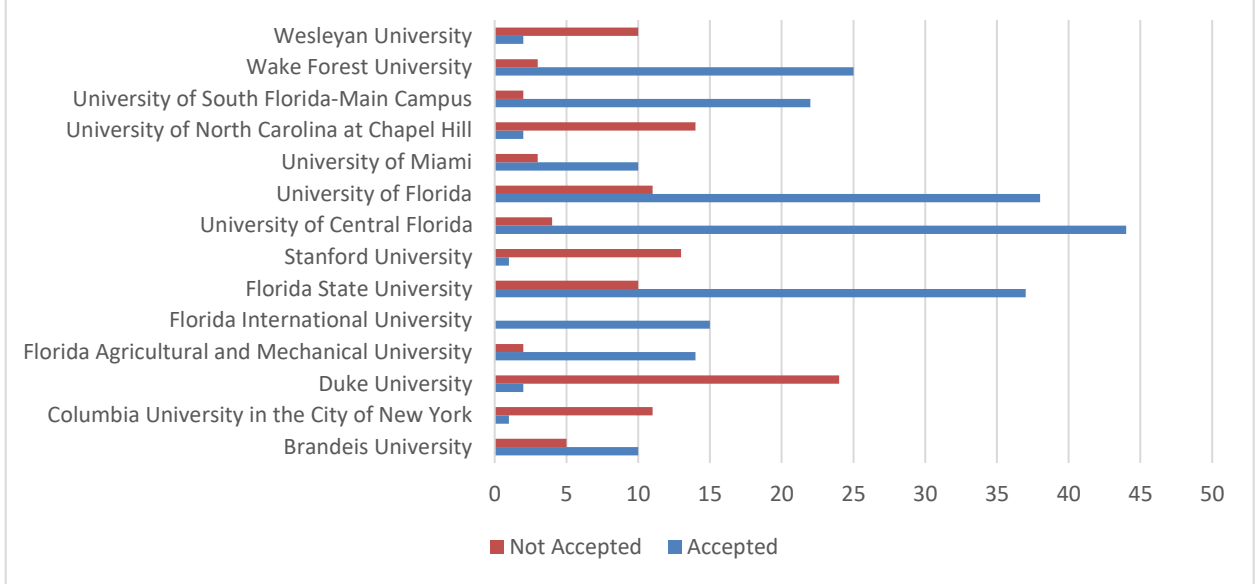


Figure 3a focuses on institutions with at least 5 students who were enrolled at a given college or university to show the enrollment outcomes of Elevation Scholars and non-scholars at selected institutions. Figure 3b focuses on institutions with at least 3 students who were enrolled at a given college or university. Importantly, Figures 3a and 3b use National Student Clearinghouse data, which will have lower enrollment numbers than data provided by Elevation Scholars due to missing data; however, we would be unable to report enrollment outcomes of *both* scholars and non-scholars without using National Student Clearinghouse data. With that caveat in mind, these data begin to show a trend of Elevation Scholars shifting away from community colleges and toward four-year institutions, whereas non-scholars appear to be much more likely to enroll at a community college.

Figure 3a. Enrollment of Scholars and Non-Scholars at Selected Institutions

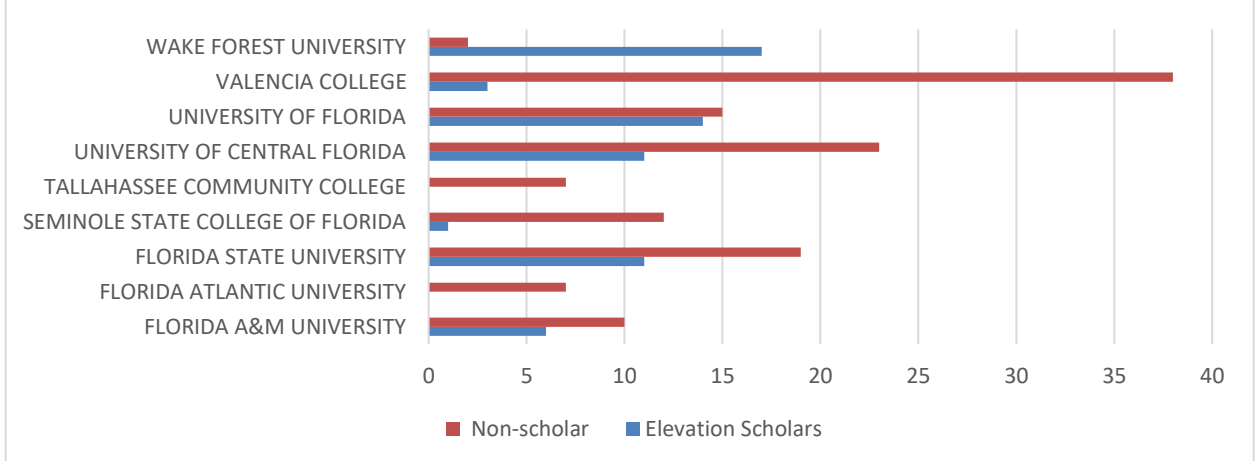
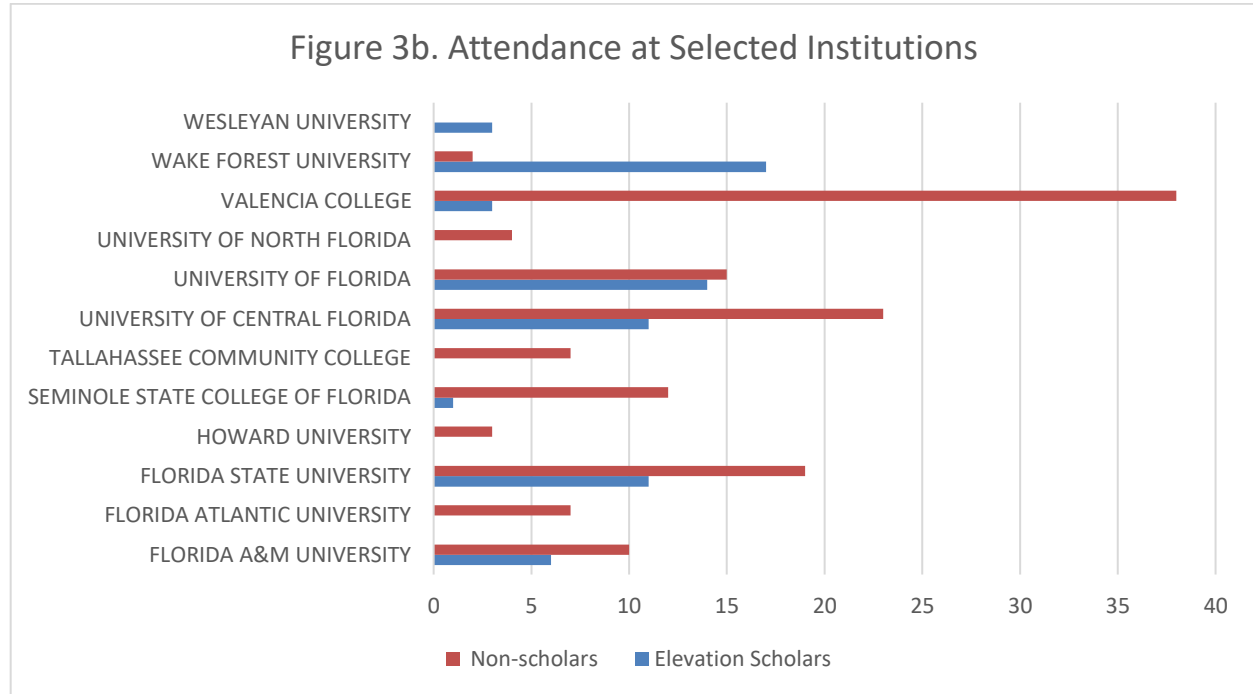


Figure 3b. Attendance at Selected Institutions



The next outcome of interest for the purposes of this report is college GPA for Elevation Scholars participants only. We focus initially on first-year college GPA before delving into semester-by-semester college GPA. The average first-year college GPA among Elevation Scholars was 3.29, with first-generation students, Black students, Native American students, and male students reporting slightly lower first-year GPAs than their peers. Figure 4 shows a scatter plot of first-year GPAs among Elevation Scholars participants in which each data point represents one student.

Figure 4. First-Year GPA

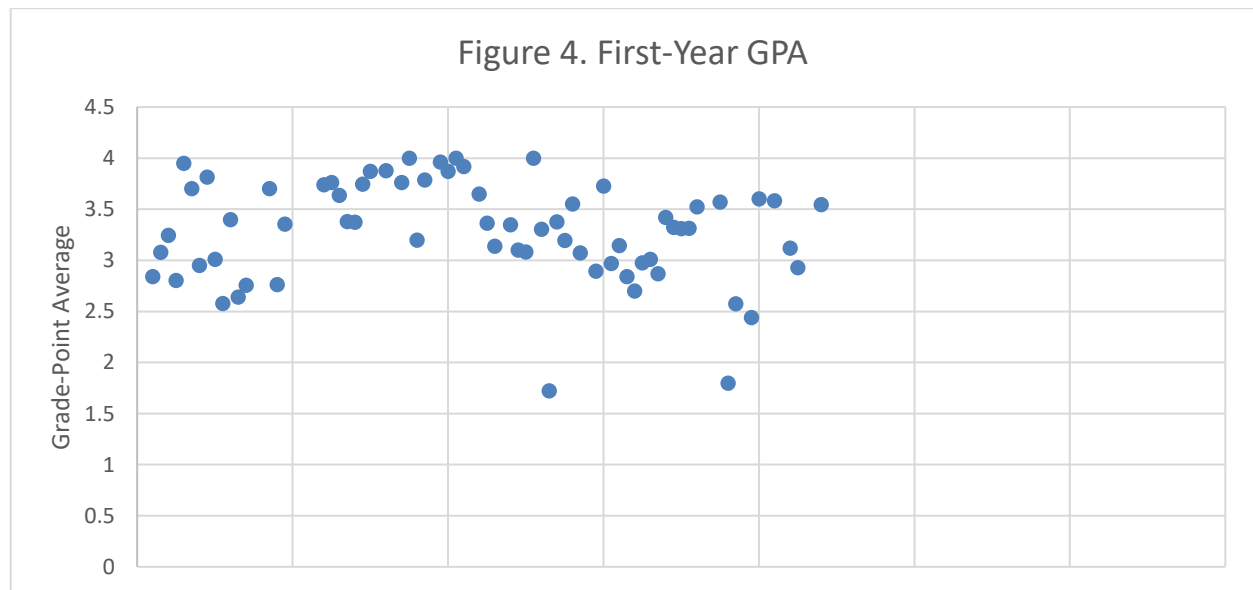


Figure 5 depicts semester-by-semester GPAs for Elevation Scholars participants. Scholars' average first-semester GPA was 3.35 before declining slightly to 3.29 in their second semester and 3.25 in their third semester. Semester-by-semester remains relatively stable between semesters 4 and 8, with a minimum of 3.31 and maximum of 3.45. Although the lowest individual-semester GPA (2.69) surfaces in the 9<sup>th</sup> semester, we do not consider this to be a valid estimate due to only four data points. To show the relatively stable semester-by-semester GPA trends, we provide Figure 5 directly below.

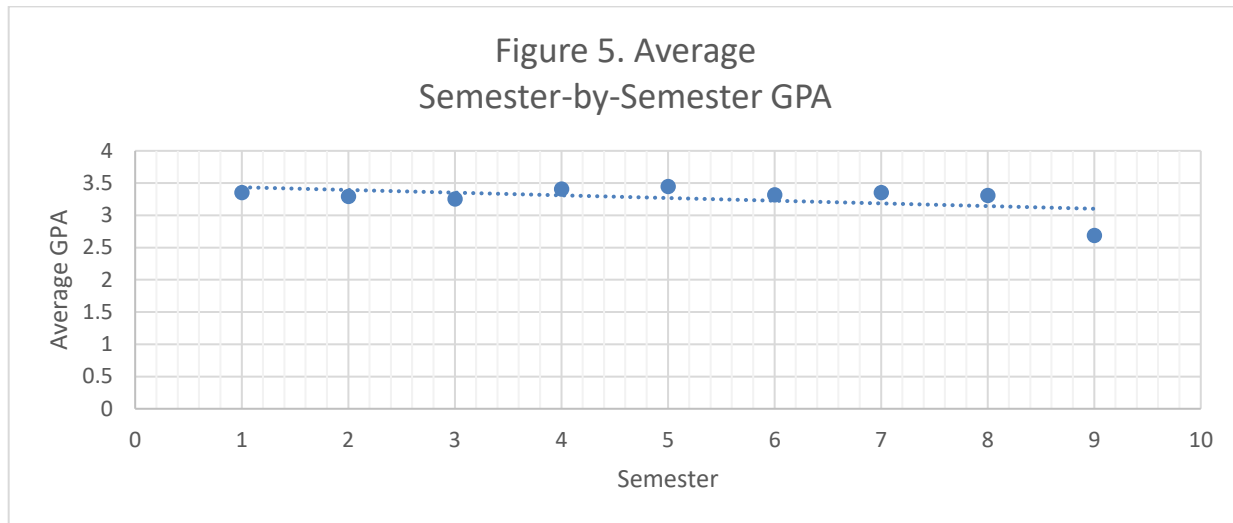
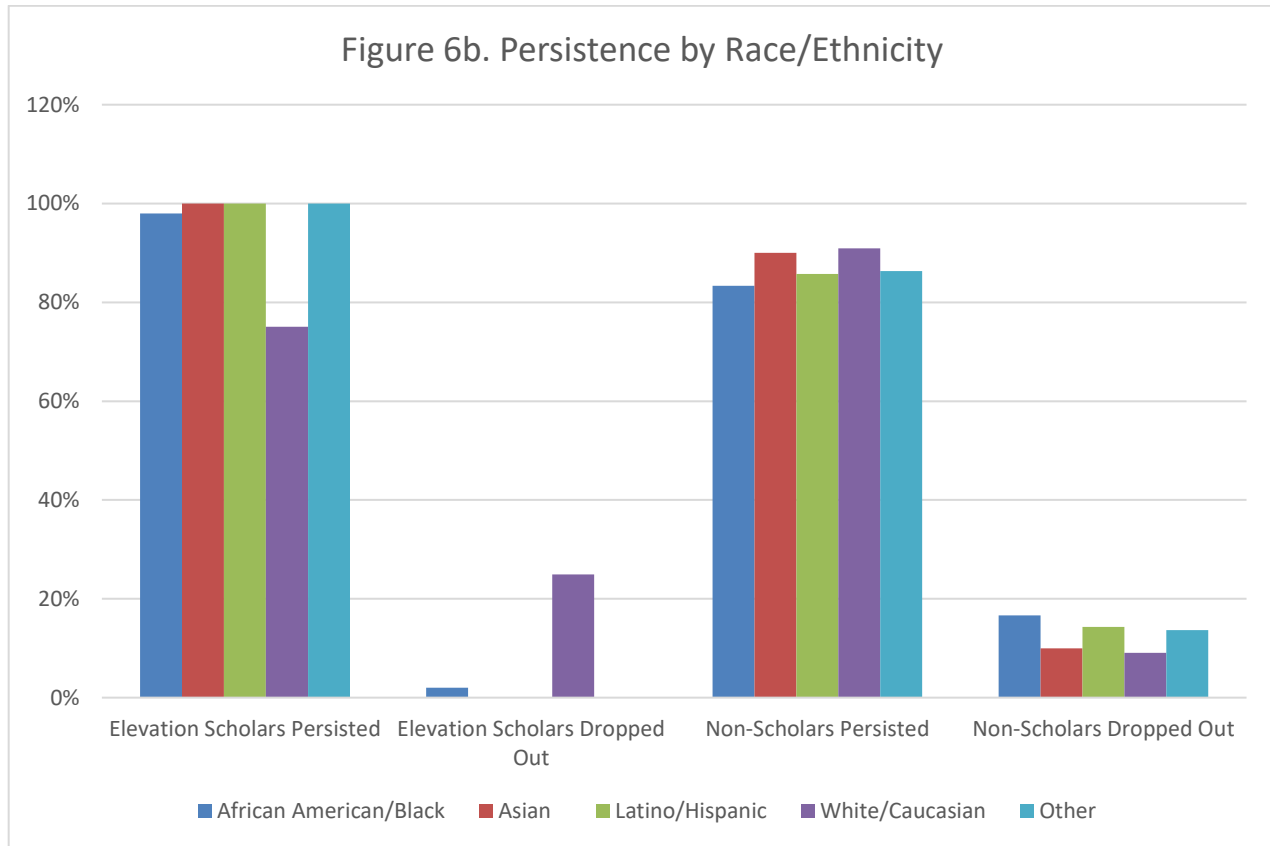
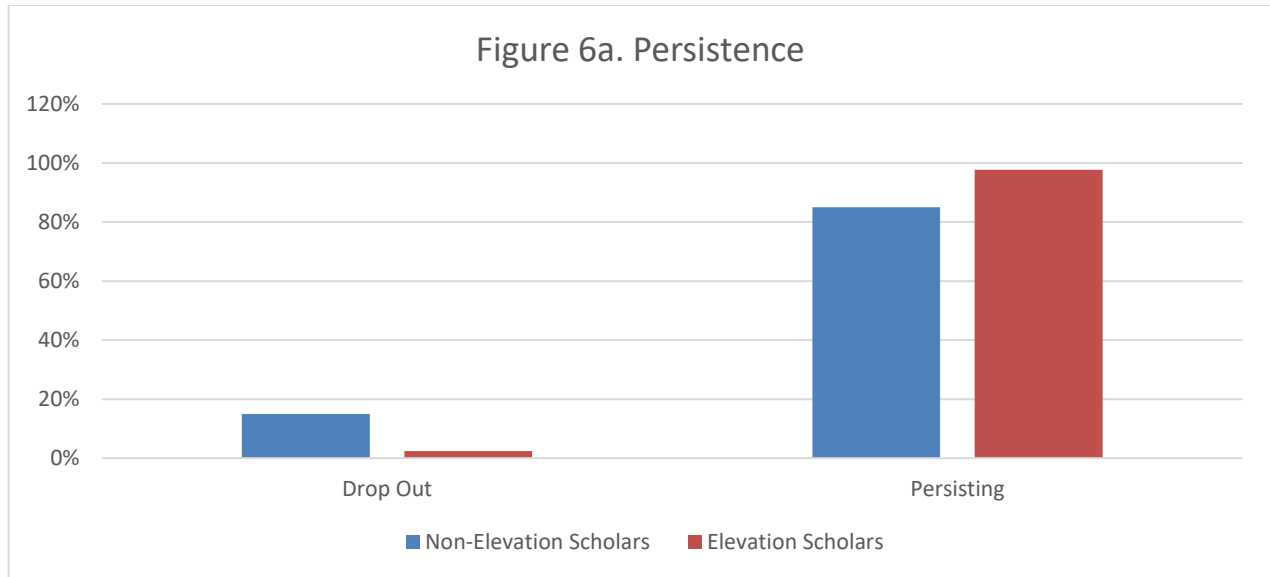
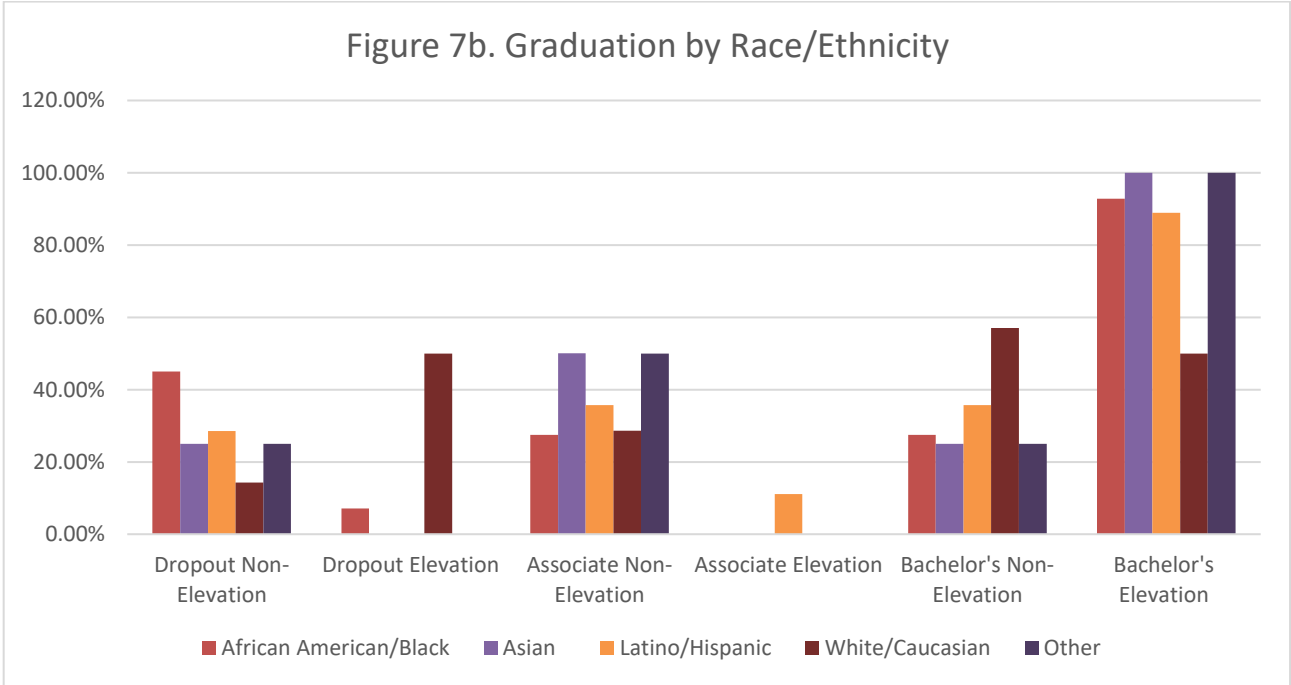
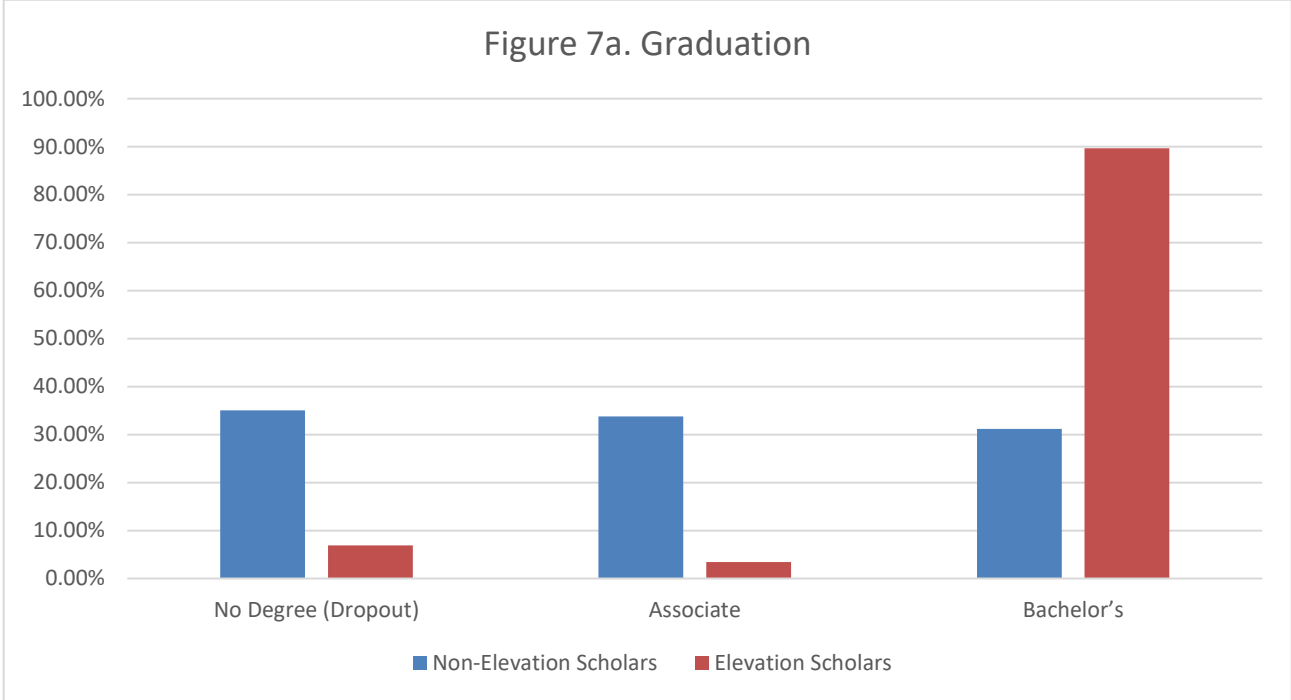


Figure 6a offers an overview of persistence trends among Elevation Scholars participants and non-scholars. National Student Clearinghouse provided persistence data for 86 Elevation Scholars participants and 180 non-scholars. In the aggregate, we show that 97.7% of Elevation Scholars participants have persisted in college, while 85% of non-scholars persisted in college. Both Elevation Scholars participants who stopped out or dropped out of college were first-generation students. Among non-scholars, a slightly lower proportion of first-generation students (83%) persisted in college. Figure 6b provides persistence trends among Elevation Scholars participants and non-scholars by race/ethnicity.



The next figure in this report, Figure 7a, provides a visual display of graduation outcomes, showing whether a given student left college with no degree, earned an associate degree, or earned a bachelor’s degree. National Student Clearinghouse provided graduation data for 29 Elevation Scholars participants and 77 non-scholars. Among Elevation Scholars participants included in the

National Student Clearinghouse data, 6.9% left college without a degree, 3.4% earned an associate degree, and 89.7% earned a bachelor’s degree. For non-scholars included in the National Student Clearinghouse data, 35.1% left college without a degree, 33.8% earned an associate degree, and 31.1% earned a bachelor’s degree. Figure 7b provides graduation outcomes among Elevation Scholars participants and non-scholars by race/ethnicity.



### III. Concluding Note for Part Two

This evaluation report outlines 66 peer programs across the nation, highlights the emergent themes drawn from 25 one-on-one interviews with Elevation Scholars program participants, and describes a host of quantitative outcomes among both scholars and non-scholars. The qualitative data reveal a myriad of positive outcomes associated with Elevation Scholars program participation, but the quantitative data describe a critically important development that speaks to the value of Elevation Scholars and similar programs with aligned purposes. To be clear, the data from this evaluation report show that a substantially higher proportion of non-scholars are going to community college or leaving college without a degree, while a much higher proportion of Elevation Scholars participants are going to four-year institutions, persisting in college, and earning a bachelor's degree.

As open-access institutions, community colleges serve an important role by educating a disproportionate share of historically underrepresented students, but students are better served going to four-year institutions – both academically and economically. Regardless of the institution type attended, students who complete college have better financial and social outcomes than their peers who drop out of college. By shifting students toward four-year institutions and cultivating cohorts of students who appear to be persisting and graduating from more-selective colleges, the Elevation Scholars program is doing important and impactful work that is systematically designed to benefit traditionally underserved students in critical ways.

### IV. Recommendations based on Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

Elevations Scholars provides important support and services to low-income students and a disproportionate share of racially minoritized and first-generation students. Given the important role and positive influence of Elevation Scholars, the next phase of organizational operations requires stakeholders to examine how to make further improvements to benefit scholars and the broader central Florida community. Below, the UF IHE evaluation team outlines several recommendations based on both qualitative and quantitative data obtained and analyzed via this evaluation, with a particular focus on the Helios Education Foundation's Black Student Success Strategy.

- Increase and sustain transparency regarding the declining support model. Numerous scholars noted that they felt like “forgotten middle children” or “lost in the shuffle” after they enrolled in college and completed their first year.
- Leverage formalized peer groups to directly address challenges associated with the declining support model. Even when scholars expressed frustrations about feelings of abandonment after enrolling in college, they continually praised Elevation Scholars for the overall positive impact it had on their individual trajectory. Most scholars interviewed for this report indicated that they would be excited to engage with incoming scholars to share their experiences and encourage them along the way. Because Elevation Scholars has graduated several cohorts, we recommend formalizing a peer mentorship program to connect current scholars with recent alumni, with a particular focus on Black and other racially minoritized students who are approaching the end of their second and third years in the program who may not have the same level of support as others at the beginning or end of the program. This

formalized peer mentorship program could serve as a modest supplement alongside the success coaches who are completing regular check-ins in addition to their other responsibilities.

- Expand “red carpet” partnerships with additional institutions, prioritizing selective minority-serving institutions. Numerous scholars noted that Elevation Scholars was “pushing” specific universities, such as Wake Forest University, but did not receive similar enthusiasm when discussing historically Black colleges and universities or other minority-serving institutions they deemed to be a better fit. Several scholars appreciated the notion of a “red carpet experience” at Wake Forest University, but they sought a similar experience at other institution that were not primarily White institutions. If it is not feasible to expand “red carpet” partnerships in the short term, we recommend intentional and transparent conversations with scholars, particularly Black scholars, about the costs and benefits of attending a highly selective primarily White institution, such as Wake Forest, relative to other high-quality, selective four-year options, such as historically Black colleges and universities or other minority-serving institutions.
- Continue to reinforce the importance of attending selective four-year institutions. The Elevation Scholars program is carrying out critically important work by essentially shifting many low-income students from open-access institutions to the more-selective four-year institutions they are qualified to attend. Decades of data reveal that this type of enrollment shift will increase students’ likelihood of earning a bachelor’s degree and, as a consequence, increase their economic and non-economic outcomes after college.
- Develop a data infrastructure to allow for data-driven organizational practices. Given the stated goal of the Elevation Scholars program to use data and evidence to shape future decisions and practices, the Institute of Higher Education recommends investing in establishing and cultivating a data infrastructure. More specifically, the Elevation Scholars program would benefit from implementing Salesforce or any cloud-based software that would allow Elevation scholars to collect and analyze context-specific data in ways that would benefit students, the local community, and ultimately the state of Florida.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Protocol

1. How did you become involved with Elevation Scholars?
  - a. If scholars mention other programs that connected them with Elevation, ask follow-up about the interplay of that program with their Elevation involvement.
2. Will you describe what participation in Elevation Scholars looks like based on your experience?
  - a. If no mention of program design features, ask a follow-up.
3. Does Elevation Scholars tailor success coaching to fit students' individual plans and schedules? If so, how?
4. Will you describe how you decided where to attend college?
  - a. If Elevation Scholars is not mentioned, ask directly about the role of Elevation Scholars
5. What types of Elevation Scholars programming have you participated in?
  - a. If new programmatic elements surface that have not already been discussed, ask a follow-up.
  - b. If no mention of funding, ask about this specific component.
6. How has your participation in Elevation Scholars changed your educational trajectory and/or personal and professional goals?
  - a. Are there parts of the Elevation Scholars program that you have found particularly influential or transformative?
7. How would you describe the program to a future student interested in participating?
8. Moving forward, how can Elevation Scholars better assist potential college students seeking help to navigate success in college?

## APPENDIX B

### Example of Open Coding Raw Interview Data

<p>Raw Interview Data:</p> <p>They made it a point to meet with several of the students and their families towards the end and even throughout just to make sure that the families are aware of what's going on. For my sake, my family, I'm Haitian American. So, my family... it took a minute for them to understand certain things, or you know, comprehend what's going on. So, whereas some families, you know, they really don't speak any English, anything like that, so it was hard for them to understand the situation or what was actually being put in motion.</p>	<p>Open Codes:</p> <p>Language/cultural barriers; opaqueness of college-going procedures; family involvement</p>
<p>Raw Interview Data:</p> <p>Um, honestly, I think being elevation scholar has made it that like, I think I could have like an educational trajectory in the sense of because of like, certain, you know, like immigration things. I didn't think I would have been able to even attend college and be able to, like, do anything aside from going straight into the workforce, and I think being able to meet with people and talk to people—not sure if you know their names specifically, but people like [staff names]— learning that like, there are different possibilities and different opportunities or different options that I never even knew about.</p>	<p>Open Codes:</p> <p>Immigration status; educational opportunity; career options; exposure to new possibilities; influence of role models</p>