

“I Knew I Was Making a Difference”: Supporting Early College High School Graduates Working Toward Bachelor’s Degrees

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Early college high schools (ECHSs) are designed to improve the postsecondary outcomes of historically marginalized students in higher education. ECHS graduates are the target population for an innovative scholarship and support program, the Greater Texas Foundation (GTF) Scholars Program, that has operated at several public universities in Texas for more than a decade. We examine the perspectives of the GTF Scholars program coordinators who implement the core elements of the program. Coordinators share their views about the GTF Scholars—from their strong potential to the stumbling blocks they can face. The coordinators share the strategies that they have developed and used to support this unique group of students. This article offers best practices useful to any institutions seeking to improve their support for ECHS graduates.

Keywords: early college high school, college persistence, college retention, student services

Through the Greater Texas Foundation (GTF) Scholars Program, participating public universities provide multiyear scholarships with wraparound support to early college high school¹ (ECHS) graduates working toward their bachelor's degrees. The GTF Scholars Program is a first-of-its kind intervention that has supported this group of undergraduates since 2012.²

The scholarships incentivize full-time enrollment, avoid displacement of other forms of financial aid, and provide financial counseling aimed at minimizing students' need for loans. Host institutions offer other forms of support and services, including academic coaching, specialized advising, meetings, and workshops on topics such as introductions to campus resources, stress reduction, personal finance, and nutrition. Program coordinators are the main point of contact on campus for the GTF Scholars. GTF Scholars meet regularly with the coordinators to fulfill program requirements, but they can also go to the coordinators with their personal struggles, concerns, and questions. Coordinators are responsible for delivering the program's core services. In spring 2022, eight program coordinators, representing seven of the eight universities in the GTF Scholars Program, shared their perspectives about the assets and strengths of the GTF Scholars, as well as the challenges and barriers that these students face. Coordinators offered 10 strategies to ensure that the GTF Scholars receive care, comfort, and form a connection to their campuses. This brief offers considerations for those interested in ECHS graduates seeking bachelor's degrees.

Strengths of and Challenges Facing ECHS Graduates

Coordinators agreed that when ECHS graduates transition to 4-year colleges, they arrive with uniquely strong potential to succeed. GTF Scholars were seen as highly driven, motivated, hardworking, and committed to their educational goals. As one coordinator put it, "They're used to meeting high expectations." These characteristics, in addition to their need for only a few years of additional study to earn a bachelor's degree, led coordinators to consider ECHS graduates a "good bet" for their universities. One coordinator noted, "The beauty of GTF Scholars coming in is [that]

¹ Early college high schools (ECHSs) offer a dual-enrollment experience complemented by a range of social and academic supports. ECHSs target historically marginalized students in postsecondary education (including students of color, first-generation college students, and students whose families have low incomes). Attending an ECHS has been shown to increase high school graduation and college attainment rates, and especially associate degree attainment (Song et al., 2021).

² The program has a long track record, during which 41% of participants have completed bachelor's degrees within 3 years (Goldberg et al., 2021) compared with recent studies of ECHS graduates showing a 17%–21% rate of bachelor's degree attainment within 4 years of expected high school graduation (Edmunds et al., 2020; Song et al., 2021).

they make us look good as an institution because they're close—they're halfway to the finish line already. They're first time in college freshmen who'll finish in two to three years."

According to coordinators, there is important converse of the many strengths that ECHS graduates bring: They have less time to become accustomed to their university. One coordinator said, "These students are coming here many times as juniors, and they really don't have that typical time that a first time in college freshman does to sort of find their way." Coordinators mentioned that ECHS graduates were challenged by needing to "navigate" college without knowing about campus resources (e.g., libraries, financial aid services, academic services). The kinds of support that might determine a student's success on a 4-year campus may be available, but students might not be aware of them, know how to access them, or feel comfortable doing so. A coordinator shared, "They have all of these college hours, but they still don't know how to navigate college." Coordinators noted that ECHS students often benefit from high levels of support. At high school graduation, these students transition out of an environment that "mandates" (Edmunds et al., 2013) a full and intensive range of support for students. As one coordinator stated,

When you're in [an early college] high school, you have a coordinator, and you have the partnering college, who [both] have a vested interest in your success, making sure that you're doing everything you need to. Once you get to the university, any university, it's sink or swim, you're in the deep end of the pool. Many times, even people that can advocate for themselves are lost in all of that.

GTF Scholars Program Coordinators as Institutional Agents

Program coordinators shared their perspectives on the aspects of the program that they believed best supported ECHS graduates. They offered 10 strategies that created an environment where students feel cared for, comfortable, and welcome and where they can build confidence and trust in both the program and their institutions. Program coordinators helped students use the resources on their campuses and build self-advocacy skills. Overall, the responses of the GTF Scholars program coordinators showed that they acted as "institutional agents" (Bensimon, 2007), fostering students' success through the provision of "confidence and affirmation as well as the academic, cultural and informational resources needed to succeed" (p. 442).

Program coordinators described 10 strategies for ensuring that GTF Scholars had the environment and information they needed to succeed.

1. A home base: “You’re not just a scholarship recipient. You’re really a part of the program. You’re part of the family on campus. We’re your home base.” Each coordinator described how they made their GTF Scholars feel that they were included in the program.
2. Availability and accessibility: “You can text me; you can call me. Doesn’t matter what time it is.” GTF Scholars program coordinators made varied efforts to help participants feel comfortable, encouraged, and confident. One coordinator gave each student their mobile phone number, making it clear they were personally available to provide support.
3. Judgment-free assistance: “And I think [I offer] the comfort of ‘no question is a bad question, no question’s a silly question.’” Coordinators described the value of being a reassuring, nonintimidating presence for students. This approach fostered students’ trust. As another coordinator stated, “You have to be totally nonjudgmental; unconditional positive regard for the students in your care.”
4. Close coordination with the ECHS and university: One GTF Scholars Program institution accepts GTF Scholars during students’ final year in high school. This model allows for a full academic year for the program to gradually familiarize students with the GTF Scholars Program and the campus. This coordinator said that their program model means that even before the GTF Scholars arrive on campus, students know that someone there already knows their name.
5. Living-learning community: A coordinator described their campus program model that requires all GTF Scholars to reside in a living-learning community and to take a specialized class together in their first year of college.
6. Proactive communication: “You have to connect routinely; you have to be available. This is not a 9-to-5 job.” In addition to fostering a supportive, encouraging program environment, coordinators said a critical part of their role was establishing routine communication with students. One coordinator called all student participants just to “check in.”
7. Celebrating success: “Hey, just wanting to say congrats, we saw you had a really challenging semester, but you did well.” Coordinators pointed out the importance of communication for positive (rather than only disciplinary) reasons.
8. Required engagement: Program coordinators structured their programs to require students’ engagement. As one coordinator said, “The design of the program really helps with that. ... Our students have to hold every semester and they have to meet with their GTF adviser [before registering for classes], so they *have* to. There’s no way around it. Same with events. ... There’s a mandatory one every semester. So, I’d have to say that by design, we create these ways of helping them persist, right?”
9. Facilitated connection to institutional resources: “We’re able to connect them to resources and make it as easy as possible for them to access them. And our

focus as a team in general I would say is access. Yes, there's all these services, but are they accessible? Are students able to find them. Is it hard to make an appointment? Is that office responsive?" Knowing that a given resource exists was insufficient. Students needed help accessing the services, knowing the steps that were involved, meeting eligibility or administrative criteria, and keeping their appointments.

10. Advocating for GTF Scholars: "You cannot put a price on having somebody advocating for you." Although students are coached on how to express their needs to university faculty and administrators, coordinators stood ready to advocate and troubleshoot for GTF Scholars.

"It Is Rewarding in So Many Ways ..."

The GTF Scholars Program has supported ECHS graduates who were earning their bachelor's degrees for more than a decade, and program coordinators have been key to its accomplishments. According to the coordinators, building students' trust is paramount. One coordinator described receiving a thank-you note from an incoming GTF Scholar who was the first in the family to attend college and had reached out frequently with questions. The note said, "My mother says it takes a village. You're part of my village now."

Program coordinators are highly committed to making GTF Scholars feel cared for, comfortable, and connected as the students transition from ECHS to university life. As a coordinator remarked,

The role is so fulfilling. ... When you can negotiate change and you can get something accomplished, it is invigorating. ... Sometimes things get overwhelming because it's like everything would hit at one time. But other times when you went through this process ... and then resolving it positively, it's like wow. It['s] rewarding in so many ways ... because you're dealing with a person's life. I knew I was making a difference.

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