

# A Scholarship Workshop Program to Improve Underrepresented Student Access to Higher Education

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*This study examines the effectiveness of a scholarship workshop program to better prepare low socio-economic and minority students to compete for collegiate scholarships. The study involves 1,367 high risk 9th to 12th grade students in Texas. Analysis of the pre- and post-tests, using a t-test for dependent variables, indicates a statistically significant improvement in the relevant knowledge of workshop participants. As evidenced by this analysis and other data, the workshop program is very successful in educating high risk students about the steps necessary to develop a competitive scholarship application that can increase their chances of accessing a higher education.*

Lack of access to higher education among underrepresented populations is a growing concern in the United States. Challenges to access can take a variety of forms. Researchers such as De Oliver (1998) assert that the location of some universities is not demographically neutral and basic geography limits access for certain minorities. Other researchers examine this issue in terms of both budgets and capacities (Shulock & Moore, 2005), as well as an interactive process between the K-12 system and the admission policies of universities (Yun & Moreno, 2006).

This study addresses access from a socioeconomic perspective as it relates to competitiveness for academic scholarships. Specifically, this research assesses a scholarship workshop program's effectiveness in educating underrepresented student populations about how to maximize their scholarship opportunities and increase their potential to access a higher education.

Scholarship reviewers—whether on a scholarship committee for a university, foundation, or local organization—may read hundreds of scholarship applications during an evaluation period. While a significant number of these applicants may have earned the minimum academic criteria for consideration (i.e., minimum SAT/ACT scores, high school rank, etc.), many applications are dismissed because the subjective components of the applications were prepared ineffectively. Examples of these components include, but are not limited to: 1) poorly developed essays; 2) resumes that do not quantitatively and qualitatively communicate a student's academic, extracurricular, volunteer, and work accomplishments; and 3) ineffectual letters of recommendation. Due to inequalities and the lack of adequate resources available to high schools in low-socioeconomic communities, students attending such institutions are less likely to be prepared to access higher education (Jones et al., 2002). Such students often lack access to guidance counselors (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987) who not only provide academic advice but assistance with preparing admission and competitive scholarship applications. This challenge is further compounded by institutional merit aid, including scholarships, which is often awarded on the basis of standardized test scores, rigorous programs of study, and extracurricular activities that tend to reward students from affluent high schools (Long & Riley, 2007).

Despite this disadvantage, measures can be taken, both internal and external to the K-12 education system, to better assist underrepresented students to obtain scholarship funds and improve their chances of accessing a higher education. The Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships at Texas State University-San Marcos undertook a program to achieve this goal. The program assisted economically disadvantaged students who were at least minimally eligible to compete for academic scholarships in terms of objective criteria (e.g., test scores) by teaching them how to develop effective resumes and essays to better compete for scholarships.

Texas State University secured a \$52,000 Public Benefit Grant from Texas Guaranteed (TG) to develop and conduct a scholarship workshop program targeted at high school students located in low socio-economic communities in Texas. In addition to the TG grant, the program received an in-kind gift from The College Board. The following three questions guided the development of the scholarship workshop and the research study:

1. To what extent does the scholarship workshop increase the knowledge of disadvantaged students with respect to the completion of a competitive scholarship application packet?
2. What is the difference in learning between those students attending the on-site and online workshop sessions?
3. To what extent does the workshop help students to better develop a scholarship essay?

## Literature Review

Considerable research has been conducted with respect to underrepresented students' access to higher education (De Oliver, 1998; Griffin et al., 2007; Long & Riley, 2007; Shulock & Moore, 2005; Yung & Moreno 2006). While the Supreme Court in 2003 upheld the use of race in university admission policies, which one can argue is a component of access for minority students, underrepresented populations still encounter financial challenges with respect to paying for a college education (Long & Riley, 2007). These barriers include high unmet need with respect to aid packages, merit scholarships structured to the advantage of students from affluent communities, and the prospect of significant loan indebtedness (Long & Riley, 2007).

As the cost of obtaining a higher education continues to be framed within the context of increasing college costs and reductions in financial assistance funding (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2006), students who come from a low-socioeconomic background will perceive attending an institution of postsecondary education as increasingly difficult. Long and Riley (2007) posit that this barrier to access is due to financial assistance being diverted from the disadvantaged to middle- and upper-income families. Their assertion is supported by the Institute for Higher Education Policy's (2006) report, *Convergence: Trends Threatening to Narrow College Opportunity in America*, which asserts that increasing tuition costs and cuts in financial aid programs will be to the detriment of disadvantaged populations with respect to their access opportunities to a college education. As a result, those with high need who apply for financial aid must either rely more heavily on alternative loans (which generally have high interest rates, less advantageous repayment arrangements, and cosigner requirements) or not matriculate. As Long and Riley (2007) proffer, "low-income students and students of color are especially likely to face substantial unmet need even after taking into account all available grants and loans" (p. 39).

Texas colleges and universities employ a variety of approaches to assist and encourage underrepresented students to attend college. For example, the federally-funded TRIO programs are employed to improve recruitment and retention among minority and first-generation students (Department of Education, 2007). These types of programs, as well as those initiated by individual universities and other organizations interested in improving access to higher education, involve partnering with the K-12 system and joint public and private sector efforts. However, such partnerships have been “constrained by a long history of structural inequality in high minority schools” (Jones et al., 2002, p. 4).

While some efforts do address this structural disparity, many still operate under the misconception that “K-12 schools have sufficiently addressed past inequalities in providing URMs [underrepresented minorities] access to college preparatory education” (Jones et al., 2002, p. 3). Given these shortcomings and the impact they have on the educational lives of underrepresented populations, more innovative ways must be developed to assist students in accessing a higher education. One option that has not been addressed within the literature is teaching underrepresented students how to be more competitive for academic scholarships, which can assist in meeting the “substantial unmet need,” discussed by Long and Riley (2007).

## The Study

The first step in implementing this study was to identify high schools located in low socio-economic communities. To make this determination the study used the *Economically Disadvantaged (ED)* indicator available via the Texas Education Agency’s website at [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us). In those instances where individual school data were not available, the study utilized the *ED* indicator for the school district in which a high school was located. The *ED* measure is calculated by summing “the students coded as eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or eligible for other public assistance, divided by the total number of students” within a particular school or district (Texas Education Agency, 2005).

Students identified as economically disadvantaged tend to have higher dropout and lower graduation rates (Community Action Network, 2006). Given these factors, the study’s target threshold for high schools was an *ED* level of 60% or greater, indicating that at least 6 in 10 students will not only have a high risk of failing to succeed in high school, but also of accessing a higher education.

Texas high schools meeting the *ED* criterion were identified, contacted and asked to participate. In addition, workshops were conducted at high schools that did not meet the *ED* criterion of at least 60%. These sessions were undertaken at the request of high school officials who had heard about the program from officials at targeted high schools and wanted their students to participate in and benefit from the program. As a result, 10 (18%) of the sessions were conducted at high schools with an *ED* indicator below the specified 60% level. Of these 10 workshop sessions, all were delivered at high schools with an *ED* level of at least 30% (i.e., 3 of every 10 students were at high risk). Despite this accommodation to meet the requests of high school educators, 46 (82%) of all workshops were held at high schools meeting the study’s 60% *ED* threshold criterion.

The sessions ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes per presentation, depending on the time allotted by each host school. Each session provided attendees with the following learning modules: 1) general overview of the scholarship application, and selection processes; 2) development of a unique and compelling essay; 3) writing a resume that truly attests to one's accomplishments from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective; and 4) approaches/strategies for securing excellent letters of recommendation. All sessions also included a component on searching for scholarship opportunities and applying for financial assistance.

The essay portion of the program dealt with what is arguably the most challenging portion of a scholarship application.

## Data Collection

Two instruments were disseminated to all workshop participants to collect data on the program. The first was a general self-report assessment completed by the participants that was used to determine the effectiveness of the presenter and presentation materials as well as attendees' overall attitudes with respect to the program. This instrument also collected attendee demographic information.

The second was a pre-test and a post-test employed to determine the extent to which the participants learned from the program. This learning assessment took into consideration the main learning modules addressed by the workshop through test questions such as: 1) Name three important components that should be included in a competitive scholarship resume; 2) Name four common mistakes students make when developing a scholarship essay; and 3) From the perspective of the scholarship review committee, what purpose do your letters of recommendation serve?

A third instrument was developed to determine the effectiveness of the essay portion of the program—the essay being perhaps one of the more challenging components of an application. This session dealt with the construction of a compelling essay. Due to the limited time available to conduct each session, the emphasis was placed on developing the introductory paragraph, which provides the initial structure and direction for the remainder of the essay. This assessment followed a pre- and post-test format; where students were asked to write an introductory essay paragraph based on their choice of one of three essay topics before receiving the training, and again at the conclusion of the workshop. The essays were subsequently graded on a scale of 1 to 10 by individuals who serve on scholarship committees at the university level, and a *t*-test was performed on the results.

These three instruments provide a generalized perspective of the effectiveness of the program. A confidence level of .05 was used for the pre- and post-tests in both the general learning and essay areas.

## Results

General assessments were collected for 1,367 (54.7%) of the approximately 2,500 students who participated in the workshop programs. Among students who completed the survey, 87.3% were Hispanic-American and 4.7% African-American. Also, 50.5% of student respondents indicated that they would be first-generation college students. These data, along with the *ED* indicator of the high schools, suggest that the workshop programs were delivered to the population intended: underrepresented students from low socio-economic communities.

With respect to the overall benefit of the workshop program, 78.1% of students rated it as good or excellent. Session presenters were rated by 83.3% of attendees as being good or excellent with only 1.2% rating presenters as being poor. Perhaps of greatest importance in evaluating the success of the workshops is the extent to which participants believed the sessions had better prepared them to complete a competitive scholarship application. When asked to rate the workshop programs in this regard, 80.5% determined that the workshops had prepared them in a good or excellent fashion. Lastly, 78.8% of attendees rated the helpfulness of the workshop handouts (presentation slides, resume examples, essay examples, etc.) as good or excellent, while less than 1.1% rated the materials as poor.

The pre- and post-test learning assessment was completed by 839 (33.6%) of all participants. Subjects were asked to complete 6 questions. The maximum score for each question, depending on its difficulty, ranged from 1 to 4. The 6 scores for each participant were then summed to produce a single measure (variable) of understanding; the value for which ranged from 0 to 15.

The mean score of participants who completed the pre-test was .92 as compared with a post-test mean of 6.62. In order to determine whether this difference was statistically significant, the study used a *t*-test for dependent variables with a .05 level of significance. As indicated in Table 1, with 838 degrees of freedom, the difference in the means is considered statistically significant with a  $p < .0001$ . In other words, there was a statistically significant increase in the knowledge of participants as measured by the mean scores between the pre- and post-tests.

**Table 1: Differences between Pre- and Post-test Scores: General Learning in Workshop**

Variable	Degrees of Freedom	Test Statistic	Standard Error Mean	P Value
Test Scores	838	-51.588	.111	.0001

$n = 839$

A second analysis of pre- and post-tests focused on attendees from those schools with an *ED* indicator of only 60% or higher. By eliminating those students from communities with an *ED* indicator of less than 60%, it is possible to assess the learning of those students who were within the original target population (i.e., extremely high-risk students) of this study. Over 90% of this subgroup consisted of Hispanic and African-American students, and approximately 65% were first-generation. The analysis yielded statistically significant results at  $p < .0001$ . Gains between the pre- and post-tests demonstrate that the workshop was successful in teaching all students, regardless of the type (i.e., *ED* level) of high school attended.

A similar *t*-test was also calculated for the pre- and post-tests administered to determine the difference in composition of introductory essay paragraphs prior to and after the workshop modules had been delivered. The pre- and post-tests means were .41 and 2.91, respectively. The *t*-test for dependent variables with 144 degrees of freedom indicates that the difference in the mean scores is not

statistically significant at  $p < .056$ . Thus, the results (Table 2) fall within the normal range of expected differences. In other words, in the case of students at schools within an *ED* indicator of at least 60%, the increase in test scores between the pre- and post-tests appear not to be the result of students having attended the scholarship workshop.

**Table 2: Differences between Pre- and Post-test Scores: Essay Paragraph Session**

Variable	Degrees of Freedom	Test Statistic	Standard Error Mean	<i>p</i> Value
Test Scores	144	-14.274	.175	.056

$n = 145$

The study also endeavored to determine whether the learning varied in a statistically significant manner with respect to the onsite (at the high schools) or online sessions. Since all presenters were able to interact with participants and deliver the same materials, it was assumed that the learning would be similar between both groups. The mean increase (gain) in learning among onsite participants was 5.70 and 5.79 among online attendees—a difference of .09. A *t* test for independent variables was performed for equal variances as Levene's Test produced  $F = 2.319$  with  $p = .128$ . The results (Table 3) reflect that the difference in learning between the onsite and online groups was not statistically different at  $p < .870$ , and, therefore, both online and in-person sessions are equally effective in producing learning among students.

**Table 3: Differences between Pre-and Post-test Scores: Online and In-Person Sessions**

Assumption of Variance	Degrees of Freedom	Test Statistic	Standard Error	<i>p</i> Value (Two-Tailed)
Equal	837	-.164	.562	.870

$n = 839$

From a qualitative perspective, comments were collected from workshop participants. While some comments were critical of the workshop (e.g., workshop should be longer, more examples are needed, etc.), the feedback from attendees and high school faculty was overwhelmingly positive. After transforming the comments into separate codifiable units for analysis, the ratio of positive to negative remarks was 20 to 1.

## Conclusion

The data from the pre- and post-tests on general learning suggest that the scholarship workshop used at Texas State University is an effective tool for increasing the knowledge of high school students with respect to completing a competitive scholarship application. Also, the results obtained from the general assessment indicate that the program's format, materials, and perceived benefit were well received by students. This is an important component to successful learning when considered within the broader context of social judgment theory, which addresses how presenters—viewed as outsiders—may be perceived by and negatively impact the learning of underrepresented student populations. Thus, this scholarship workshop program provides a practical means of better educating disadvantaged students about how to become more competitive for scholarship funds and potentially increase their access to a higher education.

The study results also demonstrate no statistically significant differences in the learning (knowledge gains) between onsite and online participants. This finding has practical significance in that it is more economically feasible to deliver online sessions than to provide an onsite representative for each participating high school. Online sessions offer a viable means of delivering more sessions to more students at a lower cost. This method improves the ability of financial aid professionals to assist a greater number of underrepresented students in learning more effective methods to access a higher education.

One measure that did not yield as positive of a result was the development of improved essays as a result of the session. This finding may be indicative of the limited time permitted at each high school to conduct the essay component. In future iterations of this workshop program, in-depth sessions will be developed to focus solely on assisting students in writing scholarship essays, as opposed to including this important component as one of five modules offered in a 60 to 90-minute workshop.

Once sufficient time has passed, longitudinal data on workshop participants will be collected and analyzed to determine whether workshop participants are more successful in winning scholarships and accessing higher education. Such research could better illustrate the value of these workshops in improving college access and, if a positive relationship is found, increase the likelihood of greater public/private investment in this kind of program to assist a greater number of the country's disadvantaged and underrepresented high school students.

Overall, the program has been successful in targeting underrepresented high school populations, increasing their knowledge of the components of a competitive scholarship application and perhaps improving their access to postsecondary education.

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