



Frequently Asked Questions for College Access Providers

The Basics

What is SOAR Scholars?

SOAR Scholars is an early commitment scholarship program created to inspire and assist high school students to reach their post-secondary education goals. SOAR Scholars is part of SOAR Virginia® the access and affordability program sponsored by Virginia529, an independent agency of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Is SOAR an acronym?

No. Virginia529 created the SOAR Scholars program to further its mission to make college more affordable and accessible to all Virginians. It is offered in partnership with college access providers and the community, working together to help students do their best and...SOAR!

Who can join the program?

To enroll, a student must complete a SOAR Scholars enrollment form and:

- have a valid Social Security Number (SSN) or Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN)
- be a Virginia resident
- be in grades 10-12* in a participating Virginia high school
- agree to comply with the SOAR Scholars pledge
- qualify to participate in the National School Lunch Program. For more on the current eligibility guidelines for that program, please visit <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/income-eligibility-guidelines>. SOAR Virginia will rely on school personnel to identify students who currently qualify for the National School Lunch Program.

Please note that early commitment advisors' family members (spouse, parents, siblings, children, grandchildren and their spouses, and in-laws) and members of the same household (whether or not related) are not eligible to participate in SOAR Scholars.

**Only Highland High School students may begin in the 9th grade.*

How does SOAR Scholars benefit the students and school(s) it serves?

SOAR Scholars provides scholarship funds and college access services to students who may have barriers beyond their control preventing them from pursuing post-secondary education. The program is designed to help eligible students realize the benefits of post-secondary education and assist them in reaching their education goals. The program provides a unique combination of scholarship funding and college access services, delivered in partnership with the school's personnel.

In each school, the program is offered to approximately 15 students in their 10th, 11th, and 12th grade years. During this time, eligible SOAR scholars can accumulate up to \$2,000 in scholarship support to apply to post-secondary education expenses. The program not only impacts the students selected for the program, but also raises awareness of opportunities for post-secondary education to other students who may have never thought of it before, while also increasing community service participation.

How many students can participate each year?

In order to make SOAR Scholars available in more schools, a maximum of 15 students per school per year can participate. Some flexibility is allowed, as some schools will enroll only 10 or 11 students while others may identify and enroll 16 or 17 candidates for the program. The program was designed to serve 10th, 11th, and 12th graders*.

**Only Highland High School students may begin in the 9th grade.*

Can students begin the program in 11th or 12th grade?

Generally, no. There may be a rare exception evaluated and approved by Virginia529 in its sole discretion. A core element of the program's design is the early intervention of beginning to work with a student in the 10th grade, while they still have several years of high school to select curriculum and make other choices to prepare them for post-secondary education.

How are schools selected?

Schools are selected in high-need areas based on economic and other demographic data where college access services and the SOAR Scholars program could provide the most benefit.

Is there a cost to the school?

No, there is no cost for a school to participate, other than the time involved by the school administration, counseling department and other staff.

What is required of the school to participate?

The college access provider will work with school personnel to administer the program. School personnel will assist early commitment advisors by verifying the selection criteria for students who enroll in the program and verify GPA and attendance for scholars who participate.

College Access Provider/Early Commitment Advisor Responsibilities**How can access providers generate interest in the program among rising 10th graders?**

Access providers may conduct interest sessions for 9th grade students and their families in the spring at a time that works best for you and your school(s). A SOAR Scholars presentation is available online as well as a poster to display to encourage interest in the program.

What is required of an early commitment advisor to certify that a SOAR scholar has fulfilled the requirements of the pledge?

SOAR Virginia relies on the college access provider to certify which scholars have met the pledge requirements and are eligible to receive an annual award. To do so, early commitment advisors meet with students regularly to get updates on grades, community service and other pledge requirements. The early commitment advisors and the college access provider also work with school personnel to verify that attendance and GPA requirements are being met.

How often does an early commitment advisor need to meet with a SOAR scholar to be deemed "meeting regularly"?

Virginia529 encourages all SOAR scholars to meet with their early commitment advisors at least three times during the school year, whether one-on-one or in a group setting. Ultimately, the early commitment advisor determines if the SOAR Virginia scholar has met this requirement, so it's important to connect regularly.

Is there any paperwork to complete if there are scholar changes?

Yes. A SOAR Scholars Change Form should be completed if:

- a scholar's contact information changes
- a scholar moves
- a scholar withdraws or is suspended from the program

The form can be requested from the SOAR Scholars Program Manager (Virginia529 representative).

Are there resources available in Spanish?

There are select resources available in Spanish, including brochure and FAQs, on Virginia529.com. If there are other materials that may be helpful for the students, please contact the SOAR Scholars Program Manager.

SOAR Scholars Eligibility & Participation

What happens if the SOAR scholar meets the pledge requirements?

All SOAR scholars are eligible to receive up to \$2,000 in award for meeting pledge requirements. For 10th and 11th grades*, scholars will be awarded \$500 in an Invest529SM account. For 12th grade, scholars will be awarded \$1,000 in an Invest529 account.

**Highland High School students may begin in the 9th grade. Award amounts for 9th and 10th grades are \$250 each of those two years.*

Is a 2.5 cumulative GPA required in all cases?

Yes. Rare exceptions are evaluated and approved by Virginia529 in its sole discretion.

What constitutes an “unexcused absence”?

SOAR Virginia relies on the scholar's school to define which absences are unexcused.

What is meant by "community service"?

Community service can be a variety of activities that the SOAR scholar already participates in or engages in during their time in the program. Scholars can work independently or in groups to fulfill the requirement. Early commitment advisors can make suggestions on activities to pursue and will determine if the scholar has met requirements. Some popular community service activities include:

- Organizing a food or clothing drive.
- Visiting homebound relatives on a regular basis.
- Reading with younger students.
- Organizing a bake sale to raise money for a local charity.
- Collecting trash after a school event.
- Making Valentines for homebound neighbors & friends or those in a local hospital.
- Organizing and conducting a safety campaign prior to prom season.
- Painting a mural over graffiti.

The Community Service Idea Guide and Community Service Log can be found at Virginia529.com/SOAR.

What happens if a SOAR scholar doesn't meet the pledge requirements?

A SOAR scholar will not receive an award if pledge requirements aren't met in a given year. However, in most circumstances, the scholar may continue in the program and receive future awards if they meet eligibility requirements.

For example, a scholar may meet all pledge requirements in 10th grade and receive an initial award. However, if the scholar doesn't meet the GPA requirement in 11th grade, they are still a SOAR scholar but is not eligible for an award for that year. If they meet all requirements in the 12th grade, they will receive an award for that year.

There are some violations of the pledge that may result in a SOAR scholar being expelled from the program. The SOAR Scholars Program Manager will work with the college access provider to determine whether a student can remain in the program.

Under what circumstances can a scholar be expelled from the SOAR Scholars program?

- If the scholar is suspended from school, the early commitment advisor should try to learn the reason(s) for the suspension and discuss them with the college access provider and SOAR Scholars Program Manager. Depending on the severity of the offense, the SOAR Scholars Program Manager and the college access provider will decide whether the SOAR scholar may continue with the program, assuming they are reinstated in school.
- If a SOAR scholar is expelled permanently from school, they are automatically expelled from the SOAR Virginia program and will forfeit any awards accumulated to that point.
- If the student is expelled from the SOAR Scholars program, they will forfeit any awards received to date.

What happens if a SOAR scholar voluntarily withdraws from the program?

- If the scholar leaves the program before earning an award, then they are no longer eligible to receive awards.
- If the scholar leaves after earning an award, they'll retain the benefit of any award(s) received up to the point of withdrawal from the program. They will not be eligible to receive an award for the current year if not yet awarded.

What happens if a SOAR scholar moves?

- If a scholar moves from one participating SOAR Scholars school to another participating SOAR Scholars school, the scholar remains in the program provided they still meet the pledge requirements to participate in program.
- If a scholar moves to a non-SOAR Scholars school, they will be withdrawn from the program. The scholar will retain the benefit of any award(s) received up to that point but will not be eligible to receive a participation award for future years.
- If a scholar subsequently returns to a participating SOAR Scholars school, they will be reinstated in the program and may begin receiving awards from that point forward, given that they meet pledge requirements.

If a SOAR scholar drops out of the program after the 10th grade year, can they “be replaced” with another student?

No. By design, there is anticipated attrition. It is important for Virginia529 to track and evaluate the level of attrition so we can make enhancements to improve the program over time.

Using Scholarship Awards

When will the scholar receive notification of their scholarship award?

At the end of each school year, early commitment advisors will certify that scholars have met all of the pledge requirements. Once that information has been processed, Virginia529 will send scholars a notification via email or text message. Be sure to encourage scholars to keep their contact information up-to-date.

Will the scholars receive cash?

No. When the scholar receives their first award, Virginia529 establishes an Invest529 account for them. These funds are automatically invested into a Stable Value Portfolio, meaning its goal is to protect against loss. Each award they receive will be deposited into their Invest529 account for future use toward any eligible college, technical school or registered apprenticeship program expenses. The funds cannot be withdrawn until they matriculate and secure post-secondary education.

Can the scholar use their SOAR scholarship for dual enrollment?

No. A scholar must be a high school graduate or have completed their GED to be eligible to withdraw any money from their Invest529 account.

Can additional funds be contributed to the scholar’s Invest529 account by a parent/guardian?

The Invest529 account is owned by Virginia529, and the scholar is the beneficiary of the account. As such, additional money cannot be contributed to it. The scholar's parent/guardian may open another Virginia529 account and name the scholar as the beneficiary should they wish to save additional money.

How does the scholar withdraw money from their SOAR Scholars (Invest529) account?

Early commitment advisors should review the Invest529 withdrawal process with scholars during their senior year. Once they've been accepted into an eligible college, a technical school, or registered apprenticeship program, they can withdraw funds. For detailed instructions, check out the [SOAR Scholars Withdrawal Guide](#).

Does a scholar need to pursue post-secondary education right after high school?

No, but the funds in the scholar’s Invest529 account must be used within six years following their high school graduation. There are exceptions for active-duty military service. Should a SOAR scholar request an extension of the six-year period for reasons other than active-duty military service, Virginia529, in its sole discretion, will determine on a case-by-case basis whether to extend the time in which the funds can be used.

What if a scholar decides not to go to college?

If college isn’t in the scholar’s immediate future, the scholar can still access the funds later (within six years of their high school graduation). Funds may also be used towards the eligible expenses of a technical school or registered apprenticeship program.

Early commitment advisors can help the scholar think through this important decision and help the scholar choose the best path. If the scholar decided not to pursue any post-secondary education, the scholar will forfeit all awards earned.

Miscellaneous

Why does the SOAR Scholars enrollment form require the scholar's Social Security Number or Individual Tax Identification Number?

Virginia529 is required to have the Invest529 account beneficiary's Social Security Number or Individual Taxpayer Identification Number before distributing any money accumulated under the SOAR Scholars program. Virginia529 is required by the IRS to report the distributed funds on a Form 1099Q which SOAR scholars (beneficiaries) will receive.