



SOAR Virginia® Frequently Asked Questions



Students and Families

What is the SOAR Virginia program?

SOAR Virginia is an early commitment scholarship program created to inspire and assist high school students to reach their post-secondary education goals. It is sponsored by the Virginia College Savings Plan (Virginia529), an independent agency of the Commonwealth of Virginia and brought to you by participating college access providers.

Is SOAR an acronym?

No. Virginia529 created the SOAR Virginia 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.

Why should I join SOAR Virginia?

SOAR Virginia participants will receive advising on academic preparation for post-secondary education, assistance with completing college applications and obtaining financial aid (including help completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid - FAFSA), scholarship support of up to \$2,000 to apply toward eligible post-secondary education expenses, and other valuable benefits including recognition as a SOAR Virginia scholar.

What is the SOAR Virginia pledge?

I pledge that...

- I will maintain a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.5 or comparable academic achievement as determined by SOAR Virginia.
- I will meet with my early commitment advisor regularly.
- I will complete financial literacy training during high school.
- I will behave in a manner consistent with my school's Code of Student Conduct.
- I will attend school regularly without unexcused absences.
- I will participate in community service activities.
- I will complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) during my senior year.
- I will apply to an eligible educational institution, including a 2- or 4-year college/university or technical school.

Who can join the program?

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

- be a U.S. citizen or legal U.S. resident.
- be a Virginia resident.
- be in grades 10-12* in a participating Virginia high school.
- agree to comply with the SOAR Virginia 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 Virginia.

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

What is required of students in the SOAR Virginia program?

Students and their parents/guardians are required to sign the pledge when the student enrolls in the program; the student is expected to fulfill the pledge requirements each year.

What happens if the SOAR Virginia scholar meets the pledge requirements?

If a SOAR Virginia scholar in grade 10 or 11* meets all pledge requirements, he/she will be awarded \$500 each year in an Invest529SM account to be applied towards eligible post-secondary education expenses. If a SOAR Virginia scholar in the 12th grade meets all pledge requirements, he/she will be awarded \$1,000 in his/her Invest529 account. All SOAR Virginia scholars have the opportunity to receive up to \$2,000 in awards.

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

What happens if the scholar does not meet the pledge requirements?

A SOAR Virginia scholar will not receive an award if they do not meet the pledge requirements in a given year, however, in most cases they may still continue in the program and receive future rewards if eligibility requirements are met. For example, a scholar may meet all pledge requirements for their 10th grade year and receive an initial award. However, if the scholar fails to meet the GPA requirement in his/her 11th grade year, he/she is still a SOAR Virginia scholar, but is not eligible for an award for that year. If they meet all requirements in the 12th grade year, he/she will receive an award for that year.

There are some violations of the pledge that may result in a SOAR Virginia scholar being expelled from the program. The SOAR Program Manager will work with the college access provider to determine whether a student can remain in the SOAR Virginia program. If the student is expelled from the program he/she will forfeit any awards received to date. The SOAR Virginia team will evaluate each incidence on a case-by-case basis.

Under what circumstances will a SOAR Virginia scholar be expelled from the SOAR Virginia program?

If the scholar is temporarily 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 the SOAR Program Manager. Depending on the severity of the offense, the SOAR Program Manager and the college access provider will decide whether the SOAR Virginia scholar may continue with the program, assuming he/she is reinstated in school.

If a SOAR Virginia scholar is expelled permanently from school, he/she is automatically expelled from the SOAR Virginia program and will forfeit any awards accumulated to that point.

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

If the scholar leaves the program before earning an award, then he/she is no longer eligible to receive awards.

If the scholar leaves after earning an award, he/she will retain the benefit of any award(s) received up to the point of withdrawal from the program. He/she will not be eligible to receive a participation award for the current year if not yet awarded.

What if the SOAR Virginia scholar drops out of high school?

If a SOAR Virginia scholar drops out of high school and does not obtain his/her GED, he/she forfeits all funds accumulated in the Invest529 account to that point and will not be eligible to receive future SOAR Virginia awards.

What happens if a SOAR Virginia scholar moves?

If a scholar moves from one participating SOAR Virginia school to another participating SOAR Virginia school, the scholar remains in the program provided he/she still meets the eligibility requirements to participate in the program.

If a scholar moves to a non-SOAR Virginia school, he/she 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 Virginia school, he/she will be reinstated in the program and may begin receiving awards from that point forward, given that he/she meets the pledge requirements.

Do scholars have to re-join the program every year of high school?

No. Once you are a SOAR Virginia scholar, you remain in the program unless you are expelled from the program or otherwise become ineligible for program benefits.

What events will scholars participate in through SOAR Virginia?

Scholars will meet regularly with their early commitment advisor, as well as have an opportunity to participate in other special events throughout the school year. These events could include celebrations, group meetings or other events hosted by Virginia529.

Who is an early commitment advisor?

The early commitment advisor is a representative of the college access provider who will assist scholars and track their status while in the program.

What will the meetings with an advisor be like?

The early commitment advisor will coordinate with the school's staff to meet with scholars at their high school. The advisor will assist scholars in the attaining their post-secondary education goals, including identifying eligible post-secondary institutions and assistance opportunities through the financial aid process; all services key to future success in post-secondary education.

What is required for an early commitment advisor to certify that a SOAR Virginia 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 the scholars regularly to get updates on grades, community service and other pledge requirements. The advisors and the college access provider also work with school personnel to verify that attendance and GPA requirements are being met.

Other related questions:

- *Is a 2.5 cumulative GPA required in all cases?* Yes. Rare exceptions are evaluated and approved by Virginia529 in its sole discretion.
- *How often does a SOAR Virginia scholar have to meet with his/her early commitment advisor to be deemed "meeting regularly"?* Virginia529 encourages SOAR Virginia scholars to meet with their advisors at least three times during the school year, whether one-on-one or in a group setting. Ultimately, the advisor determines if the SOAR Virginia scholar has met this requirement.
- *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 Virginia scholar already participates in or engages in during his/her time in the program. Scholars can work independently or in groups to fulfill the requirement. The early commitment advisor can make suggestions on activities to pursue and will determine if the scholar has met the requirement. 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.

Why does the SOAR Virginia application require the scholar's Social Security number?

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

Can scholar's use their SOAR Virginia 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 his/her SOAR Virginia account.

Will the scholars receive cash?

No, a deposit will be made into a Virginia529 Invest529 college savings account for the benefit of the scholar to apply towards eligible post-secondary education and/or registered apprenticeship program expenses. Virginia529 will establish an Invest529 account for the funds awarded to SOAR Virginia scholars, and these funds will be invested in the Invest529 Stable Value Portfolio. Virginia529 is the owner of the account and the SOAR Virginia scholar is the beneficiary. Upon matriculation to post-secondary education, the scholar can request funds be distributed on his/her behalf to the eligible educational institution he/she attends. Funds may also be applied toward qualified expenses associated with an apprenticeship program registered and certified with the Secretary of Labor. Scholars are responsible for providing an executed copy of their apprenticeship agreement to Virginia529 for verification before funds can be distributed.

When will the scholar receive notification of his/her scholarship award?

At the end of the school year, the early commitment advisor will certify that scholars have met all of the pledge requirements. Once the award has been processed, Virginia529 will send an award letter to the scholar. A scholar may also be able to view his/her account balance online at www.virginia529.com.

Can additional funds be contributed to the SOAR Virginia Invest529 account by a parent/guardian?

The SOAR Virginia 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 scholar as the beneficiary should they wish to contribute.

Do scholar's have to pursue post-secondary education right after high school?

No. Effective for 2017-2018 enrollees, funds in the SOAR Virginia Invest529 account must be used within six years following the scholar's high school graduation. There are exceptions for active duty military service. Should a SOAR Virginia 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?

Effective for 2017-2018 enrollees, scholars have six years to use the funds in their SOAR Virginia Invest529 account. If post-secondary education is not be in their immediate future, scholars may still access their scholarship funds at a later date. Early commitment advisors can help scholars think through this important decision and help them choose the best path. If a scholar decides not to pursue post-secondary education, they will forfeit all awards earned.

How do scholars withdraw money from their SOAR Virginia Invest529 account?

During the scholar's senior year, early commitment advisors will meet with soon-to-be graduates to review the process of accessing their Invest529 account online as well as how to submit a withdrawal request. Instructions and common FAQs can be found on the SOAR Virginia website at www.virginia529.com/in-the-community/soar-virginia.

What role do parents/guardians play in the SOAR Virginia program?

Parents and guardians play a vital role in ensuring a scholar's success. Parents/guardians must sign the pledge with their scholar and commit to communication with the SOAR Virginia team when necessary. Parents also provide support and guidance to help scholars understand they have to work hard to succeed in high school and beyond.

What is the FAFSA? Why do scholars have to complete it?

The FAFSA is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, and is required for any student to receive federal financial aid such as Pell grants or federal student loans. SOAR Virginia requires participants to complete the FAFSA so they are eligible for financial aid in addition to the funds awarded for successful participation in the program.