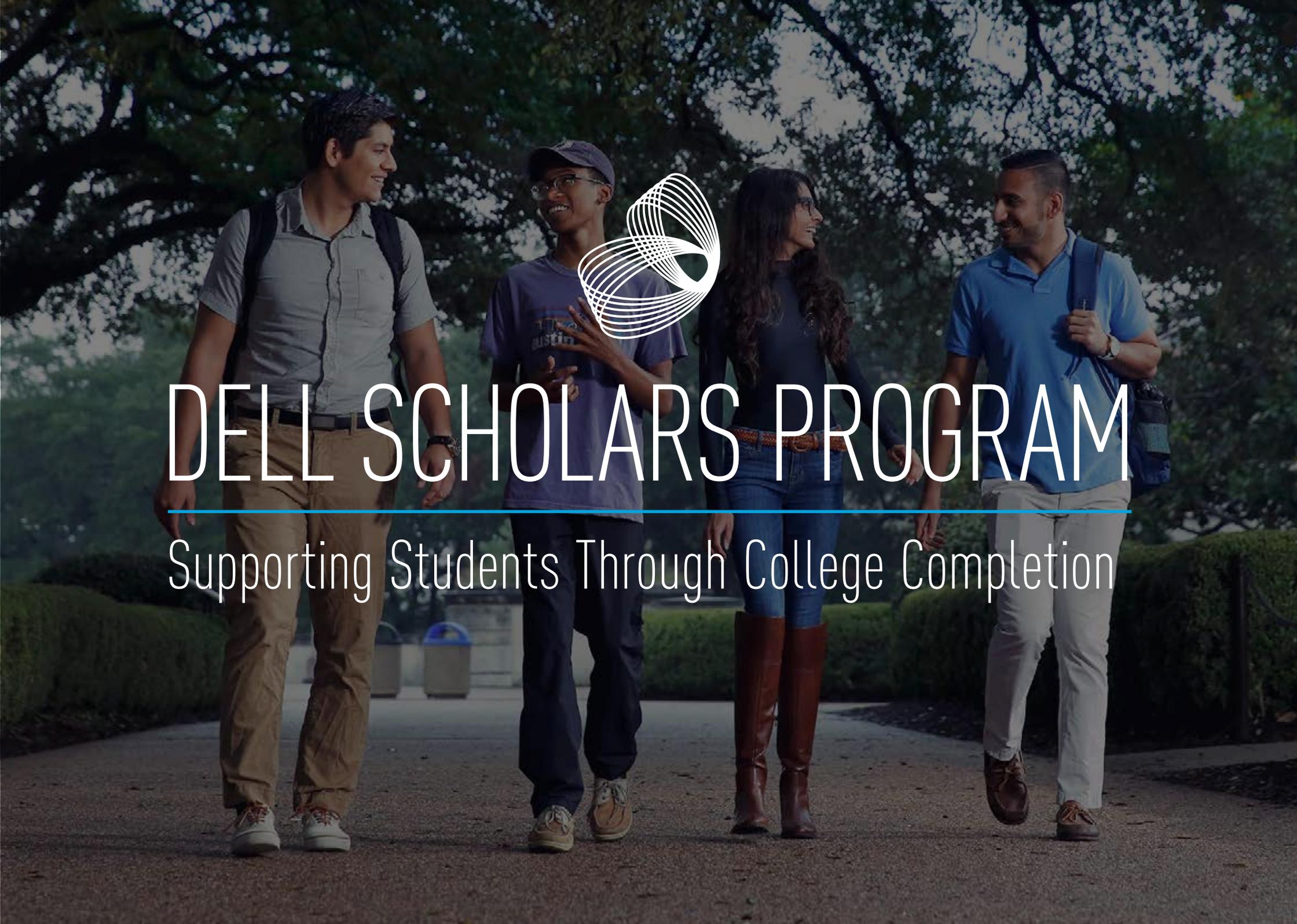




DELL SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Supporting Students Through College Completion



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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

While many students dream of obtaining a college degree, sometimes life gets in the way, particularly for those dealing with personal responsibilities at home or in their communities. Most students from low-income households, and students who are among the first in their families to attend college, work at least part-time to help support their families. They also often provide additional care for their siblings or family members in the form of physical caretaking or household management. They have to navigate financial barriers when they apply to and attend college, without the financial aid resources they need to make college affordable over the long term. These issues impact student success, and can mask as academic failure. According to [Bottom Line](#), by age 24, only nine percent of low-income students have earned a college degree, compared to 77 percent of their peers in the top income quartile.

But why *would* a new college student have time for hours of studying if she had to work two jobs to support her family? Why *would* anyone expect a student to balance academic and parenting responsibilities when he is unable to find appropriate family housing or childcare near his campus?

Without understanding the circumstances, many would believe that these students are academically unprepared or unfit for higher education. So, when we began the Dell Scholars Program, we asked “Why?” a lot. If students have a desire to obtain a college degree, why weren’t they? Why weren’t more students overcoming barriers to achieve their educational goals? Why weren’t students receiving the guidance they needed to avoid significant student or personal loan debt?

We researched. We talked to students, parents, families, counselors, professors, scholarship providers, college completion experts, and many, many more people. And in response to what we learned, we have built a college completion program that extends well beyond a scholarship check. We put together a support network comprised of students, peer mentors, and our staff at the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation. We built an online community for mentoring and peer interaction. We structured our financial award to be as flexible as possible so that students can use their funds for the many types of educational and related costs that impact their college success. And we continue to innovate and make changes as we go so that our program evolves with the changing needs of our students.

The goal of this e-book is to share what we’ve learned along the way to help other programs succeed. My colleagues and I want to spark a dialogue between everyone with a hand in student success. We hope that this e-book serves as a resource as you implement or revise scholarship, college completion, and student support programs.

Sincerely,



Oscar Sweeten-Lopez
President, College Success Tools
Former Portfolio Director, Dell Scholars Program
Michael & Susan Dell Foundation

A young woman with dark hair and glasses is shown in profile, reading a book. She is wearing a light blue button-down shirt. The background is a library with bookshelves filled with books, slightly out of focus. The overall lighting is soft and warm.

Chapter 1

THE SECRET SAUCE

OVER THE YEARS, I'VE BEEN ASKED COUNTLESS TIMES, "WHAT'S THE 'SECRET SAUCE' OF THE DELL SCHOLARS PROGRAM?"

It's clear to me: the Dell Scholars Program works because we know our students, period. We have a holistic understanding of the challenges our students face in the transition to college and their journey to graduation. Our ability to help each Dell Scholar graduate from college depends on our ability to know each and every student. To know when they need our help. To know when to intervene.

Consider the role of a family medical practitioner. Those physicians have the responsibility for the comprehensive care of every patient. When necessary, family practitioners know when to rely on specialists who can best meet individual patients' needs. The same is true of the Dell Scholars Program staff.

Our team assumes responsibility for every scholar we accept. When the students need help, we're their first stop. We draw from years of experience in the college completion field and hands-on work with students to attend to each scholar's needs as they arise. Our team serves as counselors, cheerleaders, mentors, and friends to our students as we listen, motivate, encourage and celebrate with them. However, if scholars require support beyond what our team can offer, we refer them to experts and resources that offer additional capacity.

Part of what makes a family practitioner successful is understanding the patient's lifestyle and background. Most of our staff are first-generation college students and reflect the diversity of our Dell Scholars. We have first-hand experience in navigating through the unfamiliar territory of campus life without a parent or sibling to turn to for help. One team member was a young mother when she left home for college. She is the first in her family to earn a college degree, and faced the tremendous challenges of balancing her academic life and supporting her low-income family. Her experiences help her to provide insights and advice that resonate with our students.

"Having to work has given me a relentless work ethic and the skills of a hardworking adult at a young age, both in and outside of school. I have done a lot to handle my own finances. I am a full-time student and part-time worker doing everything possible to survive and gain an education so I can be better off in the future and change the world."

– Francisco Cernada,
Dell Scholars Program Class of 2016

[Read Francisco's full story](#)

Our team works every day to advance student success because we've been there ourselves. Our personal experiences helped us develop several core beliefs that motivate our team and drive our work:

1. Students who receive adequate support to navigate the barriers to college success will complete their degrees.
2. Students who challenge themselves academically can succeed in college, even if they don't stand out based on traditional evaluation criteria like GPA, test scores, and extracurricular activities.
3. Deep, one-to-one relationships with students are at the core of our model.
4. Data drives our decisions. Technology enables our work.
5. Our culturally diverse staff creates meaningful connections with our scholars, allowing us to provide support and/or direct them to additional resources.
6. Student peers play a critical role in advising and mentoring our scholars.
7. Success requires constant review, adaptation, and evolution to meet our scholars where they are.

Today, the Dell Scholars Program offers personalized, multifaceted support to our students. It begins the day they're accepted into the program, and our support is constant until they leave campus with a degree in hand. And it's working. [*More than Dollars for Scholars: The Impact of the Dell Scholars Program on College Access, Persistence, and Degree Attainment*](#) (Page, Castleman, Sahadewo, 2016) finds that Dell Scholars are 25 percent more likely to earn their bachelor's degrees within four to six years of high school graduation compared to students of similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

My team and I have been humbled to work with so many exceptional and dedicated students over the years. They've overcome tremendous obstacles to get to high school graduation, and they deserve the opportunity to earn a college degree.



A young man with a backpack is sitting on a concrete ledge outdoors. He is wearing an orange polo shirt, blue jeans, and sandals. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. A blue folder or book is on the ledge next to him. The background shows trees and a building.

Chapter 2

DOLLARS AND SENSE

In the beginning, we started with the scholarship award as the main strategy to help students. But, we know that money alone can't get a student to college graduation. It is very important that we leverage the financial award to meet the broad and diverse types of educational related expenses. We developed a keen understanding of the financial aid system and how to effectively leverage our funds with the overall financial aid support each student is receiving. Creating a flexible disbursement model allows us to maximize the impact of the scholarship award. We believe that true innovation lies in the way we utilize resources, rather than simply throwing more money at the problem.

AWARD MANAGEMENT

Each Dell Scholar receives \$20,000 as part of their award package. Unlike other scholarship providers, our scholars have much more flexibility to better leverage these funds along with other financial aid they may receive. For example, if a student receives another scholarship that only covers tuition and fees, we can advise the financial aid office to use the Dell Scholars award money to pay for different expenses, like textbooks. Sometimes a student will receive more than one scholarship. But if all awards are restricted for tuition only, that student must choose a scholarship and potentially lose much-needed funds for college life.

The flexibility of Dell Scholar funds is meant to address this issue—called “award displacement.” Our funds can be used for summer school, when financial aid such as the Pell Grant isn't available. Students can use their Dell Scholars award for study abroad programs and internship stipends, so they can start to build a résumé in their college years. The flexibility allowed for each scholar's financial award requires that our staff works harder to manage the funds throughout the academic year. Sure, it's easier to send one check at the start of the school year. But it is worth the extra effort and creativity required to help our scholars get the most out of their award money.

Encouraging students to use their funds when they need them can create opportunities for a richer, and more successful, college experience.

TACTICS TO MINIMIZE STUDENT DEBT

1. Every accepted student reviews their financial aid package with the team, and we discuss how multiple awards or loans work together.
2. We can use the award for loan repayment for students who need it.
3. We assist with academic and financial aid appeals as a third-party reference.
4. Our team empowers students to manage their awards. We have an annual scholarship limit, but if students don't need the funds that year, we don't send them and “bank” them for future years.

FINANCIAL GUIDANCE

The Dell Scholars Program commits to arming students with the knowledge and tools they need to graduate without overwhelming debt. When we meet incoming Dell Scholars every April, they are either celebrating their admission decisions, or they are still deciding which college they will attend. As with most rising college freshmen, Dell Scholars commit to a school by May 1—but they may not have all the details of their financial aid packages.

Every year, we counsel students on the impact that key choices could have on their financial burden—and ultimately on their overall chances of graduating—in the years ahead. If needed, we assist students as they evaluate financial aid offers and make critical decisions about where to attend college.

We meet some Dell Scholars who apply only to out-of-state public universities without the knowledge of how much that decision increases costs. Often, their high school or college-readiness counselors haven't prepared them for out-of-state tuition fees that would double or even triple their cost of attendance. Sometimes, students who are briefed on the additional costs don't understand the true impact of the overall cost on their own personal finances. When we help our scholars understand the total cost of each school, and the details of the various financial aid packages offered, they are able to make informed decisions about where they will attend college.

The bottom line proves that empowering students to make smart decisions with their awards, and helping them manage their money, is impactful. Over the program's history, the total amount of each Dell Scholar's financial award has remained consistent, even as college costs have risen. But while the costs rise, and the award stays the same, the average debt at graduation for our scholars is less than \$8,000. Several scholars graduate with little or no debt at all. [In comparison](#), 68% of graduates from public and nonprofit colleges in 2015 had student loan debt, averaging \$30,100 per student.

“I have done my best to lessen my parent’s financial burdens by working multiple part-time jobs throughout the year. Between working, assisting my parents, and caring for my two younger siblings, I sometimes worry that I might jeopardize academics.”

– Bilal Lafta,
Dell Scholars Program Class of 2016

[Read Bilal's full story](#)



Chapter 3

GETTING IT DONE

So how do we do it? What are the day-to-day responsibilities of the Dell Scholars Program staff?

It's a little bit of everything—and it only gets done with the right tools.

Providing scalable support—from talking through social issues on campus, to researching the fine details of a financial aid package—requires our staff to look beyond traditional approaches and use the right tools to truly meet the needs of the students and their families.

The Dell Scholars Program Admin Tool is the beating heart of our system. It helps us collect, manage, and evaluate important data and insights that inform how we prioritize issues and strategize with our students. The tool is used to manage everything from the scholarship application process and award disbursement to academic progress and goal management. Technology allows for efficiencies that give our small team time to focus on relationships with the students. We believe that with deeper insights comes opportunities for success.

The tool allows us to take the long view on student success management, with the flexibility for immediate action and interventions. Every staff member has access to scholar information and a record of the interaction the full team had with that student over time. Scholars provide information about their lives during scheduled reporting periods, and the admin tool alerts our team when a student needs our attention for anything from struggles in a class, to increased work hours, to an illness in the family that could affect studying.

One of our scholars was a freshman when he started to wrestle with the emotional toll of being away from home for the first time, while organizing his academic and work time effectively. He worked part-time, and was juggling a full course load at college. Between work and classes, he was putting in 15 hours a day—before he even got to homework or studying. He started to fall behind, and was losing hope that he would make it through his first semester at college, let alone the years required to earn his degree.

“Growing up, I believed that if low-income kids worked hard, they would find the resources and support necessary to get to college, and beyond. I eventually realized how that was not the norm. In fact, my journey was only possible because of the many sacrifices of those closest to me, and because of the work of many people who were once strangers who fought for me to have the opportunities I have today. I hope to be like one of them someday.”

– Vi Nguyen
Dell Scholars Program Class of 2007

[Read Vi's full story](#)

That student could text our staff for help, and once our staff entered the conversation into the admin tool, we could all track the conversations taking place. The entire team worked together to direct him to resources that help with time and stress management. Over time, the tool also allowed us to track his progress—all the way to a successful graduation.

I love to share this example because it highlights all the ways that an innovative and efficient technology platform can support a lean scholarship program staff in achieving many significant touch points with students. The admin tool allows us to track scholar's academic, financial, and personal circumstances in multiple ways.

- **Collective Case Management:** In traditional student management models, individual staff members are assigned a specific group of students to counsel through their college years. We wanted to maintain a lean staff that could scale support as the number of scholars grew over time. Our collective case management approach is a hybrid of traditional case management practices and team collaboration principles. And it's all powered by our tool. Any one of our staff members can use the admin tool to find the necessary information on any student. In my example, the tool gave the whole team access to our student's progress, so any available staff person could check in on how he was doing.
- **Data Collection:** The tool allows us to securely collect and import data for every student. Our team collects monthly enrollment information via the National Student Clearinghouse to monitor each student's enrollment status. Scholars provide detailed information on their academic progress and the amount of financial aid they are receiving, along with the number of hours they work to cover their cost of attendance and support their families. All the data we have collected—and continue to collect—informs our Scholar Risk Indicator (SRI). The SRI allows our team to identify and anticipate which students may struggle and resources they might need to succeed. That holistic view of each student's college experience allows us to identify potential barriers to success and intervene as quickly as possible.

PRINCIPLES OF COLLECTIVE CASE MANAGEMENT

1. EFFICIENCY

With a secure, clear view of the student's academic performance, financial situation and personal challenges, any of our trained staff can address the scholar's specific needs in a centralized location without sifting through mountains of papers or relying on a single staff person who might be unavailable at that exact time.

2. INDIVIDUALIZATION

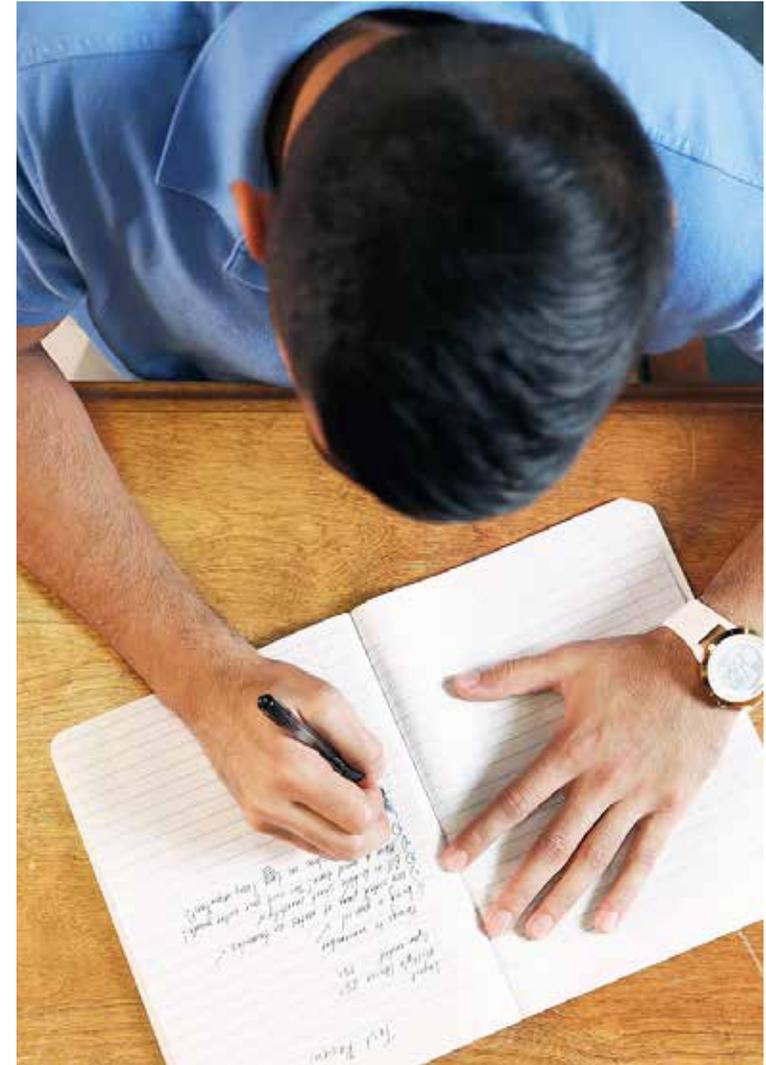
Easily-accessible student information gives our staff the power to respond to a scholar's specific needs, whether the student needs comprehensive support, resources or information for academic, financial, personal, or work-life issues.

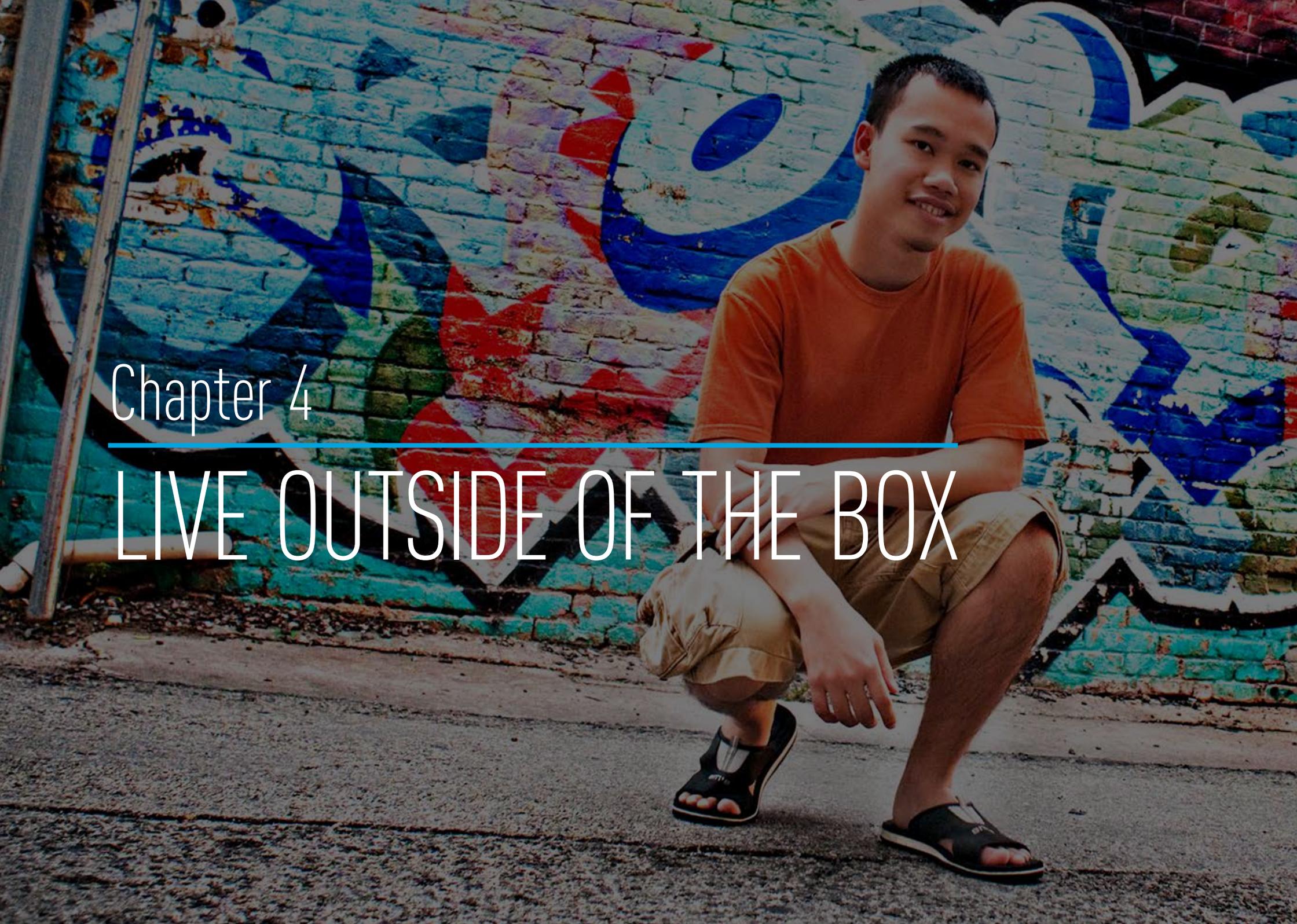
3. SCALABILITY

Our collective case management model enables us to effectively support more than 1,500 active Dell Scholars each year. It's an advancement that will grow to meet our needs in the years to come.

- **Student Communications:** Our admin tool allows us to communicate directly with our students, take extensive notes on the outcomes of the conversations, and track any next steps necessary. We call. We text. We email. We host online webinars with information about resources and tools our students may need. We insist on meeting our scholars where they are, so we post important information in the places they visit daily: on social media and in their inboxes. Our social media channels encourage our scholars to engage with us and with each other. Our scholars often answer each other's questions, provide motivation and support, and group conversations lead to collective problem solving. And these interactions are chronicled, thanks to the admin tool, so any person on our team can field an incoming message, quickly see a holistic view of the situation and respond quickly.

We built the Dell Scholars Program with an eye to continuous evolution to ensure we meet our students' needs. We built the tool to manage our program at scale, and support our students' journeys. But the day-to-day student progress management is just one way the tool helps us get more students to the graduation stage. Because of the aggregate data and the long-view updates, we also have a full view of the systemic gaps in resources and knowledge that our students face. So, how do we combat those systemic issues for our students?



A young man with short dark hair, wearing an orange t-shirt and khaki shorts, is crouching on a concrete sidewalk. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. Behind him is a brick wall covered in vibrant, abstract graffiti in shades of blue, red, and green. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an outdoor setting.

Chapter 4

LIVE OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

At the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, we recognize that impactful innovations sometimes present as better, faster, or cheaper ways of implementing existing ideas or programs. For the Dell Scholars Program, that means we need to keep looking at the needs of our students through the lens of innovation. How do we evolve along with our students' needs? How does our technology fill the gaps they experience, and scale to help more students year over year? How does a small staff continue to provide the essential wrap-around supports that we know each student needs to be successful?

To keep the program evolving, we don't just think outside of the box—we live there. We have found and implemented solutions like the Student Resource Network (SRN), Chegg, and near-peer mentoring that have not only garnered proven results, but have increased the capacity of our staff, even as we accept more students to the program. These solutions address individual and systemic issues that can create major barriers to student success.

SRN: SERVICES THAT WORK

I often talk about “[compounding events](#)” and how they affect our students. We all know that no life event exists in a vacuum. So when students experience setbacks personally, they often ripple into their academic and work lives, too. Here is an example:

1. Student goes to college and hits the books.
2. Her parent loses her job.
3. She starts working 30 hours a week to financially support the whole family.
4. Study time is cut down significantly, and as a result, the student fails two classes.
5. As her GPA falls below 2.0, she is placed on academic probation—threatening her financial aid package.
6. She is on academic probation for three terms and no longer meets the requirements to keep her financial aid.
7. She is still supporting her family, and without financial aid, must leave school.

“Many of my college peers had parents that held a degree or even two. Their parents edited their papers, and informed them about internships that could advance their careers after college. Of course, I could call my grandmother and she'd be there for me. But having never been to college, all she could offer me was prayer, love, encouragement, and moral support.”

– Donalyn Allen,
Dell Scholars Program Class of 2009

[Read Donalyn's full story](#)



Stories like this play out across our nation time and time again. Helping students with these real-life experiences informs the way we approach the Dell Scholars Program. Scholars in need of support are counseled to utilize campus resources, if possible. However, we found that service gaps exist when it comes to helping our scholars and other low-income students succeed. To help close these gaps, we leveraged a network of resources for specialized support—the specialists to bolster our team of family practitioners.

The SRN was born out of a simple idea: why can't students receive the same kinds of support for work-life issues that working professionals receive from their employers? I received an email one day from our Human Resources team reminding us that we have access to a diverse range of services offered through our Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider. When reviewing the options offered, I knew our students and their families would benefit if they could access similar services. So I worked with our benefits team to approach EAP providers about providing these services directly to our scholars. The SRN allows our staff to connect students and their families with comprehensive resources in a cost-effective way. A check alone can't help when a student's parent passes away while they're in school. With SRN we are better able to align our students with the specialized support they need.

With SRN, here's how our student's story could have gone.

1. Student goes to college and hits the books.
2. Her parent loses her job.
3. She starts working 30 hours a week to financially support the whole family.
4. Study time is cut down significantly, and as a result, our student fails two classes.
5. The Dell Scholars team is alerted through the admin tool after her transcript is submitted.
6. The Dell Scholars team contacts the student to provide support.
7. They refer her to a counselor through SRN who can help her parent access local employment resources.
8. After another semester, her parent finds new employment and she can cut back on her own work hours, her GPA rebounds, and she is back on track to college graduation.

SRN SUPPORT SERVICES INCLUDE:

CONFIDENTIAL COUNSELING

The no-cost counseling service helps scholars address personal issues the students or their families may face. It's staffed by Master's level clinicians who listen and quickly refer individuals to in-person counseling and other resources for stress, anxiety, depression, relationship conflicts, job pressures, grief, or substance abuse.

FINANCIAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Scholars and their families consult with Certified Public Accountants and Certified Financial Planners on a wide range of financial issues such as debt reduction, taxes, retirement and estate planning, savings plans, and funding for college.

WORK-LIFE SOLUTIONS

Specialists provide qualified referrals and customized resources for child and elder care, moving and relocation, event planning, pet care, home repair, and major purchases.

GUIDANCE RESOURCES ONLINE

A one-stop resource for scholars providing expert information on issues that matter most—relationships, work, school, children, wellness, legal, financial, free time and more. Printed materials, tutorials, videos, self-assessments, “Ask the Expert” personal responses, and resource finders are all available to scholars and their eligible family members.

LEGAL SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

Qualified attorneys offer free phone consultations and a 25 percent reduction in fees for additional services. Scholars can seek legal assistance for divorce, family issues, debt and bankruptcy, housing issues, real estate transactions, contracts, and civil and criminal actions.

LISTENING TO STUDENTS: THE STORY OF CHEGG

Part of knowing each and every one of our students means that we have to listen to their needs and ideas as we iterate and improve. In 2012, we surveyed students to learn more about how we could improve the Dell Scholarship Program model. What we heard informed a lot of changes, but one of the most interesting has been the development of our work with Chegg.

Chegg started as a company that provided textbooks for rent. Their business model was based on fast shipping and student-focused service, and they enjoyed a strong reputation. At that time, the textbook rental market was becoming increasingly competitive, but Chegg was providing consistently great service for students. We worked with Chegg to create a feature of the Dell Scholars Program that helps students rent textbooks via credits they receive from our program staff. Students could exchange credits for books, and then return them to Chegg when the course was over. The partnership was a success, and when Chegg expanded its services in 2016 to include online tutoring and study help services, we expanded the way students could use our credits. Our staff worked with Chegg's customer service representatives to ensure that our scholars could get support when needed. In the first year alone, 25 percent of Dell Scholars who used Chegg products took advantage of the new academic services.

A NEW MODEL FOR MENTORSHIP

We applied this same outside-of-the-box thinking to our peer mentorship programs. Peer-to-peer mentorship is a common component in college persistence programs, and it is our belief that peer mentors are hugely important to student success.

Dell Scholars Program Ambassadors are more than key mentors to other students—they are extensions of our staff. Our working theory is that by recruiting ambassadors to serve as a support to our retention officers, they

build their own professional and networking skills, while simultaneously providing the integral peer-to-peer support our students need.

Our ambassadors are either current scholars or recent graduates, and work with both students and staff to design plans and interventions for scholar support based on their real-life experiences and knowledge. Ambassadors serve in the Dell Scholars Program up to two years, taking on more responsibility over time.

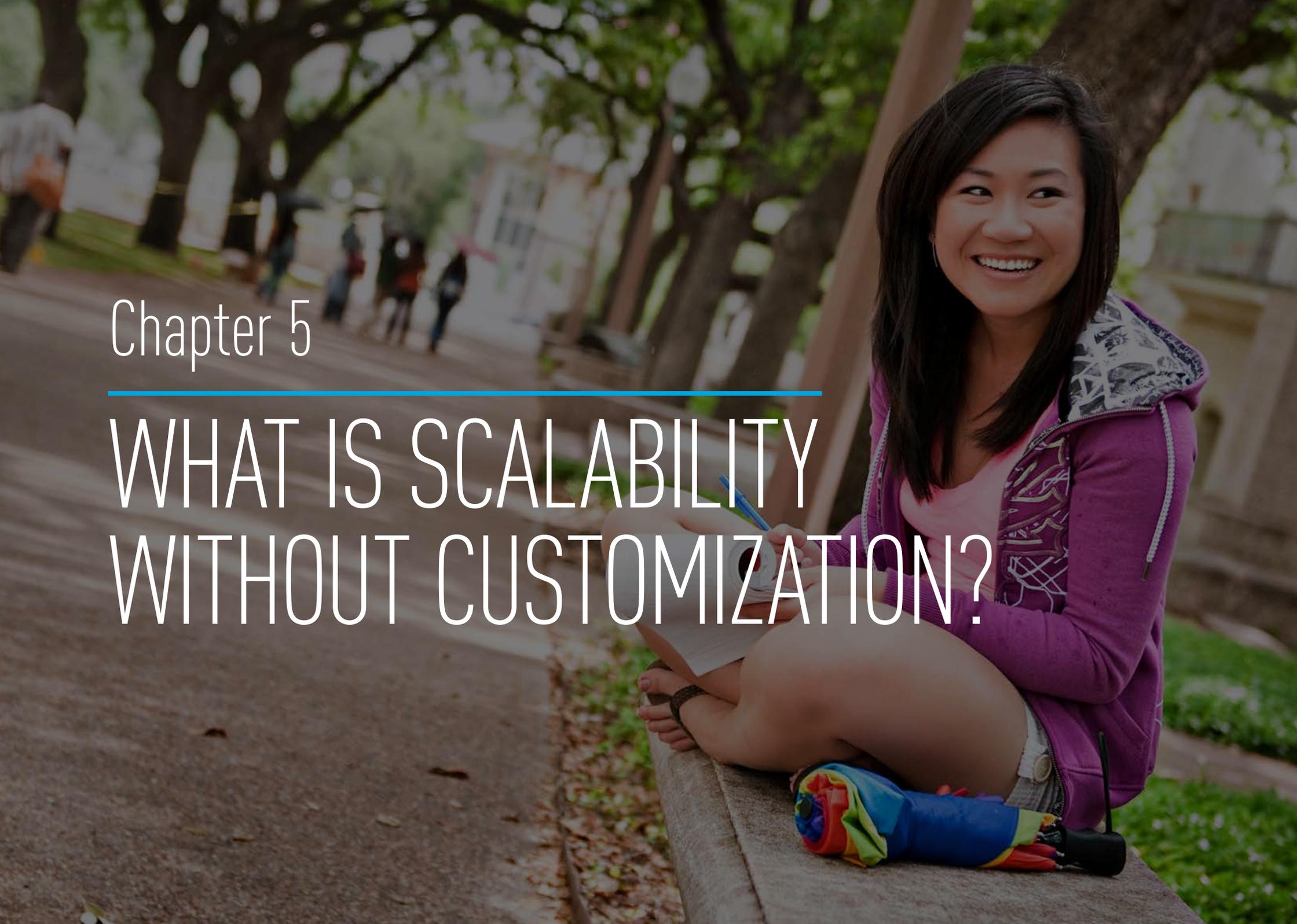
These are just some examples of how we approach the Dell Scholars Program from outside of the box—it's a part of the way we think about challenges, and how we think about broad improvements. Our work is always defined by student needs and measurable results, and we believe that there is always a way to innovate towards constant improvement.

Together, SRN, Chegg, and our Ambassador program are examples of how we find and implement creative ways to meet the needs of our Dell Scholars outside of the scholarship money and our direct retention and advising support.

"I quickly learned that leaving for college didn't mean that all my family problems were going to suddenly disappear, but rather it was going to be a challenge for me to deal with them from a distance."

— Reina Olivas
Dell Scholars Program Class of 2013

[Read Reina's full story](#)



Chapter 5

WHAT IS SCALABILITY WITHOUT CUSTOMIZATION?

For the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, there's no value in keeping programs and solutions that work to ourselves. Our mission is to reduce the number of children living in urban poverty—and we firmly believe that education is one of the pathways to success. When we witness the kind of transformational change that we've seen with the Dell Scholars Program, we want to share it—but in a way that makes sense for others. Scalability to us means that our college-completion partners can provide individualized assistance to their students and have the capacity to accomplish more within their existing programs. No two college completion programs are alike, but we believe that the ideas and the customizable technology that support the Dell Scholars Program can provide useful insights to any program that's committed to supporting students through college and to graduation.

To share our admin tool with others, we decided to launch a pilot program with charter school partners to find out if our approach could help manage the exponential growth in the number of college-bound students that some programs are experiencing. The goal of this pilot program with YES Prep Public Schools, Mastery Charter Schools, and Cristo Rey Network was to implement the Dell Scholars approach and technology within the framework of their college completion goals and program-specific needs. Together, these schools are already supporting more than 12,000 college-attending students, and by 2018, that number will be over 20,000 students.

We believe that organizations can have the power to provide exceptional student support while keeping staffing and administrative costs low. We learned a lot from our pilot program and how these organizations use the admin tool to manage their students. And we've learned a lot in the decade that we've been working with our tool and its evolution in the Dell Scholars Program. Now that we've battle-tested and refined our tool, we're making it available so other college persistence programs can better and more efficiently support students through college graduation.

We created [GradSnapp](#) as a stand-alone product that any organization can use to support students through college. We hope that our enthusiasm about the advancements we have made with our partners will be contagious. The more pathways we can clear for students, and the more risks we're willing to take, the more students will graduate with a college degree. I think we can all agree that acceptance letters are great, but diplomas are better.

"It's been so wonderful to have a central database where any of us can find out what's going on with a scholar—and it sure beats spreadsheets, emails and 'you're doing what?' conversations between our staff."

– Marlaina Wall
Palmer Scholars

FINAL THOUGHTS

As is true for any endeavor, the road to success can be bumpy. And in writing about the success of this program, I have not included the times our staff have experienced heartbreak when a student leaves school. But, to be very clear, those learning moments, and those student stories, stick with us every day. Those moments keep us inspired to achieve even greater successes, and encourage us to share our learnings and our progress with others.

My biggest takeaway from over ten years at the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation is that without constant evaluation and try-and-fail-and-try-again dedication, progress is impossible. I hope that you find our work and this e-book helpful as you think about your own programs and the students you support.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As the College Success Tools leader, Oscar oversees the foundation's comprehensive college success products and services. From 2005–2016, Oscar was the Portfolio Director overseeing the highly successful Dell Scholars Program. Oscar currently serves as President, Board of Directors for the National Scholarship Providers Association (NSPA).

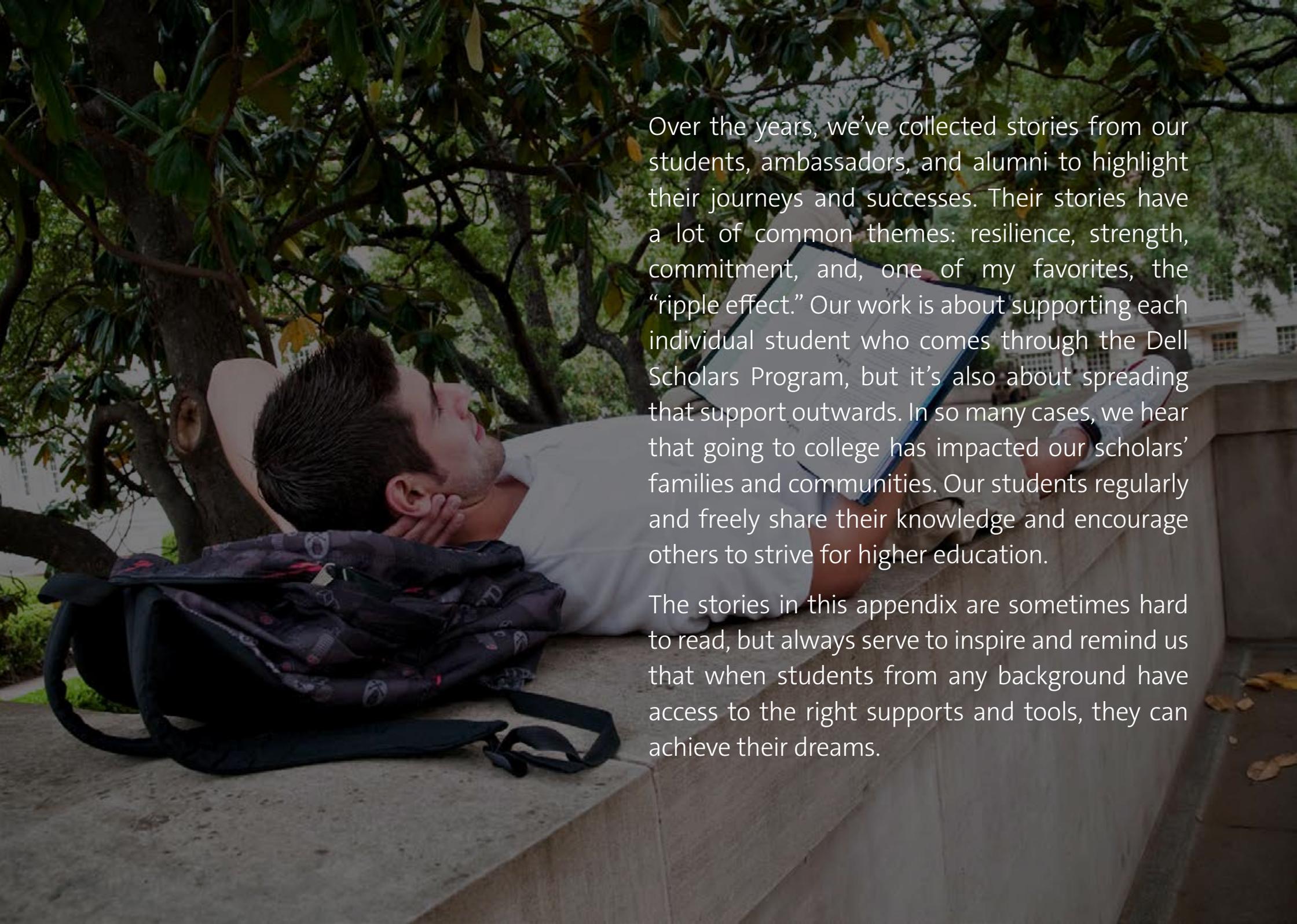
Prior to joining the foundation in 2005, Oscar was director of student retention and workforce development for the Oregon Council for Hispanic Advancement. Other past experience includes work with the Oregon Human Development Corporation and with AmeriCorps. Oscar has a bachelor's in political science and Spanish from the University of Oregon and is a leadership fellow alumni at the Institute of Nonprofit Management at Portland State University.



Appendix

SCHOLAR STORIES





Over the years, we've collected stories from our students, ambassadors, and alumni to highlight their journeys and successes. Their stories have a lot of common themes: resilience, strength, commitment, and, one of my favorites, the "ripple effect." Our work is about supporting each individual student who comes through the Dell Scholars Program, but it's also about spreading that support outwards. In so many cases, we hear that going to college has impacted our scholars' families and communities. Our students regularly and freely share their knowledge and encourage others to strive for higher education.

The stories in this appendix are sometimes hard to read, but always serve to inspire and remind us that when students from any background have access to the right supports and tools, they can achieve their dreams.

DONALYN ALLEN

Donalyn was four years old when her mother died. With Donalyn's father an intermittent presence (her parents had separated by the time she was born), the preschooler's maternal grandmother brought Donalyn from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to her La Porte, Texas, home to raise her.

Donalyn's grandmother became her lifeline, a parental figure but also—as Donalyn got older—a close friend. In school, Donalyn struggled at times with reading and she had a speech impediment. She also struggled to make sense of her mother's sudden death and the grief she was experiencing.

"Most people came from a two-parent home," Donalyn says of her peers in her hometown, 30 miles from Houston. "I'd go to school events with my grandma and my friends would ask: 'Where's your mom? Where's your dad?' Trying to explain that as a child, it's quite hard."

Finances got rockier after her grandmother suffered from health problems and eventually had to retire. By the time Donalyn reached high school, she knew she needed external support. Thankfully, a teacher close to Donalyn from the AVID college-readiness program helped involve a counselor and Donalyn's home life steadily improved. "My AVID teacher became like a second mom to me," Donalyn says. This same teacher encouraged Donalyn to pursue college. "I'd wanted to go to college ever since I was really young. But my AVID teacher was the one who really put the bug in my ear and constantly encouraged me. She'd say, 'You need to get out of this small town.' My grandma didn't know much about college except that it was really expensive," says Donalyn.



Donalyn started scholarship hunting in 9th grade without much luck. By senior year, she felt discouraged and thought she might need to settle for the local community college. Then she learned that she had been accepted to the Dell Scholars Program, and suddenly college was right around the corner. Donalyn's grandmother and a family friend helped her move into her dorm at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas - three hours from her hometown. In 2012, Donalyn became the first in her immediate family to earn a college degree, in speech pathology.

But the success didn't come overnight. Donalyn experienced a steep learning curve on her path to getting that degree, grappling with everything from how to study for a test to how to juggle finances. The Dell Scholars Program's wrap-around supports helped Donalyn navigate these issues and provided her with guidance to move forward with her degree.

Donalyn went on to earn a master's degree in speech pathology and began her work as a speech therapist in a school district near La Porte. She wanted to give back to the community where she was raised and help her grandmother. Donalyn and a fellow AVID friend have also launched a fledgling mentor program, promoting college and offering small scholarships to current La Porte AVID students. "I want to change the lives of children that were once in my shoes," Donalyn says.

Donalyn and her other first-generation college graduate friends have talked a lot about how life will be different for their own children. "Our kids will have no choice, they will go to college," Donalyn laughs. "And, thankfully, they will grow up with the knowledge of what college is all about."

FRANCISCO CERNADA

Francisco Cernada is a Dell Scholar from the class of 2016. Francisco is from Houston, Texas but much of his family resides in Guatemala. He grew up living in a two-bedroom apartment with seven family members, sharing a room with his aunt and cousin. As a teenager, he was the only one who had a stable income in the household.

Francisco faced a multitude of other obstacles as well: language barriers, periodic homelessness, and separated parents. As Francisco puts it, he faced an “identity crisis” by the time he was in high school. He felt he was going through his educational journey alone.

“I am the first of my family to seriously consider obtaining a higher education. As a matter of fact, growing up, college wasn’t seen as an option,” Francisco said.

It wasn’t until his high school counselor at [YES Prep](#) intervened that Francisco began thinking about what he could accomplish with a college degree. Thanks to the support from his high school counselors and peers, Francisco applied to the Dell Scholars Program along with several colleges and universities. He graduated as the valedictorian of his high school class and gained acceptance to four Ivy League schools, including Harvard University – a dream school.

After graduation from Harvard, Francisco decided to pursue a career that will allow him to serve as a voice for those who are walking in the shoes he once wore. He is currently an after-school program coordinator in Cambridge, MA, serving students aged 13-16.



BILAL LAFTA

Bilal was born in Baghdad, Iraq and lived there until 2005 with his father, mother and younger brother and sister. Bilal's education was cut short when his school in Baghdad was forced to close after a nearby bomb blast. His account below provides us with the details of his move to the United States and the barriers he's overcome to reach college:

"I remember holding my little brother by the hand as we watched the doors to our school close for the last time. A bomb had just gone off, and our teachers had dismissed us early. At home, we were greeted by our mother, who always waited and prayed outside when explosions shook the neighborhood. These events seemed almost normal until later that night when American troops came to our house and told us we would have to evacuate the city. It was heartbreaking, but we packed our belongings and left Baghdad soon after, leaving our friends, our family, and our home behind us. I got into a car with my father, while my brother, mother, and sister got into a different car.

After driving a few hours, I asked my father, "Where is Mama?" That was the first and last time I saw my father cry. We lived in a refugee camp in Baqubah for a few months after that, and I eventually learned that my family had been separated. Through our forced evacuation, separation, and escape to America, I learned to cherish family and always embracing diversity as a positive influence.

As the oldest child in my family, I have many obligations and responsibilities to manage. I was the first person in my family to learn English, so when we came to America, I became the family interpreter. To this day, I still



translate for my parents on a daily basis. Since I was ten years old, I've been thrown into professional settings to speak to adults in English and relay the information I receive to my parents in Arabic. As my confidence in interpreting grew stronger, the conversations I was trusted with became more important. I recall the time when I spoke to a cardiologist before my father's heart surgery. I have come to realize that family is everything and these sacrifices are always worth the effort."

Despite many struggles and pauses in his education, Bilal graduated as the valedictorian of his class at Boston Community Leadership Academy. Bilal is the first in his family to attend college and is a current Dell Scholar. He is studying engineering at Brown University.

VI NGUYEN

Vi was nine when she boarded an airplane for the first time, moving with her parents and one-year-old brother from their rural village in Vietnam to the United States for a shot at more opportunities.

That momentous decision paid off. Today, Vi holds an economics degree from Yale University, and a master's in computational analysis and public policy from the University of Chicago.

But back in 1997, Vi's family had just landed in California, where they had relatives. The family quickly decided to move to Des Moines, Iowa, drawn by a lower cost of living. Vi rapidly learned English at school and became the family translator. "My parents were asking for help, which they had never done before. I think I grew up faster. But it was also a really good thing for me to see that I could help, and that it was important to ask for what you need," Vi says.

Finances were tight. In Vietnam, her parents were teachers. In Iowa, her father worked two jobs; her mother worked the night shift at a mail services company. But Vi thrived at school, taking advanced courses at a nationally recognized magnet program.

While her parents expected her to attend college, they were not familiar with the admissions process. When Vi sat at the public library stumped by the financial-aid forms, a devoted school counselor from the TRIO Upward Bound program drove over to help.

While applying to college, Vi applied to Yale because a friend had visited the campus and encouraged her to submit an application. "I was bouncing



with joy to share the news that I had been accepted, my mom's response was, 'Yale? Where is that?'" Vi says. "She had never heard of New Haven, and had not planned on having me so far away." But, in the end, her parents supported her choice and Vi moved into her dorm on the New Haven campus.

While Vi found Yale nurturing, she still had to find her place socially and academically at Yale. After enjoying a close support network in Des Moines, Vi's biggest challenge was learning to ask for help. The Dell Scholars Program was there for Vi when she needed the extra support to face these new challenges.

After graduation, Vi moved to Washington, D.C., working in the federal Office of Management and Budget, then as a Congressional Budget Office analyst. But the value of Vi's college degree spreads beyond just her. Since graduation, she has worked for the City Colleges of Chicago and currently works for QuestBridge, a national non-profit organization that connects low-income youth with leading colleges and opportunities. She is committed to helping more students realize that success is possible.

REINA OLIVAS

Reina was a Dell Scholars Program Ambassador, who worked relentlessly alongside our staff to provide help and support to our scholars. She reflects on what mentorship means to her:

“Through my experiences at college, I have learned firsthand what it means to be on both ends of the spectrum of giving and receiving support. I began as an intimidated first-generation college student, and now, I am in the position of passing on my valuable knowledge to other first-generation college students.

I was a straight-A student in high school, applied to as many scholarships as I possibly could and was very involved in extra-curricular activities. I knew I had to work extremely hard to be able to attend college, an idea that was both motivating and intimidating.

Similar to many other first-generation students, I had to help my mother pay the bills while in high school. This meant that I had to find a way to balance a job, school work, extra-curricular activities, homework and chores around the house. It was straining at times but paid off when I was accepted to the University of Texas at Austin.

College was a completely different ball game from high school. I quickly learned that my study habits had to improve, and that tutoring and office hours would make a big difference in my grades. I was managing well my first semester until I learned my father had been incarcerated in Houston.

Coping from this far away from home made me feel homesick and distracted from my studies. Midterms were coming up, so I sat in my dorm



room one night and laid out my options:

1. I could let this consume me, allow my grades to suffer and let all my hard work in high school be for nothing.
2. I could seek help, reach out to resources on campus and at the Dell Scholars Program and push through my first semester in college.

I chose the latter. I met with a counselor, a mentor, and staff at the Dell Scholars Program to vent about my situation. They gave me tips and advice, and reassured me that I wasn't alone. I immediately felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

I reminded myself continuously that I had moved to Austin with a main goal: receive my college education and earn my degree. I had to keep that goal in sight, and continue to take advantage of the resources available to me.

Fast forward three years, and I became a Dell Scholars Program Ambassador, while very close to graduating with my degree. I believe it is so important to pass on the knowledge and guidance that I have gained to other incoming students. Whether it be my cousins, my brothers, my friends from high school, college classmates or other Dell Scholars, it's important as first generation students to help one another, and continue to inspire and help others on their journey to a better future.

As a mentor, it's incredibly rewarding to share what I now know. And knowing that I'm having a positive impact on a fellow peer or student makes all of my hardships worth it."

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