

ScholarMatch Evaluation Report
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Introduction

ScholarMatch was founded in 2010 as a crowdfunding platform for scholarships and has since evolved into a direct-services program with a mission to support low-income, first-generation students to and through college. Like many non-profit educational organizations, ScholarMatch has evolved through multiple programmatic iterations in response to funding availability and anecdotal evidence drawn from staff and student experiences. In 2013, ScholarMatch shifted toward a comprehensive programmatic model that includes individualized college success and career advising, targeted financial supports, and ongoing mentorship and emotional support for selected students.

In March 2020, ScholarMatch allocated resources for an external evaluation of the college success program. This report's findings draw on data from the program's database, persistence, and graduation rates from the National Student Clearinghouse, as well as interviews with a sample of staff members across all levels of the organization. The evaluation was conducted over the course of an academic year and was designed to compare student-level outcomes against the program's primary mission to support bachelor's degree attainment within the first five years of enrollment.

We found that **80% of ScholarMatch students who received the full program model (both non-financial and financial supports) graduated with a Bachelor's degree within five years.** The ScholarMatch graduation rate for first-generation, low-income students is remarkably higher than the nation's average six-year degree attainment rate of 21%.¹

The inconsistency of the program's resources and selection criteria over time does not allow for experimental or quasi-experimental analyses. However, the evolution of the program model allows for a compelling, *descriptive* assessment of degree attainment outcomes for students who received a full suite of program supports versus those students who only received one component of the model (either financial or non-financial supports). This evaluation found substantial differences in degree attainment rates across these two groups of scholars. **The full-program ScholarMatch Bachelor's degree attainment rate is a notable 22 percentage points higher than their peers who graduated at a rate of 58%².**

This report provides detailed findings of ScholarMatch Bachelor's degree attainment rates, drawing solely on data from the National Student Clearinghouse. In addition to providing overall degree attainment statistics, we disaggregate outcomes across institutional degree attainment rates for Pell Grant recipients, as reported to the United States Department of Education College Scorecard database. Furthermore, we present first-stage analyses on year-over-year persistence rates.

Finally, the report concludes with a proposed logic model drawn from key themes that emerged in interviews with ScholarMatch leadership, management, and front-line college success advisors. Although

¹ Graduation rate for low-income and first generation first-time postsecondary students. [Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States — Reports and Data, 2020 \(pellinstitute.org\)](#)

² Graduation rates were calculated for ScholarMatch cohorts who first enrolled between 2013 and 2015, for which five-year graduation data is available via the National Student Clearinghouse.

it is impossible to quantitatively isolate the programmatic mechanisms that are drivers of degree attainment outcomes, the logic model is an attempt to illustrate and organize the inputs, activities, and outputs that were consistently discussed and observed as critical components of the program's work. The short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes presented in the logic model are proposed metrics that were identified in collaboration with programmatic staff and leadership. We present the proposed outcomes as a potential guide for ScholarMatch as the organization continues its journey under new governance.

Data Sources and Analytic Sample Sizes

In collaboration with the ScholarMatch leadership and data team, we submitted a data request to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) for all ScholarMatch participants who enrolled in the program between 2006 and 2020 (n = 812). The NSC records matching rate (that is, the proportion of students who were found in the NSC database) was 82% (n = 667).

Our analyses of graduation rates were restricted to a sample of ScholarMatch students that 1) were selected into the 2013-2015 cohorts in our analyses of graduation rates (n = 164), for whom five-year graduation data are available; and 2) were linked with an NSC record (the NSC match rate for this analytic sample was 78%). The analytic sample for graduation rates was n = 128.

The analytic sample for outcomes related to persistence was expanded to include students selected into cohorts 2013-2019 (n = 558). The NSC match rate for the students in these cohorts was 87%, therefore yielding an analytic sample size of n = 486.

Socio-demographic data on students in the analytic samples were provided by the ScholarMatch data team and pulled from the program database. The programmatic mission specifically targets first-generation and low-income students (determined by Pell-eligibility). Program leadership confirmed that the entirety of the analytic sample met this selection criteria. The demographic composition of the degree attainment analytic sample was 54% Hispanic/Latino, 26% Asian/Asian Indian/Pacific Islander, and 11% Black. The remaining 9% of this sample were either combinations of the above mentioned categories or did not self-identify into a race/ethnicity category. The analytic sample for persistence outcomes (i.e., students in cohorts 2013-2019) was 56% Hispanic/Latino, 19% Asian/AI/PI, and 17% Black.

The assignment of scholars to program dosage categories (i.e., full program model vs. other program iterations) was guided by a series of information-gathering interviews with ScholarMatch's founding Executive Director, Diana Adamson. ScholarMatch students are assigned a unique program identification number at the time of selection. Within each program identification number is an alphabetical code that indicates the funding source and services associated with each program track in the organization's history. Students in the sample were assigned to the "Full Program Model" category if they were associated with a code that indicated receipt of a \$5,000/year financial award³ (up to five years) and college-success

³ ScholarMatch students in the Full Program model receive \$5,000 per year with access to additional funds for emergencies and career development, as needed. This award includes \$1,500 for school-related expenses (e.g., housing deposits, books, supplies, and transportation), \$500 to support campus immersion activities, and \$3,000 for student loan repayment directly to the lender upon graduation.

advising support. Students assigned to the “Other Program Iterations” category received either a financial award (ranging from \$500 - \$5,000 depending on available funding) *or* advising support.

Quantitative data were cleaned and analyzed using Python and visualized on Tableau. Institutional quality indicator data were pulled from the most recent publicly-available College Scorecard data from the U.S. Department of Education.⁴

To generate the proposed logic model, we drew on historical documentation, 90 minute interviews with programmatic staff and managers, and approximately 50 hours of information gathering meetings with the ScholarMatch leadership team *in addition to* the quantitative findings presented here. The interviews were semi-structured and prompted participants to reflect on program-wide and individual advising and management routines, programmatic culture, evidence-based practices, and hypothesized mechanisms driving outcomes of postsecondary success. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using an explanatory case study approach.

Limitations

Selection procedures for the ScholarMatch program do not allow for experimental or quasi-experimental analyses. Therefore, these findings are descriptive and should not be interpreted as causal. Furthermore, pre-program socio-demographic and academic data were not easily available at the time of this evaluation. Therefore, it should be assumed that these findings are not generalizable to the average low-income, first-generation postsecondary student in the United States. This report references national trends for postsecondary outcomes for low-income and first-generation students. However, in the absence of adequate baseline data for matching procedures, those trends should not be interpreted as baseline or comparison group statistics.

Finally, this evaluation report does not include interview data with ScholarMatch alumni or current students. The student perspective is critically important in understanding underlying program mechanisms and the impacts of programmatic design decisions on student postsecondary experiences. Unfortunately, the parameters of this first-stage evaluation did not allow for the time, staffing, and resources required to appropriately incorporate student voice. Future work should prioritize the inclusion of student perspectives to comprehensively understand the programmatic elements that matter most.

⁴ <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>

Findings

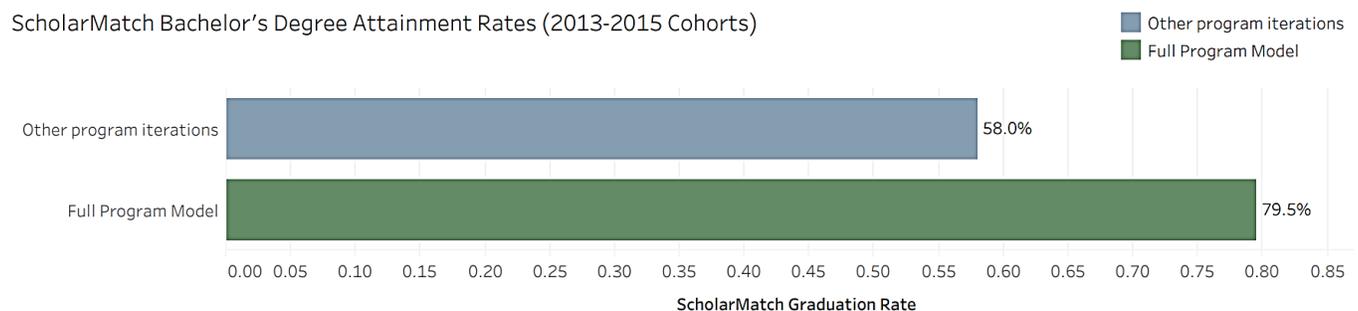
The quantitative findings presented here answer three research questions:

- 1) What is the degree attainment and persistence rates of ScholarMatch students selected into the full program model (i.e., combination of financial and non-financial supports)?
- 2) Is there a meaningful difference in degree attainment and persistence rates for students in the full program model versus students selected into alternative programmatic tracks (i.e., solely financial support OR procedural/information/social-emotional support)?
- 3) To what extent do degree attainment and persistence rates vary across predictive institutional factors (i.e., six-year graduation rates for Pell grant recipients).

Degree attainment

We assessed Bachelor's degree attainment rates, as reported by the National Student Clearinghouse, for 2013-2015 ScholarMatch students (see Figure 1). Students enrolled in the full program model (i.e., receiving both financial and non-financial supports) graduated at a rate of 79.5%. Their peers enrolled in other program variations (i.e., receiving either financial or non-financial supports) graduated at a rate of 58%.

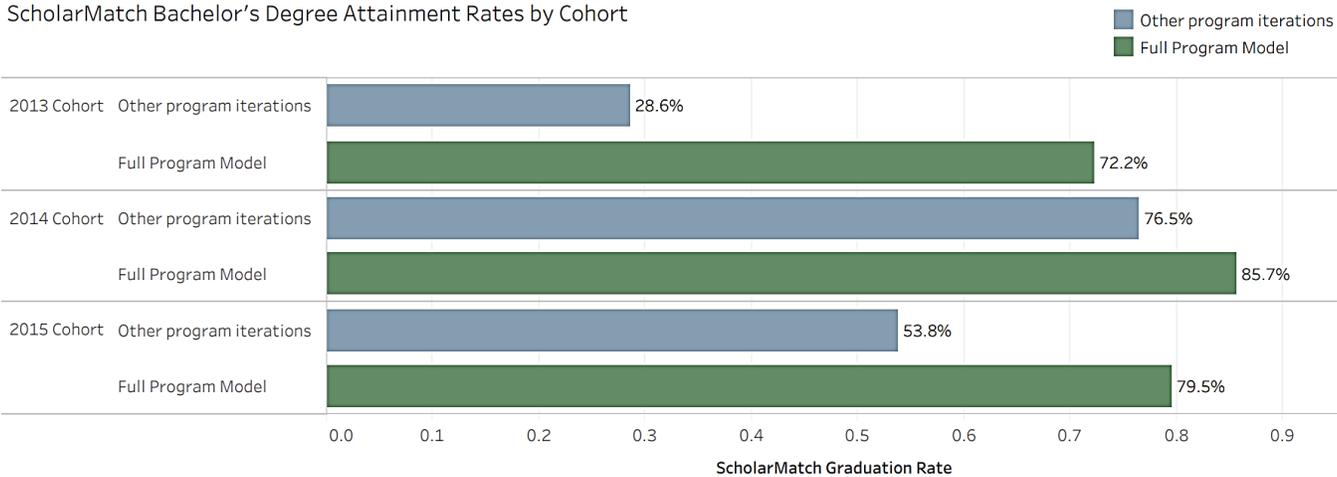
Figure 1. Bachelor's degree attainment rates for ScholarMatch Cohorts 2013-2015



Degree attainment rates did vary across the cohorts in the analytic sample (see Figure 2). ScholarMatch students selected into the full program model during 2014 attained a Bachelor's degree at a rate of 85.7% compared to 72.2% of scholars enrolled in the program during the prior academic year.⁵

⁵ Within six-year degree attainment rates for the 2015 cohort were not available at the time of this report. Therefore, we do not include this cohort in the comparative assessment.

Figure 2. Bachelor’s degree attainment rates across ScholarMatch cohorts between 2013 and 2015

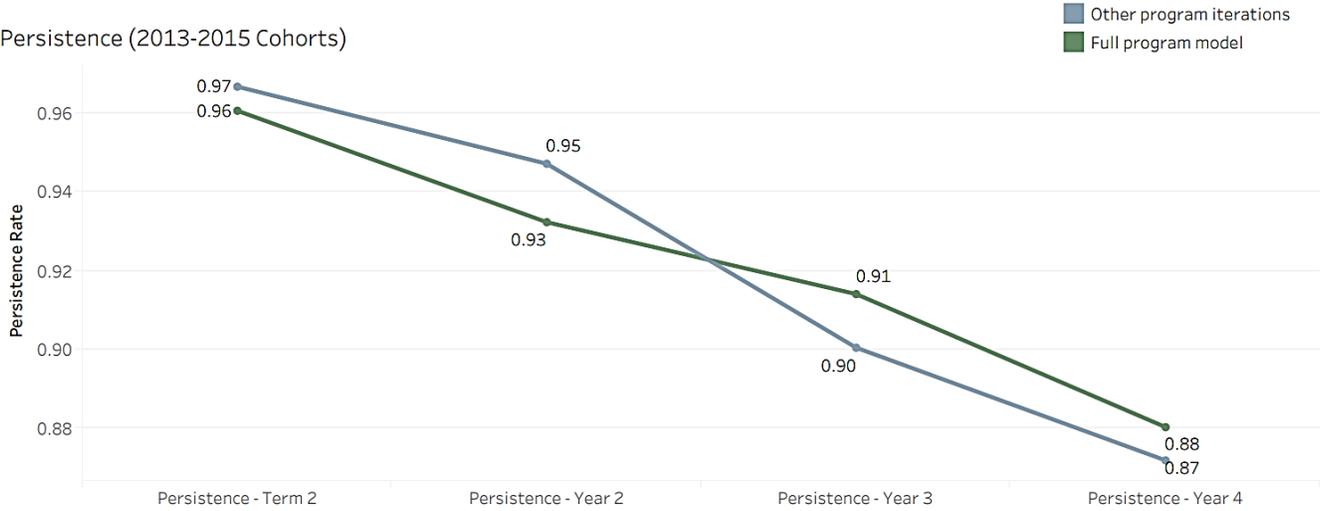


During an evaluation feedback session with program staff, during which we reviewed analytic findings, they reflected on possible explanations for the boost in degree attainment rates for the 2014 cohort. Program leadership attributed the discrepancy in success rates to the hiring of a full-time college success advisor, Monica Mendez, during the 2013-2014 academic year. “Monica began building the college success advising program at the time of her hiring and officially implemented supports for students beginning in the fall of 2014,” stated Executive Director Diana Adamson, who oversaw the organization’s strategic initiatives. “The stability of having her in that role for six years helped push institutional learning and improvement over time.”

Persistence

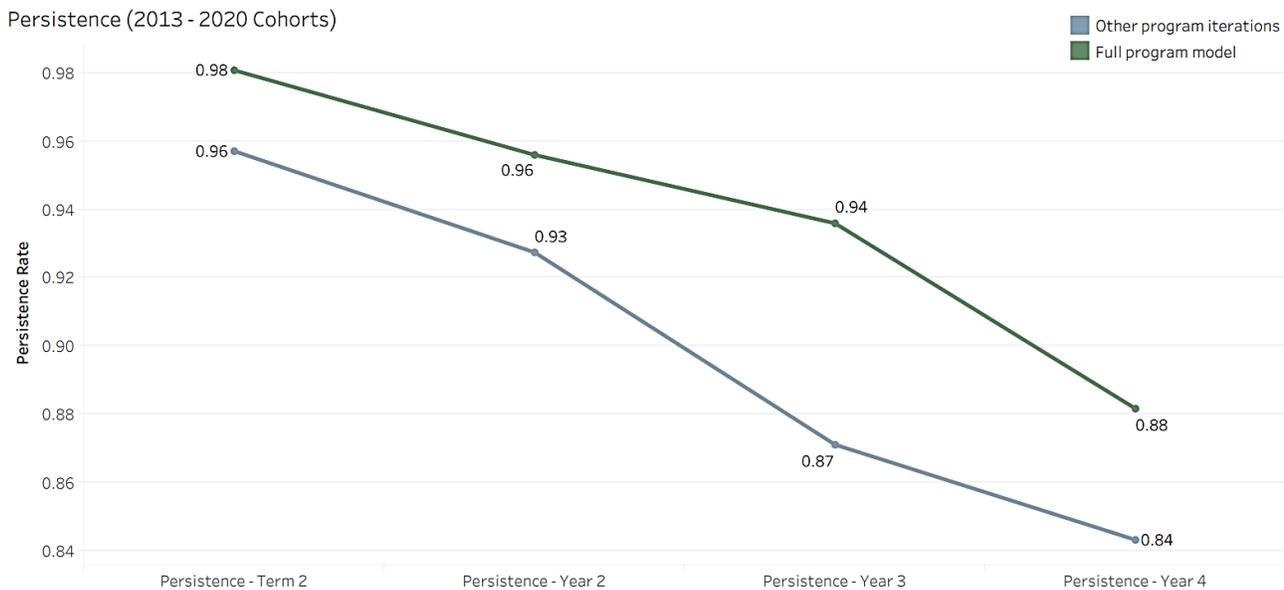
Although there is a substantial difference in degree attainment rates across programmatic models for ScholarMatch students in cohorts 2013-2015, we did not observe significant differences for year-over-year persistence rates (i.e., a record of consistent enrollment after confirmed enrollment in the first academic term) between these two groups (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Persistence rates for ScholarMatch Cohorts 2013-2015



However, when we expand the sample to include ScholarMatch students enrolled in cohorts 2013-2020, there are noticeable differences in persistence rates, specifically in the third and fourth years of enrollment (see Figure 4). The vast majority of ScholarMatch students persist into their second year of college, regardless of program assignment (96% for students enrolled in the full-program model versus 93% of other ScholarMatch students). Persistence into the third year of college drops to 87% for students who received a single service versus 94% for students in the full-program model.

Figure 4. Persistence rates for ScholarMatch Cohorts 2013-2020

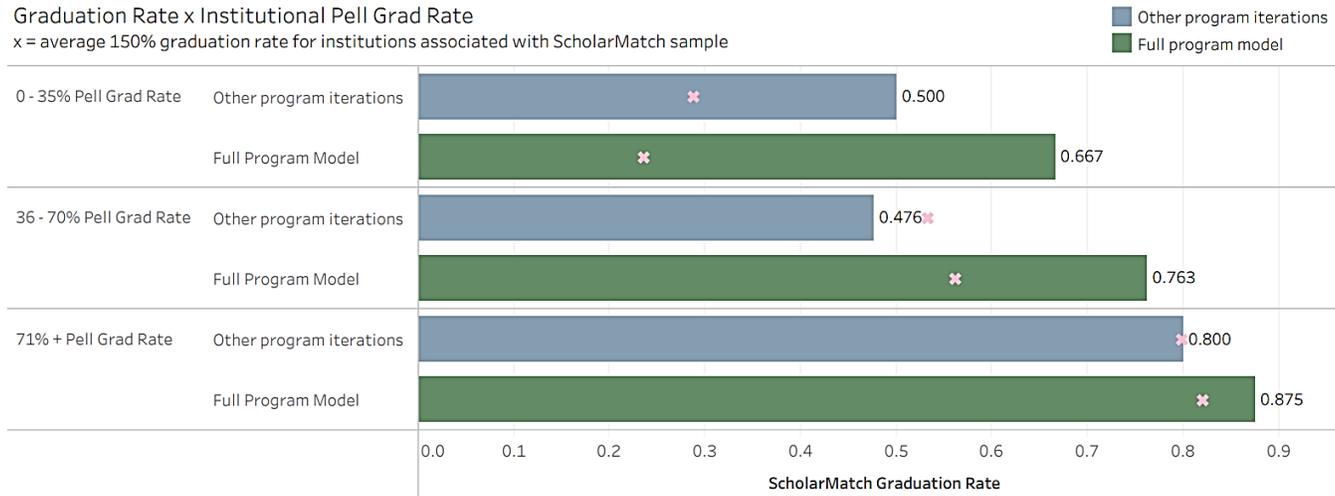


Institutional Subgroup Analyses

In addition to identifying degree attainment and persistence rates, we assessed whether degree attainment rates for ScholarMatch students varied across indicators of institutional success. We conducted subgroup analyses across a proxy measure for institutional success, as measured by Pell student graduation rates reported in College Scorecard data. Institutions were divided into three categories of Pell graduation rates: 0-35%, 36-70%, and 71% and above.

ScholarMatch students in cohorts 2013-2015 who were enrolled in institutions with the lowest Pell degree attainment rates (i.e., 0-35%) graduated at a rate of 67% compared to their peers in a single-service program model who graduated at a rate of 50%. The percentage point difference widens in the second institutional category (i.e., 35-70%) across these two groups of students. Here, we observe a notable 18 percentage point difference. ScholarMatch students enrolled in the full program model graduated at a rate of 76.3% versus 47.6% for students who received a single-service (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Bachelor's degree attainment rates for ScholarMatch students across institution categories



These findings are consistent with a growing evidence base showing that comprehensive support programs have substantially larger impacts on degree attainment rates for students enrolled in less selective, resource-strapped institutions compared to peers enrolled in more selective postsecondary institutions that are, on average, better equipped to offer more robust financial aid and advising services.

Conclusion

The descriptive, quantitative findings presented in this report confirm that after years of evolving program resources and practices, the organization's adoption of a comprehensive support services model is associated with positive and notably high Bachelor's degree attainment rates for the first-generation, low-income college students they serve. Data limitations and the historical selection mechanisms of the program limit our ability to assess to what extent this observed success can be attributed to the financial and advising resources provided by ScholarMatch. We are not able to say that the ScholarMatch program model *caused* the impressive degree attainment and persistence rates presented in this report. Nevertheless, these inaugural analyses of National Student Clearinghouse data confirms that the vast majority of ScholarMatch students attain a Bachelor's degree within six years of initial enrollment. Given that ScholarMatch specifically serves low-income students, of whom the majority are first in their families to enroll in college, the findings presented here point to the ScholarMatch program model as a potential exemplar model for college success initiatives that combine both financial and non-financial supports.

The attached logic model represents a first-stage attempt to document the organizational priorities and programmatic components that bolster the success of ScholarMatch students. The logic model draws on the quantitative data presented here as well as semi-structured interviews with program staff, historical documentation of the program's evolution, and feedback from the staff and board members during evaluation feedback meetings.

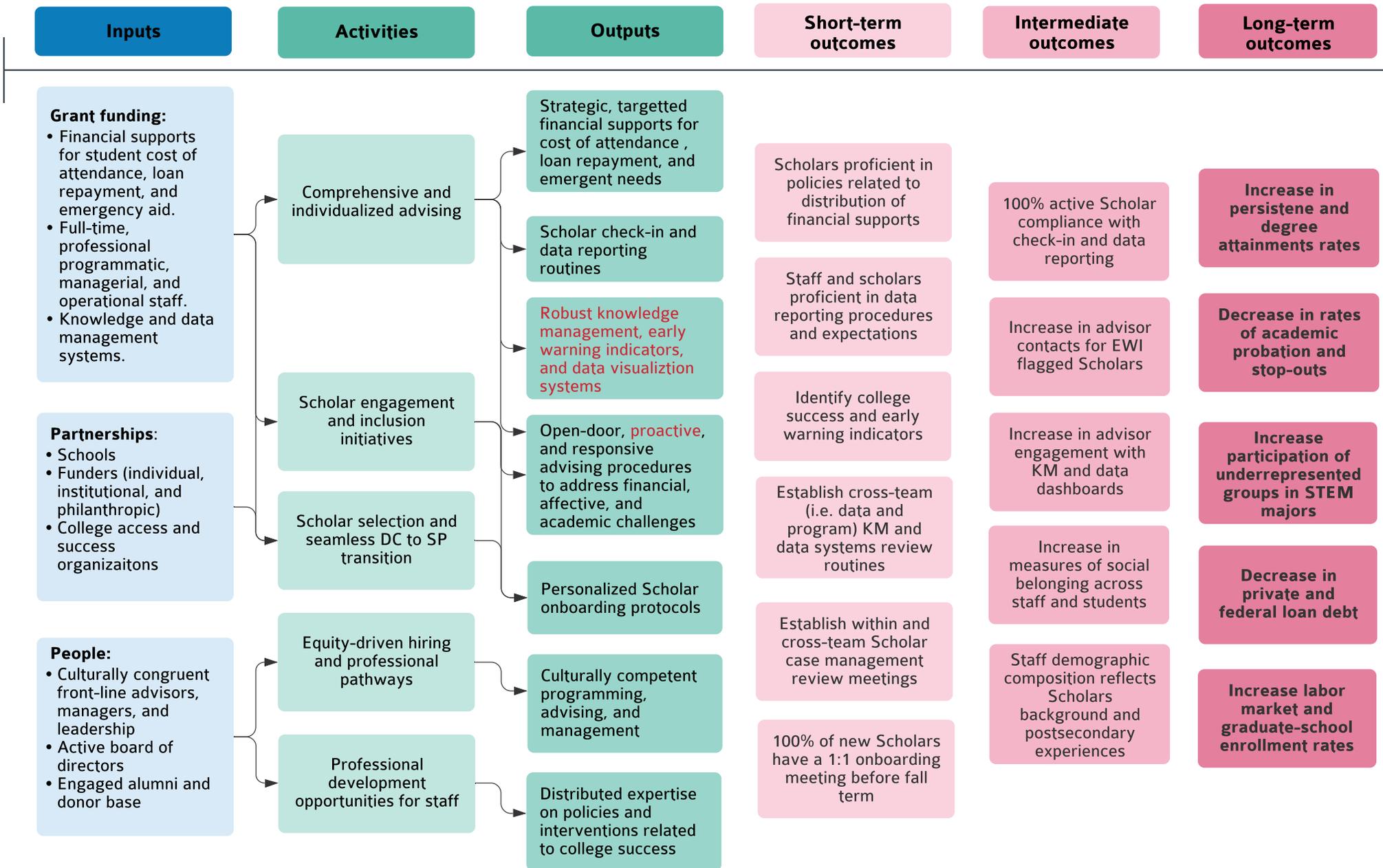
As is the case in all descriptive evaluations, we cannot attribute success to one programmatic component. However, throughout the evaluation period we were attuned to the unique aspects of the organization that may distinguish ScholarMatch from other college success initiatives. We theorize that the program's

success can be attributed to the organization's practice of hiring and promoting staff members with qualities that are reflective of the students they serve; the coupling of financial incentives with student data reporting; and the deep, organizational-wide commitment to establishing and maintaining meaningful and responsive relationships with scholars.

Sociologist Mario Luis Small's work focuses on the role of community institutions as critical brokers of resources; the fewer the resources individuals have in their personal networks, the more their outcomes depend on the organizations with which they routinely interact.⁶ We conclude with a quote from an interview with a ScholarMatch alum who is now a full-time college success advisor with the organization: "I went to my [ScholarMatch] college advisor for everything. My family could not help me with a lot of things, and I did not want to be open with my peers about what I was struggling with. But this third-party person was there with answers and guidance. It was nice. I knew that even when I felt lost, I would get help."

⁶ Allard, S. W., & Small, M. L. (2013). Reconsidering the urban disadvantaged: The role of systems, institutions, and organizations.

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Theories and Assumptions:

- Higher education is a critical stepping stone for economic mobility, specifically for low-income, first-generation students.
- Rigorous research on postsecondary interventions for low-income, first-generation students suggests that comprehensive supports (i.e., a combination of financial, procedural, and socio-emotional supports) yields significant impacts on persistence and degree attainment rates.
- Promoting socioeconomic and racial diversity and inclusiveness across all programmatic and operational initiatives increases engagement, sense of belonging, and academic validation for low-income, first-generation, and minority students.