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The AAACF Community Scholarship Program: A Strategic Approach to Building Community

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Keywords: Community foundations, scholarships, donors, college access, college degree attainment, community colleges

Introduction

Scholarships are one of the oldest forms of philanthropy, dating back to colonial days (Drezner, 2011; Gaudiani, 2003), and community foundations have a long history of providing scholarships to local students (Daun-Barnett & Lamm, 2012). These scholarship programs, however, have largely failed “to support low-income students who otherwise would not complete postsecondary education” (Hadley & Morgan, 2017, p. 3).

Founded in 1963, the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation (AAACF) had by 2014 created more than 45 scholarships, most of which were one-time awards to students meeting criteria determined by donors. For years these funds were distributed without any attempt to learn whether the scholarships were truly having an impact on degree attainment, and foundation staff did not follow up to assess their impact on students’ academic or career goals. A hands-off, donor-driven approach in general has been common among community foundations (Remmer & Ruth, 2015); for scholarships, not surprisingly, this results in programs that tend to focus on rewarding merit or fund students who might otherwise still have access to college (Hadley & Morgan, 2017).

In 2014 the foundation was also preparing for a transition in staff leadership. The new leaders brought a data-driven approach to their work in line with growing calls from the field for community foundations to be more proactive than reactive in their grantmaking (Remmer & Ruth,

Key Points

- Five years ago, the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation decided to take a strategic approach to offering college scholarships that would address gaps in educational achievement among local students. To increase the impact of its scholarship program, the foundation shifted its emphasis from one-time awards to promoting degree attainment, and determined that the criteria for new scholarships would be based on impact data instead of donor intent.
- The Community Scholarship Program awards multiyear scholarships to local students of color, students from low-income families, and first-generation college students, and provides them with a dedicated college success coach to help them successfully navigate through higher education. The program is in the midst of a four-year evaluation of its impact on persistence and degree completion among its scholarship recipients, and early assessments indicate positive outcomes.
- This article outlines the evolution of the program, examining its design, implementation, and outcomes to date. To encourage replication in other communities, it concludes with recommendations for other community foundations interested in addressing disparities in access to college and degree attainment in the United States.

2015). This changing orientation of community foundation models toward an ideology of impact coincided with a larger trend of donors asking for measurable results and accountability for their giving (Crutchfield & McLeod Grant, 2008; Grace & Wendroff, 2001). It also represented an opportunity for foundation trustees to take decisive and strategic action to achieve demonstrable community impact (Millesen & Martin, 2018).

At a board retreat in Fall 2014, trustees were briefed on how the foundation administered scholarships, with an emphasis on the time commitment necessary to oversee more than 40 programs and the lack of existing data to demonstrate their impact. Instead of tracking outcomes, the staff's focus had been on assuring donors that scholarship dollars had been awarded. Also shared with the board were data from Washtenaw Futures, the county's College Access Network member, to document the persistence of large achievement gaps based on race and socioeconomic status among students pursuing postsecondary education — this despite the fact that the foundation's service area of Washtenaw County is home to Ann Arbor, considered among the most educated cities in America (McCann, 2019). Despite the efforts of a movement led by the Michigan College Access Network to increase attainment of postsecondary credentials (Daun-Barnett & Lamm, 2012), the state ranks 33rd nationally in that outcome and is below average in the Great Lakes region (Bell & Lewis, 2020). Washtenaw County's goal is to increase postsecondary attainment to 70% of the population.

In an effort to increase the impact and efficiency of the scholarship program, staff presented the board with a new approach: No new scholarships would be created — or, as some framed it, accepted from donors — unless they were part of a new Community Scholarship Program (CSP). The program which would be administered by a central scholarship committee, while the foundation would continue to honor and administer all existing scholarships in perpetuity.

As the trustees discussed this new approach, staff assured them that the foundation would not be

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saying no to donors; rather, they were presenting other options — with one designed specifically to address disparities in degree attainment — offering the potential to attract contemporary donors focused on impact. The board's concerns were valid; community foundations have often been found to prioritize donors' perceived interests over impact (Buteau, Chaffin & Buchanan, 2014). Foundation staff was asking the board to trust not only that the new program would increase degree attainment among the community's most vulnerable populations, but also that donors would support the change.

New donors would indeed be necessary. The trustees approved the new CSP, but with no initial funding. The new program directly addressed educational disparities by focusing on three populations: students from low-income families, first-generation college students, and students of color. Donors could still create named scholarship funds, but those would be administered under the CSP umbrella.

In Fall 2015, a potential new donor contacted the foundation to learn about opportunities to make a demonstrable difference in Washtenaw County through a significant gift. Staff presented several options, including CSP. Because it was a program merely in theory at that point, with no funding and no scholarships yet awarded, staff had to rely

TABLE 1 Community Scholarship Foundation Timeline

2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Board approves program, with no funding	Anonymous donation of \$1 million to launch CSP	First cohort selected and announced	Public match met within a year	Evaluation begins	Updates to program based on growth

on the compelling data behind the CSP’s design to make the case. And they needed to have faith that the assertion made to trustees — that donors would respond to the data and the potential for impact — would be proven true.

Staff explained to the potential donor that CSP was part of a larger shift in the foundation’s approach to scholarships, away from college access and toward degree attainment — which are very different goals. Local and national data both conclude that students can often find support to start college, but rarely attain scholarships that help them persist all the way to graduation (Hadley & Morgan, 2017). The donor found the rationale compelling, and was also intrigued by the opportunity to be the CSP’s inaugural donor and kick-start the program in a meaningful way. The donor advocated for community participation in what was, after all, a community program, and also sought to prioritize public school students over students from private schools, where college preparation resources were likely to be more readily available. (See Table 1.)

Program Design

A number of foundations have notably funded college access and degree attainment support for students of color and low-income and first-generation college students. The Suder Foundation, based in Texas, devotes its resources to first-generation college students. The Boston Foundation is a partner in the city’s college completion initiative, Success Boston, which focuses on first-generation, low-income students of color. The Lumina Foundation’s emphasis on educational attainment gave rise to its A Stronger Nation data tracker, which measures

progress nationwide on postsecondary certificate achievement. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation’s scholarship programs assist students with financial needs and provide sustained support toward degree attainment (Coker & Glynn, 2017).

However, the combined aspects and features of the CSP program do appear to make it unique among community foundations. Rather than merely awarding scholarships, the AAACF’s Community Scholarship Program was designed to incentivize degree completion, whether at the two- or four-year college level, by providing a dedicated college success coach and multiyear funding. A commitment to maintaining funding for the duration of a student’s academic program is a critical component in supporting low-income students to achieve their full potential (Coker & Glynn, 2017). (See Table 2.)

Because data showed that local students from low-income families generally had lower GPAs than their more affluent counterparts, the foundation determined it was important to select students based on potential rather than merit. Students need only a 2.0 GPA to qualify for a CSP award, which takes into account the many factors that can impact a student’s high school performance. This was a significant shift from the foundation’s previous approach, which tended to focus on scholastic achievement.

In addition to changing the funding model, the foundation also designed the program to incorporate critical support services. Beyond substantial, renewable funding, many students need mentoring support to persist to graduation (Hadley & Morgan, 2017). Every CSP recipient would work with the program’s college success

Reflective Practice

TABLE 2 Community Scholarship Program Eligibility Criteria

<p>AAACF Community Scholarship Program Goal: Increase postsecondary degree attainment for Washtenaw County students with a specific focus on students who are economically disadvantaged, youth of color, and/or the first generation in their family to attend college.</p>
<p>Student Eligibility Criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be a student who qualifies as at least one of these criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Economically Disadvantaged (currently qualifies for the free or reduced lunch program) ◦ Youth of Color ◦ First-Generation College Student (neither parent having graduated with a 4-year degree) • GPA of 2.0 or higher • Resident of Washtenaw County; preference will be given to those students who are graduates of a Washtenaw County public high school • Will have graduated high school within the last 24 months and be enrolling in college for the first time

coach, who would assist students with their transition to higher education and support them in multiple ways on the path to degree attainment. The coach would help students find additional academic and social supports on campus, assist with applying for financial aid, and provide the encouragement and accountability needed to help students navigate their college journey.

The foundation relied on community partners with expertise in education to help hire and train the college success coach. In addition to Washtenaw Futures, whose data helped to inform the program design, CSP also partnered with three local institutions: Washtenaw Community College (WCC), Eastern Michigan University (EMU), and the Washtenaw Intermediate School District (WISD), which is also home to Washtenaw Futures. The coach was designated an employee of record at WCC and was given training from EMU. The AAACF and two local family foundations, the James A. & Faith Knight Foundation and the RNR Foundation, fund the salary of the coach. The distribution of responsibility for the coach across institutions was seen as a tool to further embed the scholarship in the local community.

The foundation and WCC had worked together before, but the dynamics of the CSP nurtured a new level of commitment from both. The

partnership represents a model of engagement between an area’s community foundation and community college, focused on the core goal of increasing degree attainment. The foundation’s three partners bought into the vision that CSP could have a collective impact on the community by focusing on students who would benefit most from the program.

Most place-based scholarships in Michigan are considered synonymous with “promise” scholarships (Anderson, 2019), in which a municipality partners with private or public funders to provide in-state public college tuition for local high school graduates. While not a designated promise scholarship, CSP is a community-based program in every sense of the word: Local donors support scholarships for local students who are selected by a group of community volunteers for a program overseen by community organizational partners.

Implementation

In January 2016, AAACF launched the program with an anonymous \$1 million endowed gift, which included a \$250,000, dollar-for-dollar challenge match for a CSP Level the Playing Field Fund, named to underscore the need to facilitate more equitable college access for low-income students graduating from Washtenaw

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County public schools. Most importantly, the donor wanted to be anonymous to keep the focus on the community, a critical component for community buy-in as demonstrated by the donor anonymity component of the Kalamazoo Promise (Strickland, 2009).

The foundation determined that for the Level the Playing Field match to be successful, the advertisement and invitation to donate should be unveiled at its annual community meeting, which draws the AAACF's largest public audience. Staff also determined that CSP would only seem like a viable and attractive program to the community and potential donors if the foundation demonstrated that the program was underway. That meant having the first cohort of Community Scholars selected for introduction and public reveal within just a few months.

The foundation's online portal for its existing scholarship programs, which launch each year in mid-January, would be used for the CSP as well. The committee of staff and community volunteers who had been selecting recipients of some of the existing scholarships was also given responsibility for determining the new Community Scholars. Although the work of

these volunteers is demanding and intense, administration of AAACF scholarships — particularly the CSP — is possible because a staff person has been dedicated to the task, which involves promoting the scholarships in local schools, interacting with students throughout the application process, and managing the volunteer selection committee. Additional staff members were also involved in fast-tracking every aspect of the CSP announcement.

Before hundreds of audience members at the foundation's May 2016 annual meeting, 11 Community Scholars were introduced. Promotion of the scholarship following that evening garnered interest, including early responses to the \$250,000 match opportunity. Particularly attractive to donors was the opportunity to create a permanent, named scholarship fund at the \$20,000 level if they agreed to the CSP scholarship criteria and student selection by an independent scholarship committee. The community match of \$250,000, ranging from small individual gifts to several named funds within the CSP, was met in less than one year. The early success of the program has been followed by continued support because of intentional donor engagement and the foundation's promotion of CSP as a priority initiative.

Another fast-track element was the hiring of the program's first college success coach. Just as it was important to show the viability of the program with the students selected, the first coach was a critical hire. The decision that the coach should be a graduate student from EMU helped the foundation strengthen its ties with the Ypsilanti-based university, which has fewer resources than the county's major research institution in neighboring Ann Arbor. The AAACF could not have found a better choice. The coach brought to the job a grounding in student affairs and was herself from the demographic background targeted by the CSP. Not only was she viewed as a coach, but students also remarked that she was an inspirational role model — proof that someone like them could succeed in college.

The shift to promoting degree attainment required certain measurements to be put in place

to monitor that progress. Measuring scholarship outcomes and tracking data, never a part of other AAACF scholarships, were essential components of the multiyear structure of the CSP awards. For the program's targeted student population, benchmarking data show that while 70% enroll in college for a first semester, subsequent enrollment falls to 30%. The foundation set a goal for 80% of its CSP students to enroll their first semester and 40% to reenroll in subsequent semesters; and a program goal for 40% of its students to graduate with an associate or bachelor's degree, also above benchmarks for the population.

Evolution

The CSP has evolved over its five years of its existence from a program intentionally created, yet without funding, to one that has awarded \$1 million to 50 students. As a newer initiative, as well as one with significant continued growth, CSP has been continually assessed and refined to ensure it is furthering degree attainment. That ongoing review has led to changes to several aspects of the program.

Funding Packages

When the CSP was launched, Community Scholars were presented with renewable awards for up to five years and a coach to encourage persistence. Shifting from one-time to multiyear awards was new territory for the foundation, and the initial multiyear levels represented larger annual amounts than many of the AAACF's existing scholarships. The award for students attending a two-year institution was \$1,500, renewable two times (a three-year award); for students at four-year institutions, it was a \$3,000 scholarship renewable four times (a five-year award).

To all constituents, including donors who expressed concern about the true impact of the program given the costs of a college education, it became clear that the actual award amounts needed to be increased. Although the program had been designed as a multiyear award to encourage persistence to graduation, the prescribed amounts for each year were not sufficient to create that incentive and also failed to provide

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flexibility. Students had different financial needs to begin with and, based on those needs, required differing amounts of funding at different points in their academic progression.

Additionally, the foundation learned that the impact of its funding was sometimes compromised because of the way student need was calculated by the federal government for student loans and scholarships. For example, a student might begin freshman year with other need-based financial aid in place. If that student received a CSP scholarship administered directly to their student account, their previous need-based aid might be reduced if the CSP award added to what was calculated as household income. A way to overcome this issue is to distribute what is designated as needed by the university at a given time and to distribute remaining funding as needed in the future, such as later years when students incur costs for more credit hours, laboratory fees, and other expenses.

The need for more substantial funding packages could be accommodated because CSP's endowment size grew significantly through additional gifts. During the time of growth, the foundation had also recognized that the timing of the funding needed to be adjusted from the initial yearly

In addition to the coaches and the dedicated AAACF staff person, CSP requires personnel from three key areas of the foundation — grantmaking, philanthropy, and finance — to work in tandem with the CEO. From securing gifts to working with the scholarship committee to cutting checks to the institutions and more, CSP has created opportunities to deepen working relationships at the foundation.

allocations. The packages for all CSP students have changed significantly. Each is now awarded up to \$20,000, to be distributed according to their needs for up to five consecutive academic years. This flexibility in support is designed to encourage persistence and degree attainment.

Even with the increased funding and flexibility, the foundation was aware that students often face financial barriers unaddressed by financial aid that could also impede their progress (Coker & Glynn, 2017). In response, the AAACF allocated resources to create an Emergency Aid and Financial Assistance Fund, which was also supported by donors. This fund has provided Community Scholars with money for books, transportation, groceries during breaks when student housing does not provide meals, and even expenses related to study abroad. The partner organizations and college success coach were critical to identifying this need and the difference that meeting it could make in helping students finish their degrees.

Staffing and Training

The college success coach has proven to be a critical program element and one that has also changed over time. The original coach finished her degree program and took a position as an academic advisor at another institution, although she remained engaged with students in a volunteer capacity. As the first coach, she was also able to provide important insights. She recommended that the foundation hold an orientation for Community Scholars at WCC for the coach and students to get to know one another and AAACF staff before the start of the fall semester. Research supports this suggestion, finding that such orientations are particularly helpful for matriculation among first-generation and low-income students, who often face challenges entering college (Castleman & Page, 2020). Another effort being considered is to connect new Community Scholars with more advanced students, particularly those enrolled at the same institution.

Following the advice of the first coach, her successor organized an orientation. When that coach was not able to remain in the position, the foundation and its program partners saw the benefits of having multiple coaches, especially as the program continued to grow. As of 2019, two full-time coaches serve the 50 Community Scholars enrolled across four CSP cohorts. Having two coaches ensures continuity, allows students to gain different perspectives, and enables the coaches to provide support to each other.

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Donor Response and Engagement

In addition to strengthening internal staff relationships, CSP has fostered connections with program partners and donors. The \$250,000

match was met in less than one year. Many donors who began their support during the match have not only renewed support, but often increased it. Even larger gifts have been secured since the match completion, as the program has evolved.

Foundation staff felt exposing some existing legacy scholarship donors to the CSP could result in conversion of those funds. Through education about program objectives and opportunities to meet Community Scholars and others involved in the program at the annual CSP luncheon, AAACF has drawn several preexisting funds under the CSP umbrella. These donors have been attracted by the sustainability of the program as a community-driven partnership and the uniqueness of the coaching component.

Indeed, funding the college success coach position has been so attractive that one of the local family foundations supporting the position also provided funding for a four-year, longitudinal evaluation with hopes that its findings will encourage other funders to replicate the CSP program in communities nationwide.

Evaluation

The evaluation is being conducted by a higher education faculty member at EMU, which is not only a partner in CSP's administration, but also an institution with a dedicated mission of service to the local community. The localized aspect of CSP makes the EMU connection to the evaluation work significant, as does the fact that many Community Scholars are likely to study at EMU.

The evaluation and assessment plan includes both formative and summative evaluations. Utilizing interviews, focus groups, and surveys, the evaluators created a task- and outcome-oriented evaluation model that gives CSP ongoing feedback for continuous improvement (Musick, 2006). As such, all evaluation and assessment efforts occur in close collaboration with CSP staff. Grounded in organizational and student development theory, the evaluators intend to answer two main questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the AAACF Community Scholarship Program and how do they relate to one another?
2. How do CSP characteristics relate to student outcomes (e.g., persistence and degree attainment)?

Although the research questions may seem broad, they have allowed the evaluators the flexibility to capture many aspects of the program. However, they have ultimately been tasked with identifying the impact of the coaches on students' persistence and graduation attainment. By understanding and documenting the characteristics of the program and their relationship to one another, the evaluators will be able to understand the role of the college success coach as well as other program elements in student success.

The first year of the evaluation focused on developing a baseline for the program. All major stakeholders were interviewed to understand their expectations and goals for CSP. An artifact analysis conducted to determine if modifications were necessary to application materials and the online portal led CSP to make recommended changes. During the second year, evaluators interviewed Community Scholars and coaches to assess the nature of their relationship and the ways in which coaches were or were not having an impact on student success. Evaluators made recommendations for tracking student-coach interactions and other aspects of the program. During the third year just begun, evaluators will continue to interview scholarship recipients and coaches as well as students who applied for the scholarship and did not receive it. Additionally, evaluators will work closely with CSP staff to create a procedures manual for coaching and program logistics. In the fourth and final year, the evaluation will compare CSP to similar programs across the country, identifying common and unique characteristics and evaluating the extent to which successful components of CSP can be transferred to other settings.

Preliminary results indicate that the program is helping students move toward degree attainment. During interviews, Community Scholars

The donor response to CSP has made it one of the most significant programs in AAACF's history — not just in contributions, more than \$4 million in less than 5 years — but also in the number of donors involved: 100-plus.

repeatedly stated that having a coach and knowing in advance that funding is in place for multiple years allow them to focus on succeeding in school rather than worrying about how to pay for it. The coach is often described as a supportive mentor, and students see their guidance as critical to helping avoid making choices that could have harmed their academic success, such as moving out of a dormitory because of a roommate conflict, changing schools without understanding the full implications, or failing to take advantage of institutional resources. In other words, coaching helped them to persist toward degree attainment.

Outcomes

The donor response to CSP has made it one of the most significant programs in AAACF's history — not just in contributions, more than \$4 million in less than 5 years — but also in the number of donors involved: 100-plus. The exact number is a challenge to pinpoint because some donations have been given collectively. One group of donors, for example, is composed of a high school's booster club members who pooled contributions to create a named fund to memorialize a student lost in a tragic accident. Although the scholarship may not be awarded to a graduate from that specific high school, what was most important to the supporters was assurance that the student's name and story be preserved and carried on in perpetuity for the benefit of the community.

This is just one case demonstrating that donors do indeed respond to a program based on data and impact. The board's initial fear, that no longer accepting new scholarship funds that did not fall under a central rubric would turn off supporters, was laid to rest: CSP has attracted many new donors and enhanced relationships with many existing donors. In the handful of instances where potential donors inquire about establishing a scholarship fund with particular criteria that AAACF no longer accommodates, the foundation is still able to provide a community service by referring the donor to a specific institution of higher education. When trustees now consider changes to other traditional strategies and practices, they routinely cite the community's response to CSP as evidence that donors will respond to documented impact. And with several estate commitments now in place to provide some confidence that CSP will continue significant growth, the foundation will likely focus on greater efforts to support nonscholarship aspects of the program, such as the Emergency Aid and Financial Assistance Fund, the coaching positions, and related staff work.

The foundation has also learned that the scholarship award does not always provide students with the intended aid because of the practice of "scholarship displacement," by which colleges and universities reduce or eliminate financial aid when a student's total scholarship awards exceed the total cost of attendance for an academic year. The foundation is part of statewide policy discussions to change that practice so that privately funded scholarships, such as CSP, do not displace other financial aid that institutions can provide to students (Bell & Lewis, 2020). Although this policy and advocacy role in the scholarship arena represents new territory for the AAACF, the work is in keeping with CSP's goal to promote degree attainment. Every barrier to a student's graduation must be addressed, and the foundation will continue to evolve its program and practices to meet these needs.

Community Scholars are being tracked by cohort year to monitor their progress, and they are all above benchmarks for enrollment and persistence. In Summer 2019, the foundation

celebrated its first two CSP graduates, students who received their associate degrees and transferred to four-year institutions to pursue bachelor's degrees.

Implications and Recommendations

The foundation has fielded calls from across the country seeking information about CSP, and as it continues to track program data AAACF will share its findings so that similar programs might be created in other communities. The program's structure, evolution, and outcomes to date are being shared through this article in hopes of drawing attention and interest from other foundations. As the evaluation is completed and more data are available, the AAACF will seek additional ways to share replicable concepts with other communities for building a local scholarship program that encourages educational access and attainment.

In the meantime, most communities across the country mirror the data in Washtenaw County demonstrating that young people of color, from low-income families, or who are the first in their families to attend college do not have equitable access to higher education and opportunities for degree attainment. Here are some approaches for funders seeking strategic ways to create impact on this issue in their communities:

- **Know the data.** The foundation AAACF recommends looking to local college access networks to help identify gaps in educational access and degree attainment. These data can inform the case for making changes in scholarship approaches. Beyond reviewing available data, a foundation may begin collecting its own data. The AAACF did not begin monitoring persistence and achievement data until the founding of CSP because most of its scholarships were focused on first-semester matriculation.
- **Be willing to take bold action.** The AAACF's board agreed not to accept new scholarship funds that did not fall under the bold program it developed. Despite some requests for new scholarship funds with different criteria, the foundation held firm.

The foundation has fielded calls from across the country seeking information about CSP, and as it continues to track program data AAACF will share its findings so that similar programs might be created in other communities.

Some donors agreed to the CSP structure and those who did not were referred elsewhere; but inquiries from all prospective donors are addressed respectfully. The program has been successful because it is based not only on student data, but also on data from the philanthropic field that show contemporary donors respond to efforts that can demonstrate impact.

- **Steward all supporters and encourage new ones.** The AAACF agreed to administer existing scholarship funds in perpetuity as a legacy institution, even as it has focused on finding new supporters and giving existing scholarship donors the opportunity to move their funds under the CSP umbrella.
- **Work in new ways.** Foundation staff worked across internal teams for the greater goal of the program. Those from the grantmaking side who administered scholarships, philanthropy staff who worked with donors, and financial staff who monitor every aspect of the fund and distributions are in regular contact and collaboration. Relationships have been enhanced by working toward a mutual goal.
- **Be flexible and adapt.** The AAACF has evolved the program's design as it has learned from implementation and reacted to unforeseen issues, such as scholarship

displacement. Although the three founding criteria of the program have remained, nearly every other aspect of the program has changed in the short period of time since its public introduction in 2016 — from the funding packages to the staffing of the coach position.

As the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation's Community Scholarship Program continues to evolve, it will remain a program that goes beyond awarding scholarships as it engages the entire community.

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