

Grand Rapids Community Foundation

185 Oakes Street S.W.

Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503

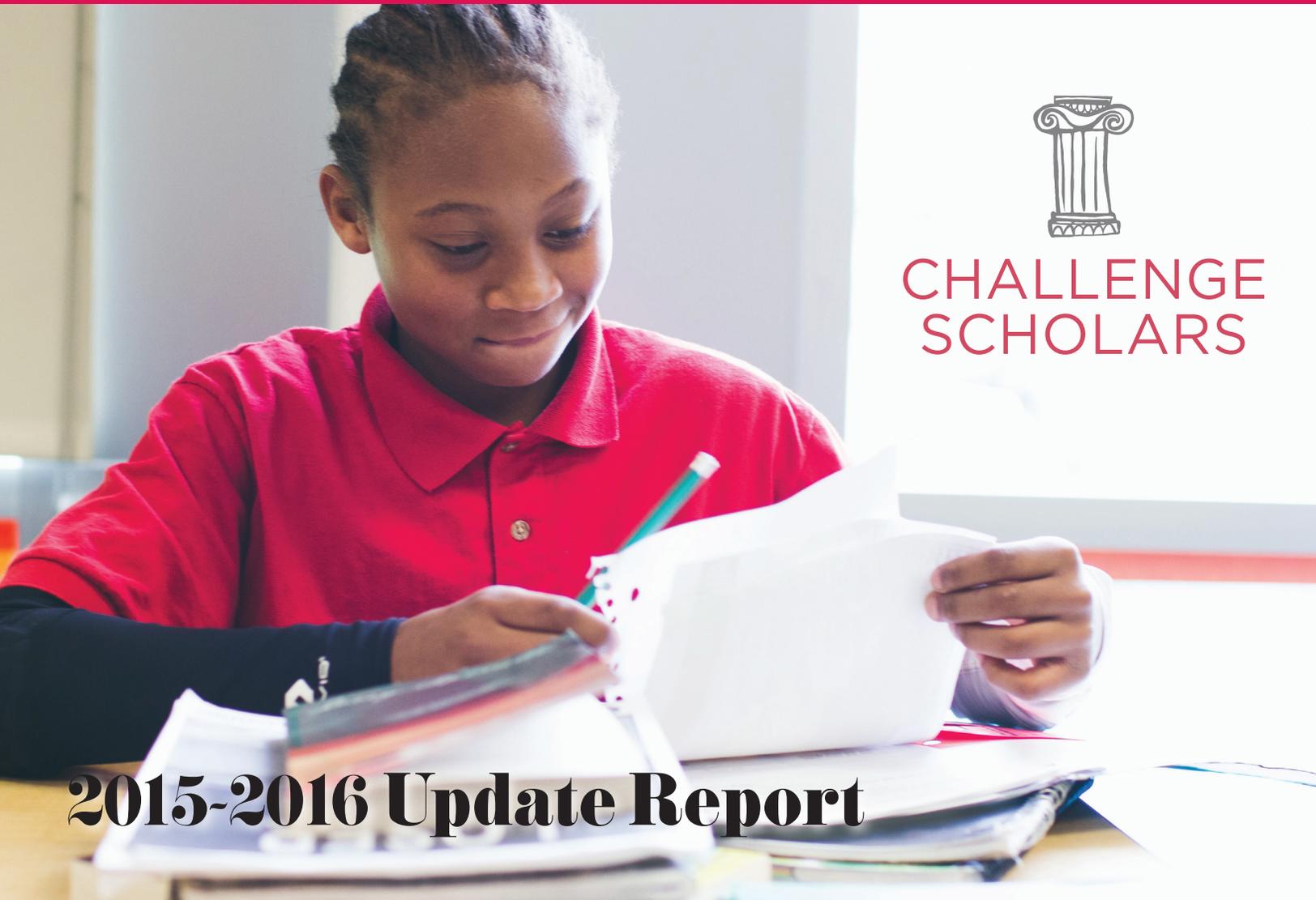
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**CHALLENGE
SCHOLARS**

2015-2016 Update Report

WHEN IT COMES TO ETIQUETTE: **Culture Matters**



I didn't really know what it felt like to "not belong" until my junior year of high school, when I was invited to attend a Rotary luncheon.

I didn't understand why I was asked to be there, and I wasn't prepared. It wasn't just lunch. The venue was swanky. The tables were thoughtfully set, and each spot had a carefully placed napkin, numerous forks, knives and glasses. Then, the biggest surprise came. I was asked to stand in front of a room full of strangers who did not look like me... for what felt like an eternity. I stood awkwardly while I was grilled with questions about myself and my future plans. I answered to the best of my ability. No, actually, I lied in my responses because I was caught off guard. I left feeling like a fraud—like I did not belong.

Some 14 years later, through Ferris State's Latino Talent Initiative, I developed a new awareness of my own culture, as a third-generation, Mexican-American female. I understood the value my cultural background contributes to my character and skill development. This awareness inspired me to pursue my passion for equity and inclusion, which led me to Challenge Scholars.



When you're not part of the majority culture, "not belonging" is a norm. Our work with Challenge Scholars requires intentional sensitivity to inclusive and equitable practices because of the cultural diversity within the program. About 85 percent of our scholars identify as non-white, and 38 percent live with a non-English speaking parent(s). Despite our community's best intentions, these students know what it's like to not belong.

Our first Challenge Scholars Donor and Student Luncheon was held in the spring of 2015. The event honored our donors and students for their contributions to the program. As we began planning the event, I reflected on my own junior year luncheon experience. I felt a responsibility to shield our Challenge Scholars—to protect them from the distress I felt back then. I recommended contracting an etiquette coach.

Although the material in etiquette handbooks is generally good, it lacks the cultural awareness that's needed to complement the importance of etiquette. They say that President George Washington wrote the book on etiquette norms in the U.S. However, his book was written during a time when a non-white person's "not belonging" was more than a cultural norm; it was codified in law.

For us, this was a bigger opportunity than simply preparing kids for a luncheon. We could help them develop cultural self-awareness. If they could see how their cultural differences are valuable, then they could be prepared for new experiences, whether a fancy lunch or a future interview.

I prepared our Challenge Scholars by teaching them about different social etiquette norms from around the world and how they contrasted with norms of the U.S. For example, in Asian cultures, *the youngest of the group introduces the eldest first and themselves last*. In Mexican culture, *a tortilla will typically be seen taking the place of an eating utensil during a meal*.

It is unjust to teach students that there is only one way of behaving. These actions result in the individual feeling that what they've learned from their parents or personal culture is wrong. We sought to infuse self-confidence in the students by using cultural self-awareness to understand and celebrate what has influenced who they are. This confidence created a bridge to talking about the importance of self-presentation.

As a person who has experienced "not belonging," the most powerful lesson I've learned is that having a strong sense of identity helps to combat self-doubt. Our hope for our Challenge Scholars is that they not only look within themselves for strength, but can look for strength in each other and their community as they continue to find their purpose and sense of belonging. Ultimately, everyone's etiquette matters.



Jessica Ledesma

Article author and
Challenge Scholars
Program Assistant

CHALLENGE SCHOLARS REPORT CARD:

Measuring What Matters

It is important for Challenge Scholars donors and stakeholders to understand and see the progress of our students.

This year we are pleased to present specific data for each Challenge Scholars class cohort. Thanks to a data-sharing agreement with Grand Rapids Public Schools, we can now show you how Challenge Scholars students are doing relative to the requirements for the four-year scholarship.

In order to receive this scholarship, students must sign up for Challenge Scholar in 6th grade, remain enrolled at Harrison Park or Westwood for middle school and graduate from Union High School with a 2.0 cumulative grade point average (GPA) and 95% attendance.

The chart to the right illustrates how many Challenge Scholars are meeting each of those criteria and are on-track for the four-year scholarship as of the end of the 2015-16 school year. It also shows how many students are not quite meeting the requirements but can recover in the coming school year, and how many are currently below the eligibility threshold. Because we're now able to track this data, these students will receive extra interventions and support throughout the school year to help them get back on track.



	Class of 2020	Class of 2021	Class of 2022
ELIGIBILITY STATUS FOR 4-YEAR SCHOLARSHIP			
% Good standing (2.0 GPA or higher & 95% attendance)	50%	44%	43%
% Cautionary status (Less than a 2.0 GPA & 80%-95% attendance)	41%	50%	52%
% Off-track (Less than 80% attendance regardless of GPA)	9%	6%	5%

REASONS FOR CAUTIONARY OR OFF-TRACK STATUS			
Due to attendance only (Less than 95% attendance)	44%	37%	37%
Due to GPA only (Less than a 2.0 GPA)	14%	25%	13%
Due to both attendance and GPA	42%	38%	50%

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	
CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM				
The percentage of students missing 10% or more total school days.	Harrison Park (Grades K-8)	28%	24%	17%
	Westwood Middle (Grades 6-8)	52%	33%	39%

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	
POST-SECONDARY ASPIRATIONS				
The percentage of students reporting plans to pursue post-secondary education.	Harrison Park (Grades 6-8)	59%	62%	70%
	Westwood Middle (Grades 6-8)	63%	65%	57%



Want to know more about how our Challenge Scholars are doing, or anything about the program? Contact Challenge Scholars program director Cris Kutzli at 616.454.1751 or ckutzli@grfoundation.org.

LEADERSHIP LETTER 2016: A BETTER CHALLENGE SCHOLARS EMERGES

Dear Friends,

This is an exciting time for us to be writing to you. Our first class of Challenge Scholars is settling in as freshmen at Union High School. Now the real work of preparing them for college or technical training begins. We are confident that under the leadership of Principal Karl Nelson and with the support of teachers, school staff, Kent School Services Network workers, families and the community, our first class will be totally successful!

In this report, you'll find an essay by Challenge Scholars Advisor Ben Oliver. He writes with insight and passion about why the incentive of a scholarship alone is not enough to help students achieve. The path to college is complicated and difficult to navigate. Imagine trying to understand admission forms and instructions when English is your second language or trying to comprehend a financial aid application with limited literacy. This is why the family support portion of Challenge Scholars is as fundamental as the scholarship incentive.

In addition to our first class reaching high school, you might have heard that we expanded Challenge Scholars to include a community college component for all students enrolled as freshmen at Union High School this fall and beyond. There is a large cohort of students headed to Union from middle schools and K-8 schools across the city, including Burton, Riverside and Southwest Community Campus. And while these students would be in classes with Challenge Scholars, they would not have been Challenge Scholars. Through the expansion, any Union High graduate who has been at the high school for four years, avoided 180-day expulsions and graduates with a 2.0 GPA or better will be eligible for two years of tuition-free college at Grand Rapids Community College. We are pleased that we can have **all** students at Union High on the path to college or a credential.

As you might recall from previous reports and letters, we are doing developmental research of the Challenge Scholars program. This ongoing research tells us that students are increasingly seeing themselves in college and being successful. In fact, 88 percent are confident that they will be able to meet the requirements of being a Challenge Scholar. However, the data shows students are trending closer to 50 percent in eligibility. Because of support provided by family members, school staff and community partners, we believe that we can bring those students along. We are committed to doing whatever it takes to get them there.

Your ongoing support of Challenge Scholars is important to the students who are enrolled in the program! We both thank you for your interest in this investment in our community's future.



Diana R. Sieger

Diana R. Sieger

President, Grand Rapids
Community Foundation



Teresa Weatherall Neal

Teresa Weatherall Neal

Superintendent,
Grand Rapids Public Schools



When Kara Garrison first heard about the Challenge Scholars program, her son Cody was a fifth grade student at Harrison Park School. "It was the number one factor in sending him on to Westwood Middle School and now Union High School. I couldn't wait to learn more about Challenge Scholars. It takes a huge load off of us and has really given him motivation," she said.

Cody is now a freshman at Union and is very focused on the years ahead. "Challenge Scholars makes college so attainable. All you have to do is keep up with it," Kara said. "I just have to stay on task—keep up

my grades and stay out of trouble," said Cody. He's admittedly a good student: "I pretty much like all of my classes." He's in four honors classes—English, history, biology and geometry. He's also willing to help out his classmates and lead on a project when a leader is needed. "I want my classmates to succeed too," he said.

Cody is interested in attending the University of Michigan after his graduation in 2020. "I've been a Michigan fan since I was really young, and I'd like to be a doctor. U of M has a hospital right there on campus. I'd like to help people and have a lot of variety in my work. Being a doctor would be different every day," he said. He is also interested in criminal justice, and, with a college education, the world will be his to explore. Cody is a Union Redhawk football player—a freshman playing at the varsity level. He also plays basketball, wrestles and was recently accepted as a member of Grand Rapids Community Foundation's Youth Grant Committee. He's also joined Union's Junior ROTC.

Challenge Scholars Advisor Ben Oliver said, "What's impressive about Cody is that he is dedicated to his sports, but also to his studies. He exemplifies the scholar-athlete."

While Kara always wanted Cody to attend college, she wasn't thinking too hard about how to pay for it while he was in elementary school, though she sensed that finances would be a roadblock. "I never put a whole lot of thought into it. Then Challenge Scholars came along, and now we're looking at colleges, places I never heard of, and keeping a close eye on his grades. We need to keep his GPA where it needs to be," she said.

Cody is adjusting to the fast pace at Union High School and likes not being treated like a kid anymore. "He's confident in himself and that helps me," Kara said.

LOOKING AT THE BIG PICTURE OF CHALLENGE SCHOLARS:

It Takes More Than a Scholarship Promise

The recent expansion of Challenge Scholars promises that all students in the incoming class of 2020 at Union High School will have at least a two-year, tuition-free option for college or career training at Grand Rapids Community College. With Union's enrollment at over 1,000 students, that is big news.

But is the promise of free college enough to guarantee success? Is it a tangible enough incentive? My work with Challenge Scholars for the last three years has confirmed what we already knew: the promise of free college doesn't magically raise grades and remove all barriers that have kept low-income people and people of color from being successful. We know that to address one inequity, we must address them all.

One way we address systemic inequities is by giving people who have been marginalized the tools to make a difference. It's one thing to promise free college to children, but how can parents who haven't attended college or even graduated from high school successfully navigate their children's path to college? If parents can't find jobs that pay living wages with benefits, how can we expect them to adequately provide for their children so they can learn their best? If rising housing prices make it impossible for parents to find safe, healthy and affordable housing, how can we hope to make good on the promise of free college? We fail the child in all the ways we fail the parents.

The true power of Challenge Scholars requires moving beyond the enormous investment this community has made to make college affordable for these students. It also requires committing to leadership that brings together the other pieces necessary to make good on our investment.

This means continuing to build stronger communities through inclusive growth. It means not just helping to pay for college, but working with local businesses to hire these same parents and students from the neighborhood. It means helping some start a new business or own a home so they no longer have to fear displacement. It means investing in building the parents' capacity to support their children, because they are also our children, the community's children.

The true power of Challenge Scholars requires moving beyond the enormous investment this community has made to make college affordable for these students. It also requires committing to leadership that brings together the other pieces necessary to make good on our investment.



We're already seeing some of Challenge Scholars' power to transform a life. We saw it in a parent who spoke at the expansion announcement. She said that Challenge Scholars inspired her to pursue her own career training and become a pharmacy technician. She wants to set an example for her children.

Achieving the full promise of Challenge Scholars depends on the community coming together to intervene on behalf of parents who need affordable places to live—so they can remain on the West Side and in the Challenge Scholars program. The landlord of the future pharmacy technician was willing to see the value of keeping this mom and her family in the neighborhood rather than renting to college students who could pay more.

The true power of Challenge Scholars will be visible when the broader community recognizes that the parents are doing their part, as best they can, and we respond, "Let us do our part. Let us help fix what we have broken." It means promising that the rising tide of investment and capital in our neighborhoods will indeed raise all ships, rather than crash down like a tsunami on our most vulnerable citizens.

It's going to take a heck of a lot more than free college to guarantee student success. It's going to take a community that is willing to reinvent itself, to take ownership and address all the interconnected, historical and generational inequities. Maybe if we can figure it out on the West Side in the Challenge Scholars model, we can figure it out for other parts of Grand Rapids too.



Ben Oliver

*Article author and
Challenge Scholars Advisor*



Things Worth Knowing about Challenge Scholars

- The Challenge Scholars schools are on Grand Rapids' West Side. All students who enroll for sixth grade at Harrison Park or Westwood Middle School and attend all four years at Union High School are eligible for a scholarship.
- Challenge Scholars offers a two-year Grand Rapids Community College scholarship opportunity and a four-year scholarship opportunity that can be used at more than 46 Michigan colleges and universities. Both scholarship types cover tuition and fees and have grade and behavior requirements. The four-year scholarship also requires 95 percent attendance.



- The current program focuses on college and career exposure, family engagement, summer enrichment and, most importantly, academic

achievement. We work closely with Grand Rapids Public Schools and other partners to implement adaptive programs that keep students on the path to success.



- In spring 2016, Grand Rapids Community College announced a significant additional commitment to Union High School students. All incoming freshmen, starting with Union's Class of 2020, will have at least a two-year, tuition-free option for college or career training at Grand Rapids Community College. GRCC Success Coaches will work with students starting in ninth grade to identify college and career goals.

- In fall 2015, Challenge Scholars began partnering with WestSide Collaborative, a network of nonprofit, faith-based and community-based organizations on the West Side. Community Engagement Coordinators from WestSide Collaborative connect our families with information on Challenge Scholars and other community resources.



- Kent School Services Network expanded to Union High School beginning in fall 2016 to address the health and human service needs of students.



Donors are the heart of keeping our promises to Challenge Scholars. There is no stop date for Challenge Scholars, so we'll continually need funds to provide scholarships and in-school programs. Endowed gifts fit well with this work. Please contact Vice President of Development Marilyn Zack at 616.454.1751 x127 if you'd like to make a gift. You may also donate online at www.challengescholars.org.