

# **Evaluation of Shiawassee Scholars**

## Summer 2025 Updated Report

For over two decades, the Shiawassee Regional Education Service District (SRES D) has partnered with the Cook Family Foundation (CFF) to operate the Shiawassee Scholars program. This program identifies academically talented students in Shiawassee County and helps them pursue higher education and attend an institution that is aligned with their individual interests and needs. To accomplish this, the program provides support to students by helping them pursue their academic goals, apply for competitive scholarships, and ultimately enroll in college.

Having conducted Shiawassee Scholars programming for many years, the SRES D and CFF have recently established a relationship with the Center for Education, Design, Evaluation, and Research (CEDER) at U-M to conduct an evaluation of the program. The primary goals for this evaluation include understanding the extent to which the program has been successful in supporting students' pursuit of higher education. This document is an updated report of CEDER's findings with a final report to follow after these materials have been shared with project partners this summer.

## **Evaluation Framework**

To guide the evaluation work, CEDER used the following questions:

1. To what extent is Shiawassee Scholars successful in promoting application and matriculation to postsecondary institutions in Michigan?
2. What academic outcomes do participants have after enrolling in college?
3. How do participants describe the Shiawassee Scholars Program's influence on their academic motivation and subjective task value judgments related to college preparation?

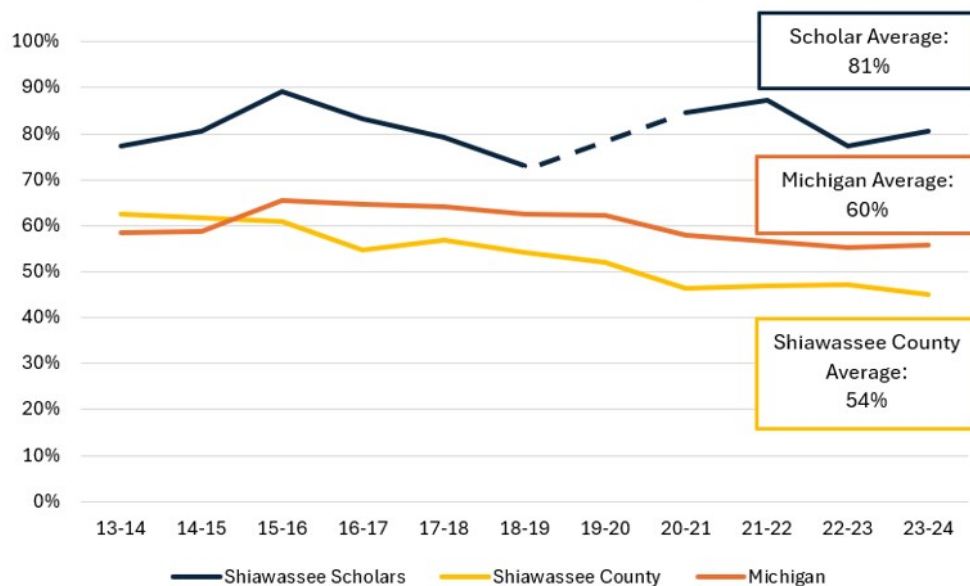
To respond to the first two evaluation questions, CEDER relied on administrative data from multiple sources. Specifically, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) was the source of data for matriculation and graduation from universities across the United States. To provide a reference point for the outcomes of students participating in the Shiawassee Scholars program, CEDER collected data from MI Schools Data on the postsecondary outcomes of Shiawassee County graduates, as well as statewide outcomes for all Michiganders. For the subanalysis of students attending the University of Michigan (U-M), the Learning Analytics Data Architecture (LARC) provided data relevant to academic progress (i.e., credit accumulation and GPA).

For evaluation question three, CEDER conducted interviews and focus groups with 29 current and former Shiawassee Scholars participants. Development of questions for these interviews was aligned with components of Expectancy-Value theory. This theory posits that one's expectations for success and how one values an activity influence their motivation to engage in the activity. Further, expectation and value are influenced by a variety of factors including past experiences, personal goals, self-schema, beliefs and behaviors of others, cultural stereotypes, and social identities. In response to these questions, participants described influences on their expectations for success and ways of valuing the pursuit of higher education. These descriptions included ways the Shiawassee Scholars program contributed to their motivation.

## Key Findings

Data from the National Student Clearinghouse represented in Figure 1 shows 81% of participants since 2013 enrolled at a postsecondary institution within six months of high school graduation. Further, enrollment rates were similar across cohorts and schools, and are significantly higher than the rates observed for all students in Shiawassee County (54%) and the state of Michigan (60%).

**Figure 1. College Enrollment Rate in 6 Months, by Graduating Cohort**



Notes. Data for Shiawassee County and Michigan come from [MI School Data](#). Data for Scholars in 2019-20 is excluded and represented by the dashed line.

While the college-going rate in Shiawassee County is on a slight downward trajectory, the relatively stable rates for Shiawassee Scholars suggest consistency in promoting college-going

among participants throughout the time frame of the project. Turning to the location of matriculation, Figure 2 shows the top 10 institutions where Shiawassee Scholars and their peers in Shiawassee County enrolled, respectively. For Shiawassee Scholars, it is important to note that all 10 of the most common institutions are four-years, whereas two of the most common institutions for students in Shiawassee County are two-year institutions (including the most commonly attended institution, Lansing Community College). These patterns suggest a positive relationship between being a part of the Shiawassee Scholars program and attending a four-year institution. Further, while U-M ranks first among the most common institutions for Scholars, it ranks ninth for students in the county. It is important to note that the Scholars are included in the count for the county (112 of the 201 enrollees), meaning that they comprise over 55% of the students from Shiawassee County who have attended U-M since 2013.

**Figure 2. Top 10 Institutions First Attended, for Fall Enrollees**

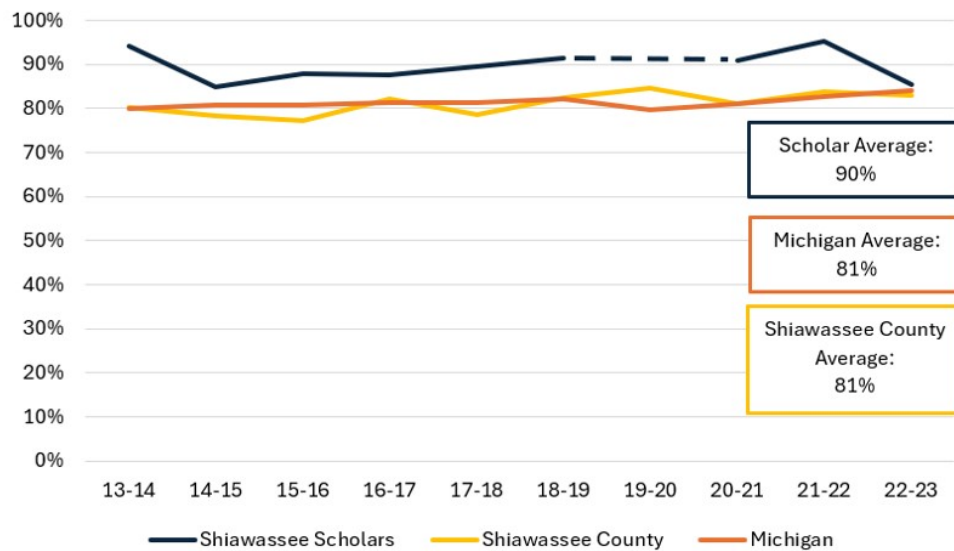
Shiawassee Scholars			Shiawassee County	
#1	University of Michigan - Ann Arbor	112	Lansing Community College	949
#2	Michigan State University	46	Baker College	451
#3	Saginaw Valley State University	25	Michigan State University	424
#4	Kettering University	22	Saginaw Valley State University	327
#5	Central Michigan University	16	Mott Community College	295
#6	Grand Valley State University	14	Central Michigan University	273
#7	Michigan Technological University	11	Grand Valley State University	217
#8	University of Michigan - Flint	11	University of Michigan - Flint	206
#9	Ferris State University	9	University of Michigan - Ann Arbor	201
#10	Oakland University	8	Ferris State University	119

Notes. Data for Shiawassee County come from [MI School Data](#). Counts are based on graduating high school cohorts between 2013-2023.

## Persistence and Major in Higher Education

After enrollment in higher education, an important measure of academic progress is persistence — measured here as enrollment in the fall semester of the academic year subsequent to the first year of enrollment. Figure 3 shows the rate of persistence for Shiawassee Scholars who had enrolled in the fall immediately following high school graduation. This figure shows that 90% of participants who initially enrolled in higher education after high school graduation persisted in their enrollment to the following year. The persistence rate is mostly stable over time, with Scholars generally persisting at higher rates than the average observed for Shiawassee County/Michigan. However, for the most recent cohort available in the data (2022-23), there was a relatively sharp decrease in persistence rate, which resulted in very similar rates for Scholars (85%) and the county (83%) and state (84%) average.

**Figure 3. Persistence in Second Year of College, by Graduating Cohort**



*Notes.* Data for Shiawassee County come from [MI School Data](#) while data for Michigan are from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#). Data for Scholars in 2019-20 is excluded and represented by the dashed line.

We next examined the academic major students selected, first by identifying the initial declared major for Shiawassee Scholars in the left panel of Figure 4. This represents the first instance of a non-missing CIP code in a student's enrollment records, indicating their initial declared major. The most common first observed major is Liberal Arts & Sciences, likely reflecting enrollment in more general courses of study during the first years of attending college. Other common initial majors include: Engineering, Business, Healthcare, and Biomedical Sciences. Because many students change their major over time, we also examined the CIP code associated with their first observed record of graduation (Figure 4, right panel). It appears that many Scholars move away from Liberal Arts by the time of graduation, and enroll in more specialized fields — including Biomedical Sciences, Healthcare, Business, Engineering, and Computer Science - by the time they graduate.

**Figure 4. Top 5 Majors, for Fall Enrollees**

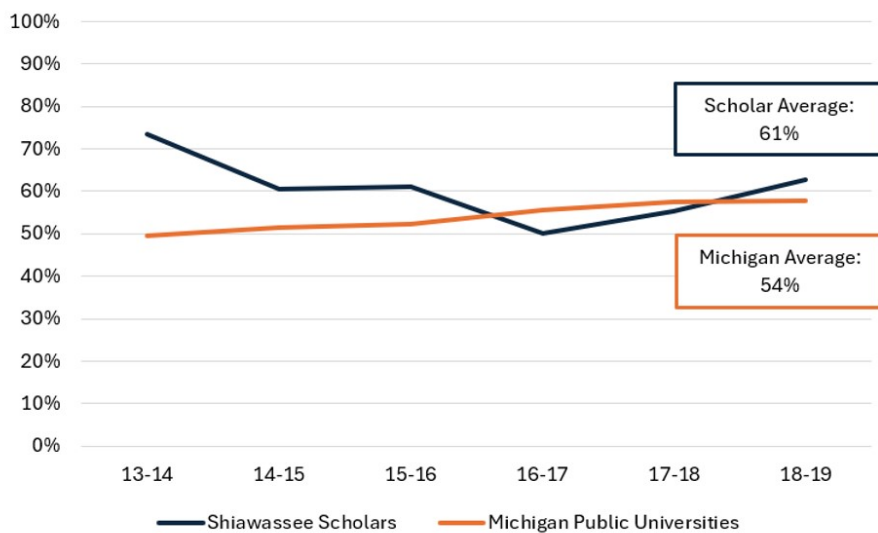
	First Declared Major (CIP)	Major at Graduation (CIP)
#1	Liberal Arts & Sciences	Biological/Biomedical Sciences
#2	Engineering	Health Professions/Related Fields
#3	Business Management/Marketing	Business Management/Marketing
#4	Health Professions/Related Fields	Engineering
#5	Biological/Biomedical Sciences	Computer/Information Sciences

*Notes.* Data is only available for Shiawassee Scholars. First declared major indicates the first instance of a non-missing CIP code for a student, while major at graduation is the CIP code associated with the first credential earned.

## Graduation with a Bachelor's Degree

We next examine the four- and six-year graduation rates for all cohorts of Scholars who initially enrolled in higher education following high school graduation compared to the statewide average in Michigan.

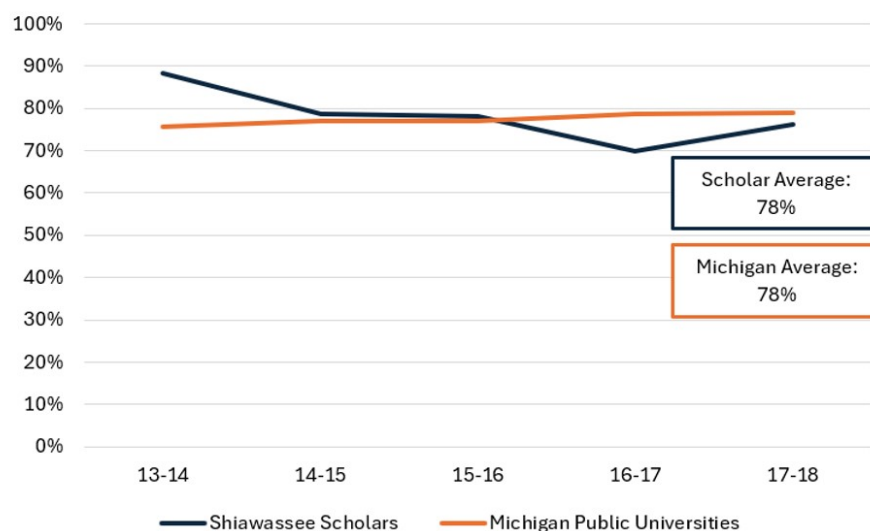
**Figure 5. 4-Year College Graduation Rate, by Graduating Cohort**



*Notes.* Data for Michigan come from [MI School Data](#) and represent the average graduation rate for students attending one of the 15 public universities in the state. More recent cohorts are excluded due to data limitations.

Sixty-one percent of Scholars earn a degree within four years of enrolling, compared to 54% of students attending one of Michigan's 15 public four-year institutions. The graduation rate gradually decreased for the first few cohorts of Scholars, reaching a low point in 2016-17, though this cohort may have encountered unique obstacles due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the four-year graduation rate has slowly rebounded, exceeding 60% for the most recent cohort available. Turning to six-year graduation rates (Figure 6), there is a similar decline in completion rates through 2016-17, with a slight uptick for the subsequent cohort. Scholars have very similar six-year graduation rates to the average for all public institutions in Michigan, though the rate for Scholars remained slightly below the state average in the most recent cohort (76% vs. 79%, respectively).

**Figure 6. 6-Year College Graduation Rate, by Graduating Cohort**



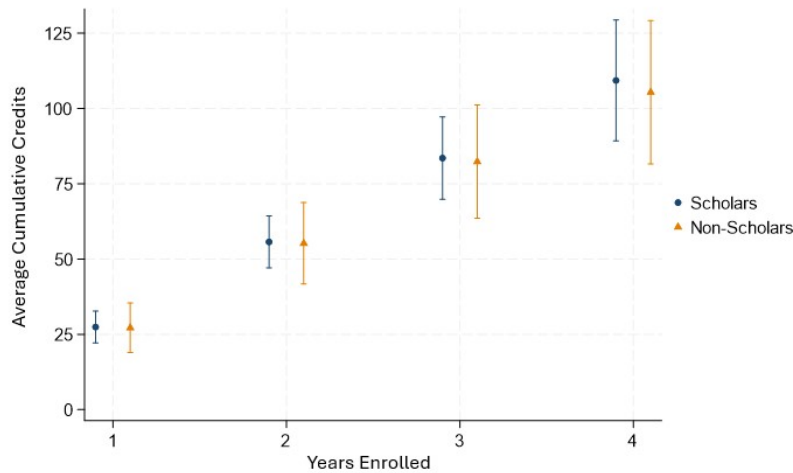
*Notes.* Data for Michigan come from [MI School Data](#) and represent the average graduation rate for students attending one of the 15 public universities in the state. More recent cohorts are excluded due to data limitations.

## Academic Achievement at U-M

Lastly, we present more detailed outcomes for Shiawassee Scholars who first enrolled at U-M. To do so, we draw upon data available through LARC at U-M and observe the academic success (i.e., credit accumulation and grade point average) for Shiawassee Scholars compared to the overall average for all in-state students. Figure 7 shows the pattern of credit accumulation over four years for Shiawassee Scholars (blue dots) who attended U-M for at least four years. Scholars accumulated an average of 27 credits in their first year, increasing to 55, 82, and 109 in the second, third, and fourth years, respectively. We next compare these figures to the overall average for all in-state students at U-M (orange triangles). Scholars earn slightly fewer credits in year one, but gradually accumulate more credits in years two through four, culminating in four

additional credits by the end of their fourth year. Vertical bars in the figure represent one standard deviation of credit accumulation, reflecting the amount of variation in credit accumulation for each group.

**Figure 7. Average Cumulative Credits by Year, Shiawassee Scholars at U-M**

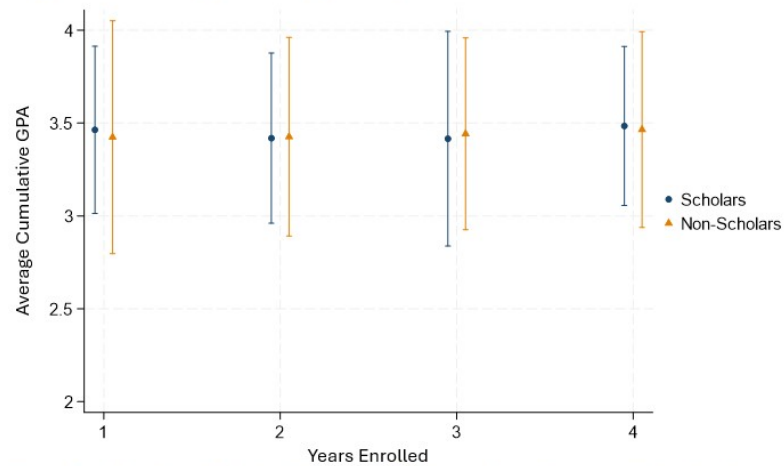


Notes. Data is only available for Shiawassee Scholars who enrolled at the University of Michigan.

Figure 8 represents cumulative GPA on an annual basis for Shiawassee Scholars who attended U-M for at least four years (blue dots) compared to in-state students at U-M (orange triangles). This figure shows the cumulative GPA was similar for Shiawassee Scholars across all four years. Average GPA was lowest two years after first enrollment with a mean of 3.39, and it was highest four years after first enrollment, with a mean of 3.47. These figures are comparable to their peers at U-M, with Scholars being slightly below the U-M average two and three years after initial enrollment, but having higher average cumulative GPAs in year one and again in year four.



**Figure 8. Average GPA by Year, Shiawassee Scholars at U-M**



Notes. Data is only available for Shiawassee Scholars who enrolled at the University of Michigan.

## **Relationship between Shiawassee Scholars Program and Academic Outcomes**

Through interviews and focus groups, current and former Shiawassee Scholars offered insights about the relationship between the program and their academic trajectories. In particular, they shared their paths to participation in the program, their expectations of attending college, the role of the Shiawassee Scholars program in motivating academic success, and the value of attending college.

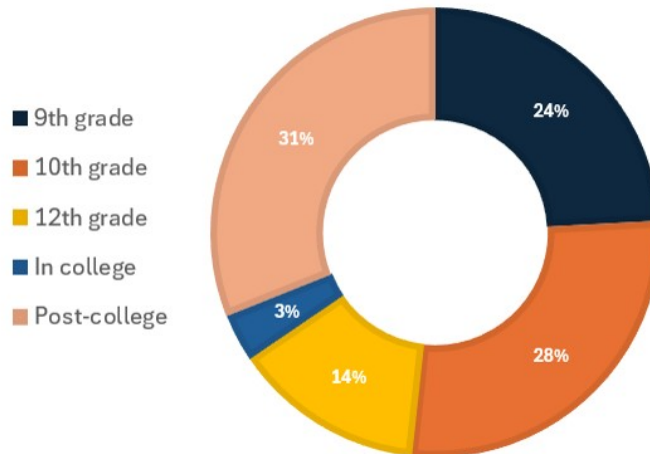
### **Motivations for participation in the Shiawassee Scholars Program**

Several factors led to participants' involvement in Shiawassee Scholars, including, 1) encouragement from teachers, 2) family expectations and relations, 3) academic self-concept (or personal expectations of success), and 4) short-term goals.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, schools and teachers played an important role in raising awareness about the program. Teachers often identified high achieving candidates and encouraged them to apply. One student recalled, "I had a good PSAT score at the time, so she [a teacher] really wanted me to join."



**Figure 9. Participants by Grade (N=29)**

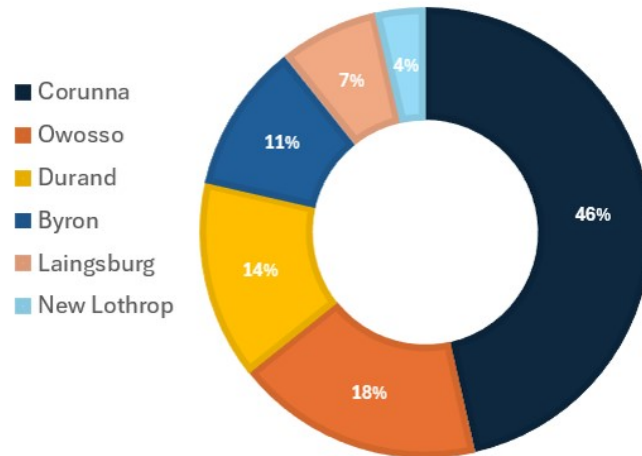


Current and former Scholars pointed out the roles their parents and families played to positively reinforce their academic abilities. One student said, “I think my mom wanted me to [apply] because she has high standards for me.” Further, parents viewed the program as a gateway to higher education and opportunities such as better scholarships and jobs. Imbued with the perception that participation in the Shiawassee Scholars program would “open doors” and provide opportunities, familial expectations motivated students to apply to the program, to study for SATs and other difficult exams, and to apply for and persist in college. Yet, Scholars also explained that their parents helped mitigate the stress of potential failure by pointing out that applying was worth it regardless of their acceptance. At least two students mentioned that if they had not been selected as Shiawassee Scholars, their lives would still continue. This indicates that it was more important for students to try, learn, and build resilience to “overcoming adversity” than to aim for “perfectionism.”

Relationships with siblings also influenced students’ motivation to apply to the program, with a few participants expressing a sense of competition, while another wanted to serve as a “good role model” for their younger sibling.

Several interview participants expressed a strong academic self-concept, for example, seeing themselves as being good at academics, expecting to get all As, or finding school easy. This expectation of success motivated some to apply to the Shiawassee Scholars program, and through their acceptance, fueled their belief that they can “accomplish hard things.” This belief followed them to college, and as one participant noted, they had “built resilience,” a fact they could recognize when faced with challenging tasks at Michigan State University.

**Figure 10. School Districts Represented (N=28)**



Not all students expressed this level of confidence, however. Another participant explained the Shiawassee Scholars program was the first to define academic excellence and then instill an expectation for achieving such excellence in them. Conversely, some students accepted their expectation to do well within their school district or county, but questioned how this would translate to an elite university like the University of Michigan. Reflecting on their transition from high school to U-M, one participant recalled their lack of study tools, personal accountability, and time management: “I think just more real talk about what it’s really going to look like would’ve just been helpful.” Because high school “came relatively easy” to them, they felt unprepared for managing their workload and athletics in college.

Another motivation was the possibility of accessing additional opportunities, such as summer camps and workshops. Students viewed participation in Shiawassee Scholar activities as useful for their personal and academic growth. Recognition of opportunities offered underscore the value of the program in providing access to experiences beyond classroom settings.

Even with school and family support, and their own self-concept, both the Shiawassee Scholars program and the Cook Family Foundation were named as sources of affirmation, validation, and support. Scholars described how Shiawassee Scholars gave them “a vote of confidence,” and as one former Scholar explained, the Shiawassee Scholars program “was one of the first rungs...in a long ladder of achievement.”

### **Perspective shifts in academic disciplines, career options, and college acceptance**

Overall, participants chronicle the many ways the Shiawassee Scholars program prepared them for college in general, often serving to affirm, support, and refine their academic and career interests. Preparation included material support in middle and high school, such as funding for

additional SAT preparation, academic or career-focused summer camps, and conferences. Material support was offered through various scholarships for college, and in one case, for research funds. Other support mechanisms included providing “motivation and [a] framework” for what students should do to be competitive for college, such as taking AP courses, doing dual enrollment, applying for scholarships, keeping up with deadlines, and “thinking about your essays ahead of time.” As one former Scholar noted, the program helped them stay focused, to “get your ducks in a row to apply.” Indeed, former Shiawassee Scholars participants at U-M identified an uneven playing field between themselves and out of state applicants “who have resources to take several practice tests and apply to several ivy league colleges.” Participants reported that Shiawassee Scholars helped even this playing field.

A major factor in shifting the Scholars’ perspectives was the overnight visit to the University of Michigan. These visits, which generally occur prior to their first year of high school, provided a range of impacts on both expectancy and value. For example, visiting U-M helped dispel misconceptions or fears about attending prestigious universities, as highlighted by a student’s reflection on their initial apprehensions about the University being “beyond” their reach. Exposure to college life seemed to make the idea of attending college more tangible and accessible. One student explained,



“Honestly, I feel like the fact that I had never actually seen the place made it be this big thing that seemed a lot larger than it actually was. And once I had actually gone there, I was like, ‘This is just a normal college.’”

Visiting the campus helped make the campus feel less intimidating and more like a place they could see themselves attending. The guides, who were also Shiawassee Scholars, played an important role for the students as they “divulged us into what their life is like, and what our lives can be like, and how to make the campus feel more at home.” In addition, Scholars who later became guides and chaperones for the campus visits mentioned feeling pride and a sense of accomplishment in this role. This suggests a perspective shift that corresponds to the current context of former Scholars.

While visiting campus, students recounted attending mock lectures across disciplines (including those aligned with their interests), building networks of support for their questions (e.g., admissions counselors, professors), getting advice about applying and attending the U-M, talking with peers and near-peers who are also Shiawassee Scholars, seeing the campus, and having fun. These activities cover a range of task values, such as intrinsic (enjoyment), attribution (connected to their sense of identity), utility (reaching a goal), and cost (effort expended, opportunities given up, or psychological or emotional tolls).

## **Expectation of College Attendance**

Across the interviews and focus groups, most participants noted their intention to attend college, regardless of whether they were a first generation college student or had parents or siblings with postsecondary degrees or experience with Shiawassee Scholars. Scholars

mentioned their parents' high standards for them as well as their personal goals to attend college. For many Shiawassee Scholars, the desire to go to college was ingrained from an early age. Their reasons for attending college ranged from proving self-worth to improving themselves to being a role model and making their parents proud. In addition, several Scholars commented that college was a natural and necessary step for personal and professional development.

While some students attributed development of their academic interests to the Shiawassee Scholars program, most participants found Shiawassee Scholars helped build on the interests they already had. Several Scholars, current and former, stated their perceptions of academic disciplines or subjects were further developed through terms like, "widened," "solidified," and "refined." In addition, the program helped the Scholars build a plan for success by first illuminating the paths of success, such as advanced AP classes, academic-focused camps, networks of support, essay and SAT practice, etc. Similarly, campus visits helped solidify their aspirations of attending not just any college, but the best college that fits their personal and professional goals. Moreover, this suggests that the Scholars' self-efficacy and autonomy was also cultivated through Shiawassee Scholars. For example, Scholars explained the program helped them recognize their intellectual, and to some degree financial, capabilities for attending an elite university like U-M, while also encouraging them to find the best fit for their goals, without fear of being "shun[ned]."

## **Collective Support and Expansive Peer Networks as Motivation**

One salient insight is the way in which students described how the Shiawassee Scholars program works in tandem with the school and teachers. A current Scholar reflected on the ways they felt collectively supported, including having time to meet, discuss, and practice testing. They commented, "I felt like I had everything done that I needed to do and that the whole school was behind us. And it wasn't just like you were going in by yourself." As Scholars considered who pushed them to apply for the program, they mentioned their parents and Shiawassee Scholars program affiliated teachers and staff. However, they also mentioned other teachers who were invested in their success.

Peer support was also named, as friends motivated each other to do well on SATs during the summer months prior to their 8th grade year when they could apply for the program. Students motivated each other to excel academically and strive for acceptance into the program. A couple of them described a collaborative and a supportive environment, whereby they collectively encouraged each other to perform well on practice tests. One student shared,



"A lot of my friends were going to do it because when we were taking all of the practice SATs in the seventh grade, we were all doing really well on it. So we were excited to take it in the eighth-grade year."

This demonstrates how previous experiences of success can motivate future achievement-related academic choices and performances. As Eccles & Wigfield (2020) note, "today's choices and performances become tomorrow's past experience" (p. 3).

In addition, the near-peer interactions between current and former Scholars also shape expectancy and task value. Current Scholars reported appreciating being able to learn from former Scholars who are currently attending university, especially when they are from their school district. Students from rural districts in Shiawassee County noted challenges particular to their social and spatial location, such as fewer resources and differences in academic rigor, and felt they could relate to former Shiawassee Scholars. One Scholar noted that talking with college students (who were presumably former Scholars) strengthened their resolve to go to college and be successful. As such, they found it helpful for their career, as well as for the transition between student and adulthood.

Finally, some Scholars also perceived collegiate peer networks as another means of enrichment. Reflecting on their time at U-M, a former Scholar stated, “Just the exposure to I think people and backgrounds and ideas that were quite a bit different from what you would get just within Shiawassee County, that also had a really big impact on my time in school, and I guess my life afterwards. I look at all the friends that I made, all their backgrounds are quite different than my own. It was an extremely diverse friend group that wouldn’t have been possible if I had not gone to the University of Michigan.”

## Limitations and Future Directions

While a range of current and former Shiawassee Scholars are represented in this evaluation, one suggestion for future research is to gather additional data, especially qualitative interview data with students who are in the top eight receiving institutions, to further explore the question about how participants define the relationship between Shiawassee Scholars and their academic outcomes. In addition, one limitation is that while we have quantitative and qualitative data from those who attended college, we do not know the experiences of those who chose an alternative career path. Gathering their insights would likely provide a more comprehensive understanding of the program’s impact. Another direction is to consider how Scholars’ expectations and values change over time. The developmental aspects from 7th grade to post-secondary education spans nearly a decade, and may provide insights on when Shiawassee Scholars should engage in certain programming (or confirm that current practices are developmentally appropriate). Moreover, additional data could allow us to explore subgroups in a future round and disaggregate them according to certain characteristics.

Another future direction is to consider the role of advisors. For participants, advisors played a relatively small role in the program. For instance, one student said, “I’m sure there is an advisor, I just don’t know who they are.” Students also had difficulty determining whether the advisers they were in touch with were specifically from the Shiawassee Scholars program or part of the school management, adding to the ambiguity around roles. Perceived usefulness of advisers and engagement with them also varied among students. A few students mentioned that they met with the advisers “sometimes,” discussing opportunities and upcoming events. Students appreciated that logistical tasks such as reminders about forms or upcoming deadlines were processed by advisers, but suggested that engagement beyond logistics may be more impactful.

The Shiawassee Scholars program is overall doing an excellent job of sending Scholars to college — particularly four-year institutions — relative to their peers in Shiawassee County and the state

of Michigan. Further, the program is very successful in getting students to enroll at specific target institutions, such as U-M. Our CEDER team believes this is a significant success of the program that should be sustained, and potentially enhanced by better understanding the role of advisors as mentioned above. However, once students matriculate to these institutions, there may be an opportunity to provide more support as the data show that the benefit relative to their peers dissipates. In other words, once at a four-year institution, Scholars have very similar academic performance - and sometimes slightly worse (e.g., six-year graduation rate) — to their peers, despite the additional obstacles they have overcome, their demonstrated resilience, and capacity to succeed. Continuing to explore and providing additional support to students after they enroll in college thus represents one potential avenue to further enhance the success of the program.

## Summary

In summary, initial data analysis shows many positive results related to the Shiawassee Scholars program. Participants had high rates of enrollment, persistence, and graduation with a bachelor's degree. These results were apparent both at U-M and other four-year universities. Further, participants explained ways the program was part of shaping their ideas about attending college, expressing gratitude for the various opportunities. Campus visits seemed to be a particularly valuable component of the program, while other components such as advising might be leveraged with greater benefit in the future. Altogether, evaluation of Shiawassee Scholars shows evidence of having meaningful and impactful influence on participants' motivation and achievement.

## References

Eccles, J. S. & Wigfield, A. (2020). From expectancy-value theory to situated expectancy-value theory: A developmental, social cognitive, and sociocultural perspective on motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 61, 1-13.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101859>