



SOAR Virginia® Frequently Asked Questions

For College Access Providers



What is the SOAR Virginia program?

SOAR Virginia is an early commitment scholarship program created to inspire and assist high school students to reach their post-secondary education goals. It is sponsored by the Virginia529 College Savings PlanSM (Virginia529SM), an independent agency of the Commonwealth of Virginia, and brought to you by participating college access providers.

Is SOAR an acronym for anything?

No. Virginia529 created the program SOAR Virginia to further its mission to make college more affordable and accessible to all Virginians. It is offered in partnership with college access providers and the community, working together to help students do their best and...SOAR.

What is the SOAR Virginia pledge?

In order to participate in SOAR Virginia, students pledge to...

- Maintain a minimum cumulative **GPA** of 2.5 or comparable academic achievement as determined by SOAR Virginia
- Meet with his/her early commitment **advisor** regularly
- Complete **financial literacy** training during high school
- **Behave** in a manner consistent with his/her school's Code of Student Conduct
- **Attend** school regularly without unexcused absences
- Participate in **community service** activities
- Complete a **Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)** during his/her senior year and
- **Apply to an eligible educational institution**, including a 2- or 4-year college or university or technical school

Who can join the program?

To enroll, a student must complete a SOAR Virginia enrollment form and 1) be a U.S. citizen or legal U.S. resident, 2) a Virginia resident, 3) in grades 10-12¹ in a participating Virginia high school, 4) agree to comply with the SOAR Virginia pledge, including the minimum cumulative GPA at the time of enrollment of 2.5, and 5) qualify to participate in the National School Lunch Program. For more on the current eligibility guidelines, please visit <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/notices/iegs/IEGs.htm>. SOAR Virginia will rely on school personnel to identify students who currently qualify for the National School Lunch Program.

¹ Only Highland High School students may begin in the 9th grade.

What is involved in implementing the interest sessions for 9th graders?

Early commitment advisors will offer interest sessions to 9th grade students and their families during the spring. You may set up the interest sessions with the early commitment advisors for the day and time that works best for you and your schools.

Virginia529 has created a SOAR Virginia Interest Session kit. This kit contains the SOAR Virginia poster, SOAR Virginia presentation, student interest form and interest session invitation template. Virginia529 will distribute this material in the early spring in preparation for the sessions.

Early commitment advisors will hang SOAR Virginia posters in your schools in preparation for the interest session. You can also use the interest session invitation template to post around your schools. You do not have to use the interest session invitation, but it is available if you need it. During the session, you will use the SOAR Virginia presentation and hand out the student interest form to students who attend. Those students will then submit this form to the school counseling office or you can have them turn the forms in to you at the end of the interest session. The early commitment advisors will use the forms to select new students on a first come, first served basis for their 10th grade year.

How many students can participate each year and do they have to be in 10th grade to begin the program?

In order to make SOAR Virginia available in more schools, we are targeting a maximum of 15 students per school per year. There is some flexibility, as some schools will enroll only 10 or 11 students while others may identify and enroll 16 or 17 very good candidates for the program. The program was designed to serve 10th, 11th and 12th graders. Going forward, we will only allow students to join the program in 10th grade.²

² Only Highland High School students may begin in the 9th grade.

Can students begin the program in 11th or 12th grade?

Generally no, but there may be a rare exception evaluated and approved by Virginia529. A core element of the program's design is the early intervention of beginning working with a student in their 10th grade year, while they still have several years of high school to select curriculum and make other choices to prepare them for higher education.

What happens if the student meets the pledge requirements?

For 10th and 11th grades¹, if a SOAR Virginia scholar meets all pledge requirements, he/she will be awarded \$500 each year in a Virginia529 inVESTSM (inVESTSM) 529 account to be applied towards tuition and fees for post-secondary education. For 12th grade, if a SOAR Virginia scholar meets all pledge requirements, he/she will be awarded \$1,000 in his/her inVEST account. All SOAR Virginia scholars have the opportunity to receive up to \$2,000 in awards.

¹ Highland High School students may begin in the 9th grade. Award amounts for 9th and 10th grades are \$250 each of those two years for students beginning in 9th grade.

What is required for an early commitment advisor to certify that a SOAR Virginia scholar has substantially fulfilled the requirements of the pledge?

Virginia529 relies on the college access provider to certify which students have met the pledge requirements to receive an annual award. To do so, early commitment advisors meet with the students regularly to get updates on grades, community service and other pledge components. The advisors and the college access provider also work with school personnel to verify attendance and GPAs.

Other related questions:

- *Is a 2.5 cumulative GPA required in all cases?* Yes, with rare exceptions evaluated and approved by Virginia529.
- *How often does a SOAR Virginia scholar meet with his/her early commitment advisor to be deemed “regularly?”* Virginia529 encourages SOAR Virginia scholars to meet with their advisors at least three or four times during the school year, whether one on one or in a group setting. Ultimately, the advisor determines if the SOAR Virginia scholar has met this requirement.
- *What constitutes an “unexcused absence?”* SOAR Virginia relies on your school to define which absences are unexcused.
- *What is meant by community service?* Community service can be a variety of activities that the SOAR Virginia scholar already participates in or engages in during his/her time in the program. Scholars can work independently or in groups to fulfill the requirement. The early commitment advisor can make suggestions on activities to pursue and will determine if the scholar has met the requirement. Some popular community service activities include:
 - A food or clothing drive
 - Visiting homebound relatives on a regular basis
 - Reading with younger students
 - A bake sale to raise money for a local charity
 - Collecting trash after a school event
 - Making valentines for homebound neighbors & friends or those in a local hospital
 - Organize and conduct a safety campaign prior to prom season
 - Paint a mural over graffiti

What happens if the student does not meet the pledge requirements?

A SOAR Virginia scholar will not receive an award if they do not meet all pledge requirements in a given year, however, in most cases they may still continue in the program. For example, a scholar may meet all pledge requirements for their 10th grade year and receive an initial award. In their second year, the scholar fails to meet the GPA requirement. He/she is still a SOAR Virginia scholar but is not eligible for an award for that 11th grade year. If he/she meets all requirements in the 3rd year, he/she will receive an award for that year. In this scenario, the scholar will receive two yearly awards.

There are some violations of the pledge that may result in a SOAR Virginia scholar being expelled from the program. Virginia529 will work with the college access provider to determine whether a student can remain in the SOAR Virginia program. If the student is expelled from the program, he/she will forfeit any awards received to date. The SOAR Virginia team will evaluate each incidence on a case by case basis.

In what circumstances will a SOAR Virginia scholar be expelled from the SOAR Virginia program?

If the scholar is expelled on a temporary basis from school, the early commitment advisor should try to learn the reason(s) for the expulsion, discuss them with the college access provider leader and Virginia529. Depending on the severity of the offense, Virginia529 and the college access provider leader will decide, in their sole discretion, whether the SOAR Virginia scholar may be able to continue with the program, assuming he/she is reinstated in school.

If a SOAR Virginia scholar is expelled permanently from school, he/she is automatically expelled from the SOAR Virginia program. If the scholar is expelled from the program for any reason, he/she will forfeit any awards accumulated to that point.

What happens if a SOAR Virginia scholar voluntarily withdraws from the program?

If the scholar leaves the program before earning an award, then nothing happens and the scholar is no longer eligible to receive awards.

If the scholar leaves after earning an award, he/she will retain the benefit of any award(s) received up to the point of withdrawal from the program, but will not be eligible to receive a participation award for the current year if not yet awarded or future years. For example, if the scholar withdraws from school and obtains a GED, he/she will still be eligible for any funds awarded up to withdrawal from the SOAR Virginia program but will not be eligible to receive future awards.

What happens if a SOAR Virginia scholar moves?

If a student moves from one participating SOAR Virginia school to another participating SOAR Virginia school, the student remains in the program and nothing is changed.

If a student moves to another school which is not able to be supported by an early commitment advisor, he/she will retain the benefit of any award(s) received up to that point but will not be eligible to receive a participation award for future years.

If a student subsequently returns to a participating SOAR Virginia school, the student will be reinstated in the program and may begin receiving awards from that point forward, given that he/she meets the pledge requirements.

If a SOAR Virginia scholar drops out of the program after the 10th grade year, can he/she “be replaced” with another student?

No. By design, we anticipate there will be attrition. It is important for Virginia529 to track and evaluate the level of attrition so we can make enhancement to improve the program over time.

Why does the SOAR Virginia application require the student’s social security number?

SOAR Virginia is required by law to have the beneficiary’s social security number before making any distributions of the monies accumulated under the SOAR Virginia program. Virginia529 is required by the IRS to report the distributed funds on a Form 1099Q which SOAR Virginia scholars (beneficiaries) will receive.

Can the student use his/her SOAR Virginia scholarship for dual enrollment?

No. The student must be a high school graduate to be eligible to withdraw any money from his/her SOAR Virginia account.

Will the students receive cash?

No, a deposit will be made into a Virginia529 college savings account for the benefit of the student to apply to post-secondary education expenses. Virginia529 has established an inVEST account for the monies awarded to SOAR Virginia scholars, and these monies are invested in the inVEST Piedmont Portfolio. Virginia529 is the owner of the account and the SOAR Virginia scholar is the beneficiary. Upon matriculation to higher education, the scholar can request funds be distributed on his/her behalf to the higher education institution he/she attends. Funds may only be used for higher education tuition and fees.

When will the student receive notification of his/her scholarship award?

At the end of the school year, the early commitment advisor will certify that the students have met all of the pledge requirements for the year. Once the award has been processed, Virginia529 will send an award letter to the student.

A student will also be able to view his/her account balance online at www.virginia529.com by logging in with credentials provided by Virginia529.

Can additional funds be contributed toward the \$2,000 by a parent/guardian?

The SOAR Virginia529 account is owned by Virginia529 and the student is the beneficiary of the account. As such, additional monies cannot be contributed to it. The parent/guardian may open another Virginia529 account and name the student as the beneficiary.

Why can funds only be used for tuition and fees?

Virginia529 established SOAR Virginia to promote higher education access and attainment. To serve more eligible Virginia students, Virginia529 chose to concentrate scholarships on tuition and fees.

How does the student withdraw money from his/her SOAR Virginia inVEST account?

During the spring, Virginia529 will distribute a SOAR Virginia Distribution Packet to all of the advisors. The advisors will review this information with all students who will graduate at the conclusion of each school year. The Distribution Packet includes all forms required, as well as Frequently Asked Questions that help walk students through the distribution process.

Will a student receive a SOAR Virginia Distribution Packet if he/she is no longer in the program?

If the student has earned at least one award, he/she may still be eligible to take a distribution from their SOAR Virginia scholarship once they have graduated high school or earned a GED and will be attending an eligible post-secondary institution. Since he/she is no longer working with an early commitment advisor, he/she will need to download and print the SOAR Virginia Distribution Packet from our website at www.virginia529.com/soar.

How does SOAR Virginia benefit the students and school(s) we serve?

SOAR Virginia provides financial scholarships and college access services to students who may have barriers beyond their control to pursue post-secondary education. The program is designed to help selected students realize the benefits of post-secondary education and assist them in reaching their education goals. The program provides a unique combination of scholarship funding and college access services, delivered in partnership with the school's personnel.

In each school, the program is offered to approximately fifteen students in their 10th, 11th and 12th grade years. During this time, students can accumulate up to \$2,000 in scholarship support to apply toward post-secondary education expenses. The program not only impacts the fifteen students selected for the program, but it also raises awareness of opportunities for higher education to other students who may have never thought of it before, while also increasing community service participation.

How are schools selected?

The college access providers recommend schools based on their past experiences and understanding of where the SOAR Virginia program could provide the most benefit.

Is there a cost to the school?

No, there is no cost for a school to participate, other than the time involved by the school administration, counseling department and other staff.

What is required of the school to participate?

The college access provider will work with school personnel to administer the program. School personnel will assist early commitment advisors by verifying the selection criteria for students who enroll in the program and verify GPA and attendance for students who participate.