



SOAR Virginia® Frequently Asked Questions

For Students and Parents/Guardians



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?

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.

Why should I join SOAR Virginia?

SOAR Virginia participants will receive advising on academic preparation for post-secondary education, assistance with completing college applications and obtaining financial aid (including help completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid - FAFSA), scholarship support of up to \$2,000 to apply toward post-secondary education tuition and fees, and other valuable benefits including recognition as a SOAR Virginia scholar.

What is the SOAR Virginia pledge?

I pledge that...

- I will maintain a minimum cumulative **GPA** of 2.5 or comparable academic achievement as determined by SOAR Virginia
- I will meet with my early commitment **advisor** regularly
- I will complete **financial literacy** training during high school
- I will **behave** in a manner consistent with my school's Code of Student Conduct
- I will **attend** school regularly without unexcused absences
- I will participate in **community service** activities
- I will complete a **Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)** during my senior year and
- I will **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 required of me in the SOAR Virginia program?

Students and their parents/guardians are required to sign the pledge when the student enters the program; the student is expected to fulfill the pledge requirements each year.

What happens if I meet 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 happens if I don't meet the pledge requirements?

A SOAR Virginia scholar will not receive an award if they do not meet the pledge requirements in a given year, however, 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 11th grade 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 12th grade 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 I voluntarily withdrawal 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 if I drop out of high school?

If a SOAR Virginia scholar drops out of school and does not obtain his/her GED, he/she forfeits all monies accumulated in the iVEST account to that point and 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.

Do I have to re-join the program every year of high school?

No. Once you are a SOAR Virginia scholar, you remain one unless you are expelled from the program.

What events will I participate in through SOAR Virginia?

You will meet regularly with your early commitment advisor, as well as have an opportunity to participate in other special events throughout the school year. These events could include celebrations, group meetings or other events hosted by Virginia529.

Who is my advisor?

The early commitment advisor is a representative of the college access provider who will assist students and track their status while in the program.

What will the meetings with my advisor be like?

Your early commitment advisor will meet with you at the high school where he/she works through the school's personnel. The advisor will assist you in the attainment of your post-secondary education goals, including the identification of post-secondary institutions and assistance with the financial aid process, all services key to future success in post-secondary education.

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

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 I use my SOAR Virginia scholarship for dual enrollment?

No. You must be a high school graduate to be eligible to withdraw any money from your SOAR Virginia account.

Will I 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 you 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?

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

Do I have to pursue post-secondary education right after high school?

No. Funds in the inVEST account must be used within ten years following your high school graduation. There are exceptions for active duty military service. Should a SOAR Virginia scholar request an extension of the ten year period for reasons other than active duty military service, Virginia529, in its sole discretion, will determine on a case-by-case basis whether to extend the time in which the funds can be used.

What if I decide not to go to college?

You have ten years to use the monies in your Virginia529 inVEST account. So, even if post-secondary education may not be in your immediate future, you may still access your scholarship at a later date. Your early commitment advisor can help you think through this important decision and help you choose the best path for you. If you decide not to pursue higher education, you will forfeit all awards earned.

How do I withdraw money from my SOAR Virginia inVEST account?

During your senior year, your early commitment advisor will give you a SOAR Virginia Distribution Packet. It will include the forms required, as well as Frequently Asked Questions that help you through the process.

How do I receive a SOAR Virginia Distribution Packet if I am no longer in the program?

If you have earned at least one award, you must also have graduated from high school or earned a GED and be attending an eligible post-secondary institution in order to be eligible to take a distribution from your SOAR Virginia scholarship as discussed above. If you remain eligible, since you are no longer working with an early commitment advisor, you will need to download and print the SOAR Virginia Distribution Packet from our website at www.virginia529.com/soar.

What role do parents/guardians play in the SOAR Virginia program?

Parents and guardians play a vital role in ensuring a student's success. Parents/guardians must sign the pledge with their student and commit to communication with the SOAR Virginia team when necessary. Parents also provide support and guidance to help scholars understand they have to work hard to succeed in high school and beyond.

What is the FAFSA? Why do I have to complete it?

The FAFSA is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, and it is required for any student to receive federal financial aid such as Pell grants or federal student loans. SOAR Virginia requires participants to complete the FAFSA so they are eligible for financial aid in addition to the funds awarded for successful participation in the program.