



**Transforming Lives. Building Futures.**

ANNUAL REPORT 2024-25

## From the Elon Academy Team

As always, we are happy to share with you our annual inside look at Elon Academy. This has been a year of growth and expansion, with the Elon Academy team increasing its capacity to deepen and broaden the programs our Scholars and families value most. We have enhanced longstanding initiatives and introduced fresh approaches to meet the evolving needs of our community. With renewed energy, a steadfast commitment to our mission and a deep respect for the legacy built by those before us, we continue to strengthen and innovate our work. We are grateful for the opportunity to partner with you — our friends, families, collaborators and donors — in providing this life-changing program for students and families in Alamance County. These pages reflect Elon Academy's enduring commitment to advancing college access and success for our incredible Scholars and families.

In May 2025, we proudly accepted our 19th cohort, the Upsilon Class. Every year we see more and more competitive cohorts enter our program, and this year was no exception. The 25 Upsilon Scholars represent the Alamance-Burlington School System, as well as our local early college and public charter schools. The majority of these students come from households with incomes below the county median, and most aspire to be the first in their family to graduate with a bachelor's degree from a four-year college or university. All share the determination to transform their futures by pursuing higher education. We are confident that their talents and our guidance can make these dreams a reality.

As we look ahead, we do so with optimism and resolve. We extend our sincerest thank you for your ongoing support and look forward to the journey ahead and all that we will achieve together.

With deep gratitude,  
**The Elon Academy Team**







## Our Mission

Elon Academy serves high school students in Alamance County who aspire to graduate from a four-year college. All of our students face obstacles to achieving this goal. Each comes from a family with no history of college and/or faces significant financial barriers to college access and success.

Our students demonstrate academic promise, emergent leadership and excellent character. Once part of the Elon Academy, students join a vibrant, multi-year community that offers intensive mentoring, rich learning experiences and comprehensive resources that empower them to access, excel in and graduate from college prepared to lead and thrive.

## DID YOU KNOW

56%

of Alamance-Burlington School System graduates enroll in post-secondary education within 12 months of graduation.

382: 1

The student-to-counselor rate in Alamance County

< 30%

Fewer than 30% of adults in Alamance County possess a bachelor's degree or higher.

52%

of Alamance County students have parents with no college degree (two- or four-year).

37-45%

of males, low-income students, Black students and Latinx students graduating in Alamance County attend a post-secondary institution.

(MyFutureNC, 2022)

90%

of low-income, first-generation students will not graduate college within six years.

(Education Advisory Board, 2019)

Source: MyFutureNC, 2025, unless otherwise noted

## Our Team

*Elon Academy welcomed several new members to its team this year, each with their own personal connection to the program and its work.*



### **Emily Wiersma, Director of the Elon Academy**

Leading the program is Emily Wiersma, who joined Elon Academy as director in fall 2024 after most recently leading transition programs at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

“The impact of Elon Academy is so evident and it’s just undeniable. You can see it. You can feel it,” Wiersma says. “It’s incredible when you see Scholars start to recognize that potential in themselves. It really is a privilege to just be alongside them in that journey to help them recognize and reach their potential.”

Wiersma earned her undergraduate degree from the University of Mount

Union in Ohio and a Master of Education in college student personnel from Ohio University. She has spent her entire career in education, establishing and leading intentional initiatives designed to empower students to overcome barriers and achieve success.

At Elon, Wiersma has created a strategic plan that includes developing a comprehensive competency-based college success curriculum, embedding well-being into programming, building family programs and launching a college success program.



### **Kristin Ring, Associate Director of the Elon Academy**

Associate Director of Elon Academy  
Kristin Ring returns to Elon after earning a bachelor’s degree in human service studies in 2012. During her time as an Elon student, Ring was a Scholar in the Odyssey Program, also housed in the Center for Access and Success.

“I loved my time here at Elon and I had a pretty transformational experience,” she says. “I knew as a student wrapping up my undergraduate studies that I wanted to work with first-generation, low-income students. That’s been my passion throughout my career.”

Ring earned her master’s degree in college student personnel from the University of Tennessee Knoxville and launched West Virginia Wesleyan College’s first-generation student programming. After moving back to North Carolina, Ring worked with a TRIO Talent Search program, a federally funded college access initiative.

As associate director of Elon Academy, Ring helps develop programming for families, provides staff supervision and support, and assists in developing student leader/training programs.



### **Manny Campos, Assistant Director of the Elon Academy**

Manny Campos was a Scholar in the Elon Academy and, after earning a degree in mathematics from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he joined the program as the assistant director of college success in January 2024.

Campos works with the senior class of Elon Academy Scholars as they apply

for college and make major academic decisions.

“It’s definitely very different to be on the other end,” Campos says. “One of the biggest things for me is continuing to provide that support for students and just helping them get to where they need to be.”





### **Melissa Chacon Villalobos, Coordinator for Well-being**

Melissa Chacon Villalobos was a Scholar in the fourth cohort of Elon Academy and is now the coordinator for well-being. Chacon Villalobos earned her bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in human development and family studies, but never strayed far from the Elon Academy. During monthly summer programs, she worked as a Spanish interpreter and became a Summer Mentor during graduate school.

After doing some administrative work

with the program in summer 2024, she took the leap to become coordinator of well-being, developing programming around wellness both with Elon Academy and other programs in the Center for Access and Success.

"Having grown up in Alamance County and having grown up as a low-income, first-generation student is going to help me sympathize with students and help me have a perspective on what they might be going through that not a lot of people may have," Chacon Villalobos says.



### **Briston Whitt, Assistant Director of the Elon Academy**

Throughout her academic career at Elon, Briston Whitt worked with Elon Academy as a Summer Mentor and then as a College Mentor. She was also a Scholar in the Odyssey Program.

Following her graduation in 2023 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in acting, Whitt took a year to travel and enjoy herself before returning to Elon Academy as program coordinator and later as coordinator of student involvement in the Division of Student Life. Whitt joined Elon Academy again in June 2025, this time as assistant director.

"I did a values assessment recently and my core values are faith, empathy and connection, and I feel like college access work is the embodiment of all those things," Whitt says. "It helps students who are well deserving, that can't control their circumstances, be able to have the opportunity to achieve as much as the next person."

As assistant director, Whitt primarily works in Scholar recruitment and supports the sophomore scholars in their first year of the academy.



### **Evan Small, Elon Academy Faculty Scholar**

Evan Small is a faculty member in Elon's Dr. Jo Watts Williams School of Education and is thrilled to join the Elon Academy team as the Faculty Scholar. In this role, Evan provides support to instructors across the program and works to enhance the academic experience for Scholars.

At Elon, Evan teaches in the School of Education, in the Poverty and Social Justice program, study abroad courses and core capstones. His research interests focus on community, belonging, mattering, inclusive teaching and experiential education. He is passionate

about ensuring students feel a sense of connection and belonging within educational environments. Evan has undergraduate degrees in history education and music performance, a master's degree in education and a Ph.D. in educational leadership.

Prior to Elon, Evan taught middle school and worked in a variety of educational contexts. "I'm excited to work alongside the amazing Elon Academy staff to support Scholars in reaching their next steps," he says.



## Our Program

**A**t the heart of Elon Academy is a comprehensive, multi-faceted model that supports Scholars and families every step of the way on their journey to and through college. Each component of the program is intentionally designed to provide rigorous academic preparation, holistic personal development, meaningful leadership opportunities and sustained support that extends beyond high school graduation.



### Summer Academy

The cornerstone of the Elon Academy program, the Summer Academy provides Scholars with an immersive, residential experience on Elon University's campus. Over the course of several weeks, students engage in college-style classes with professors that build academic skills and foster intellectual curiosity. Beyond academics, the Summer Academy emphasizes community building, leadership and wellness, ensuring that Scholars develop socially and personally alongside their academic growth. Living on campus allows Scholars to envision themselves as future college students, while co-curricular well-being activities and exposure to new experiences expand their horizons. For many Scholars, the Summer Academy is

the first opportunity to immerse themselves in a collegiate environment, laying the foundation for confidence, motivation and long-term success.

### Saturday Academy & Ongoing Scholar Support

Building off of their growth and development during the Summer Academy, the Saturday Academy sessions extend support throughout the school year and are held monthly, focusing on academic enrichment, college readiness, leadership development and holistic well-being. These sessions allow Scholars to stay connected with their cohort, deepen their learning and continue to grow as leaders.

Complementing these structured gatherings is a robust framework of ongoing support that Scholars receive year-round. This includes individualized support from Elon Academy staff, college application guidance, workshops on topics such as financial literacy and wellness, and responsive resources tailored to each student's needs.

Together, Saturday Academy and ongoing support provide consistent touchpoints and reinforcement, ensuring that Scholars remain engaged, supported and equipped to meet challenges head-on throughout high school.



### Student Leadership

A signature feature of Elon Academy, student leadership and employment opportunities offer reciprocal benefits for both Elon Academy Scholars and Elon University students. During the Summer Academy, Summer Mentors live and learn alongside Scholars while providing encouragement, guidance and a





relatable perspective on college life. Throughout the year, College Mentors, Academic Coaches and Peer Leaders extend this support, fostering academic growth, confidence and community at both the high school and college levels. These roles serve as meaningful employment and professional development opportunities, equipping Elon University students and Elon Academy Scholars alike with valuable leadership, communication and mentoring skills that prepare them for future success.

### **Family Engagement**

Recognizing the critical role families play in a student's educational journey, the Elon Academy

partners with families through ongoing communication, workshops and resources designed to empower them as advocates for their students. Families participate in learning opportunities that address college access, financial planning and the social-emotional aspects of supporting a college-bound student. By equipping families with knowledge and tools, Elon Academy strengthens the foundation of support at home, creating a unified network around each Scholar. This partnership not only reinforces student success but also helps families share in the pride, empowerment and transformational impact of the program.

### **College Success Program**

Extending Elon Academy's impact beyond high school graduation, the College Success Program provides sustained support as Scholars transition into and persist through higher education. A key component of this program is the Transitions to College Academy, which takes place the summer before Scholars begin college and equips them with practical skills, strategies and resources to navigate their first semesters successfully.



Recognizing that the first years of college can be particularly challenging, the College Success Program also offers ongoing workshops, mentoring and networking opportunities tailored to the unique needs of College Scholars. From accessing and engaging with campus resources to building resilience, independence and supportive networks, the College Success Program ensures that Scholars remain connected to Elon Academy while thriving in higher education. By maintaining these relationships, the program reinforces that Elon Academy is not just a high school initiative,

but a lifelong support system.

Together, these program features form a holistic model that not only prepares Scholars for higher education but also empowers them to grow as leaders, learners and changemakers within their families and communities.



## From Our Scholars

### Zainab Elzibair

Williams High School Class of 2025  
N.C. State University Class of 2029

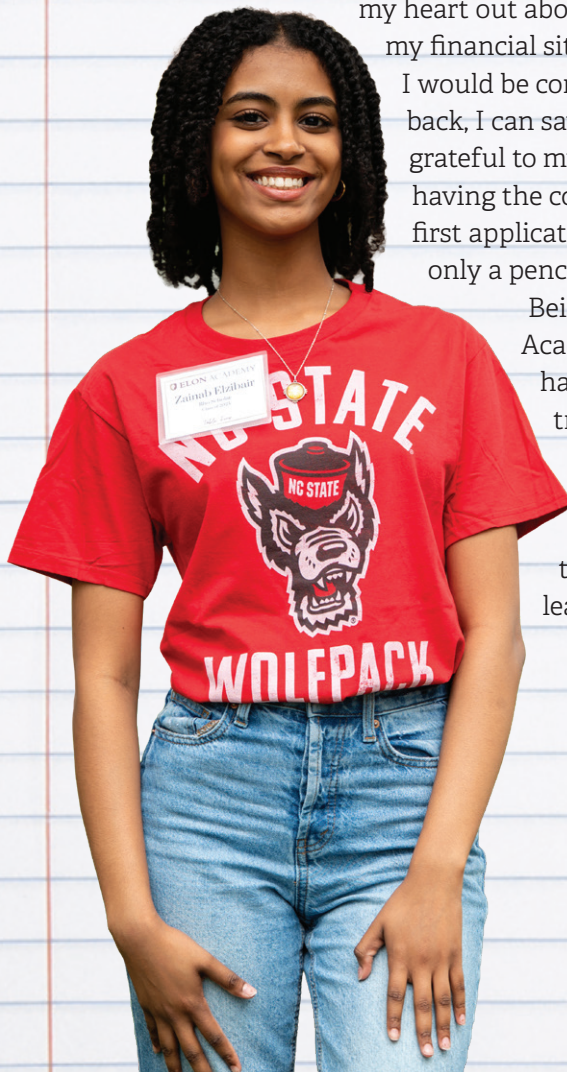
I immigrated to the United States when I was 5 years old, tackling an entirely new environment while only knowing Arabic. My family came to the States to be able to afford my brother's care, as he has a severe case of cerebral palsy. As we began to navigate the education system here, it was extremely confusing. From the ages of 6 to 10, I would be in my local library going through tutor after tutor until my English was fluent.

Fast forward to freshman year, I remember picking up a pencil and looking down at the Elon Academy application that came in the mail. I began filling out the questions, pouring my heart out about my dreams and my financial situation, unsure if I would be considered. As I look back, I can say I am eternally grateful to my 14-year-old self for having the courage to write her first application of many with only a pencil and a dream.

Being an Elon Academy Scholar has profoundly transformed my high school and college journey. I was able to take on my first leadership role at

the Academy, contributing to my future involvement in my school through various organizations. I connected to alumni of the program to help with my college process. I took a class that delved into the human brain, solidifying my career aspirations. And most importantly, I was able to create a bond with my fellow Scholars that will never be broken. I have grown through being an Elon Academy Scholar as staff and peers pushed me to try new things constantly.

Now, as I step onto the campus of N.C. State as a Goodnight Scholar pursuing a STEM major, I give Elon Academy my thanks as I would not be this successful so young without their support.



ZAINAB



## Jacob Navarette

Southern Alamance High School

Class of 2025

Elon University Class of 2029

I didn't understand the importance of school when I was a kid. I thought the peak of pre-K was picking my boogers and eating cheese sticks while watching "Barney" on PBS Kids. However, as I got older and, inevitably, closer to adulthood, I realized the true value of education, especially after seeing how hard my parents fought for me to go to college when it was a fantasy for them.

Coming from Mexico and working at such young ages, my parents fought through financial distress and mental turmoil for my siblings and me. It was too late for them to explore other interests

or skills through school. It was too expensive to chase a degree and feed four mouths at home at the same time. It was too much for them, but a fresh start for me and my siblings to pursue something bigger than what they could achieve. Fortunately, this is where Elon Academy came into our lives.

With Elon Academy, I was able to reach bigger dreams and greater connections like never before. Ever since the beginning of high school, I've built a system of heavily educated mentors and incredibly dedicated peers learning about the wonders of college always at my side. This system provided me with knowledge that many students my age wouldn't know about, such as scholarship websites, advice for the application process, and institutions and organizations that are actively reaching out to help households like mine.

Elon Academy was able to build a community that meant much more than just academics. Especially after the summer programs, where we developed skills for the college environment and engaged in plenty of team-building activities, it felt like family. Wherever I go now, I know that God guided my steps ever since the start, and Elon Academy is testimony to that.



# JACOB



## Indigo Zettle

Southern Alamance High School  
Class of 2021

Yale University Class of 2025

Boston University MSW Class of 2027

I would have never ended up at Yale without Elon Academy. Not because I wasn't capable or didn't work hard enough, but because I didn't believe in myself.

For a long time, the idea of attending a school like Yale felt unrealistic — something meant for other people, not for someone like me. It was my College Mentor from Elon Academy who changed that.

He saw potential in me that I couldn't yet see in myself and encouraged me to dream bigger, to step outside my comfort zone and, most importantly, to apply. That push was the catalyst I needed.

It allowed me to see beyond the limitations I had unknowingly placed on myself and gave me the confidence to reach for opportunities I would have otherwise dismissed.

Elon Academy didn't just prepare me for the college process — it gave me the belief that I belonged in spaces like Yale. And the truth that many first-generation, low-income students like myself

never hear is that they belong in higher education. They belong in classrooms where ideas are challenged and expanded. They belong in conversations that shape the future. They belong in institutions that have historically overlooked students like them — not because they need to prove anything, but because their presence enriches those spaces.

Of course, being at Yale came with challenges, and there were days when it didn't feel like I belonged. Imposter syndrome crept in, and the pressure felt overwhelming. But in those moments of doubt, I held onto the unwavering support I had received from Elon Academy. Knowing that they believed in me, even when I questioned myself, gave me strength. Their love, encouragement and belief in my potential reminded me that I didn't get here by accident. I got here through hard work, resilience and the guidance of people who saw something in me long before I saw it in myself. Their support carried me through the toughest days and reminded me that I did belong — fully, truly and without question.

Elon Academy changed the trajectory of my life. The program created a space where I felt seen, supported and empowered to pursue opportunities I once thought were out of reach. Its impact goes far beyond college applications and acceptances; it instills confidence, fosters ambition and opens doors that many first-generation students might never have imagined walking through. I carry the lessons and encouragement I received from Elon Academy with me every day, and I know I always will.



INDIGO





## Class of 2025 Snapshot: Rho Scholars

Our high school seniors, the Rho Scholars, accepted over \$5 million in merit scholarships and grants from their prospective institutions. They earned more than 250 college acceptances to more than 75 different schools. Scholarships earned include two Goodnight Scholars at North

Carolina State University, a Levine Scholar at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, a Presidential Scholarship at Winston Salem State University and eight Odyssey Program Scholars at Elon University, among others. Ten Scholars have enrolled at Elon, the largest number of Elon Academy Scholars to ever commit to the university. The 27 Rho Scholars are one of the largest cohorts in the program's nearly 20-year history, and the first cohort in which all the students who began the program finished together.

## FAST FACTS

### COLLEGE ACCESS:

- **72** high school students from Alamance County
- **89%** of families served fall below the median income for Alamance County.
- **93%** will be the first in their family to graduate with a four-year college degree.
- **100%** of Elon Academy Scholars enroll in honors, advance placement and/or dual enrollment courses.

### COLLEGE SUCCESS:

- **77** Elon Academy College Scholars attend 13 different colleges and universities.
- **98%** of Elon Academy Scholars retain from their first year to second year in college (compared to **56%** national first-gen retention rate).
- Nationally, **11%** of low-income, first-generation students earn a bachelor's degree within six years of enrolling in college, compared to **55%** of continuing-generation students. *(The First Generation Foundation)*

## The Gift of Education

The generosity of the Elon donor community has fueled Elon Academy since its founding. Visionary donors, including the late Nancy Watson '66, have created a legacy of support that continues to shape the lives of Scholars and families today. Each gift, whether a planned gift, an endowed fund, a recurring contribution or a one-time donation, helps sustain and expand life-changing opportunities for first-generation and underrepresented students in Alamance County.

While endowment and annual gifts provide a critical foundation, the Elon Academy's impact depends on continued partnership from donors at every level. By investing in the Elon Academy, you're not just funding a program; you're opening doors to higher education, nurturing future leaders and strengthening our community.

You can be part of this transformational work. Visit [elon.edu/makeagift](https://elon.edu/makeagift), select "Center for Access and Success," and choose "Elon Academy Annual Fund" or "Elon Academy Endowment" from the dropdown list to direct your support. Together, we can ensure that Scholars today and for generations to come have the resources and relationships they need to thrive.

Together, we can do even more. Donor support directly powers the programs that shape Scholars' journeys — from their first day on campus through college graduation and beyond. Contributions help fund Summer Academy courses and enrichment activities, sustain year-round Scholar support through Saturday Academy and well-being support, and expand student leadership roles like Summer Mentors, Peer Leaders, Academic Coaches and College Mentors.

Your generosity also strengthens the College Success Program, offering workshops, mentoring and networking to help Scholars persist through college, while providing family engagement programs that empower parents and guardians to walk alongside their students. Each of these initiatives represents a tangible way to make a lasting difference. Each gift to these areas — no matter the size — creates life-changing opportunities and strengthens the community we build together.

## FISCAL YEAR 2025

### Donors

149

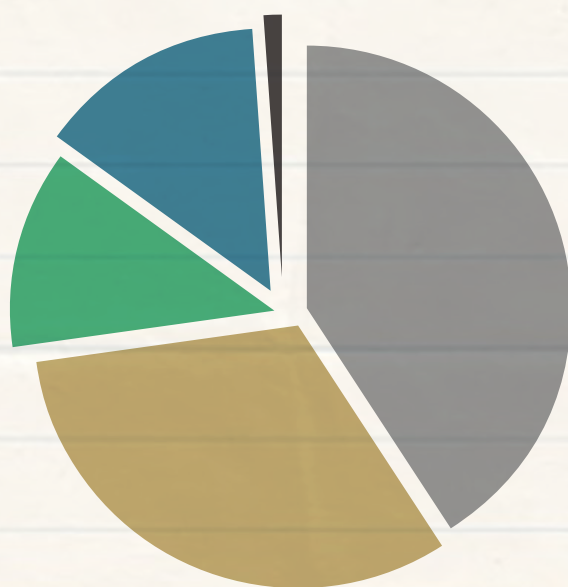
individual donors

101

households

### Donor Makeup

- 41% Undergraduate and Graduate Alumni
- 32% Faculty/Staff
- 12% Parent/Grandparent
- 14% Friends
- 1% Corporation/Foundations





## Honor Roll of Donors

Alexa Milan	Jessica and Jerry Small	Nyjah Rollins
Allison Bryan	Jill Epperson	Olivia Allen-Price and Sam Price
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Javik Blake		
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## Building on Our Strengths, Expanding Our Impact

**A**s we celebrate all that Elon Academy has accomplished, we are equally energized by what lies ahead. The next chapter will be defined by innovation, deeper impact and a continued commitment to empowering Scholars and families to thrive.

Our vision for the future is rooted in growth, collaboration and excellence. We are embarking on a full program and curriculum review to ensure our work remains impactful and responsive to the evolving needs of our Scholars. A new competency-based approach will integrate wellness, college preparation, personal development and career readiness. These enhancements will prepare Scholars not only to succeed in college but to thrive in life.

We are deepening our commitment to experiential learning by creating new opportunities for student leadership development across all student employment programs and integrating high-impact experiences that foster confidence, leadership and career readiness. We are also expanding family engagement, developing a new College Success Program to support graduates beyond high school, and revitalizing our alumni network. We are building bridges between past, present and future Scholars while deepening our collective impact with renewed partnerships with Elon University, the Alamance-Burlington School System and local organizations.

To bring these bold plans to life, we are deepening efforts around donor engagement, grant funding and endowment growth. By staying engaged — whether through your time, expertise or financial support — you are helping to ensure that Elon Academy continues to transform lives and strengthen our community. The future of Elon Academy is bright, and with your continued partnership and engagement, our impact will reach further and deeper than ever before.



UPDATE YOUR  
CONTACT INFO



JOIN OUR ALUMNI  
LINKEDIN GROUP

## Celebrating and Connecting Elon Academy Alumni

**W**e are excited to share that we are developing a new Alumni Engagement Program designed to strengthen connections within the Elon Academy community. This initiative will allow us to keep alumni informed with program updates, celebrate accomplishments, and create opportunities to engage with and inspire our current Scholars.

Alumni stories and successes are an essential part of Elon Academy's legacy, and we want to ensure we are staying connected as they continue to grow and thrive. Please take a moment to scan the QR code (above left) and share a few details with us so that we can reach out as this program evolves. You are also invited to join our Elon Academy Alumni LinkedIn group (scan the QR Code, below left), a space to expand your professional network, share opportunities and connect with fellow alumni.

Together, we can build a vibrant network of alumni who continue to support one another and future generations of Scholars.



## Help Us Recruit Future Scholars

The strength of Elon Academy has always been rooted in the power of community. Each year, we welcome a new class of Scholars who bring talent, determination and diverse perspectives to our program. You can play a vital role in this process.

### We encourage you to:

- Nominate potential Scholars by encouraging promising students and families to learn more about Elon Academy.
- Spread the word within your networks so that more students know about the opportunities available to them.
- Volunteer during recruitment events and information sessions to share your experiences and insights.

Your involvement ensures that deserving students across Alamance County not only hear about Elon Academy but also see themselves as part of it. Together, we can continue building a community where every Scholar feels supported, valued and empowered to pursue higher education.



COMPLETE OUR  
RECRUITMENT  
SURVEY







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UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR  
Access and  
Success

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