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## Per Scholas Diligence Trip Report National Capital Region and Baltimore April 19, 2023

### Program Visited

- Per Scholas Baltimore and National Capital Region (NCR)

### Focusing Philanthropy Staff

- Teresa Burton

### Per Scholas Staff

- Gary Bonner, Managing Director National Capital Region
- Jessica Diaz, Managing Director Baltimore

### Executive Summary

Teresa Burton visited Per Scholas National Capital Region (NCR) at their training site in Silver Spring, Maryland. NCR is Per Scholas' second largest market outside of New York City. The goal of the visit was to see the location for the first time, learn about the program and employers in the area, meet staff, and talk to students. The Managing Directors of both NCR and Baltimore also attended to give an overview of their programs.

### Background

Per Scholas is a national nonprofit offering intensive, tuition-free classes, job placement and career development services to prepare adults for long-term careers in technology. Working closely with employers in each location, Per Scholas designs class curricula to teach students the technical and career skills they need for local, in demand entry-level tech jobs.

### National Capital Region (NCR) Description

Since 2014 Per Scholas NCR has trained more than 1,500 learners and boasts an 83% graduation rate and 78% job placement rate. Graduates who have completed training since 2021 are earning an average wage of \$21.73/hour, roughly \$45,200 annually, and nearly 3.25 times the reported average pre-training wages of \$13,884. At Per Scholas NCR, 91% of learners identify as people of color, 35% are women, and 63% have a high school diploma as their highest educational attainment.

NCR will graduate 320 learners in 2023, making it the second largest market after the New York City region. NCR runs 6 cohorts at a time - IT Support (two concurrently), AWS, Cybersecurity, Software Engineering, and Women in Software Engineering. They are in the middle of an RCT examining success of students in the IT Support training track. The instructor is Kiana, an experienced tier 2 senior instructor.



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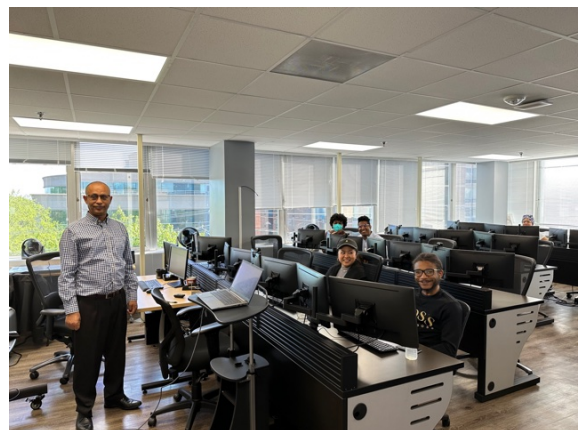
NCR also has a training site on H Street in downtown Washington, DC that is shared by both Per Scholas and YearUp. The site, called Talent for Tomorrow, has extensive classroom space. Per Scholas provides technical training and YearUp, alongside two other NGOs, provide learners with scholarships, soft skills, mentoring, and internships. The course is a truncated 10-week IT Support class for YearUp students as part of its career pathway offerings. Per Scholas provides the tech training and YearUp provides the paid internship and soft skills training. A new YearUp class in Cybersecurity starts on May 15.



### NCR Government Employer Pipeline

Gary Bonner met with Tom Zinzi, friend of Focusing Philanthropy and government tech recruiter, several times to discuss how best to encourage government employers to create a pipeline of Per Scholas graduates for open positions in tech. In the Washington area, 25% of entry level tech jobs are open, equaling thousands of open positions. Gary and Tom sit on a board together, the Armed Forces Signals and Electrical Communications Association (AFSECA). One of AFSECA's primary objectives is to increase diversity hiring by military and nonmilitary contractors. By law, each base or military installation is required to hire a workforce that resembles the demographics within a 25-mile radius. For example, General Dynamics is situated near Quantico and the 25-mile radius includes Washington DC, mandating that their workforce resemble the city's population.

In May, Gary and Tom also made a presentation to the CIO of the Department of Defense and they are in negotiations to establish an apprenticeship program that would potentially help hundreds of employers fulfill their diversity goals. In the process, Per Scholas learners would become a part of the applicant pool for the government and contractor community. The plan is for Per Scholas to prepare and onboard graduates to a paid, full-time apprenticeship in cohorts of 40 students with a salary goal of \$23/hour. The courses that best prepare learners for the open positions are IT Support, Cybersecurity, and AWS/Cloud. As part of the agreement, Per Scholas will offer job coaching, learner supports (e.g., help opening a bank account), and use trauma-informed practices to 1) help trainees navigate the new systems, 2) to encourage students to embrace their new corporate culture as they acclimate to the competitive, fast-paced workplace environments.





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### Student Discussion

I met with three students on my visit.

Elizabeth began her education studying art at community college. During the pandemic, it was difficult to continue from home. Her mother, a local librarian, heard about Per Scholas and recommended it because she knew another graduate who was successful finding a government job. Elizabeth receives financial help from her family and also works shifts at CVS on weekends to pay for gas and parking. She mentioned that other students saved up in order to attend the Per Scholas and others work night shifts. Elizabeth recently passed the certification exams in IT Support for both CompTIA+ and Google IT. She has two job interviews in the next week with two partner employers, but she may hold out for an interview at Booze Allen or Deloitte. She plans to participate in alumni classes to gain certifications in Cybersecurity and Security+.



Carlos grew up in the Dominican Republic and moved to the US three years ago. He enjoys learning new things and likes technology, graphics, and gaming. After high school he was a bank teller who often found himself helping customers and colleagues solve problems with technology. With the goal of combining both banking and tech, he took the online CompTIA course and failed to pass the certification exam twice before a friend recommended Per Scholas. Carlos is very proud that he recently passed the certification exam and credits the community of friends with shared interests and goals that helps each other at Per Scholas. Carlos has support from his husband to participate in class, but he is also still teaching a computer class at a Senior Center in Arlington. His dream job after graduation is to work for Apple or Google.

Mel came to the US from the Philippines 4 years ago. She has a degree in Computer Engineering and passed the Cisco CCSA certification in the Philippines. When she was unable to find a tech job in the US, she worked in the food industry and became a manager. She too became the tech support person for colleagues. Wishing to return to working in technology, Mel decided to try again. She found Per Scholas and credits the program with restoring her sense of hope. Mel was able to save up enough money to support herself for 5 months in addition to receiving some family support. She also works shifts as a part-time pharmacy tech trainee. She believes the professional development components of the training has helped build her confidence and says the technical training refreshed her skills. She is hoping to find a position in IT Support for smartphone applications.

### Baltimore Description

Since 2018 Per Scholas Baltimore has trained more than 300 learners and boasts a 79% graduation rate and 84% job placement rate. Graduates who completed training since 2021 are earning an average



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wage of \$19.33/hour, roughly \$40,200 annually, and nearly 3 times their average reported pre-training wages of \$14,250. In Baltimore, 87% of learners identify as people of color, 44% are women, and 61% have a high school diploma as their highest educational attainment.

The Baltimore location currently draws learners from 4 neighboring counties. Currently, Per Scholas Baltimore offers two training courses - IT Support, a 12-week course, and Software Engineering, a 15-week course. The current classes are hybrid (remote/in-person). The IT Support certification course is in week three. Notably, the hybrid classes are primarily made up of women because staying home makes it easier to manage childcare and is less expensive in terms of transportation.

Baltimore will soon add two new courses for the first time this summer 1) AWS, a 15-week course, and 2) Cybersecurity, a 15-week mid-level course. They also have an End User Desktop Support class funded by TekSystems which has a waitlist for the 24 seats. That class includes an extra 2 weeks of TekSystems curriculum. After graduation, Tek Systems has 45 days to hire the graduates before they look for other jobs.

Baltimore staff helps students in a variety of innovative ways from taking photos for their LinkedIn pages to helping with transportation costs to exams and interviews. Notably, most learners are hired by employers participating in mock interviews.

The newly hired Senior Manager of Business Solutions is working with large employers in the area capable of hiring 5 to 10 graduates per cohort. The major employers in Baltimore include Advance Business Systems, DP Solutions among others and TekSystems – a staffing agency for T. Rowe Price, Blue Cross and Venable among others. Baltimore is sufficiently established now to begin recruiting an Advisory Council with leaders from the community and local employers.

### Innovation

This year, Baltimore developed a recruiting pipeline in partnership with the local Goodwill Industries' adult high school, the Excel Center. Goodwill has created several of these programs in other states and opened their first in Baltimore in March to extend services to the estimated 80,000 adults there who do not have a diploma. Through the accelerated program, which offers childcare and transportation, Excel graduates can matriculate directly into the Per Scholas IT Support class.

### Challenges

Baltimore finds it challenging to recruit and retain tech instructors due to the national shortage of tech instructors. The current instructor is teaching virtually from Florida while a teaching fellow is assisting in-person during class. Student retention also presented a challenge in Baltimore until recently. To boost retention, Baltimore added a pre-kickoff meeting so students can meet each other and meet Per Scholas staff, make sure their computers are working properly, and identify and address other barriers to success. After the pre-kickoff meetings, which are essentially a warm handoff to the instructor's



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kickoff session, students are more likely to raise their hands in class and ask for help. In addition, the Per Scholas staff and instructors have been trained to recognize the warnings signs of students about to quit and to provide an extra dose of support and encouragement. Now, it's typical to only lose 2 students per class in Baltimore as opposed to the previous rate of 50%.

The biggest barrier to certification exam rates in Baltimore is test anxiety. To help students build their confidence, Baltimore is partnering with the local Catholic Charities which is providing a class led by a mental health professional on the subject of stress, anxiety, and imposter syndrome. The course is funded by a grant to Catholic Charities to address anxiety and further the goal of connecting communities who may qualify for services and other grants.

Learners take the IT Support certification exam during their training and as many as 13 out of 20 will be certified before the end of this training course. To improve the odds of passing exams, Per Scholas administers three challenging practice tests plus a final exam. The CompTIA A+ exams, available online and at a local testing site, consist of two, three-hour tests covering installing and configuring operating systems, expanded security, software troubleshooting, and operational procedures. Per Scholas strongly encourages students to take tests in a professional testing site in order to avoid distractions during exams and improve passing rates. They offer a Lyft voucher for transportation which can be earned by taking all of the practice tests offered by instructors.

### Baltimore Expansion Plan – One Maryland

Other Maryland counties have expressed an interest in starting a rural program and opening a new site. Jessica Diaz is currently doing the groundwork to create a satellite model that would serve other counties, including rural areas. The potential new site in Anne Arundel County is adjacent to 4 other counties and a military base with several large employer headquarters. Jessica reported that local funders are enthusiastic about the plan, called One Maryland. The philanthropic investment required is \$500,000 and fundraising efforts are already underway.

### Key Observations

In my conversations with Per Scholas students in different locations, I often hear about imposter syndrome and learners' lack of confidence. My chat with these students was similar, but I was delighted to hear about the partnership with Catholic Charities. The ability to offer professional development sessions delivered by a mental health expert to deal specifically with overcoming anxiety is a targeted solution that is showing results. When I asked more about it, the students all commented on how test anxiety held them back before coming to Per Scholas. They recounted how doubtful they were about their ability to pass exams based on previous experience with language barriers or academic challenges. Now, the students are very proud of their personal and professional accomplishments and credit Per Scholas for arming them with test taking strategies (e.g., practice questions, study sessions, eliminating distractions) and for inspiring the courage they need to move forward in their careers.