



KESSLER --- **SCHOLARS**

Putting First-Generation College Students First

KESSLER SCHOLARS COLLABORATIVE 2022 ANNUAL REPORT

A blue-tinted photograph of a group of students sitting on the floor in a library, looking at books and papers. The text is overlaid on the center of the image.

KESSLER SCHOLARS

PROVIDING CREATING BUILDING
SUPPORT • COMMUNITY • SUCCESS

A Message from our Director



2022 marked a year of momentous growth for the Kessler Scholars Collaborative and our work to provide transformational support for high-achieving students who are the first in their family to pursue a four-year college degree. In April, 10 diverse colleges and universities were selected to launch Kessler Scholars Programs on their campuses as part of a new partnership with the American Talent Initiative and with generous funding support from the Judy and Fred Wilpon Family Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies.

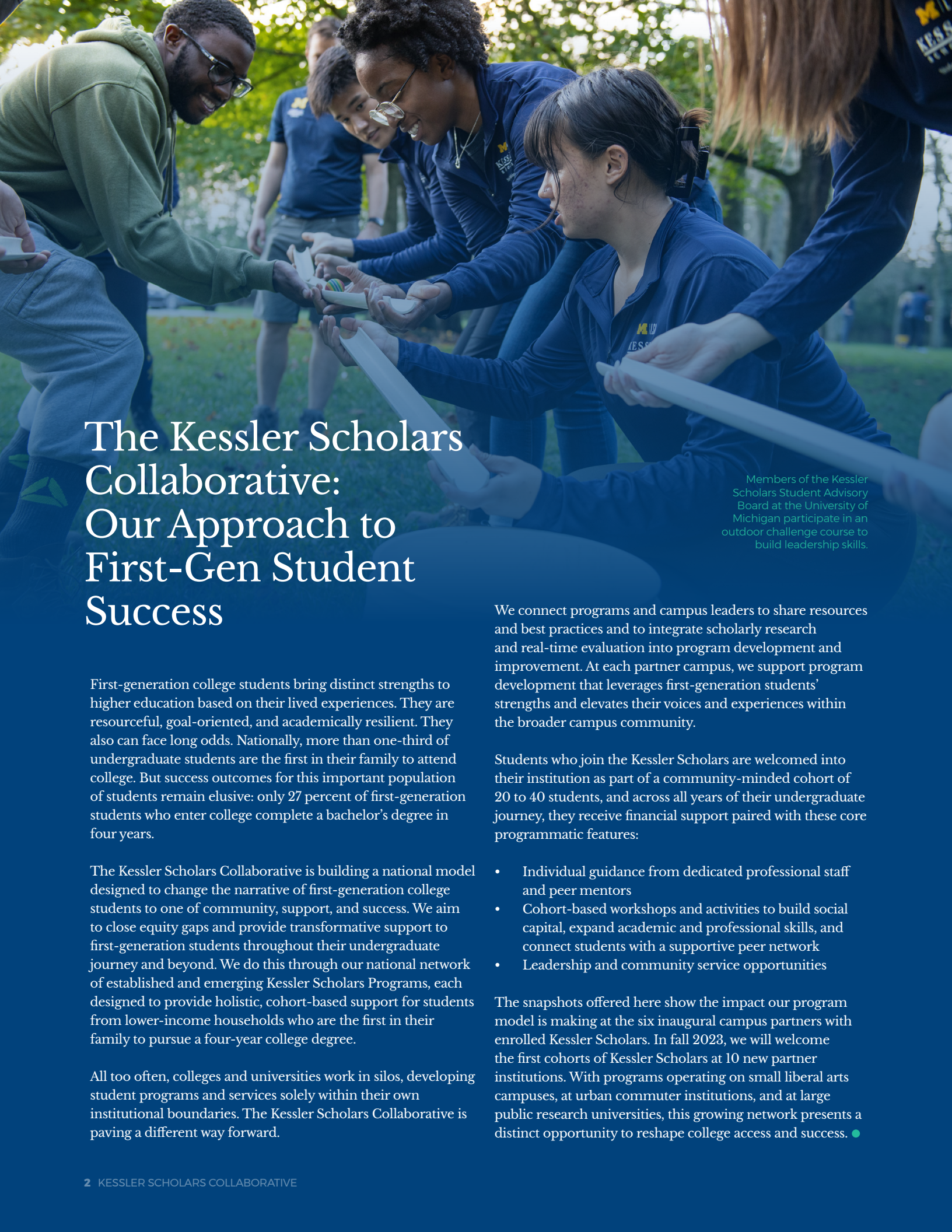
This exciting expansion means that the Kessler Scholars Program model will impact many more students and families—from 381 enrolled scholars across our six inaugural campus programs during the 2021-2022 academic year to more than 1,600 enrolled Kessler Scholars across 16 campuses over the next four years. To support this growth and guide development of campus-based programs, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative in July moved from our founding home at the University of Michigan to operate as a direct initiative of the Wilpon Family Foundation. As you will see in the following pages, though, this new chapter remains grounded in an abiding belief in the strengths of first-generation college students and commitment to student support guided by evidence-based best practices and informed by continual evaluation and assessment.

In all we do, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative is driven by core values that center the experiences of first-generation students, promote learning and growth among students and professional staff, prioritize meaningful collaboration, and

foster equity and inclusion in higher education. Our work guided by these principles shows results. Through the 2021-2022 academic year, students enrolled in Kessler Scholars Programs at our six inaugural campuses showed a first- to second-year retention rate of 94 percent, a key indicator of expected degree completion. Across these programs, 92 percent of Kessler Scholars rated their experience in the program as good or excellent. In the coming year, the Kessler Scholars Programs at Cornell University and Johns Hopkins University will celebrate their first graduates, students who will join an alumni base of more than 300 graduates from programs at the University of Michigan and St. Francis College.

And there is more ahead. In fall 2023, our 10 new campus programs will launch, each welcoming cohorts of 20 to 40 new Kessler Scholars. Across this growing collective, students will have new opportunities to build unique connections with peers and alumni across campus boundaries, all who share an understanding of what it means to navigate higher education as the first in your family to do so. We are inspired by their drive, curiosity, and community spirit. We are grateful for the shared commitment of our campus, organizational, and funding partners. And we look forward to the challenges and work ahead.

Gail Gibson, PhD
Executive Director



The Kessler Scholars Collaborative: Our Approach to First-Gen Student Success

Members of the Kessler Scholars Student Advisory Board at the University of Michigan participate in an outdoor challenge course to build leadership skills.

First-generation college students bring distinct strengths to higher education based on their lived experiences. They are resourceful, goal-oriented, and academically resilient. They also can face long odds. Nationally, more than one-third of undergraduate students are the first in their family to attend college. But success outcomes for this important population of students remain elusive: only 27 percent of first-generation students who enter college complete a bachelor's degree in four years.

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative is building a national model designed to change the narrative of first-generation college students to one of community, support, and success. We aim to close equity gaps and provide transformative support to first-generation students throughout their undergraduate journey and beyond. We do this through our national network of established and emerging Kessler Scholars Programs, each designed to provide holistic, cohort-based support for students from lower-income households who are the first in their family to pursue a four-year college degree.

All too often, colleges and universities work in silos, developing student programs and services solely within their own institutional boundaries. The Kessler Scholars Collaborative is paving a different way forward.

We connect programs and campus leaders to share resources and best practices and to integrate scholarly research and real-time evaluation into program development and improvement. At each partner campus, we support program development that leverages first-generation students' strengths and elevates their voices and experiences within the broader campus community.

Students who join the Kessler Scholars are welcomed into their institution as part of a community-minded cohort of 20 to 40 students, and across all years of their undergraduate journey, they receive financial support paired with these core programmatic features:

- Individual guidance from dedicated professional staff and peer mentors
- Cohort-based workshops and activities to build social capital, expand academic and professional skills, and connect students with a supportive peer network
- Leadership and community service opportunities

The snapshots offered here show the impact our program model is making at the six inaugural campus partners with enrolled Kessler Scholars. In fall 2023, we will welcome the first cohorts of Kessler Scholars at 10 new partner institutions. With programs operating on small liberal arts campuses, at urban commuter institutions, and at large public research universities, this growing network presents a distinct opportunity to reshape college access and success. ●



Cornell University

Program launch year

2019

Entering cohort in fall 2022

20

Total students served in 2021-2022

56

Average first-to-second year persistence

93%

Of note: At Cornell, Kessler Scholars work with community-based organizations across the country to host virtual information sessions for high school students navigating the college application process.



JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Program launch year

2020

Entering cohort in fall 2022

18

Total students served in 2021-2022

28

Average first-to-second year persistence

100%

Of note: At JHU, the Kessler Scholars Program focuses on support for students studying in a social science or humanities discipline. Through spring 2022, the Kessler Scholars at Johns Hopkins had a 100 percent student retention rate across all years.



Program launch year

2020

Entering cohort in fall 2022

19

Total students served in 2021-2022

30

Average first-to-second year persistence

93%

Of note: At Queens College, entering Kessler Scholars participate together in a first-year seminar focused on navigating the often unwritten rules and academic expectations of higher education.



Program launch year:

2015

Entering cohort in fall 2022

21

Total students served in 2021-2022

79

Average first-to-second year persistence

93%

Of note: A partnership with the non-profit First-Generation Investors in 2021-2022 allowed students in the McGuire Scholars Program to gain understanding of financial investing and, in turn, share those lessons with area high school students as a community service and mentorship project.



Program launch year:

2020

Entering cohort in fall 2022

18

Total students served in 2021-2022

32

Average first-to-second year persistence

89%

Of note: The inaugural class of Kessler Scholars at Syracuse University had higher first-year GPAs (3.15) compared to their non-Kessler first-generation counterparts (3.06).



Program launch year

2008

Entering cohort in fall 2022

39

Total students served in 2021-2022

147

Average first-to-second year persistence

96%

Of note: Through spring 2022, the first cohort to enter the Kessler Scholars at Michigan under the program's redesigned cohort-model in 2017 had reached a five-year graduation rate of 94 percent.

A portrait of a young woman with long, wavy brown hair, smiling at the camera. She is wearing a black blazer over a light-colored top and a gold necklace with a small pendant. The background is a blurred indoor setting with large windows and greenery outside.

Student Profile:

Olivia Gurfinkiel
Cornell University

Putting First-Generation Students First Through Unparalleled Support and Guidance

A native of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Cornell University senior Olivia Gurfinkiel was no stranger to adapting to new environments when she came to Cornell as a first-generation college student. She and her mother had moved to the United States when Olivia was a sophomore in high school, and Olivia had already learned to navigate countless cultural differences by the time she was accepted in the Cornell Peter and Stephanie Nolan School of Hotel Administration.

Still, heading to the Ivy League required an entirely different level of adaptation, and Olivia credits her participation in the Kessler Scholars—and the support she has received along the way—as key to assimilating to both the cultural and academic rigors of college life.

Cornell University was the Kessler Collaborative's first partner institution, joining the University of Michigan in fall 2019. Gurfinkiel was part of the Cornell program's first entering cohort, set to graduate in spring 2023.

"There are so many unknowns that you're not supposed to know coming in," she says, "like how do I reach out to my professor about a question in class or what do I even need for a dorm room—such simple facts that I wasn't able to receive from my parents. I of course had their encouragement and their love but these resources weren't really available to me, which is why Kessler Scholars is so amazing."

For Olivia, the strength of the Kessler experience boils down to one thing, every step of the way: the people. "It's the network and the people that make the Kessler program." That includes everyone from her peer mentor freshman year, fellow Kessler Scholars, Kessler staff, and even an extremely helpful networking phone conversation with the founder of the Kessler Scholars Program, Fred Wilpon. In turn, Olivia served as a peer mentor to new Kessler Scholars her junior

year and is now a member of the Kessler Student Advisory Board at Cornell.

"Kessler points you to other students, clubs, and organizations on campus. Kessler Scholars are computer science majors, engineers, architects, food majors—there's such a wide variety and it really provides newcomers with some point of contact in their areas of interest," she notes.

*"It's the network
and the people
that make the
Kessler program."*

— Olivia Gurfinkiel,
Cornell University Class of 2023

"This level of close engagement with students is a hallmark of the Kessler Scholars Program, and one of the most crucial benefits we provide to our students," says Shakima M. Clency, National Director of Campus Partnerships and Student Success for the Collaborative. "We know that these connections provide a solid foundation for student success."

A highlight for Olivia was participating in a study abroad program as a sophomore, when she lived in Barcelona for a semester. Kessler Scholars staff guides and encourages students as they explore these kinds of high-impact educational experiences. Olivia says it changed her perspective: "I recommend studying abroad to everyone. It forces you to become independent, to get some real separation from your parents and opens up a lot of experiences."

Olivia believes Kessler Scholars at Cornell all share a common throughline: recognizing the immense opportunity inherent in the college experience, something that peers whose parents earned a four-year college degree might take for granted. "It's an opportunity that you really have to take advantage of while you're here. I haven't met one single person who isn't totally driven and has the same values and sees college the same way which is not a given," she says. "I can't wait until I'm in the working world and, hopefully, Kessler Scholars are reaching out to me." ●

Promoting Cross-Campus Student Engagement for Professional and Leadership Growth

One distinct opportunity of the growing Kessler Scholars Collaborative is the chance to connect scholars to their peers at other institutions and to provide access to unique activities beyond the boundaries of their own campuses. In the Collaborative's second full year of operations, we brought together students from the six inaugural sites for two distinct points of engagement to support their professional growth and build their leadership capacities.

In January 2022, the Collaborative hosted an interactive virtual workshop with students from the six partner campus programs facilitated by the LinkedIn Guys, an organization that aims to demystify the LinkedIn website and its assets for college students and staff.

Build Your Personal Network and Brand: A LinkedIn Workshop for Kessler Scholars provided students with targeted skills aimed at maximizing the potential of this online professional networking platform. In addition, the workshop focused on how to connect with others to support students' professional exploration and growth.

This workshop coincided with the launch of the Collaborative-wide Kessler Scholars and Alumni LinkedIn page, intended to promote opportunities for connection, engagement, and professional sharing by Kessler Scholars across the national network. With this workshop and this dedicated online space, the Collaborative aims to support students to tell their own professional narrative, identify and name their professional strengths, and learn insider tips about optimizing LinkedIn as a professional networking tool.



Tamam Waritu, First-Gen Speaker & Trainer

"We want students to know that they are part of a bigger network," says Kristen Glasener, National Director of Organizational Learning and Strategy for the Collaborative. "We know that first-generation students enter and, too often, leave college with narrower professional networks than peers who have at least one parent with an earned bachelor's degree."

The Collaborative brought Kessler Scholars across the six inaugural campus sites together again in March 2022 for a virtual leadership seminar, **First to Lead**, focused on their leadership development. The Collaborative hosted first-generation speaker and trainer Tamam Waritu, who challenged students to leverage the strengths they bring as emerging leaders because of their first-generation experience. Students also strategized about specific challenges they hoped to tackle or change at their institution, leading Kessler Scholars across this growing national network to recognize similar hurdles—and similar opportunities—as they navigate higher education.



Lubna Azmi, Johns Hopkins University Class of 2023

The leadership seminar also featured Lubna Azmi, a Kessler Scholars senior at Johns Hopkins University, who is studying International Studies and Sociology, and exemplifies the program's dedication to academic excellence and public service, on both institutional and community levels. Lubna, who introduced the workshop facilitator to her Kessler Scholars peers, also is co-founder of PWC Mutual Aid, an organization created to provide support for vulnerable communities at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the summer of 2022, she worked to expand mutual aid operations by recruiting new organizers and also worked on a family documentary.

Moving forward, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative continues to grow by developing projects that bring students together around shared priorities. Current and future workshops empower Kessler Scholars to contribute their voices to the program's evolution and to connect with its growing alumni base. ●



The Kessler Scholars Collaborative Aims for Collective Impact Across Campuses

The past year marked a period of extraordinary transition for the Kessler Scholars Collaborative. Our early work to meet that moment highlights our dedication to building meaningful support for new program development, creating authentic connections among professional staff, and establishing unparalleled student experiences.

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative formed in 2020 to support program development at six inaugural institutions: Cornell University, Johns Hopkins University, Queens College, St. Francis College, Syracuse University, and the University of Michigan, where the first Kessler Scholars Program was established. In spring 2022, ten

additional institutions were selected to join the Kessler Scholars Collaborative as a partner project of the American Talent Initiative (ATI), a coalition of leading public and private institutions committed to expanding college enrollment and success for low- and moderate-income college students.





Representatives from across the 16-institution Kessler Scholars Collaborative gather for the first time at the University of Michigan.

Further expansion of the Kessler Scholars Program increases impact of first-generation student support across a national network.

With support from the Wilpon Family Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies, these ATI member institutions were chosen from a competitive proposal process to launch new Kessler Scholars Programs in fall 2023: Bates College; Brown University; Centre College; Saint Mary's College (IN); The Ohio State University; University of California, Riverside; University of Dayton; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; University of Pittsburgh; and Washington University in St. Louis.

Each new partner institution will receive \$1 million to launch and build a Kessler Scholars Program. To support strong early program development, the Collaborative in July hosted an in-person convening of program staff and institutional leaders from all 16 Kessler Scholars partner campuses. From that robust initial engagement, the Collaborative is

supporting each newly-selected institution with planning and resources and coordinating early evaluation with Ithaka S+R, a co-managing partner of the American Talent Initiative. Beginning in fall 2023, and continuing over the next four years, these 10 new partner campuses will welcome cohorts of 20 to 40 students annually and, along with our earlier campus partners, work together to share learning and build toward common goals.

These new institutional partners have ambitious plans for the emerging Kessler Scholars Programs on their campuses. At Washington University in St. Louis, the Kessler Scholars Program will focus on support for first-generation students who care about social impact in STEM fields. At the University of Dayton, the Kessler Scholars Program will support successful two-year transfer outcomes for a cohort of regional students who begin their undergraduate studies at nearby Sinclair Community College. First-generation students from rural communities in North Carolina will be the focus of cohort-based support from the Kessler Scholars at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Collaborative Cornerstones

There are four cornerstones that guide the work of the Kessler Scholars Collaborative:



SUPPORT FIRST-GENERATION SUCCESS

Support students from matriculation through completion through a four-year comprehensive support program.



BUILD CAMPUS-BASED PROGRAM CAPACITY

Connect higher education leadership and staff across diverse institutions to strengthen individual and collective capacity to effectively support first-generation students.



SHARE BEST PRACTICES

Integrate scholarly research and evidence-informed practices to advance first-generation student success.



FACILITATE AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT

Foster meaningful connections among Kessler Scholars, alumni, and program staff across institutional boundaries.



Candice Powell with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill shares her experiences guiding student support.

The aims of the Collaborative in this expansion phase also are bold. Over the five-year term of this expansion development, we seek to achieve the following benchmarks:

- ✔ **a 70% four-year graduation rate and an 85% six-year graduation rate for students across the Collaborative**
- ✔ **a 90% participation rate for Kessler Scholars in at least one high-impact practice experience before graduation (e.g., study abroad, research experience, internship opportunity)**
- ✔ **a 90% rate of students reporting a strong sense of belonging to the Kessler Scholars Program at their campus**



Colleagues from Queens College, The Ohio State University, and Cornell University connect at the Collaborative's annual convening.

The Collaborative is guided by a collective impact approach to align our work with the goals of our campus partners and achieve shared aims to improve outcomes for first-generation students. Together, Kessler Scholars campus partners work toward a set of shared goals and objectives, facilitate learning across the network, elevate evidence-based practices, and collaborate on programming and activities that enhance the first-generation student experience. ●

Why Collective Impact?



ISOLATED IMPACT

Institutions work separately and compete against one another.

Evaluation attempts to isolate a particular college's impact.

Colleges are disconnected, each working to solve student success problems independently.



COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Institutions work toward the same goal and measure the same things.

Colleges are partners, aligning their work and collaborating to solve challenges.

Colleges actively coordinate their actions and share lessons learned.

10 new Kessler Scholars Programs will launch in fall 2023

Fostering Equity & Inclusion: Mattering Matters to College Success

The Kessler Scholars Program helps to promote greater diversity at our partner institutions by increasing representation on campus of students whose parents did not earn four-year degrees, students from lower-income backgrounds, and students from underrepresented racial and ethnic communities.

In the 2021-2022 academic year, 57 percent of students supported across six campuses with enrolled students self-identified as belonging to historically underrepresented racial or ethnic groups.



At Cornell University, Kessler Scholars Olivia Gurfinkiel, Jalen Jenkins, and Daphne Lucana connect at a program workshop.

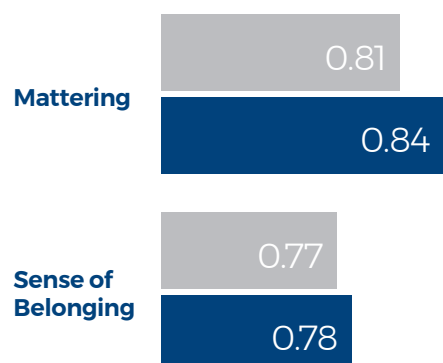
The Kessler Scholars Program model also recognizes that representation alone is not enough. True college access and success means that, once enrolled, students have the opportunity to build deep, meaningful connections with others, engage in a process of self-discovery, and to feel like they belong at their institution. Early evidence from an independent evaluation led by the Center for Education Design, Evaluation, and Research (CEDER) at the University of Michigan suggests that the Kessler Scholars Program is laying a strong foundation for first-generation students to thrive. Over the past academic year, Kessler Scholars across the Collaborative network reported increases in their feelings of mattering and their sense of belonging to both their individual institutions and the Kessler Scholars Program.

Sense of Belonging & Mattering

Scholars' average sense of belonging and mattering to their institution **increased** from the fall 2021 to the spring 2022 surveys. (n=227)

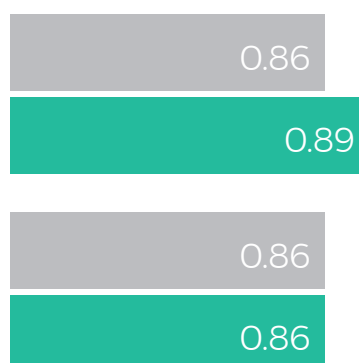
INSTITUTION

● Fall 2021 ● Spring 2022



KESSLER SCHOLARS PROGRAM

● Fall 2021 ● Spring 2022





Over the past year, Kessler Scholars returned to on-campus activities at Cornell University -- and across our network -- as COVID-19 restrictions eased.

Promoting equity and inclusion in this way requires that campus-based Kessler Scholars Programs have the flexibility to be responsive to local institutional contexts. Scholars are assured of tailored, meaningful support for success on their specific campus even as program leaders draw from evidence-based best practices in designing cohort-based programming and individual student guidance.

What does that look like on the ground?



Incoming Kessler Scholars at Queens College, a primarily commuter campus within the broader City University of New York (CUNY) system, can build strong connections within their cohort through a week-long summer engagement program focused on preparing for college academic expectations and navigating campus resources intended to support engagement with experiential activities such as research or internship opportunities. This immersive experience allows Kessler Scholars at Queens College to connect with one another and build a sense of community and connection even before their first classes are fully underway.



The Kessler Scholars Program at Syracuse University has recognized the importance of engaging family members in the college experience of first-generation students via financial support for families to travel to campus for the university's annual Family Weekend. Parents and other family engage in activities and events to signal their support for the new experiences Kessler Scholars encounter as undergraduates and to help build greater understanding of the challenging structures and expectations of college life.



At the University of Michigan, a robust, student-led Kessler Scholars Student Advisory Board gives Kessler Scholars an active role in shaping the activities of the program while also providing space for leadership development. The Kessler Scholars who led the student advisory board at U-M in the past year organized community service projects for fellow Scholars, hosted a trivia night to encourage social connection across cohorts, and built their own leadership capacity through participation in team- and trust-building activities at the university's outdoor learning classroom. ●

The combination of institution-specific opportunities and those available as part of the evolving nationwide network of Kessler Scholars provides participating students with a sense of belonging, as well as agency in their identity and path as Kessler Scholars. The result is an enriched four-year college experience that rises to meet the unique needs of first-generation students.

About the Kessler Scholars Collaborative:

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative operates as a direct initiative of the Judy and Fred Wilpon Family Foundation. Our offices are located in Ann Arbor, Michigan, home of the founding Kessler Scholars Program at the University of Michigan.

Support for the Collaborative and campus-based Kessler Scholars Programs is provided by the Wilpon Family Foundation and by Bloomberg Philanthropies (www.bloomberg.org).

About Our Team:



Shakima M. Clency, MS

National Director of Campus Partnerships and Student Success

As the National Director of Campus Partnerships and Student Success, Shakima Clency is responsible for developing and supporting sustainable institutional partnerships with leadership of campus-based Kessler Scholars Programs to support effective implementation of the Kessler Scholars Program model.



Gail Gibson, PhD

Executive Director

Gail Gibson leads the Kessler Scholars Collaborative, working with campus colleagues to imagine and build better systems of support for first-generation college students. Previously, Gail served as Director of the Kessler Scholars Program at the University of Michigan, where she designed and led the early development of this cohort-based student support initiative.



Kristen Glasener, PhD

National Director of Organizational Learning and Strategy

Kristen Glasener is responsible for managing and supporting the assessment of organizational learning across the national Collaborative network and overseeing the design, implementation, and assessment of campus-based Kessler Scholars Programs.

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