

2023-2024 ACADEMIC YEAR

Annual Report

Kessler Scholars Collaborative

BUILDING SUPPORT, COMMUNITY, AND SUCCESS
FOR FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS



KESSLER
SCHOLARS



Table of Contents

ABOUT OUR WORK	2
A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	5
KESSLER COLLABORATIVE GROWS COLLECTIVE IMPACT WITH TEN NEW SCHOOLS	7
BUILDING BELONGING FROM COAST TO COAST	13
OUR COMMUNITY: A YEAR IN REVIEW	18
SPRING COMMENCEMENT: MEET OUR GRADUATES	22
WHAT SETS THE KESSLER SCHOLARS COLLABORATIVE APART?	34
LOOKING AHEAD	38
CONNECT WITH US	43

About Our Work



Kessler Scholars from Washington University in St. Louis with their program lead Mark Figueroa

In the United States, as many as one-half of all students who enroll in college each year are the first in their family to pursue a four-year degree. Of these first-generation students, only 27% will go on to attain a bachelor's degree in four years compared to 60% of their continuing-generation peers. We're rewriting that story, helping first-generation college students leverage their own strengths—including their innate capacity for resilience, creativity, and courage—to succeed in college and beyond.

805

TOTAL KESSLER SCHOLARS ENROLLED
ACROSS 16 CAMPUSES IN 2023-2024



Scholars at St. Francis College (Brooklyn, NY) thrive as part of cohort-based community

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative supports and connects Kessler Scholars Programs across 16 institutions in the United States, transforming the college experience for students who are among the first in their families to pursue a four-year college degree and who come from lower-income households. The Kessler Scholars Program follows a cohort-based model. This means that, in addition to financial support, Kessler Scholars at each institution receive academic, professional, and personal guidance to help them not just *access* higher education but *thrive* across their undergraduate experience.

Our goals for this work draw on the collective impact model and aim for Kessler Scholars across our partner institutions to outperform national persistence and graduation rates for first-generation students, to feel a strong sense of belonging and mattering at their institution, and to explore and engage in high-impact practices shown to promote success outcomes and close equity gaps.

Our mission is personal. Across the Collaborative, campus-level staff share the experiences and identities of the students they support with 65% of staff identifying as first-generation college graduates and 60% of staff reporting belonging to historically-marginalized racial or ethnic groups. Campus staff leading this work know first-hand the challenges Kessler Scholars have and will face. Together, our Collaborative celebrates the diverse pathways that have led Kessler Scholars to college and ensures their voice guides our work.

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative is an initiative of the Judy and Fred Wilpon Family Foundation, working in partnership with Bloomberg Philanthropies and the American Talent Initiative. ●

Our partner campuses:

Bates College
Brown University
Centre College
Cornell University
Johns Hopkins University
Queens College
Saint Mary’s College
St. Francis College
Syracuse University
The Ohio State University

University of California,
Riverside
University of Dayton
University of Michigan
University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill
University of Pittsburgh
Washington University
in St. Louis



A Message from Our Executive Director

GAIL GIBSON, PHD

Across the past year, higher education has faced steep challenges to college access and success exemplified by further restrictions on race-based admissions practices and broad challenges in the public discourse to the value of a college degree and campus diversity efforts. These assaults underscore the importance of our project. Now more than ever, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative remains steadfast in its commitment to closing equity gaps and creating opportunities for first-generation and lower-income students to thrive.

The impact of the Kessler Scholars more than doubled its reach in the past year with new programs launching on 10 campuses. Together, the now 16 institutions that make up the Collaborative welcomed 400 first-year students and reached more than 800 scholars across all years of their college experience. This spring, the graduating class of 2024 includes the first graduating cohorts at three additional partner institutions—Johns Hopkins University, Queens College, and Syracuse University. I encourage you to read our spotlight features of a few of those graduates on the pages that follow.

Moving forward, we are committed to providing more opportunities for authentic connection for first-gen students across our growing national network. These efforts are exemplified by new partnerships with the University of Michigan Rackham Graduate School and FutureMap, two

initiatives that allow Kessler Scholars across institutions to participate in experiential learning opportunities together. Additionally, these initiatives will help us reach an important milestone: ensuring that 90% of Kessler Scholars can, and do, pursue at least one high-impact learning experience during their college journey. We also remain committed to pursuing continuous improvement through ongoing, real-time program evaluation and adjustment, and to amplifying what we are learning to support a broader understanding of how to build first-generation student success across higher education.

This Annual Report shares more about each of these efforts and demonstrates the profound impact of our work to date and our ongoing commitment to supporting first-generation student success. I invite you to read more about our work and to connect with us to talk further about this important project.

This work would not be possible without support from the Wilpon Family Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies. We also are grateful to dedicated program staff, committed institutional leadership, and innovative partners who lead the American Talent Initiative: the Aspen Institute and Ithaka S+R, which also serves as evaluation lead for this project. Our shared work proves the power of collaboration across institutional boundaries. In a time of systemic challenges, we are working together to open more doors for first-generation college students so they may walk through and achieve their dreams. ●



Gail Gibson, PhD

Executive Director, Kessler Scholars Collaborative

Kessler Scholars Collaborative Welcomes Ten New Schools



Emily Shipway, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Class of 2027

Growing Student Confidence

“I don’t belong here.”

That thought crept into Emily Shipway’s mind as she began her college experience this fall at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). Shipway is a Kessler Scholar and a first-generation college student from rural Roseboro, North Carolina, a small town with a population of just over 1,000 people.

Shipway is not alone. Many first-generation college students feel joy when they are accepted to college and loneliness once they

arrive on campus. Gaining access to college may be foundational to their dreams, but feeling they belong there is transformational. Once accepted to college, students need that feeling of belonging to support their long-term success.

When Candace Jones, the Kessler Scholars Program Coordinator at UNC, received the call from Shipway saying that she wanted to quit, she knew first-hand what Shipway was feeling. A former first-generation student herself, Jones understands the pressures first-generation students face as they navigate their college experience without support from home. She also knows the courage and strength that students like Shipway carry within them—assets they need only be reminded of to excel.

Now, Shipway is well into her first year at UNC and credits the Kessler Scholars Program for reminding her of her own strengths—and reminding her that she belongs. “I’ve loved the program,” Shipway says. “I don’t think I’ve gone a day without being grateful for it because without it I don’t think I would have lasted.”



*Kessler Scholars at The Ohio State University
with Program Manager Ramsey Pizza, MS*



*Kessler Scholars from Brown University
attend their first-year orientation*

In fall 2023, UNC was one of ten new partner campuses that welcomed their very first cohorts of Kessler Scholars as part of a partnership between the Kessler Scholars Collaborative and the American Talent Initiative, a coalition of leading public and private institutions committed to expanding college enrollment and success for low- and moderate-income college students. Just as Shipway found her footing through the support of her peers and the staff in her Kessler Scholars Program, more than 250 new Kessler Scholars across these ten institutions are receiving unparalleled support—and a sense of belonging—to begin their academic journey. They are among the 800 Kessler Scholars enrolled this year across a total of 16 institutions. From large public flagship universities to small liberal arts colleges to a community college transfer partnership, these ten new schools represent a wide range of institutions and reflect the diversity of first-generation college students across the country.



“Not only are all of our scholars first-generation college students from limited-income families, but they also come from rural backgrounds. With the intersection of these identities, our students come to campus with rich insight, experiences, and strengths that we will leverage throughout their involvement in the program...I am thrilled to support these students on their path to graduation.”

—Candace Jones, MA
Kessler Scholars Program Coordinator at UNC

“When you are a first-generation student, you are a history maker, a game changer, someone who has hope and seizes possibilities. The Kessler Scholars Program enshrines the purposeful spirit of first-generation students, and it’s a privilege to be a part of a community that is so meaningful and inspirational.”

—*Kia Fletcher, EdD*
Director, Academic Success Programs at OSU



A Growing Collaborative

Each of these new partners brings a wealth of institutional experience to the Kessler Scholars Collaborative and ambitious programming goals to support their unique student populations. The Kessler Scholars Program at the University of Dayton supports a cohort of regional students beginning their undergraduate studies at nearby Sinclair Community College, with the goal of facilitating a successful and seamless two-year transfer to the University of Dayton. At Bates College, Kessler Scholars attended an exclusive, personalized pre-orientation experience in the fall that included their families and celebrated their first-generation identity.

The University of California, Riverside is the first Hispanic Serving Institution to join the Kessler Scholars Collaborative with a program dedicated to celebrating and building upon first-generation students’

assets and strengths, allowing them to become leaders. “Even though I came from a start that was unstable and financially difficult, I still managed to get into college and into this program, proving that I am going to do better than how I started,” says Imani Carter, a Kessler Scholar at UCR studying mathematical sciences. “I can’t wait to be the student guide for future students in this program.”

As the first historically women’s college to join the Collaborative, Saint Mary’s College is also building a program focused on the unique strengths of their Kessler Scholars. “We are the only women’s college in the Collaborative—that is important,” says Donna Taylor-Schuman, Associate Director for Student Equity and First Gen at Saint Mary’s College. “Our mission is to empower our graduates to make change, to be leaders, and to feel supported at every stage of their lives. We want to enroll women who are smart, capable, and eager to grow. And, we want to help remove any barrier to their success, whether it’s financial or social.”



Kessler Scholars from UC Riverside receive t-shirts from their program coordinator Ebony Miles

“This inaugural class of Kessler Scholars embodies resilience and courage to chart a new path toward their dreams and to create a legacy that will shape the future Kessler Scholars experience for many classes to come!”

— *Hannah Colliver Stokes, MEd*
Director, Kessler Scholars at Centre College



Kessler Scholars at The Ohio State University comprise the largest cohort to date with 73 new scholars this inaugural year. Washington University in St. Louis welcomed a new cohort of Kessler Scholars who aspire to pursue science and engineering degrees to improve society. New Kessler Scholars Programs at Brown University, Centre College, and the University of Pittsburgh welcomed cohorts of their own, each receiving wrap-around services tailored to the context of the institution to enhance students' college experience.

Not Just Access but Belonging

As the Kessler Scholars Collaborative expands, so too does its impact. As we welcome these ten new schools into the program this year, they each bring their own care and expertise, fostering a deeper well of support for Kessler Scholars across the nation. Most of all, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative's core message is amplified, through their voices, to first-generation students across the country: you belong. ●

Building Belonging from Coast to Coast



Ten New Partner Institutions:

Bates

Location:
Lewiston, ME

NEW PARTNER

Students in first Kessler
Scholars cohort:

34

Total number of entering first-year students:

509

First-generation students
in entering class:

12%



BROWN

Location:
Providence, RI

NEW PARTNER

Students in first Kessler
Scholars cohort:

18

Total number of entering
first-year students:

1,699

First-generation students
in entering class:

15%



CENTRE
COLLEGE

Location:
Danville, KY

NEW PARTNER

Students in first Kessler
Scholars cohort:

19

Total number of entering
first-year students:

372

First-generation students
in entering class:

24%



Saint Mary's
College
NOTRE DAME, IN

Location:
Notre Dame, IN

NEW PARTNER

Students in first Kessler
Scholars cohort:

19

Total number of entering
first-year students:

434

First-generation students
in entering class:

28%



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Location:
Columbus, OH

NEW PARTNER

Students in first Kessler
Scholars cohort:

73

Total number of entering
first-year students:

7,983

First-generation students
in entering class:

22%



Location:
Riverside, CA

NEW PARTNER

Students in first Kessler
Scholars cohort:

25

Total number of entering
first-year students:

5,525

First-generation students
in entering class:

49%



University
of Dayton

Location:
Dayton, OH

NEW PARTNER

Students in first Kessler
Scholars cohort:

17

Total number of entering
first-year students:

1,893

First-generation students
in entering class:

9%



THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

Location:
Chapel Hill, NC

NEW PARTNER

Students in first Kessler
Scholars cohort:

17

Total number of entering
first-year students:

5,602

First-generation students
in entering class:

20%



University of
Pittsburgh

Location:
Pittsburgh, PA

NEW PARTNER

Students in first Kessler
Scholars cohort:

20

Total number of entering
first-year students:

4,844

First-generation students
in entering class:

17%



Location:
St. Louis, MO

NEW PARTNER

Students in first Kessler
Scholars cohort:

20

Total number of entering
first-year students:

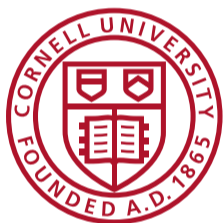
1,832

First-generation students
in entering class:

17%



Six Established Programs:



Cornell University

Location:
Ithaca, NY

EXISTING PARTNER

Program
launch year

2019

Students in 2023-2024
Kessler Scholars cohort:

94



JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY

Location:
Baltimore, MD

EXISTING PARTNER

Program
launch year

2020

Students in 2023-2024
Kessler Scholars cohort:

63



Location:
Queens, NY

EXISTING PARTNER

Program
launch year

2020

Students in 2023-2024
Kessler Scholars cohort:

67



Location:
Brooklyn, NY

EXISTING PARTNER

Program
launch year

2015

Students in 2023-2024
Kessler Scholars cohort:

80



Location:
Syracuse, NY

EXISTING PARTNER

Program
launch year

2020

Students in 2023-2024
Kessler Scholars cohort:

67



Location:
Ann Arbor, MI

EXISTING PARTNER

Program
launch year

2008

Students in 2023-2024
Kessler Scholars cohort:

173

Our Community: A Year in Review



Representatives from all partner campuses, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative, Ithaca S+R, the Aspen Institute, the Wilpon Family Foundation, and Bloomberg Philanthropies gathered in summer 2023 at Cornell University

Summer Convening

Ahead of the current academic year, we celebrated our annual Summer Convening of Kessler Scholars partner institutions at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, bringing together leadership and staff from our 16 campuses to connect with one another and support the growth and advancement of first-generation students. The energizing and inspiring event featured a student panel led by Kessler Scholars from Cornell and Syracuse and a keynote address by Dr. Tia Brown McNair, Vice President in the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Student Success at the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), who challenged Kessler Scholars program leaders to deliberately seek ways to make their campuses welcoming and supportive spaces for

students. This gathering highlighted the work of each campus-based Kessler Scholars Program and how they are transforming the college experience for scholars, and it allowed program leaders to share plans and set goals for the academic year ahead. Planning is already under way for the 2024 Summer Convening, to be held at the University of Pittsburgh.



April Belback, DEd, Associate Vice Provost for Student Success and Advising from the University of Pittsburgh, shares her expertise

Monthly Learning Sessions

Every month, our campus partners meet virtually to share best practices, discuss what's working at their institutions, and plan strategies to meet shared goals around promoting student sense of belonging, year-to-year persistence, and degree completion. Across the academic year, these regular points of connection among campus teams reinforced the Kessler Scholars Collaborative as a productive and engaged community of practice, one focused on sharing knowledge and expertise to improve the college experience and outcomes for all Kessler Scholars. Campus partners have led learning sessions focused on topics such as engaging family members and supporting career exploration to advance first-gen student success, and they have worked together to apply evaluation findings toward continuous program improvement.



Kessler Scholars at Centre College after their coin ceremony (top left). Trey Thomas-Ward, University of Dayton Class of 2027, receives his coin from Kristen Glasener, PhD, National Director of Organizational Learning and Strategy (right). Coins from UC Riverside (bottom left).

Fall Welcome Ceremonies

During the fall semester, our ten new partners each welcomed their first Kessler Scholars cohort to campus with a Kessler Scholars Coin Ceremony. Every incoming Kessler Scholar receives a coin marked with a distinct landmark at their campus as a symbol of community and a signal of their membership to the Kessler Scholars Program on their campus and to the broader Collaborative. This tradition, first established at the University of Michigan, has evolved and expanded along with the Kessler Scholars Program, with each school adding their own significance to the story of the coin, reinforcing for scholars their sense of belonging to the Kessler Scholars Program and broader campus community.



*Gorick Ng, Career expert and author of
The Unspoken Rules*



Arabi Hassan, Founder of First Gen Empower

First-Generation College Celebration Week

First-Generation College Celebration Day is a national initiative held annually on November 8th and has steadily grown to a week-long celebration at many campuses to highlight their own first-generation community and support their success. This year, all 16 partners celebrated with unique activities tailored to their campus communities. The Collaborative also hosted a series of cross-site events intended to build connections for current Kessler Scholars across campus boundaries. These Collaborative-led events featured guest speakers Arabi Hassan, founder of First Gen Empower, and Gorick Ng, author of *The Unspoken Rules*. A panel of Kessler Scholars alumni also contributed to this workshop series, sharing with current scholars how they found career paths they are passionate about and navigated new life transitions. ●

Spring Commencement: Meet Our Graduates

A Growing Community of Kessler Scholars Alumni

The Kessler Scholars graduating cohorts for 2024 began their college journey during a time of unprecedented upheaval. Across the country, these scholars entered college in the fall of 2020, right at the height of a global pandemic. Instead of exploring their campuses on foot, they logged into countless Zoom classes. Rather than meeting fellow Kessler Scholars in person, they made what connections they could online. Yet, in true first-generation spirit, the Kessler Scholars graduates of 2024 met these challenges head-on, demonstrating their resilience and excellence. The Kessler Scholars featured in these pages navigated this period of uncertainty with the guidance and support of their Kessler Scholars Programs—at Queens College, Syracuse University, and Johns Hopkins University, respectively—all of which launched that same year. As some of the first Kessler Scholars to experience newly-launched programs at their schools, they left an indelible mark, serving as trailblazers for those who come after them.

They join a robust community of Kessler Scholars Alumni across the country who continue to leave their mark on the world. We invite you to read the stories of these graduates and catch up with one of our alumni to learn how they are forging new paths and giving back to their communities. ●



CLASS OF 2024

Luca Xia

Queens College
Major: Communication Sciences
and Disorders, BA
Minor: Business and Liberal Arts

What has the Kessler Scholars Program meant to you?

The Kessler Scholars Program, especially at Queens College, is a community for me. Queens College is great, but being a commuter school, it doesn't always give me a sense of belonging. With the Kessler Scholars Program, I have friends who share the same goals as me and professors who help me develop my skills and interests in terms of career, academics, and more. The word “community” really summarizes what Kessler Scholars means for me. It extends beyond friendship—it extends to social, academic, and personal development. Kessler made me feel like I belong at Queens College.

What are your plans for after graduation?

I want to become a Speech-Language Pathologist. I really want to make a difference for kids who stutter. In my Asian community,

speech pathology is not widely known, and being a first-generation college student, my family has no idea what speech pathology is. In the field, there's not a lot of male representation. There's also not a lot of Asian representation. I'm one of few Asian and male classmates in my courses. It doesn't push me away. It makes me want to go into speech pathology even more because I want to represent these communities.

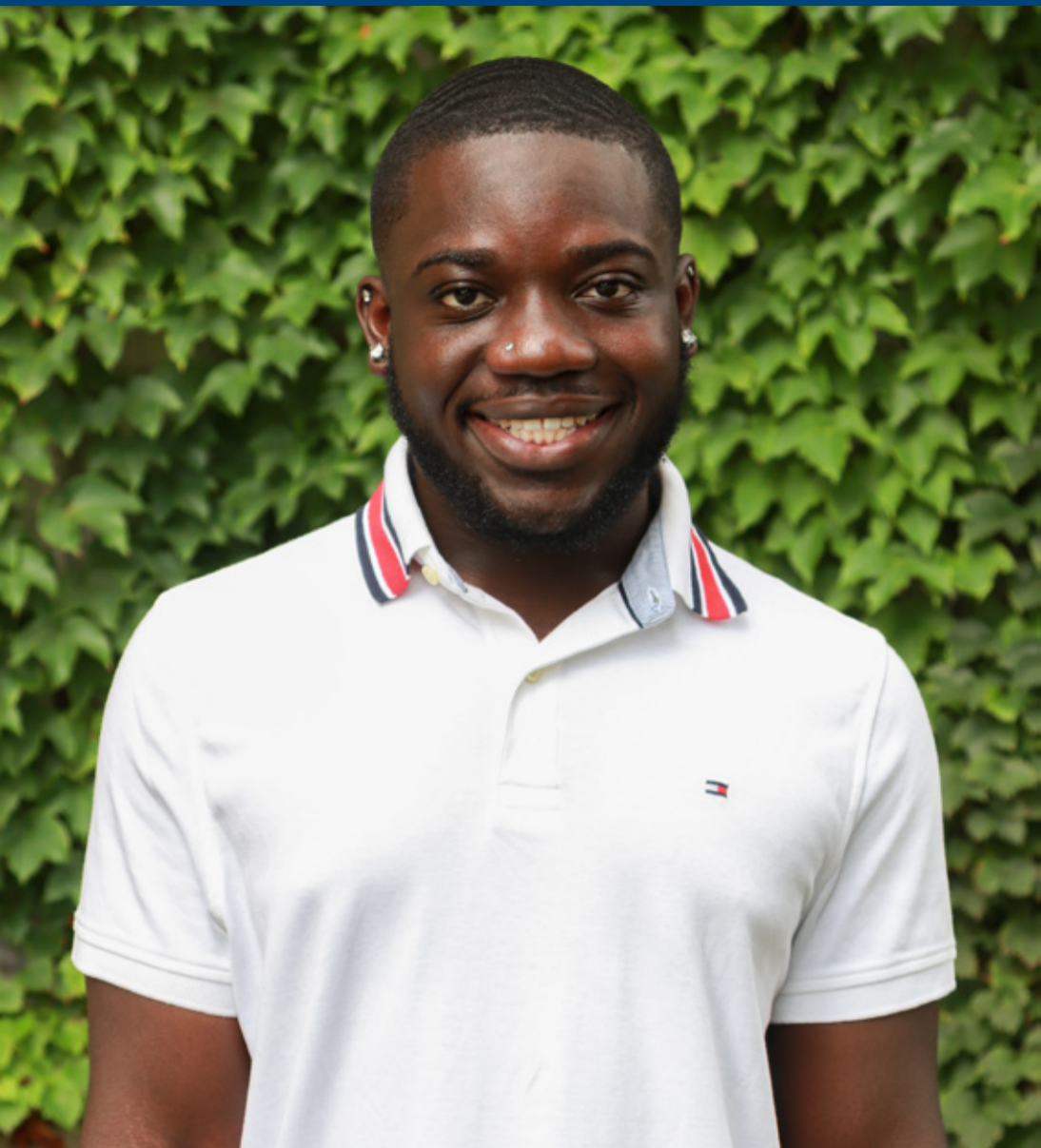
What are you passionate about?

My true passion is music. I discovered my passion for music, especially piano, last year. I took a piano class, and it was the best class I ever took in my whole life. It's a very rewarding experience. I'm still practicing piano and still taking lessons from my teachers, and will continue after graduation.

What advice do you have for future Kessler Scholars?

Study something you're passionate about. I always have friends majoring in something that can make them money. I think that's a reasonable reason, but it's not a *great* reason. You're spending four years pursuing something that, in the end, yes, will give you money, but at what cost? Four years of your best time.

And: focus on more than academics. There's so much more outside of academics in college. The beauty of college is you can explore anything you want. Queens College has more than 100 clubs. I learned so much more about myself in clubs than in classes. In clubs, you take on leadership opportunities. It builds your interpersonal skills. In class, you learn knowledge, but in clubs, you learn how to become a person. ●



CLASS OF 2024

Kelvin Kwaku Boakye

Syracuse University

Major: Public Health

*Concentration in Community
Health Education*

What has the Kessler Scholars Program meant to you? What has the experience been like?

In high school, I received a letter that said I'd been selected to be a Kessler Scholar. There was nothing on the Syracuse University website yet about being Kessler Scholars because we were the inaugural class. My first encounter with Kessler was the summer before my freshman year, and the cohort all met each other online. I was nervous going into college. When we had that first Zoom, it made it all a little bit easier. Then, when we had our first group meeting after school started, I remember being really excited because it was nice having a community, being able to say, "oh, I know her," or "I know him." My best friend right now, I met her at that first Zoom. She's from Ghana like me, and she's studying public health. What are the odds?

Are there any challenges you've faced, and how have you overcome them?

I'm such a different person than I used to be. I was always super nervous. Freshman year was during the height of the pandemic, so there were no clubs, no organizations, no events that you could go to. Everything was online. I feel like sophomore year was my second freshman year, but I was even more nervous because we were starting to go back to doing things in person, and I felt like, *where did people get all these friends from?* People were starting to join clubs, and I was just sitting in my room—a single—feeling like I didn't know what to do. I overcame it by putting myself out there. I joined the step team, and I started going out more to events. But, at the end of sophomore year, I realized I was doing a lot. I had an awakening and asked myself, “do I like what I'm doing?” Now as a senior, I can say that every single thing that I'm doing, I enjoy. I'm the vice president for step. I'm on the African Student Union as a Student Liaison. I joined the Kessler Scholars Student Advisory Board (KSAB) last year. I work as a Peer Educator, and I do research. Now I'm very comfortable with everything that I'm doing.

What are your plans for after graduation?

I'm really passionate about sexual health and LGBTQ+ health. I used to be pre-med until I realized I didn't like needles or blood. But, I liked the education aspect of health. I'm really interested in HIV awareness and prevention. After college, I'm going to get my Masters in Public Health. I'm actively applying for MPH programs that start in Fall 2024. My big dream is to build an HIV clinic. I want to employ doctors and nurses, but I also want to have HIV educators on staff to build programming, like after school programs. Education and

awareness is so important, especially for black boys who identify as LGBTQ+. We just don't learn enough, and that's the problem.

After graduation, I also really want to celebrate. Because of the pandemic, I didn't have a prom, and I didn't have a high school graduation, so my college graduation means a lot. I'm graduating college!

What advice do you have for future Kessler Scholars?

Do everything that you think you want to do. Just try it. It's better to say "that didn't work out" than to think "what if?" I don't have any regrets. I tried things. Some worked, some didn't.

Also, go abroad. The Kessler Scholars Program at Syracuse funded my study abroad in Madrid, Spain this past summer, and I had so much fun. I lived in a hotel with other study abroad students from other countries. Everything was close and accessible. I really did enjoy my time there, and I learned so much about myself in Spain. My junior year was hard. So, I took time that summer abroad to learn who I was. In Madrid, I liked that there were a lot of themed villages. One town was African with African food and shops. There was a whole LGBTQ+ district and it was so welcoming. I really do recommend the experience of going abroad and specifically going to Madrid. I would go back. ●



CLASS OF 2024

Alex Solis

Johns Hopkins University

*Major: Biophysics and Medicine,
Science and Humanities with
a concentration in Latin
American Studies*

*Minor: Spanish for the
Professions in Medicine*

What has the Kessler Scholars Program meant to you? What has the experience been like?

Being a Kessler Scholar here at Hopkins has truly enriched my experience, not only by allowing me to form a community with like-minded individuals who have the greater Baltimore community at the forefront of their minds, but also through providing truly beneficial guidance in navigating undergrad as a first-gen student, as well as offering professional development to prepare me as I begin to transition to life beyond campus.

Have you participated in any experiential opportunities during college? What was that like?

I was able to conduct research during my junior year under one of the Bloomberg Distinguished Professors in the Biophysics Department,

and I felt like it really opened my eyes to learning beyond the classroom. It was refreshing to be able to actually analyze phenomena that I was learning about in my course, seeing it applied first-hand, and being able to make my own interpretations of what lay before me as a result.

This was a mindset that I carried with me as I interned in the Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine Center at Johns Hopkins Medicine, working underneath one of the practicing scientists there, and this is where I think my interest in research skyrocketed. What was really special to me about this experience was the immersive nature that was required of me, allowing me to get an insider perspective on the nitty-gritty that is full-time research. All-in-all, I feel like I definitely grew from each experience, adopting a more intentional and critical mindset after the fact that I apply in my day-to-day life.

What are your plans for after graduation?

The short and sweet answer is med school but there's more to it than that. The plan as of now is to take a single gap year before med school, with the goal being to come out on the other side more prepared mentally and emotionally for what I'll face in med school. Right now, I'm in the process of preparing to apply to post-bac programs, looking at research and masters programs across the country, and trying to decide what would be the best fit for me. After that year, I hope to transition into med school, following that path until I reach my end goal, which is (tentatively) to become a surgeon!

What advice do you have for new and future Kessler Scholars?

The one thing that is said time and time again, and that I hope to echo, is to ask for help. Always ask, unabashedly ask, ask with intention. Being the first in your family to go to college is terrifying, but more than anything, it's exciting! And the best way to embrace this new leap is to ask those around you for help and guidance. I feel like there are so many resources that you don't really know about as you enter college [or] until it's too late and the only way to mitigate that is to reach out to friends, faculty, and staff to try and put your best foot forward in this next chapter for you and your family. ●



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Libby Willkomm

Cornell University,

Class of 2023

Major: Industrial and

Labor Relations

Minor: Inequality Studies

What have you been up to since you graduated?

I work for the Elks National Foundation, the charitable arm of the Elks Fraternal Organization. In June, I started a year-long fellowship in their scholarship department. My role is predominantly scholar programming where I plan fun activities for our scholars. Being a recent graduate and Kessler Scholar helps me be better at my job. I see both the student perspective and the scholarship provider perspective. I moved to Chicago for this role, and I love it. It's been so fun to live in a big city for the first time in my life. I love exploring Chicago. Last summer, I spent a lot of time at the beach and walking around the parks.

Where would you like to see yourself in five years?

Being a peer mentor was the most transformative part of my Kessler

experience. It informed much of what I want to do in the future. I see myself going to grad school in the next couple of years. What I'd really love to do is work at a higher education institution in student affairs or advising, and ultimately get my masters in higher education. I'd like to work in some kind of student advising or student affairs role.

I also really love being in the nonprofit world, so I could see myself working in workforce development. I believe that having financially sustainable, fair, and fulfilling employment is a human right. I care a lot about supporting people of all identities, especially historically-excluded identities, through career transitions, underemployment, and unemployment. I could see myself working at a nonprofit institution doing case management, helping people find jobs, or facilitating job training.

Looking back, do you have a favorite memory from your time in the Kessler Scholars Program?

One of my favorite Kessler anecdotes was during my second month at Cornell when we had our Kessler inaugural dinner. It was fancy. I knew the donors would be there and everyone was dressed up. I was seated next to the president of Cornell, and I thought to myself, "this is absurd. I just got here. I'm just a freshman." She asked me what she could do to reach more first-generation students and was genuinely interested in me and my experience. The wildest moment though was at the end when everyone linked arms and sang the alma mater. On one side of me, I had the president of Cornell, and on the other side, I had Fred Wilpon. We were singing together, and I thought to myself "how is this my life?" It was one of my most memorable moments at Cornell.

Another great memory was from when I started studying abroad in Amsterdam. I didn't know many people, and another person in the program, Lubna, asked if a group of us wanted to go to France for the weekend. We were hiking the alps together and Lubna was taking photos. I was wearing my Kessler Scholars t-shirt. Lubna stopped at one point and asked, "wait, are you a Kessler Scholar? I'm a Kessler Scholar too!" It turned out she was a Kessler Scholar from Johns Hopkins University (Lubna Azmi, Class of 2023). When we realized we were both part of the Kessler Scholars program, it was such a "small world" moment. It was amazing.

What advice do you have for future Kessler Scholars?

You can do anything. A lot of students see an opportunity and think "that isn't for me. I don't have the experience or connections or money." There is always a way. You have to advocate for yourself. Sometimes, it's unfair because first-generation college students have to advocate for themselves so much more than other students, but that's why we're so resilient. You belong in college as much as anyone else does, even more maybe because you've worked harder to get to where you are. You might have to get creative, but you really can do anything you set your mind to: you can study abroad, apply for prestigious internships, or apply to graduate school. ●

What Sets the Kessler Scholars Collaborative Apart?

While colleges and universities across the country develop programming for student support, few are built within the framework of a multi-institutional collaborative. The Kessler Scholars Collaborative leverages the unique experiences and knowledge of each institution to reach shared goals and build community. The Collaborative also centers student voice in decision making, affirming the invaluable insights of first-generation students.

Collective Impact

Just as each Kessler Scholars Program across the country brings together its own talented cohort of first-generation students, fostering collective peer support, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative is founded on the idea that institutions, too, are stronger when they work together.



ISOLATED IMPACT

- Colleges work separately, competing against one another.
- Evaluation is focused on isolating one particular college's impact.
- Colleges are disconnected, each working to solve student success problems on their own.



COLLECTIVE IMPACT

- Colleges are partners, aligning their work to meet shared goals.
- Colleges measure the same things, evaluating their impact as a group.
- Colleges actively coordinate their actions, collaborating to solve challenges together and share lessons learned.

Community of Practice

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative brings all 16 of our partner campuses together to meet shared goals, build community, and eliminate barriers to ensure the success of first-generation students across the country. Since the launch of the very first Kessler Scholars Program, community support—whether program staff to scholar, or peer to peer—has always been a cornerstone of our work. As our reach has broadened, so too has our dedication to creating a Collaborative centered around a community of practice framework.

How we work together



PUT FIRST-GEN FIRST

We support students from matriculation to graduation through a four-year comprehensive support program that incorporates scholars' feedback and celebrates their strengths.



BUILD CAPACITY

We connect higher education leadership and staff across diverse institutions to amplify the impact of each program and increase their capacity to effectively support scholars.



SHARE BEST PRACTICES

We integrate scholarly research and evidence-based practices to advance first-generation student success.



CREATE COMMUNITY

We foster meaningful connections among Kessler Scholars, alumni, and among program staff across institutions, building a robust community of support that doesn't end when scholars graduate.

Centralized Support and Evaluation

One of the greatest strengths of the Kessler Scholars Collaborative is our dedication to bolstering support networks, not just for our scholars, but among our partner institutions as well. Over the past year, each of our ten new schools received structured guidance and resources to directly support the campus-level development of their Kessler Scholars Program, including onboarding support for new staff and program tools developed with the shared knowledge of the Collaborative. Through monthly learning sessions, partner campuses continue to work together to set shared goals, fortify support structures across the Collaborative, and identify meaningful strategies for continued learning and program evaluation.

Through centralized, culturally-responsive evaluation—led by Ithaka S+R—the Collaborative continues to ask meaningful questions about the first-generation college student experience and develop evidence-based methods for promoting student success. What we’re learning through shared evaluation helps us build a stronger Collaborative and serves as a model for every higher education institution across the country seeking to use data-driven assessment to guide continuous improvement in student success outcomes.

Early outcomes point to the promise of our work

The first cohort of Kessler Scholars at the program’s founding institution, the University of Michigan, marked a four-year completion rate of 83% (spring 2021) and a six-year completion rate of 94% (spring 2023).

Program Satisfaction

96%

Fall 2023 baseline survey of all entering first-year students showed that 96% of incoming students reported that the Kessler Scholars program met or exceeded their expectations

93%

Spring 2023 survey data from enrolled Kessler Scholars showed that 93% of Kessler Scholars agree or strongly agree that people in the program support their needs

94%

Spring 2023 survey data from enrolled Kessler Scholars showed that 94% of students say support from the Kessler Scholars Program has met or exceeded their expectations

Sense of Belonging

Research shows that a student’s feelings of belonging are a key predictor of their college success. The Kessler Scholars Program aims to support retention and degree completion by ensuring that students feel a strong sense of belonging and connection to the campus experience across their entire college journey. External evaluation points to the positive impact of the Kessler Scholars Program on important measures like sense of belonging.

86%

of Kessler Scholars agree or strongly agree that they feel they belong at their institution.

92%

of Kessler Scholars agree or strongly agree that someone in the program cares about them.

Looking Ahead: Connecting Scholars Across Sites



Student panel at the 2023 Summer Convening joined by Kessler Scholars Collaborative staff and program founder Fred Wilpon

Creating High-Impact Learning Opportunities

Any higher education institution can draw together a cohort of first-generation students, and many do. What makes the Kessler Scholars unique is our focus on keeping first-generation students together, fostering meaningful community and mentorship across all four years of their college experience. The Collaborative is dedicated to the success of all scholars and we use empirical research to drive our decisions around our programming and practices.

Research shows that experiential learning opportunities, like participating in study abroad, internships, or research programs, improve college success outcomes for first-generation college students. We aim to ensure 90% of all Kessler Scholars will participate in at least one of these high-impact practices. To help reach this goal, the Collaborative launched two new partnerships in 2023-2024 to connect Kessler Scholars with unique and tailored learning opportunities across the country.

Summer Research Opportunity Program

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative has partnered with the University of Michigan's Rackham Graduate School through its Summer Research Opportunity Program (SROP) for a pilot initiative to provide undergraduate research opportunities, professional development, community, and mentorship to Kessler Scholars



“SROP offers a unique opportunity to reduce systemic barriers and increase student access to a valuable high-impact educational practice, undergraduate research. Through this transformative experience, Kessler Scholars can continue to build their social networks while gaining personal and professional experiences to enhance their preparation for continued success in college and beyond.”

—*Shakima M. Clency, PhD, National Director of Campus Partnerships and Student Success for the Kessler Scholars Collaborative*

across the nation. The initiative will provide full support for up to five Kessler Scholars from the Collaborative's network for each of the next three summers. These scholars will function as a cohort within a cohort, receiving valuable research opportunities with U-M faculty in addition to summer stipends, travel allowances, housing, programmatic support, networking opportunities, community, mentorship, and academic coaching. Scholars will further deepen their support network by connecting with Kessler Scholars at the University of Michigan, where the program was founded. This summer, four Kessler Scholars—one each from Cornell University, Queens College, St. Francis College, and Syracuse University—will become the first mini-cohort to participate in this new opportunity.

FutureMap

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative has also partnered with FutureMap, an organization focused on serving first-generation college students in their college-to-career transition. In early 2024, more than 70 students from across our partner institutions joined together as a mini cohort of scholars to participate in a curated career exploration experience. Through a three-part series of seminars tailored to support Kessler Scholars, students developed skills to guide them in reaching their personal and professional aspirations. They learned in community with one another, forging meaningful connections with Kessler Scholars at other institutions who they might not otherwise have the opportunity to meet. First-generation students face unique challenges after graduation as they transition to the professional workforce or seek graduate education. This new initiative anticipates these challenges, supporting scholars as they

navigate the unwritten rules of the professional workforce and continued education.

Building Student Leaders through the Collaborative Student Leadership Board

Since our inception, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative has recognized the crucial role that student voice serves in programming by gathering—and valuing—input from students across the Collaborative. As we welcomed 10 new partner institutions this year, the Collaborative also launched a Student Leadership Board. Comprised of student representatives from across all 16 partner institutions, this board provided valuable insights based on their own experiences, driving decision making to support scholar engagement and connection across the Collaborative.

This spring, members of the Collaborative Student Leadership Board



*Ashleigh Kilgore and Daniela Caisaguano
at the 11th Annual First Gen Summit*

“It was really inspiring to hear everyone’s different stories and backgrounds and how they got to where they are today. The resilience of first-generation students was really highlighted throughout this summit, and it was really amazing to experience that.”

—Ashleigh Kilgore, University of Michigan

“I don’t think I’ve ever been in a room surrounded by people with such a similar background; it was refreshing. Oftentimes there are things I don’t talk about, guilt and familial pressures to name a few, and the summit provided a space to share and highlight our experiences while simultaneously learning about others.”

—*Daniela Caisaguano, Cornell University*

hosted a series of virtual, cross-site events to connect Kessler Scholars across campus boundaries as they virtually explored topics ranging from study habits to managing failure.

These students serve not only as leaders for the institutions but as leaders across the national first-generation community too. In fall 2023, two Kessler Scholars—Ashleigh Kilgore from the University of Michigan and Daniela Caisaguano from Cornell University—represented the Collaborative by participating in the 11th Annual First Gen Summit where the Collaborative’s own Shakima Clency served as a keynote speaker. Both Kessler Scholars shared their expertise and learned from that of others, deepening national conversations around first-generation student support and generating positive new ideas for the future of the Collaborative. ●

Connect with Us

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative operates as a direct initiative of the Judy and Fred Wilpon Family Foundation. Support for the Collaborative and campus-based Kessler Scholars Programs is provided by the Wilpon Family Foundation and by Bloomberg Philanthropies (Bloomberg.org).

Our Team



Shakima M. Clency, PhD

National Director of Campus Partnerships and Student Success

sclency@kesslerscholars.org



Gail Gibson, PhD

Executive Director

ggibson@kesslerscholars.org



Kristen Glasener, PhD

National Director of Organizational Learning and Strategy

kglasener@kesslerscholars.org



Perla Salazar-Rangel, MEd

Project Coordinator

psalazarrangel@kesslerscholars.org

KESSLER
SCHOLARS



www.kesslerscholars.org
2723 S. State Street, Suite 150
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
734-600-0360