



# Leading Change

KESSLER SCHOLARS COLLABORATIVE  
2025-2026 ANNUAL REPORT

**KESSLER**  
SCHOLARS



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# A Message from Our Director



Meaningful change in higher education plays out over long arcs and requires sustained commitment. That makes it especially rewarding to share this year's annual report for the Kessler Scholars Collaborative, which offers a moment to reflect on our early years of impact and to look ahead to the next phase of our shared effort to advance first-generation, limited-income (FGLI) student success.

This fall, we begin an academic year in which all of our campus partners will collectively celebrate graduating Kessler Scholars for the first time—an exciting moment for the Collaborative and for the 10 campus programs that launched in fall 2023 in partnership with the American Talent Initiative (ATI). Those graduating cohorts will mark an important milestone for the Collaborative, one that underscores the power of our national network and the depth of our commitment to expand college access and opportunity for FGLI students.

Across the academic year ahead, we'll see more than 1,400 Kessler Scholars enrolled across our diverse campus partners and more than 700 alumni building lives and careers beyond college. Since the Collaborative's launch in 2020, Kessler Scholars have demonstrated strong outcomes on core measures of persistence and degree completion, including a 74 percent four-year graduation rate for cohorts that entered in 2021—24 points above the national average for first-generation students.

The experiences of these Kessler Scholars reflect the power of a comprehensive, cohort-based approach that connects students to financial support, proactive advising, and opportunities that expand their sense of what is possible. As a result, 82% of last spring's graduating Kessler Scholars participated in at least one high-impact experience such as research, an internship, or study abroad. Across the Collaborative, students also continued to build meaningful relationships through peer mentoring, leadership opportunities, and connections with fellow Kessler Scholars beyond their home campuses.

At the same time, the Collaborative deepened its impact as a maturing and generative community of practice. Campus partners are learning from one another, sharing innovations, and contributing to a broader national conversation about how colleges and universities can better support first-gen students. The work of the Collaborative reaches beyond individual programs and campuses to build shared knowledge about what effective support can look like and create opportunities for that knowledge to inform practice more broadly.

Together, these strands of the work—supporting students, strengthening campus practices, and sharing what we learn—are at the heart of how the Collaborative is leading change. This annual report captures just some of the ways that change plays out in the lives of students and on Kessler Scholars partner campuses.

For making this possible, and for committing to seeing this effort through over time, we are grateful to Kessler Scholars and alumni, campus partners, and our funding partners, the Judy and Fred Wilpon Family Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies. We look forward to building on our strong early years and to all that comes next.

With gratitude and appreciation,

Gail Gibson  
*Executive Director*

# 2025-2026 At a Glance

The 2025-2026 academic year brought the Kessler Scholars Collaborative's strongest outcomes to date. Across our campus partners, our first-to-second year retention rates climbed, our graduation data continued to outpace national benchmarks, and students reported the highest program satisfaction levels in the Collaborative's history.

These results demonstrate what happens when first-generation, limited-income students are connected to sustained, evidence-based support and to each other. Since the launch of the Collaborative in 2020, the pattern is clear. The four-year comprehensive model provided by the Kessler Scholars Program is having a transformative impact on first-generation student success, and the evidence keeps getting stronger. ●

**96%**

of first-year Kessler Scholars who started their college journey in 2024 returned for their second year—**up from 94% in the prior year.**

**74%**

four-year graduation rate for Kessler Scholars who entered college in 2021, **24 percentage points above the national average** for first-generation students.

**1,200+**

Kessler Scholars actively enrolled across **our national network.**

**92%**

of enrolled Kessler Scholars rated their program experience as **good or excellent.**

**130+**

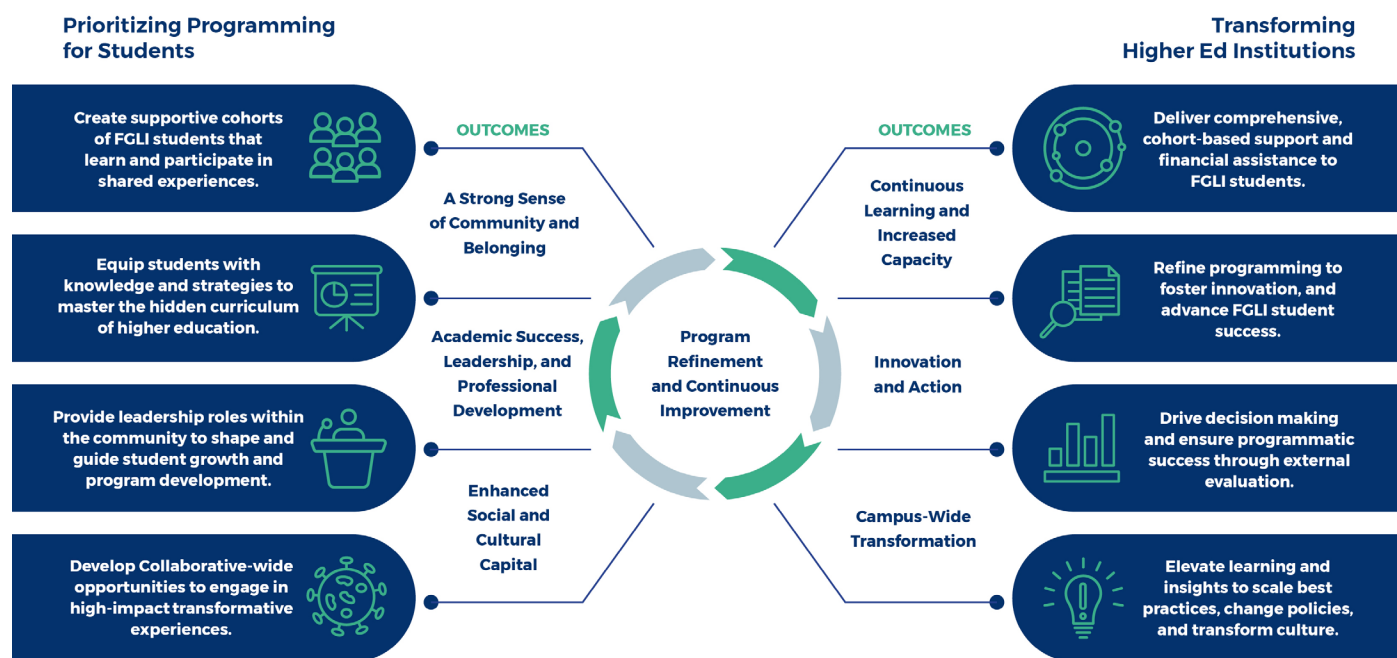
new graduates joined our growing alumni network of **more than 700 Kessler Scholars.**

# Theory of Change

## Theory of Change

First-generation college students—those whose parents did not earn bachelor’s degrees—demonstrate remarkable resilience in pursuing higher education, yet they face greater obstacles to degree completion than their continuing-generation peers. Just half of first-generation students attain their degrees within four-years,

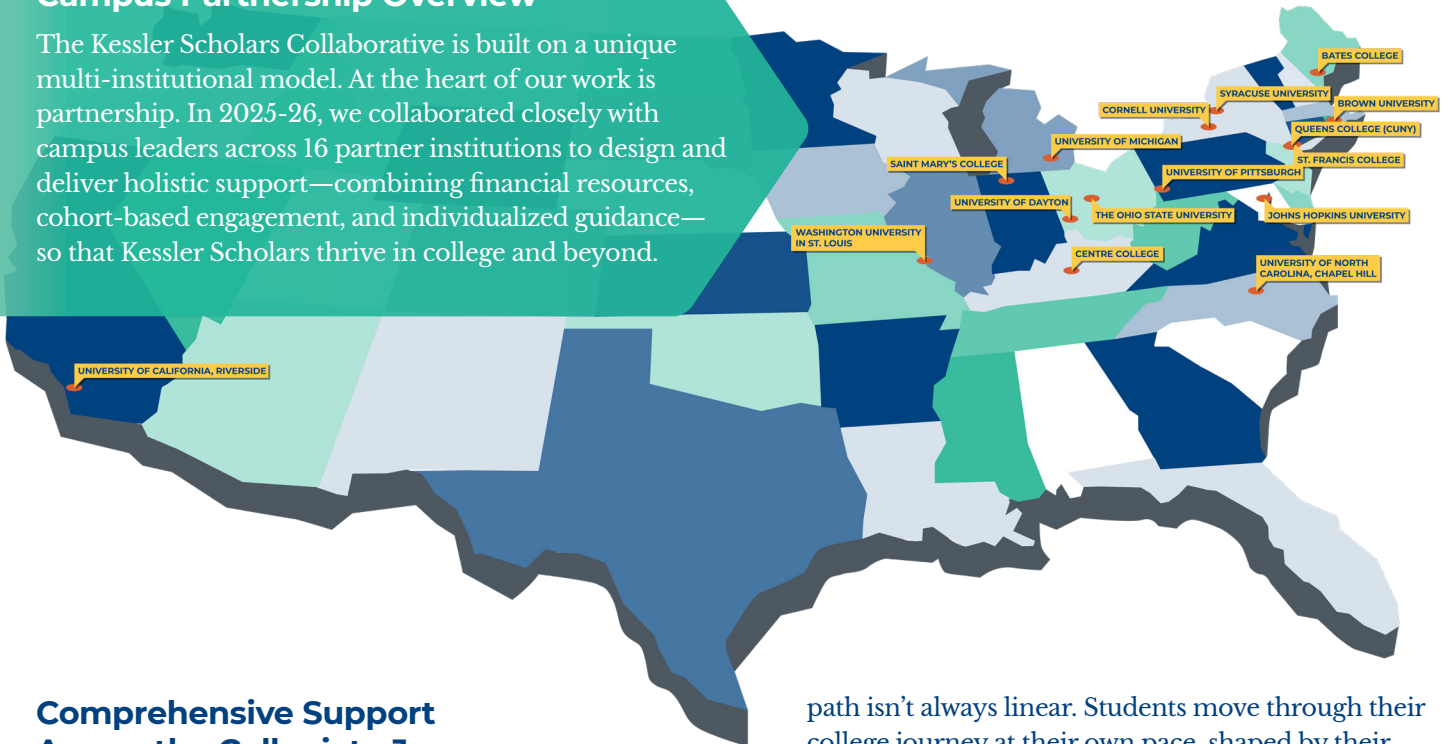
compared to 68% of continuing-generation students—those whose parents earned bachelor’s degrees.\* The Kessler Scholars Collaborative aims to close these equity gaps and transform the college experience for first-generation students.



\*Source: Nolan, S., Armstrong, E., Freeman, M., Herring, W., Hughes, R., Kajikawa, T., Kim, B. H., & Park, S. (2025, October 2). First-generation status in context, part four: Enrollment, persistence, and completion by first-generation status. *Common App*.

## Campus Partnership Overview

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative is built on a unique multi-institutional model. At the heart of our work is partnership. In 2025-26, we collaborated closely with campus leaders across 16 partner institutions to design and deliver holistic support—combining financial resources, cohort-based engagement, and individualized guidance—so that Kessler Scholars thrive in college and beyond.



## Comprehensive Support Across the Collegiate Journey

The Kessler Scholars Program is built as a cohort-based model with students entering together and moving through all four years of college with a community around them. The programming is responsive to students as they grow. The needs of a first-year student beginning their college journey look different than a senior preparing for life after graduation.

Each campus adapts the program model to fit its students and institutional context. And the

path isn't always linear. Students move through their college journey at their own pace, shaped by their individual goals and the campus community they are a part of. ●



### Year Four: Embark

- Empower students with transitional life skills and planning for post-graduate success
- Support progress towards graduation and celebrate student milestones and accomplishments
- Foster meaningful mentoring relationships with Kessler Scholars alumni



### Year Three: Empower

- Develop leadership skills and provide opportunities for student-led engagement in Kessler Scholars programming
- Encourage students to engage in high-impact practices like study abroad, internships, or undergraduate research



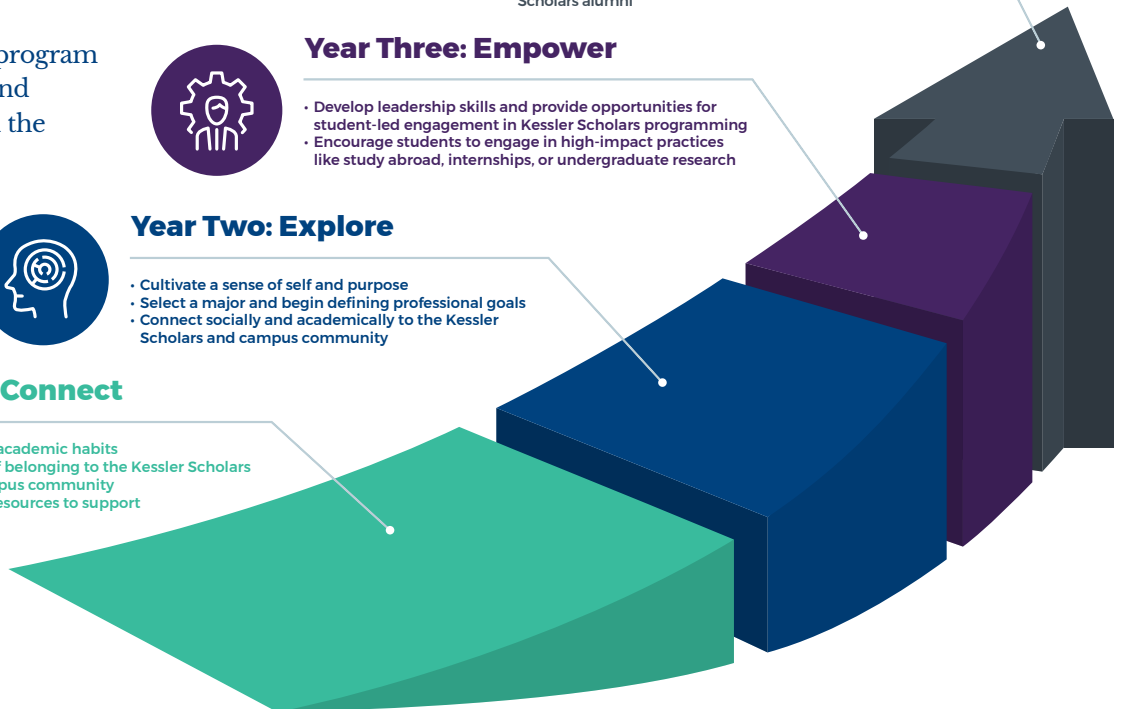
### Year Two: Explore

- Cultivate a sense of self and purpose
- Select a major and begin defining professional goals
- Connect socially and academically to the Kessler Scholars and campus community



### Year One: Connect

- Establish healthy academic habits
- Develop a sense of belonging to the Kessler Scholars Program and campus community
- Identify campus resources to support student success





# Enhancing the Kessler Scholar Student Experience

The cornerstone activities of the Kessler Scholars Program are designed to build a sense of community among Kessler Scholars and lead to strong outcomes around key metrics, including year-to-year persistence and degree completion. Our core program activities draw from research about the role of holistic student engagement and its link to retention and increased academic achievement, particularly for students whose parents or guardians did not earn a four-year college degree.

Building from an understanding of proactive advising, the Kessler Scholars Program model seeks to regularly reach out to students, review academic progress, discuss strategies for academic success, and make referrals to additional support services. This approach to student support intentionally acknowledges students' personal lives and non-academic factors that may influence their college success.

## Transformative Experiences

We believe that participation in research, study abroad, internships, and other high-impact practices matters particularly for first-generation college students because these opportunities can expand students' sense of what's possible, build confidence and a sense of belonging, and provide access to cultural and social capital that may otherwise be less familiar or accessible. The Kessler Scholars Collaborative aims for 90% of Kessler Scholars to participate in high-impact practices before graduation, and we are well on our way to achieving this collective impact goal. According to the spring 2026 student survey administered by our external evaluation partner, Ithaka S+R, 82% of graduating seniors have completed at least one of these activities across their college journeys.

To support this work, we've deepened our existing partnerships, and we saw campus partners launch new initiatives to raise awareness of these opportunities and connect Kessler Scholars across the Collaborative network.

**71%**

of graduating Kessler Scholars completed an internship, surpassing the national average of 42% for first-generation students.

**28%**

of graduating Kessler Scholars studied abroad compared to 8% of first-generation students nationally.

**46%**

of graduating Kessler Scholars participated in research, compared to the national average of 18% for first-generation students.

## Summer Research Opportunity Program

Over the past three years, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative has partnered with the Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan for a pilot initiative supporting 14 Scholars from nine partner institutions to participate in the Summer Research Opportunity Program (SROP). Over 10 weeks, under the guidance of faculty and mentors, Scholars explored their research interests and potential career pathways.



[SROP] provided me with a space to grow academically and personally, surrounded by many first-generation college students who shared similar journeys and aspirations. It wasn't just about research—it was about learning how to navigate academic spaces, build meaningful connections, and see graduate school as an achievable and exciting path. This summer gave me a deeper sense of belonging, helped me realize that spaces like these are meant for students like me, and expanded my vision of what's possible for my future."

## Professional Development

We're continuing to make internships, career-building experiences, and professional development opportunities more visible and accessible to Kessler Scholars across a wide range of industries. We've hosted virtual information sessions and regularly promote opportunities for Kessler Scholars to gain professional experience and develop career readiness skills. Kessler Scholars have participated in internships across various sectors, including at Bloomberg Philanthropies and at the

National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). These opportunities are invaluable, particularly for first-generation college students from limited-income backgrounds, because research shows that participation in these experiences contributes to college success outcomes such as retention, persistence, and graduation.

## Study Abroad

Last spring, 40 Kessler Scholars from 11 partner institutions traveled abroad and studied away from their home campuses. To keep these Kessler Scholars connected as they embark on new journeys, we launched a new virtual community where they shared stories and photos from their travels, reflected on their experiences, and built new connections. This virtual space extended the Kessler experience beyond campus by creating opportunities for Scholars to connect in person, learn from one another, and build relationships across campus boundaries, which is a strength of our Kessler Scholars Collaborative network.



## Peer Mentoring

The Collaborative deepened its support for campus partners seeking to strengthen peer mentoring programs.

At Centre College, the team identified peer mentor training and leadership development as key areas for growth, prompting them to hire a Kessler Scholar as a summer intern to research mentoring models, interview fellow Scholars, and develop recommendations. His work informed changes to mentor matching, training, and student leadership development, contributing to an 18 percentage point increase in Centre's peer mentoring score from 2025 to 2026.

Across the Collaborative, peer mentoring outcomes improved by three percentage points overall, with 100% of mentors at six campuses reporting a positive experience. Students shared that mentoring offered a meaningful opportunity to give back, support peers with similar backgrounds and experiences, connect mentees to campus resources, and develop their own leadership, communication, and empathy skills. ●



# A Childhood Dream

Dua Hussain, a 2026 Kessler Scholars graduate of Johns Hopkins University, had a dream of becoming a doctor that started during her childhood

Growing up in Delaware, Dua Hussain watched her father regularly travel with her grandmother to Johns Hopkins Hospital for treatment after she was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). Those visits to Baltimore left an impression that would shape her future.

“In the second grade, I was like, ‘I want to go to Johns Hopkins, and I want to be a doctor!’” she said.

With parents who immigrated to the United States and placed a deep value on education they themselves had not been able to complete, Dua's educational aspirations were nurtured and supported from an early age.

“My parents told me to ‘do whatever you want and we’ll figure it out,’ basically,” she said. “We’re very low-income, so it should have been a conversation of ‘how are we going to afford this?’”

When it came time to apply to college, she—not surprisingly—made the choice to apply early decision to Johns Hopkins. The combination of strong financial aid and the opportunity to pursue her lifelong goal made the university a clear fit. But arriving on campus brought a new set of adjustments.

“I’m Muslim, and where I grew up, there were

not many of us,” she said. “For the schools that I went to, the people did not share the same identity as me, and I would be questioned all the time.”

Moving to a city the size of Baltimore was a little overwhelming but also exciting. At Johns Hopkins, she was finally in a space where she no longer felt the need to explain the nuances of her background.

“I was so shocked at how much everyone knew,” she said. “I would say, ‘I have to go pray’ or ‘It’s Ramadan, and I’m fasting’ and I wouldn’t have to explain it. It was so life-changing.”

Still, the transition wasn’t without its challenges. Dua’s younger brother has Down syndrome and autism and has always been a central part of her life. Moving away meant leaving him and changing her role from that of a daily caretaker to a long-distance sister.

“It was sad, and it continues to be sad, but we’re a little more used to it now,” she said.

To aid in the transition, Dua found a space that fully brought together her academic interests and her personal identity. The Kessler Scholars Program, with its focus on the humanities and social sciences within the predominantly STEM-focused Johns Hopkins community, provided her with support as she navigated her undergraduate experience as a dual major in anthropology and medicine, science, and the humanities.

“Kessler was the first time I met people who were first-generation,” she said. “I was able to talk to them about things my other friends didn’t really understand.”

The Kessler Scholars Program opened doors to allow her to mentor through the pre-orientation activities, attend conferences across the country, and build relationships with other like-minded students.



This fall, Dua will take the next step toward her lifelong dream as she begins graduate school at Thomas Jefferson University’s Sidney Kimmel Medical College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At the same time, she maintains an interest in storytelling, with hopes of becoming a published author for young readers.

“Being at the point that I am now is crazy to me,” she said. “It feels like I’ve been constantly climbing the steps toward something, and I can see the door now.”

Reflecting on her journey, Dua emphasizes the importance of community and curiosity. For first-generation students especially, the willingness to ask questions and build relationships can make all the difference.

“The biggest thing I’ve learned as a first-generation student is to always ask for help and to lean on the people around you,” she said. “Sometimes there are questions you don’t even know to ask, and the people around you will ask them for you.” ●

# Alumni Engagement

With 700+ Kessler Scholars alumni already making their mark on the world, we now have four years of alumni survey data from our earliest campus partners attesting to the long-term impact of the Kessler Scholars Program for first-generation college graduates now thriving first-generation professionals, graduate students, and entrepreneurs across the country.



**94%**

of Kessler Scholars alumni surveyed were somewhat or extremely satisfied with their experience in the Kessler Scholars Program.



**100%**

probably or definitely would recommend being a Kessler Scholar at their alma mater.



**92%**

were employed or enrolled in graduate school within one year of graduation.



**89%**

want to give back by mentoring a current Kessler Scholar.

Alumni attend graduate schools like Brown, Cornell, Syracuse, U-M, and Penn.

Alumni work for employers like Accenture, Amazon, Great Lakes Water Authority, JPMorgan Chase, KIPP Academy, Microsoft, Ohio Health, Sidley Austin, SW Detroit Environmental Vision, Tetra Tech, and Wells Fargo.



**I am thrilled and honored to be a part of a lifelong community. Although it has been two years since I graduated, I can always reach out to any of my peers or mentors within the Kessler network."**

Sokhnadiarra Ndiaye (Cornell University '24)  
*Founder and CEO of Muneke*

From this strong foundation, we are poised for a major milestone: this is the first academic year in which all partner institutions will have a graduating class. By June 2027, we expect to reach **1000+ Kessler Scholars alumni**. We are hard at work developing tools, programming, and mentorship pathways that will support this growing network of first-gen college graduates as they pursue their goals, connect with undergraduate Kessler Scholars, and become changemakers in their communities. ●

# New Connections



## Cross-site Connections

The strength of the Collaborative network is reflected in the opportunities for Kessler Scholars to connect, learn, and build new relationships with their cohorts and beyond their home campuses. We were delighted to see campus partners coordinate several off-campus excursions to bring Kessler Scholars together over the past year.

Campus teams at Johns Hopkins University, Syracuse University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill used the spring break vacation to coordinate a multi-day excursion for Kessler Scholars to explore the social, cultural, and career opportunities in New York City, including a day of connection with fellow Kessler Scholars at Queens College on the campus of St. Francis College.

The team at Washington University in St. Louis brought a group of Kessler Scholars to the University of Michigan to learn about graduate school pathways and expand their networks beyond their home institution.

Campus partners at Cornell University and Syracuse University collaborated to host a retreat for Kessler Scholars in the Adirondacks to reflect on their leadership strengths, set goals, and identify strategies to maximize their college experience.

## Kessler Scholars Student Awards Ceremony

Throughout each academic year, the Collaborative brings Scholars across the national network together virtually to celebrate successes and facilitate connections.

In spring 2026, this culminated in the inaugural Kessler Scholars Awards Ceremony to recognize student leadership and the innovative programming that has shaped the student experience. Campus partners hosted viewing parties to cheer on more than 50 Kessler Scholars who received Emerging Student Leader and Kessler Scholars Impact Awards for demonstrating leadership and contributing to the program on their

campuses. The Kessler Scholars Student Advisory Board at **Johns Hopkins University** received the Student-led Programming Award for planning and executing a highly successful leadership night, and the programs at **Centre College** and the **University of Michigan** received awards for their community service engagement.

The event celebrated individual and collective achievement while elevating student leadership and ensuring that Kessler Scholars can learn from and support one another across campuses. ●



# In the Field

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative is committed to sharing what we learn about our cross-site, cohort-based program model with the broader higher education community. This year, Collaborative staff, campus partners, and evaluation colleagues from Ithaca S+R brought research, practice, and student voices to national stages, contributing to the growing conversation about how to support first-generation, limited-income college student success.



## FGLI Consortium

In fall 2025, the Collaborative team presented with four Kessler Scholars at the FGLI (First Generation, Lower-Income) Consortium conference held at **Johns Hopkins University**, a Collaborative partner institution. This annual conference brought together administrators and faculty committed to advancing the success of first-generation, lower-income college students, creating a valuable space to share knowledge, discuss promising practices, and foster a sense of community among those engaged in this important work. During our session, Kessler Scholars shared how participating in transformative experiences such as research, study abroad, and leadership shaped their personal and professional journeys. Their stories offered a powerful reminder of the impact that intentional opportunities and support can have in amplifying student voices and contributing to students' sense of belonging, confidence, and pathways to success.

## First Gen Summit

For the third consecutive year, the Collaborative sponsored a delegation of Kessler Scholars to participate in the First Gen Summit, an annual student-led conference focused on experiences of first-generation college students. The delegation drew student leaders from 14 partner institutions and featured a presentation led by three Kessler Scholars, who shared insights on how social media can be leveraged to demystify and navigate higher education and professional opportunities. Over the past few years, this Collaborative-sponsored initiative has brought together more than 25 student leaders, creating a distinctive opportunity for Kessler Scholars to build new connections across partner institutions and to foster their leadership development and growth.



## SXSW EDU

The Collaborative brought its story to a new audience at SXSW EDU in Austin, Texas this year. Campus partner leaders from the **University of Pittsburgh** and **Washington University in St. Louis** and colleagues from Ithaca S+R joined the Collaborative team for a session on building and sustaining a national cross-campus network to advance outcomes for first-generation, limited-income students. The session explored how the Collaborative's structure, from shared evaluation to cross-site learning, creates conditions for campus programs to improve together and move toward institutionalization.



## NASPA Conferences on Student Success in Higher Education

The 2026 NASPA Conferences on Student Success in Higher Education brought together more than 20 Kessler Scholars colleagues from our campus partners to engage in professional development and community building. Collaborative staff presented key insights on first-generation student leadership development with colleagues from **Bates College**, **Centre College**, **Queens College**, and the **University of Michigan**, sharing how colleges and universities can develop, assess, and strengthen leadership experiences for FGLI students while empowering them, cultivating their skills, and promoting more equitable engagement in leadership development. ●





# Looking Ahead

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative is entering a new chapter grounded in the lessons of our early years and guided by an ambitious vision for the future of first-generation, limited-income student success

## A Defining Moment for the Collaborative

From the launch of the Kessler Scholars Collaborative in 2020, we have built a strong foundation and demonstrated a deep understanding of what it takes to lead real change in outcomes and experiences for FGLI college students. We now are positioned to build on that learning.

Next year, campus partners will enter a four-year grant renewal period with continued support from the Judy and Fred Wilpon Family Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies. In our next phase, we will focus on strengthening the Kessler Scholars model, deepening our understanding of student outcomes, and engaging a growing network of program alumni. We are committed to supporting the continued development and sustainability of campus programs and to sharing our learnings with the broader field.

Our partner campuses remain central to this work. We are grateful to the campus leaders, program staff, faculty, and communities who have helped build and evolve the Kessler Scholars Program over the past six years. Through the next phase of grant support, the Collaborative will continue to learn alongside our partners, support continuous improvement, and help campuses strengthen practices to ensure student success over time.

Evaluation and evidence will also play an increasingly important role in this next phase. In partnership with our evaluation partner, Ithaka S+R, we will continue to examine the implementation and impact of the Kessler Scholars model and use emerging outcomes data to strengthen our programs and contribute knowledge to the broader field of FGLI student success. We aim not only to demonstrate what works, but to share what we learn in ways that can inform higher education nationally.

The grant renewal period ahead will sustain direct-to-student support, shared learning, evaluation, and efforts to institutionalize effective Kessler Scholars practices. It provides a critical foundation for the next stage of the Collaborative's work while allowing campus partners the opportunity to build on early learning.

We also are intent on building toward sustainable practices over time. By 2028, most partner institutions will have participated in the Collaborative for six or more years. The Collaborative will undertake a holistic program review at that point, taking stock of how campus programs have developed, what the evidence shows about student outcomes, and how the most effective practices can be sustained over time. This process will build on the ethos of continuous learning and improvement that has guided the Collaborative since its formation.

With the partnership of our funders, evaluators, participating institutions, and inspiring Scholars and alumni, we look ahead to this next phase with confidence in the groundwork we have built and a clear commitment to strengthening the work and thoughtfully positioning our impact and legacy of meaningful change for many generations of students ahead. ●

# In Their Own Words

The impact of the Kessler Scholars Program is perhaps best understood through the voices of the alumni who have experienced it firsthand. Their reflections speak to the power of belonging, mattering, community, financial support, and opportunities to grow alongside peers with shared experiences. From finding the confidence to thrive academically to carrying greater peace and purpose into their professional lives, these voices illustrate how the Kessler Scholars experience can shape a student's college journey and extend well beyond graduation. ●



“The honest and vulnerable conversations that I experienced within the Kessler community have positively contributed to the way that I trust myself, the confidence I have in my abilities, and the conversations that I initiate today.”

“I credit Kessler with getting me through my undergraduate education. If it weren't for the community I built with staff and my peers, I don't think I could have succeeded at [institution] the way that I did .... You get out of it what you put into it, and I'm so grateful for everything I put into the Kessler Scholars Program, because I got so much out of it.”

“I didn't realize it at the time, but the shared identity and collaboration with others with a similar background gave me grounds to push myself academically and sense that I belonged on this campus.”

“With absolute confidence, I can say this program changed my life for the better. Thank you for everything you do for first-generation students like myself!”

“Scholarships and opportunities like Kessler Scholars relieved a large financial burden ... I have much more peace and focus on my professional life.”

# Get in Touch



The Kessler Scholars Collaborative guides the implementation and ongoing work of campus-based Kessler Scholars Programs. Using a community of practice model, the Collaborative seeks to build space for shared learning and cross-campus community, focused on closing equity gaps and improving outcomes for first-generation, limited-income students across the nation.



**Shakima M. Clency, Ph.D.**  
National Director of  
Campus Partnerships and Impact  
[sclency@kesslerscholars.org](mailto:sclency@kesslerscholars.org)



**Gail Gibson, Ph.D.**  
Executive Director  
[ggibson@kesslerscholars.org](mailto:ggibson@kesslerscholars.org)



**Kristen Glasener, Ph.D.**  
National Director of  
Organizational Learning and Strategy  
[kglasener@kesslerscholars.org](mailto:kglasener@kesslerscholars.org)



**Sabrina Wise, M.Ed.**  
Senior Manager of  
Scholar and Alumni Engagement  
[swise@kesslerscholars.org](mailto:swise@kesslerscholars.org)



**T.J. Zepp, M.Ed.**  
Senior Communications Manager  
[tzepp@kesslerscholars.org](mailto:tzepp@kesslerscholars.org)

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**KESSLER**  

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[info@kesslerscholars.org](mailto:info@kesslerscholars.org)  
[www.kesslerscholars.org](http://www.kesslerscholars.org)  
200 S. 1st Street, Suite 227  
Ann Arbor, MI 48104  
734-600-0360