Tailored Support for First-Year, First-Generation College Students

Findings from an Evaluation of the Kessler Scholars Program

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December 19, 2024

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Introduction

The first year of college or university is a crucial phase which significantly influences students' persistence, academic achievement, and degree completion. During this exciting but daunting time, students face the challenges of adapting to the academic expectations and social experiences of their new institutional environments, all of which shape their long-term educational outcomes. Before they arrive on campus, incoming students must complete various pre-enrollment tasks, such as registering for classes and securing financial aid, housing, and health insurance. Once they arrive, they also need to manage rigorous coursework, form new friendships and social networks, and balance their newly gained independence with any family responsibilities and work obligations.[1] Support systems play an important role during this transition. Research suggests that students who feel supported socially and academically, and valued by the institution, are more likely to persist and graduate.[2]

The challenges associated with transitioning to college are often amplified for students who are the first in their families to attend college and may be

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[1] Amanda Richardson, Sharron King, Robyne Garrett, and Alison Wrench, "Thriving or Just Surviving? Exploring Student Strategies for a Smoother Transition to University. A Practice Report," *Student Success* 3, no. 2 (2012): 87–93, https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v3i2.132; Bas T. Agricola, Fiona Veraa, Mieke van Diepen, and Louise Elffers, "Academic Capital Formation Upon the Transition to Higher Education: First-Year Students' Experiences After Participation in a Preacademic Program," *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success* 4, no. 1 (2024): 73-101; Mehak Stokoe, David Nordstokke, and Gabrielle Wilcox, "First Year Students' Perceptions of the Transition to University: The Role of Informational, Instrumental, and Emotional Support," *International Journal of Research in Education and Science* 10, no. 2 (May 2024): 377-393; Rayane Alamuddin and Melissa Bender, "The First-Year Experience in Two-Year Public Postsecondary Programs: Results of a National Survey," *Ithaka S+R*, 26 September 2018, https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.309318.
[2] Vincent Tinto, "Taking Student Retention Seriously: Rethinking the First Year of College," *NACADA Journal* 19, no. 2 (1999): 5-9, https://www.tnstate.edu/servicelearning/documents/Taking%20Student%20Retention%20Seriously.pdf; George D. Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John H. Schuh, and Elizabeth J. Whitt, *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011); Terrell L. Strayhorn, *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315297293.

less familiar with the norms and expectations of higher education. More than half of all college students nationwide are first-generation, and this population continues to grow.[3] First-generation (FG) students are resourceful, academically resilient, and goal-oriented, and bring unique strengths to higher education based on their lived experiences.[4] However, they also face considerable challenges in accessing higher education, succeeding academically, and completing their degrees.[5] Research indicates that compared to students whose parents attended college, FG students are more likely to leave college after the first year and less likely to earn a bachelor's degree within four and six years.[6] They are also less likely to be academically prepared for college, receive financial assistance from their families, and feel that they belong on campus.[7] Given the strong

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[3] "First-generation College Students in 2020," Center for First-Generation Student Success, https://firstgen.naspa.org/files/dmfile/15405_NASPA_FactSheet-01.pdf.

[4] Andreina Alvarado, Alexandru Spatariu, and Christine Woodbury, "Resilience & Emotional Intelligence between First Generation College Students and Non-First Generation College Students," *FOCUS on Colleges, Universities & Schools* 11, no. 1 (2017), https://www.nationalforum.com/Electronic%20Journal%20Volumes/Alvardo%20Andreeina,Resilience%20and%20Emotional%20Intelligence%20FOCUS%20V11%20N1%202017.pdf; Rosanna A. Reyes, "Proving Them Wrong: Academically Resilient First-generation Latinas in College" (PhD diss., Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, School of Graduate Studies, 2012), https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/37275/PDF/1/play/.

[5] Emily Forrest Cataldi, Christopher T. Bennett, and Xianglei Chen, "First-Generation Students: College Access, Persistence, and Postbachelor's Outcomes, Stats in Brief, NCES 2018-421," National Center for Education Statistics (2018), https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED580935.pdf.

[6] Linda DeAngelo, Ray Franke, Sylvia Hurtado, John H. Pryor, and Serge Tran, *Completing College: Assessing Graduation Rates at Four-year Institutions* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 2011), https://heri.ucla.edu/DARCU/CompletingCollege2011.pdf; "First-Generation College Students: Demographic Characteristics and Postsecondary Enrollment," RTI International, 2019, https://firstgen.naspa.org/files/dmfile/15405_NASPA_FactSheet-01.pdf.

[7] Matthew C. Atherton, "Academic Preparedness of First-Generation College Students: Different Perspectives," *Journal of College Student Development* 55, no. 8 (2014): 824-829, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/561674/pdf; Michael J. Stebleton, Krista M. Soria, Ronald L. Huesman Jr., "First-Generation Students' Sense of Belonging, Mental Health, and Use of Counseling Services at Public Research Universities," *Journal of College Counseling* 27, no. 1 (April 2014): 6-20, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.2161-1882.2014.00044.x; Ernest T. Pascarella, Christopher T. Pierson, Gregory C. Wolniak, and Patrick T. Terenzini, "First-Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes," *The Journal of Higher Education* 75, no. 3 (2004): 249-284,

links between postsecondary credentials and labor market outcomes, closing these equity gaps in access and completion is important to unlock opportunities for all students.[8]

There is compelling evidence that comprehensive student support programs that combine, to varying degrees, academic advising, mentoring, cohort activities, and financial assistance over multiple years can lead to an improved sense of belonging, academic achievement, and persistence and completion rates, particularly for students historically underrepresented in higher education.[9] However, additional research is needed to understand which features and approaches of these interventions are most effective for specific student populations and to identify promising practices for improving their impact.

Ithaka S+R and the Kessler Scholars Collaborative are collaborating on an external evaluation of the Kessler Scholars Program, a comprehensive, cohort-based program designed to support first-generation, limited-income college students through a combination of financial aid and robust, evidence-informed support programming. In addition to financial support, all Kessler Scholars benefit from a core set of evidence-based program activities designed to build a sense of community within the program, improve year-to-year persistence and degree completion, and enable students to develop in three outcome areas—college navigation and academic self-efficacy, sense of belonging and mattering, and leadership and professional development. These core program activities include one-

https://heritage.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Research_Related_to_Success_of_First_Generation.pdf.

[8] Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and Meredith Welch, "Education Pays 2016: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society. Trends in Higher Education Series," *College Board* (2016) https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED572548; Richard Fry, "First-generation College Graduates Lag Behind Their Peers on Key Economic Outcomes," *Pew Research Center*, May 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/05/PSDT_05.18.21_parental.education.report.pdf.

[9] Rachel Fulcher Dawson, Melissa S. Kearney, and James X. Sullivan, "Comprehensive Approaches to Increasing StudentCompletion in Higher Education: A Survey of the Landscape, *National Bureau of Economic Research*, no. w28046, August 2020, https://leo.nd.edu/assets/411401/comprehensive_approaches_to_increasing_student_completion_in_higher_education_fulcher_dawson_sullivan.pdf; Joseph A. Kitchen, Rosemary Perez, Ronald Hallett, Adrianna Kezar, and Robert Reason, "Ecological Validation Model of Student Success: A New Student Support Model for Promoting College Success Among Low-income, First-generation, and Racially Minoritized Students," *Journal of College Student Development* 62, no. 6 (2021): 627-642, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/850733.

on-one meetings with a Kessler Scholars staff member, general and cohort-based meetings and workshops, peer mentorship in the first year of college, leadership opportunities within the program and broader campus community, and community service projects. Established and emerging Kessler Scholars Programs at 16 colleges and universities are embedded in and supported by the Kessler Scholars Collaborative, a nationwide network that guides program development and implementation, facilitates practice sharing across institutions, and provides students with opportunities to connect with other first-generation scholars across the country. Ithaka S+R's multi-year mixed-methods evaluation aims to assess the long-term relationship between program participation and students' college experiences and psychosocial and academic outcomes, in order to support program improvement and maximize impact.[10]

In Fall 2023, 10 campus partners who joined the Collaborative in 2022 welcomed their first cohort of scholars, doubling the Collaborative's reach from over 450 scholars in the prior year to more than 800 scholars in the academic year 2023-24, half of whom were first-year students.[11] As a result, a key focus of the Collaborative's activities was supporting the inaugural year of programming at these new institutions for first-year students, drawing on evidence-based practices and the experiences of more established campus partners.

To inform the Collaborative's efforts, Ithaka S+R's formative evaluation during the academic year 2023-24 focused on assessing the effectiveness of three targeted evidence-based interventions provided to first-year Kessler Scholars across multiple campuses—peer mentoring, first-year seminars, and summer transition programs—in addition to core program supports. In this report, we synthesize findings from our evaluations of these interventions and share insights into the backgrounds and needs of these first-year scholars who participated, their

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[10] Lia Lumauig and Ifeatu Oliobi, "Announcing a New Partnership with the Kessler Scholars Collaborative," *Ithaka S+R*, 6 June 2022, https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/announcing-a-new-partnership-with-the-kessler-scholars-collaborative/;
"Kessler Scholars Collaborative Evaluation Plan Brief," *Kessler Scholars Collaborative and Ithaka S+R*, https://sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Kessler-scholars-collaborative-evaluation-plan-brief.pdf.
[11] Ifeatu Oliobi, Caroline Doglio, and Dillon Ruddell, "Evaluating the Kessler Scholars Program: Findings from the Academic Year 2022-23," *Ithaka S+R*, 11 July 2024, https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.320987.

program experiences, and self-reported psychosocial outcomes. The following research questions guided our analysis:

- What were the backgrounds and needs of first-year scholars across the Collaborative's participating institutions in the academic year 2023-24?
- What kinds of targeted support did participating institutions offer to first-year scholars?
- What were the experiences of scholars who received these targeted interventions?
- What promising practices can help provide holistic support to first-year first-generation and low-income (FGLI) students navigating the transition from high school to college?

To answer these research questions, we draw on multiple qualitative and quantitative data sources, including administrative and program tracking data, student surveys and focus groups, and in-depth interviews with program administrators.[12] Our analysis highlights several key takeaways:

- The Kessler Scholars Collaborative supports and serves a diverse population of first-year students with multi-dimensional identities and experiences which influence their institutional experiences and needs for academic and social support as they navigate higher education.
- Many first-year scholars arrived on campus with limited awareness of campus resources, strategies for academic success, and social connections. These students were seeking a safe space to learn more about the academic expectations of college classes, connect with other students, and understand the program requirements and benefits without being judged.
- In addition to the core program supports, partner campuses offered three evidence-based interventions to first-year scholars— peer mentoring, first-year seminars and summer transition programs—which aimed to provide academic preparation, social integration, and holistic support. While some of these programs were designed specifically for Kessler Scholars, others leveraged existing supports across the institution.
- Most students who participated in these programs reported positive experiences, noting that these programs provided them

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[12] Details of our methodology and data collection are included in Appendix B.

with valuable peer connections, helped them navigate academic challenges, and fostered a sense of belonging to the institution. Program staff also observed that students who participated in these programs tended to perform better academically, were more aware of resources, and were more engaged with program activities. While most participants found these programs to be beneficial, a few students experienced challenges, such as infrequent interaction with peer mentors, gaps in basic needs support during summer programs, and scheduling conflicts in first-year seminars.

- Based on student feedback and our interviews with program staff, we identified several practical strategies for improving the effectiveness of these programs including 1) adapting program support to meet the needs of the target population, 2) collaborating with other campus units to synchronize schedules, maximize existing resources and reduce duplication, and 3) regularly monitoring students' program experiences to identify challenges and suggestions for improvement.

- Overall, our findings suggest that these targeted interventions can be an effective strategy for promoting academic preparedness, social connection, and a sense of belonging for first-year students. When programming is tailored to students' individualized needs and delivered in a validating environment, such programs can significantly improve FGLI students' transition to college and set students on a path towards success.

The remainder of this report proceeds as follows. First, we describe the population of first-year students served by the program in the academic year 2023-24. Next, we describe the three first-year interventions, detailing the relevant literature, the program's approach, student and staffs' perspectives of their experiences of the program and its benefits and limitations, and emerging promising practices. Throughout, we provide some detailed examples of specific campus interventions through vignettes. Finally, we close with a set of recommendations for institutions or programs seeking to provide effective support for first-year FGLI students.

Understanding the First-Year Kessler Scholars Served in the Academic Year 2023-24

To understand the backgrounds and demographic characteristics of first-year scholars served across the Collaborative during the academic year, we analyzed student survey responses and administrative data. Tables 1 and 2 show descriptive statistics for the cohort of first-year scholars enrolled across the 16 partner campuses of the Kessler Scholars Collaborative in the 2023-24 academic year.[13]

Two-thirds of first-year scholars are women, and around 70 percent of scholars identify as students of color, including Hispanic or Latino (33 percent), Black or African American (17 percent), Asian (16 percent), and white (24 percent). Most first-year scholars were first-time students, only one percent had served in the military. There were no transfer students among enrolled first-year scholars. Seventy-six percent of scholars received Pell grants, and 27 percent participated in federal work-study programs. Additionally, first-year scholars had an average cumulative federal student loan amount of about $4,000 (median of $3,000). At the end of the Fall term, the average first-year scholar had accumulated 15 credits with an average cumulative GPA of 3.29. These demographic characteristics of Kessler Scholars are reflective of national trends. Nationwide, 46 percent of first-generation students identify as white, compared to 61 percent of continuing-generation students; and female learners made up 60 percent of first-generation students, and 52 percent of continuing-generation students as of 2016.[14] First-generation college students also disproportionately come from lower-income backgrounds. In 2019-20, 55 percent of first-generation students received a Pell Grant, compared to 35 percent of continuing-generation students, and the

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[13] While over 400 students were served across the Collaborative during the academic year 2023-24, we were only able to access administrative data for a subset of those students at 15 institutions, and data for some variables was missing for certain students.
[14] Ilana Hamilton, "56% Of All Undergraduates Are First-Generation College Students," *Forbes*, 13 June 2023, https://www.forbes.com/advisor/education/student-resources/first-generation-college-students-by-state/.

average federal student loan amount for first-generation students was $7,582, compared to $8,886 for continuing-generation students.[15]

Student surveys conducted in academic year 2023-24 provided additional context on scholars' demographic characteristics and pre-college backgrounds.[16] The average first-year scholar is 18 years old. Most scholars are domestic students who attended public high schools in urban (36 percent) or suburban (44 percent) areas, rather than rural or remote/areas (19 percent). Only three percent of scholars attended high school outside the United States. Although 78 percent of survey respondents reported receiving some financial assistance through need-based grants or scholarships, 68 percent expressed concern about their ability to finance college. Scholars also expressed concerns about their academics (66 percent), and their family (40 percent) and peer (45 percent) relationships. Additionally, a quarter or more of respondents said they did not have access to affordable healthy food (25 percent), housing (32 percent) or transportation to campus (24 percent) during the school year. Regrettably, many college students across the United States struggle to meet their basic needs, and this is associated with lower academic performance and graduation rates.[17] According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), a representative survey of college students across the United States, 23 percent of undergraduate students were experiencing food insecurity and eight percent were experiencing homelessness in the prior 30 days.[18] Furthermore, 58 percent of surveyed students in the Student Financial Wellness Survey

[15] Postsecondary National Policy Institute, "First Generation Students in Higher Education Factsheet," November 2023, https://pnpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/FirstGenStudentsFactSheet-Nov-2023.pdf.

[16] Descriptions of the student surveys are included in Appendix B.

[17] Meghan R. Silva, et al., "The Relationship Between Food Security, Housing Stability, and School Performance Among College Students in an Urban University," *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 19, no. 3 (2017): 284–299, https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621918; Julia A Wolfson, Noura Insolera, Alicia Cohen, and Cindy W. Leung, "The Effect of Food Insecurity During College on Graduation and Type of Degree Attained: Evidence from a Nationally Representative Longitudinal Survey," *Public Health Nutrition* 25, no. 2 (29 July 2021): 389–397, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980021003104.

[18] US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 2020 Undergraduate Students (NPSAS:UG).

(SFWS) in Fall 2023 had experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness in the prior 12 months or since starting college.[19]

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of First-Year Kessler Scholars in the 2023-24 Academic Year

Characteristic	Level	Number of Scholars	Percent of Scholars
Age*	18	217	60%
	19	124	35%
	20	14	4%
	21-24	4	1%
Gender	Female	244	64%
	Male	131	34%
	Other	5	1%
Race/Ethnicity	U.S. Nonresident	10	3%
	Hispanic or Latino (regardless of race)	126	33%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	9	2%
	Asian	59	15%
	Black or African American	64	17%
	Race and Ethnicity Unknown	8	2%
	White	90	24%
	Two or More Races	16	4%
Pell Recipient	Pell	217	79%
	No Pell	47	17%
	Ineligible (US Non-resident/Did not file FAFSA)	12	4%
Federal Work-Study	Yes	52	22%
	No	185	78%
First-time Student	Yes	345	5%
	No	17	95%
High School Attended*	Public	294	82%

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[19] Allyson Cornett and Carla Fletcher, "Student Financial Wellness Survey: Fall 2023 Semester Results," *Trellis Strategies*, May 2024, https://www.trellisstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SFWS-Aggregate-Report_FALL-2023_FINAL.pdf.

	Private (religiously affiliated)	36	10%
	Private (non-religiously affiliated)	19	5%
	Others	11	3%
High School Location*	Urban	126	35%
	Suburban	157	44%
	Rural/Remote	76	21%

Data Source: Administrative data pull for the Fall 2023 entering cohort at 15 institutions.
*Asterisked variables represent data from the Fall 2023 First-Year Kessler Scholars Survey.
Proportions are based on non-missing data for each variable.

Table 2: Academic Characteristics of First-Year Kessler Scholars in the 2023-24 Academic Year

Characteristic	Average	Median	Standard Deviation	Number of Students
Cumulative Federal Student Loan	$4,371	$3,053	$7,582	128
Cumulative GPA	3.29	3.5	0.72	345
Credits earned	15.05	15	8.99	338

Data Source: Administrative data pull for the Fall 2023 entering cohort at 15 institutions.
Proportions are based on non-missing data for each variable.

Assessing Key Supports for First-Year Kessler Scholars

This section describes the targeted interventions provided to first-year scholars across the Collaborative—peer mentoring, first-year seminars, and summer support programs—and explores students' experiences in these programs.

Support 1: Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring, where more experienced students support newer students with the academic, social, and emotional demands of college, has become a prominent strategy in higher education for promoting student success.[20] Peer mentoring can help first-year college students adapt to their new environment and has been shown to improve both traditional measures of student success, such as GPA, credits earned, and retention, and students' sense of belonging and satisfaction with their institutions.[21] These benefits are critical for students from diverse and underrepresented groups, who face unique challenges when adapting to college life.[22] These programs also provide valuable leadership development and service opportunities for students who serve as mentors. Studies show that peer mentoring is particularly effective when

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[20] Peter J. Collier, "Why Peer Mentoring Is an Effective Approach for Promoting College Student Success," *Metropolitan Universities* 28, no. 3 (2017): 9-19.

[21] Katharine Moffat, "Critical Conversation Nine: They're Here. Now, What can we do to Keep Them?" in *At the Intersection: Understanding and Supporting First-Generation Students*, eds. Robert Longwell-Grice and Hope Longwell-Grice (Routledge, 2021), 260-265; Stephanie R. Lane, "Addressing the Stressful First Year in College: Could Peer Mentoring Be a Critical Strategy?" *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 22, no. 3 (2020): 481-496, https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025118773319.
Michele C. Everett, "Leading the Way: First-Generation Students Serving as Peer Mentors," *Journal of First-generation Student Success* 3, no. 3 (2023): 218-224, https://doi.org/10.1080/26906015.2023.2263992.

[22] Juan I. Venegas-Muggli, Carolina Barrientos, and Fernando Álvarez, "The Impact of Peer-mentoring on the Academic Success of Underrepresented College Students," *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 25, no. 3 (2023): 554-571, https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025121995988.

mentees are paired with mentors from similar backgrounds and there is consistent and intentional interaction.[23]
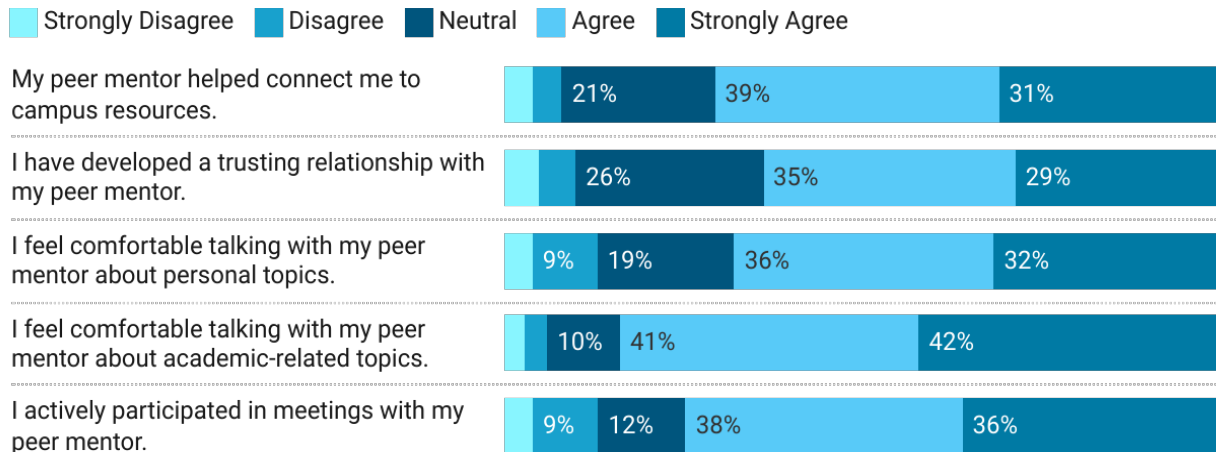
To support their transition to college, first-year Kessler Scholars are paired with other first-generation students in their sophomore through senior years who serve as mentors. In established campus programs with multiple cohorts of scholars, peer mentors are selected from upper-class students who are current Kessler Scholars. In contrast, newer programs in earlier stages of development may recruit non-Kessler students who identify as first-generation and understand the experiences of students from limited-income families. Mentors receive training and ongoing support from campus program staff to help set expectations, provide resources, and support their engagement and leadership development. They may receive compensation or serve as volunteers and receive credit for their work as a form of community service, a core requirement of participation in the program. Mentors are encouraged to interact with their mentees frequently in person and via digital means.

Experiences of Peer Mentees

Most first-year scholars—83 percent of first-year respondents to the 2024 Spring Survey—were assigned a mentor during the academic year. The survey asked these students about their experiences within the peer mentoring program. Many respondents said they actively engaged with their mentors throughout the year (74 percent), developed trusting relationships (64 percent) that enabled discussions of both academic (83 percent) and personal (68 percent) topics, and facilitated an understanding of campus resources (70 percent) (Figure 1).

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[23] Sean Plaskett, Diksha Bali, Michael J. Nakkula, and John Harris, "Peer Mentoring to Support First-generation Low-income College Students," *Phi Delta Kappan* 99, no. 7 (2018): 47-51, https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721718767861.

Figure 1: We are interested in learning more about your experience in the peer mentoring program. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements.

Legend: Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
My peer mentor helped connect me to campus resources.			21%	39%	31%
I have developed a trusting relationship with my peer mentor.			26%	35%	29%
I feel comfortable talking with my peer mentor about personal topics.		9%	19%	36%	32%
I feel comfortable talking with my peer mentor about academic-related topics.			10%	41%	42%
I actively participated in meetings with my peer mentor.		9%	12%	38%	36%

Created with Datawrapper

Source: Spring 2024 Kessler Scholars Survey (N=311)

Peer mentorship programs also provided first-year students with valuable connections that helped them to navigate academic challenges and build a sense of belonging. A recurring theme from the surveys was the value of having someone relatable to talk to who had recently experienced the challenges of transitioning to college life, outside of formal faculty or staff interactions. One student described their mentor as "a good listener" who helped with both academic and personal challenges. Another student shared, "It was really nice to just have someone who had gone through the same issues you had and could guide you from academics to personal life problems." Several students also connected with their mentors on shared identities and experiences beyond their first-generation status, such as gender, race, and college major, and said their peer mentors helped them feel more comfortable on campus and less isolated.

> It means a lot to me that my peer mentor is also a woman of color. I don't have that connection to many people on campus and to share that with her is important.

> My peer mentor and I are involved in the same major. It is incredibly useful and helpful to attend meetings with him because I feel like he understands in ways that my friends or other mentors don't. Through our classes and experiences, we have built a unique relationship I don't have with other peers.

Many students say their peer mentors also provided useful and practical academic support on choosing classes and accessing campus resources and professional development opportunities.

> In my first year, I was very lost on how classes work on campus, how to register for classes, and what good professors I should take. So, having a peer mentor has helped me a lot and not feel out of place.

> What I appreciate most about my peer mentor is her advice on how to develop social skills. I now know how to dress up for career fairs, stay updated on Instagram to hear of upcoming opportunities, and connect with alumni on LinkedIn to get referred for possible internships.
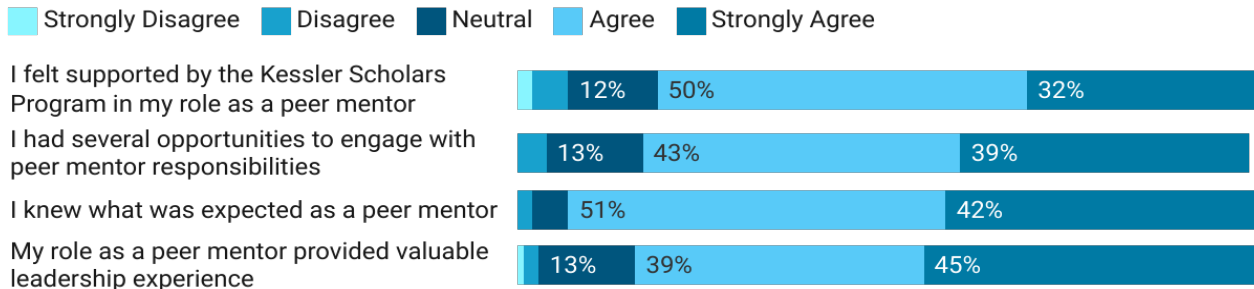
Peer mentors also provided emotional support and helped students build confidence in their abilities to navigate college successfully. One student explained, "Just knowing that I have someone to talk to and text, and knowing I always have someone able to listen to me, made a difference." Another student remarked, "The advice they gave me and how they cared about my success was invaluable."

While most students found the mentorship program helpful, a few students reported inconsistent communication with their mentors or difficulty navigating scheduling conflicts. These challenges suggest that institutions can improve the effectiveness of the mentoring program through increased follow-up and monitoring of mentor-mentee interactions by program staff. Overall, students perceived the peer mentoring support as valuable and said it helped them feel more confident, supported, and connected during their first year.

Experiences of Peer Mentors

While this report focuses on the experiences of first-year Kessler scholars, the peer mentoring program also provided valuable leadership development opportunities for upper-year Kessler Scholars who served as peer mentors. Forty-two percent of upper-year scholars who responded to the 2024 Spring Survey had mentored other scholars sometime during their college journey, and 85 percent of these peer mentors felt adequately supported by the program to fulfill their responsibilities (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements. (1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly Agree)

Legend: Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

Statement	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I felt supported by the Kessler Scholars Program in my role as a peer mentor		12%	50%	32%
I had several opportunities to engage with peer mentor responsibilities		13%	43%	39%
I knew what was expected as a peer mentor			51%	42%
My role as a peer mentor provided valuable leadership experience		13%	39%	45%

Source: Spring 2024 Kessler Scholars Survey (N = 127)

Practical Strategies for Improving Program Effectiveness

The experiences of students who participated in the peer mentoring program—either as mentors or mentees—provide valuable insights into promising practices for improving the effectiveness of these programs.

- Where possible, pair students with mentors who share similar experiences and backgrounds (e.g., major, demographic identities, co-curricular interests) to improve the range of support that can be provided.
- Provide robust training to mentors on students' frequently asked questions and concerns, and access to relevant resources where applicable.
- Set clear expectations for all participants on the nature of support to be provided and the frequency of communication and interaction.
- Facilitate opportunities for mentees to meet and interact with their mentors. Additionally, regularly monitor and solicit feedback on the frequency and nature of these interactions and address any issues that arise in a timely way.

Support 2: First-Year Seminars

First-year seminars are discussion-based courses that help first-year students adjust to college and develop the academic and social skills they need to succeed. These credit-bearing courses are typically offered in small classes that provide opportunities for students to interact with faculty and peers, learn about institutional resources and processes, and understand the expectations of the academic community. First-year seminars are considered a high-impact practice, which means they have been shown to improve students' interaction with faculty, their participation in extracurricular activities, and their satisfaction with the college experience.[24] Additionally, studies show that first-generation students who take a first-year seminar during their first semester have higher GPAs and are more likely to persist beyond the first year.[25]

Teaching First-Year Seminar Courses Designed for First-Generation Limited-Income Students

Five institutions within the Collaborative network offered an exclusive semester-long, first-year seminar course for scholars during the academic year 2023-24. These courses were tailored to address the distinct needs and strengths of these FGLI students and provide a shared learning experience to build connections among students in each entering cohort. These credit-bearing seminars typically met at least once a week and were

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[24] George D. Kuh, *High-impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Washington DC: AAC&U, 2008); Mary Starke, Marshall Harth, and Frank Sirianni, Retention, Bonding, and Academic Achievement: Success of a First-year Seminar," *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition* 13, no. 2 (2001): 7-36;
Carolyn A. Schnell and Curt D. Doetkott, "First Year Seminars Produce Long-term Impact," *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 4 no. 4 (2023): 377-391, https://doi.org/10.2190/NKPN-8B33-V7CY-L7W1.
[25] Angela Vaughan, Janessa Parra, and Trent Lalonde, "First-Generation College Student Achievement and the First-year Seminar: A Quasi-experimental Design," *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition* 26, no. 2 (2014): 51-67; J. Klatt and R. Ray, "Student Academic Outcomes After Completing a First-year Seminar, *NACTA Journal* 58, no. 4 (2014): 288-2.

developed and taught by the program staff. Program staff designed the syllabus for these seminars in consultation with other faculty at their institution, referencing academic literature on first-generation student success and adapting existing seminar syllabi to suit their students' needs.

The courses also featured several internal and external guest speakers who presented on topics such as accessing campus resources (e.g., financial aid, campus counseling, and wellness). Program staff drew on their own experiences as first-generation college graduates to develop targeted content relevant to students' experiences.[26]

> Because the two individuals that were teaching the class were first-generation and were thinking about first-generation students when they were designing the class, students were getting material that was very intentional, that they wouldn't necessarily get in a standard first-year seminar class. And that's not to say that those aren't intentional, but they are not built just for first-generation students.

To explore these seminar courses in greater depth from the perspectives of course instructors and participating students, we conducted case studies at two campus sites—a flagship public university and an urban research university. Using data from staff interviews, student surveys, and program documentation, we examined how program staff designed and taught these seminars and also explored students' perspectives on the benefits of their participation. In the vignette, we share a few insights we learned from our case studies about these programs' approach to first-year seminars and the experiences of their program staff and instructors.

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[26] Ifeatu Oliobi, Caroline Doglio, and Dillon Ruddell, "Evaluating the Kessler Scholars Program: Findings from the Academic Year 2022-23," *Ithaka S+R*, 11 July 2024, https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.320987.

Vignette 1: First Year Seminar Courses Designed for Kessler Scholars in AY 2023-24

Fall 2023: 'Special Topics - Kessler Scholars Seminar' at an Urban Research University

In Fall 2023, the Kessler Scholars Program at an urban research university introduced a mandatory first-year seminar for its inaugural cohort, taught by two program staff members with experience teaching first-year seminar courses for first-generation students. The course aimed to increase scholars' awareness of campus resources; help them formulate academic, social, and professional goals and understand their learning styles; and provide a space for reflection on their transition to college. Weekly topics covered academic success strategies, such as time management and scholarly communication, and personal wellness subjects like self-care, nutrition, and imposter syndrome. The seminar also featured guest speakers from campus offices like financial aid, counseling, and campus wellness to familiarize students with available services. Assignments included weekly journal entries and a final reflection, with grading also based on attendance and participation.

Program staff found that the seminar facilitated consistent engagement with students, enabling them to address challenges and provide support proactively. This regular interaction built trust with students during their first semester, complementing the one-on-one meetings scholars were required to attend with program staff twice each term.

Reflecting on their dual roles as both instructors and program administrators, staff noted the importance of setting clear expectations for more formal classroom interaction and setting boundaries where appropriate. They identified several ways to improve future iterations of the seminar, including increasing the use of interactive content to sustain engagement, such as student-led presentations and discussions, and ensuring that topics did not overlap with other campus programs or courses. They also highlighted a need to adjust seminar times to better align with students' schedules.

Spring 2024: 'First-Generation College Students in Higher Education' at a Flagship Public University

The Kessler Scholars Program at a flagship public university introduced a one-credit seminar course in Spring 2024 for its inaugural cohort, specifically designed to support first-generation students from rural backgrounds. The course aimed to introduce scholars to academic research, explore the intersection of their identities and the higher education context, and identify opportunities for high-impact practices. Weekly topics were organized around two primary themes: 1) identity exploration and 2) leadership and professional development. Identity-focused lectures encouraged students to reflect on their rural and first-generation identities and how these identities could enhance their ability to succeed in college. Meanwhile, the leadership and professional development lectures addressed topics such as citizen leadership, professional networking, service learning, and participating in high-impact practices. The course was developed and facilitated by the Kessler Scholars Program Coordinator who had prior K-12 teaching experience and included several guest speakers.
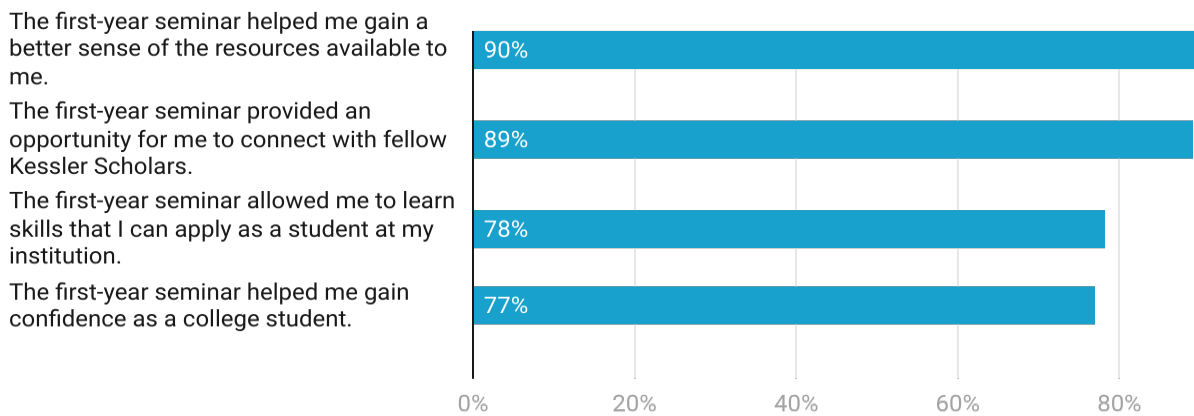
To develop the syllabus, the instructor drew inspiration from an existing first-year seminar course, research on rural first-generation student success strategies, and consultations with institutional colleagues and the Kessler Scholars Collaborative leadership. Students were graded on attendance and required to complete several assignments. These included maintaining a resource journal to identify useful campus resources, developing a proposal for a high-impact practice opportunity, and drafting a service-learning project proposal aimed at benefiting rural communities.

In reflecting on the course, the instructor noted that students had expressed a desire to attend the seminar multiple times a week. To address this feedback, the instructor proposed expanding the seminar to a three-credit course meeting twice weekly, to allow additional time for students to further explore their identities and foster stronger peer connections. Additionally, they identified the importance of tailoring course content more closely to students' specific needs and interests as first-years and implementing innovative strategies to sustain student engagement throughout the semester.

Benefits of First-Year Seminars

The 2024 Spring Survey provided insights into scholars' experiences during the first-year seminars. Seventy-three percent of respondents at the five campus sites that offered first-year seminars for Kessler Scholars rated their experiences.[27] At least two-thirds of these respondents, on average, agreed that their experience in these seminars was beneficial. Respondents said these seminars provided them with opportunities to learn about campus resources (90 percent), connect with other scholars (89 percent), learn valuable skills (78 percent), and gain confidence (77 percent) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: We are interested in learning more about your experience in the first-year seminar class designed for Kessler Scholars. Percentage of respondents who indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with each item.

The first-year seminar helped me gain a better sense of the resources available to me.	90%
The first-year seminar provided an opportunity for me to connect with fellow Kessler Scholars.	89%
The first-year seminar allowed me to learn skills that I can apply as a student at my institution.	78%
The first-year seminar helped me gain confidence as a college student.	77%

Created with Datawrapper

Source: Spring 2024 Kessler Scholars Survey (N = 96)

These results suggest that first-year seminars played an important role in preparing students to navigate the social and academic demands of college. We also asked survey respondents which aspect of their experience in the first-year seminar was most valuable. The recurring theme among scholars was that the weekly cadence of seminars provided regular opportunities to meet with other scholars, develop a sense of community, and learn more about their first-generation identities.

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[27] Ninety-six respondents reported attending a first-year seminar course during the academic year 2023-24, around 73 percent of all enrolled first-year students (N =131) at those five institutions.

Reflecting on the most valuable aspects of their experience in the seminars, one student shared, "[The first-year seminar] really addressed a lot of my worries about entering college, specifically with classes. It was relieving to hear other people share their tough experiences." Another remarked, "Being able to connect with other Kessler Scholars and knowing that we are all in the same boat makes me once again know that I am not alone in this journey as a first-generation student."

Program staff also observed that students who actively participated in the seminar tended to perform better academically, had greater awareness of resources, and were more engaged with program activities overall. They also noted that the seminars provided a safe space for students to learn more about the institution. As one staff member said, "I think they benefited from having a space where they could say things and ask questions and not feel judged. So, they talk about anything they were wondering about whether it was financial aid or class registration."

Practical Strategies for Improving Program Effectiveness

The experiences of students who participated in the first-year seminars, and the program staff who led these courses provide valuable insights for improving the effectiveness of these programs.

- Tailor the syllabus to meet the needs of the target student population, balancing academic and professional development content with structured opportunities to reflect on their intersectional identities and how these identities can be leveraged as strengths in the college environment.
- Incorporate interactive activities such as peer presentations, small group discussions, and campus tours to improve student engagement and encourage peer connections.
- Utilize frequent contact with students to establish rapport with students, identify any ongoing challenges, particularly in academic performance, and provide timely support.
- Collect regular feedback from students through end-of-course surveys, and informal discussions throughout the semester to improve the course experience for current and future participants.

Support 3: Summer Transition Programs

Many colleges and universities offer summer bridge or extended orientation programs that expose newly admitted first-year students to college-level academic work and the campus environment before they begin college.[28] Summer bridge programs typically last several weeks and take a variety of approaches to introduce first-generation, low-income, or otherwise underrepresented students to college life. These programs often combine academic coursework with co-curricular experiences such as socialization activities, peer mentoring, community engagement, and workshops to improve students' knowledge of the campus environment and available resources and support services. At residential institutions, summer bridge participants usually live in campus residences, providing opportunities to bond with peers. While these summer programs vary in length and approaches, research suggests that summer bridge programs offer lasting benefits, including improved belonging, academic engagement and self-efficacy, connections with staff and faculty, familiarity with campus resources, GPA, and retention.[29] Additionally, data from the 2023 Student Voice survey from Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse indicates that summer bridge program participants who are first-generation feel more comfortable accessing resources, more prepared for

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[28] Adrianna Kezar, *Summer Bridge Programs: Supporting All Students* (Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, 2000),1-7, ED442421.pdf.
Matthew Kilian McCurrie, "Measuring Success in Summer Bridge Programs: Retention Efforts and Basic Writing," *Journal of Basic Writing* 28, no. 2 (2009): 28-49.
[29] Beverlyn-Grace Odeleye and Jessica Santiago, "A Review of Some Diverse Models of Summer Bridge Programs for First-Generation and At-Risk College Students," *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research* 9, no. 1 (2019): 35-47; John Wachen, Joshua Pretlow, and Karrie G. Dixon, "Building College Readiness: Exploring the Effectiveness of the UNC Academic Summer Bridge Program," *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 20, no. 1 (2018): 116-138, https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025116649739; Lubella Lenaburg, Ofelia Aguirre, Fiona Goodchild, and Jens-Uwe Kuhn, "Expanding Pathways: A Summer Bridge Program for Community College STEM Students," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 36, no. 3 (2012): 153-168, https://doi.org/10.1080/10668921003609210;
Anne Suzuki, Audrey Amrein-Beardsley, and Nancy Perry, "A Summer Bridge Program for Underprepared First-year Students: Confidence, Community, and Re-enrollment," *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition* 24, no. 2 (2012): 85-106; Beth Bir and Mondrail Myrick, "Summer Bridge's Effects on College Student Success," J*ournal of Developmental Education* 30, no. 1 (2015): 22-30.

college, and more socially connected than other first-generation and even continuing-generation students.[30]

Campus partners offered various summer transition programs for incoming first-year Kessler Scholars in the 2023-24 academic session, including summer bridge programs, orientation programs, or peer mentoring during the summer months. The content and focus of these programs are often influenced by the campus context, existing institutional support, and students' needs. While some campus programs leveraged existing institution-led programs designed for historically underrepresented students, several campuses designed tailored programs specifically for Kessler Scholars. The program content included academic course-taking, workshops and talks on topics like first-generation identity, college readiness and available campus resources, campus tours, and social activities like field trips to build community and foster a sense of belonging.

To further explore the range of summer support provided to scholars across the Collaborative, we conducted case studies at four campuses through interviews with program staff and student focus groups. In the vignette, we describe the different implementation approaches from these four campuses.

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[30] Colleen Flaherty, "Students' Insights on Orientation," *Inside Higher Ed*, 31 August 2023, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/college-experience/2023/08/31/survey-what-college-students-want-orientation.

Vignette 2: Diverse Approaches to Providing Summer Support

Summer Academic Program at a Private Research University

At this university, scholars participate in an institution-led academic program designed for first-generation students or students who graduated from under-resourced high schools. The intensive five-week residential academic program allows students to earn seven college credits, register early for fall classes, make friends, and become familiar with the campus and surrounding neighborhoods. Tuition, food, housing, books, and round-trip travel expenses are covered.

Pre-Orientation Program at a Liberal Arts College

At this college, scholars are invited to participate in an optional three-day, exclusive, pre-orientation program for Kessler Scholars before joining the mandatory institution-led first-year orientation program. This residential program allowed students to move onto campus a few days early and attend workshops about campus resources and social events designed to foster peer connections within their Kessler cohort and introduce them to the campus and available resources. The agenda included family engagement workshops, an exploration of the first-generation identity and experience at the college, and a field trip. The program covered the cost of lodging and meals for participating students.

Summer Bridge Program at an Urban Public College

This campus program runs a four-day exclusive summer bridge program for Kessler Scholars which enables students to learn about campus life, available resources, and the expectations of program participation while meeting the rest of their cohort and forming early friendships. The schedule includes workshops with speakers representing various campus offices, activities led by upper-year students who serve as peer mentors, and a local field trip. Participants commute daily to campus, and the program covers the cost of meals.

Summer Peer Mentoring Program at a Flagship Research University

This exclusive program for Kessler Scholars pairs incoming first-year students with upper-year students within the program who serve as peer mentors. The program is fully virtual and intended to be an accessible and affordable way to support scholars across the country during the summer. Each peer mentor is assigned four to five mentees, and mentor-mentee matching is based on region, identity, and intended majors, where possible. Mentors are expected to contact their mentees weekly by email and every other week by voice or video call, either one-on-one or as a group. Mentors also receive training from program staff on frequently asked questions related to financial aid, housing, and support throughout the summer in their roles. While this role is unpaid, ambassadors receive approximately 20 hours of community service that can be applied to the program's service requirements.

Tailoring Summer Support to Students Needs

Incoming Kessler Scholars have diverse needs for summer support, influenced by their first-generation low-income identities, demographic characteristics, and pre-college academic experiences. For students from under-resourced high schools, academics-focused summer programs provided an opportunity to experience college-level coursework and build the skills necessary for success. One focus group participant shared, "I'm a first-gen [student], so I didn't know what was expected from going to college and how the classes worked, and I come from a low-income high school. So, I wanted to experience how much work I needed to put it in, and how to become organized." Many students also needed support adjusting to campus life and the new environment, having never left home or visited campus before. As one student narrated, "When I enrolled, I didn't know much about [the college]. I knew that it was a good school, but I had never actually come to campus. And I didn't know anyone in my grade or any of my future classmates." These students expressed a desire to learn about the institution, discover available resources, and make social connections in a space where they could ask questions without judgement. Others sought a better understanding of the program itself, including participation requirements and benefits.

Although summer programs varied in their curricular focus and structure across campuses, they shared core goals closely aligned with students' needs: fostering a sense of belonging, building strong peer connections, improving academic preparedness, and introducing students to campus resources. Program staff frequently emphasized the importance of creating a supportive community within each first-year cohort. As one staff member described, "One of our goals was to help [first-year Kessler Scholars] transition positively and build a community to feel more comfortable coming into. That's certainly, I think, a piece that we were able to meet through this four-day Summer Bridge Program."

To achieve these goals, program teams strategically partnered with colleagues across their institutions. For campuses hosting Kessler-specific programs, faculty and staff from departments like counseling and psychological services, community engagement, financial services, and the writing center were invited to give talks and lead workshops. Teams also collaborated with offices such as housing, financial services, admissions, campus safety, and dining to ensure smooth logistics. Other campuses integrated their scholars into existing summer bridge and orientation programs, leveraging institutional structures to maximize resources and align programming with broader first-year activities. As one staff member explained, "Instead of trying to recreate the wheel, we try to be really strategic about partnering with departments that service incoming freshmen and are doing a lot of the things that we know that they need to do as well."

Programs were designed with intentionality, relying on student feedback, institutional knowledge, and reflective practice to adapt and improve program features. Interactive activities such as campus tours and field trips were introduced to encourage peer socialization and increase student engagement, and tailored training prepared peer mentors to address frequently asked questions. At the urban commuter campus, student feedback about the desire for in-person interaction led to transitioning their program from virtual to face-to-face:

> When the program started it was heavily virtual because it was right in the middle of COVID. And it was just a few hours in a day. A couple of weeks after I started in this role, I received my first [survey] report from Ithaka S+R. I was able to read and incorporate some of that, and one of the major standout pieces that students expressed was that they wanted more in-person programs.

Accessibility was another guiding principle of program design, ensuring all participants could engage regardless of their location. The urban public college offered an in-person summer bridge program for its commuter population, while the residential liberal arts college prioritized early arrival programs to accommodate its significant international student community. Meanwhile, the public flagship university implemented a virtual peer mentoring program to accommodate students unable to attend in person. As the program director noted, "We only coordinate virtual opportunities [in the summer] so that we can be fair and equitable across the board because not every student is in the state [where the university is located] and can come and participate in person."

Finally, programs addressed students' basic needs by covering costs such as tuition, lodging, meals, and transportation. Removing these potential barriers to participation is especially important given the limited-income student population the program targets. Additionally, recognizing that some students faced opportunity costs like missed income from summer jobs or caregiving responsibilities, several campuses made participation optional rather than mandatory. One staff member reflected, "We know that a number of our students work over the summer and try to gather as much money as possible. So, coming to campus even three days early is three days less of work. We factored that into not making [the program] a requirement." This flexible approach underscored a commitment to supporting students holistically, acknowledging their diverse circumstances and responsibilities outside of academics. However, given the benefits of attendance observed by program staff—strong program engagement and connections within cohorts—students who are unable to attend summer programs might be at a disadvantage compared to their peers. Determining which core components of the program should be required rather than encouraged will be important to maximize the impact on students.
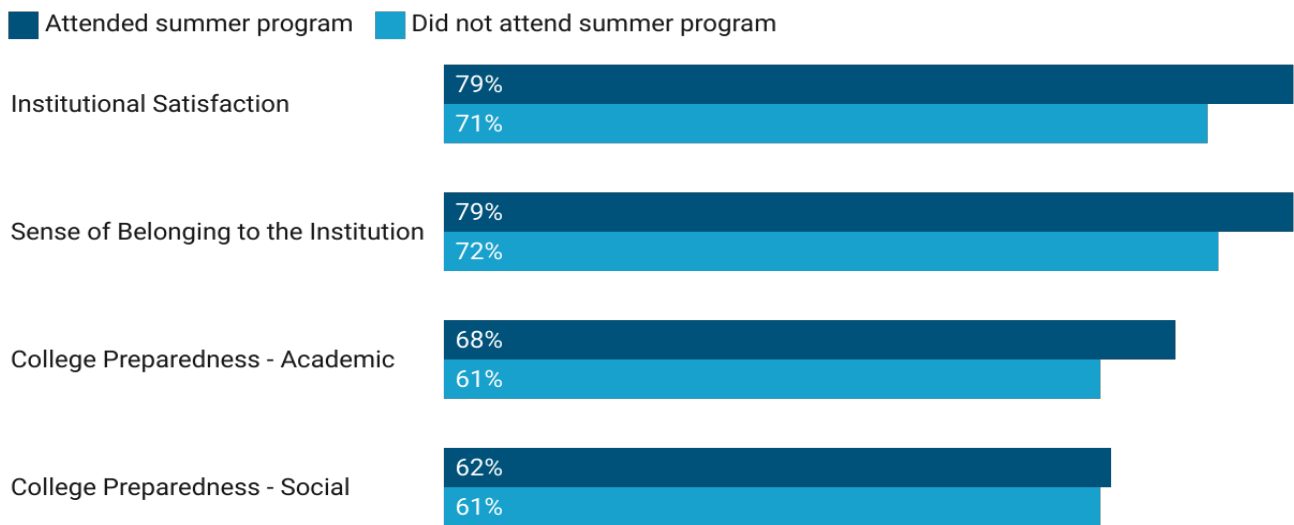
Students' Experiences of Summer Programs

The 2023 Fall First-Year Survey revealed valuable insights into Kessler Scholars' experiences with summer support programs across the Collaborative.[31] At the start of the Fall, participants in these programs reported higher levels of institutional satisfaction, a stronger sense of belonging to the institution, and greater college preparedness compared

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[31] Seventy-one percent of respondents reported attending a summer program or receiving some summer support in the summer before college.

to their peers who did not participate (Figure 4).[32] These findings align with staff observations that summer program participants displayed greater engagement with the program, stronger peer connections, and higher participation in leadership opportunities within the program like student advisory boards. As one staff member noted, "We see the data of the folks who attended, I think they are more engaged generally in the program and have a stronger sense of belonging amongst one another."

Figure 4: Core Program Outcomes by Summer Program Attendance. Percentage of respondents by program participation.

Created with Datawrapper

Source: Fall 2023 First-Year Kessler Scholars Survey (N = 360)

Through open-ended survey responses and focus group discussions, students shared overwhelmingly positive reflections on their summer program experiences. They frequently emphasized how these programs eased their college transition, enhanced their understanding of campus resources, and fostered a sense of community. Participants highlighted benefits such as building friendships, connecting with peer mentors, and learning about the institution. Summer program participants across the Collaborative shared positive reflections about their experiences.

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[32] These proportions represent raw average differences of the survey items. A detailed description of each survey item is included in the Appendix.

I was able to make connections and meet other students, especially other Kesslers. I struggle with maintaining relationships and starting friendships, but the summer program gave me a community and allowed me to bond with many of my close friends now that I hang out with daily. The retreat allowed me to learn more about the program, get to know my mentor, [the program lead], and the other mentors involved in the program.

Having a small group of women all going through the same transition, who all might be feeling the same feelings, made me feel validated. It helped me create bonds and have friends so that I am not completely alone on my first day. Familiar faces make me feel very included and not so alone. It helped me ask questions about the campus and of classes in general that I didn't want to ask in a big group setting."

Beyond social benefits, several students noted that summer programs prepared them for academic success by helping them to navigate coursework, engage with faculty, and utilize campus resources and support services. One student reflected, "[The summer program] helped me learn about taking classes, doing research, tips and tricks to succeed on campus, and ways to make friends." Another added, "It gave me a sense of self-responsibility with time management. I got accustomed to living on campus and learning where things are. I got to find support from other individuals and meet others who relate to me." For some students, the academic rigor of summer programs offered valuable preparation for college life. A student who participated in the summer academic program at the private research university remarked, "It gave me a taste of how academically rigorous the school was. It was almost like a free trial."

Despite these positive benefits, some students encountered challenges during their summer program participation. For some, timing conflicts with summer jobs, family commitments, or other enrichment programs posed difficulties. Others expressed feeling homesick given that it was their first time leaving home for an extended period. Several students expressed feeling exhausted or burnt out by the time the fall semester began, noting limited time to rest after high school graduation. Additionally, a few participants in the extended academic programs occasionally found the general coursework irrelevant to their majors, and report that the rigor of classes exacerbated feelings of imposter syndrome.

As one student shared, "The classes were not helpful to me, they didn't have anything to do with my major. The only thing I took away from the classes was that classes were going to be really difficult for me to adjust to." Some students also noted that guest speakers and faculty were not always sensitive to the financial realities of FGLI students, particularly when discussing opportunities like study-abroad programs. Relatedly, despite many Kessler Scholars Programs covering the core costs of these summer experiences, unexpected expenses such as commuting costs or meals during limited dining hours created additional financial challenges for a few students.

Despite some of these challenges, overall, the majority of participants reported significant benefits from their summer program experiences. These findings suggest that summer transition programs can be an effective strategy for promoting academic preparedness, social connection, and a sense of belonging among first-generation, limited income students at the start of their college journey. When programming is tailored to students' individualized needs and delivered in a validating environment, such programs can significantly improve FGLI students' transition to college and set students on a path towards success.

Practical Strategies for Improving Program Effectiveness

Based on conversations with program staff and student feedback, we identified several promising practices for implementing summer engagement programs for Kessler Scholars.

- Develop social and interactive programming (e.g., field trips, campus and city tours, group discussions and hands-on activities) to increase student engagement and foster close connections within cohorts.
- Sensitize participating faculty, guest speakers and campus staff to the unique challenges that first-generation students face and how to use appropriate asset-based framing that highlights students' strengths and the value they bring to higher education.
- Leverage technology to provide cost-effective virtual support to students who cannot be physically present on campus.
- Collaborate with other campus offices offering first-year student supports on the timing and curricular focus of programs to maximize existing resources and reduce content overlap.
- Consistently collect data from students to identify their needs, any barriers to participation, and feedback on program experiences.

- Adequately allocate resources to meet students' basic needs and attendance costs to increase accessibility.

Recommendations

After speaking with program staff, student participants and the leadership of the Collaborative, our team identified several elements and practices that support the ability of these programs to influence students' experiences and outcomes. We shared our emerging evaluation findings with the Collaborative leadership and program staff throughout the academic year in an effort to inform ongoing program improvements. Here we summarize key recommendations for program administrators, institutions, and other stakeholders seeking to design effective holistic support programs for first-year FGLI students navigating the college transition.

Adapt program support to students' multi-dimensional identities and needs.

Students hold various identities based on their race, gender, academic background, family income, parents' education, family situations, and lived experiences. These identities and prior experiences influence their early experiences of the college environment, the challenges they face, and their need for support. For instance, while some scholars expressed a need for academic support, others desired opportunities to learn about campus resources or form social connections. Program design should reflect this diversity while ensuring that programs remain accessible and impactful. For instance, encouraging rather than mandating full program attendance or providing virtual support may expand a programs' reach, but in-person interaction is likely to foster a stronger sense of belonging and connection among students. Finally, to address concerns about affordability, programs should anticipate and cover the full costs of program attendance where possible and sensitize program facilitators to the needs of the limited-income students they serve.

Leverage existing campus resources.

Program staff acknowledged the importance of partnerships with various campus units, both to connect Kessler Scholars with existing institutional supports and resources, and to implement programs designed for Kessler Scholars. It will be important for program administrators to supplement rather than duplicate existing campus resources and programs to maximize program effectiveness given resource constraints. This will involve a careful understanding of the institutional context and close collaborations between program staff and colleagues across the institution to create program content and deliver program logistics. Furthermore, this collaborative approach helps to break down silos and promote practice sharing within campuses.

Use data to inform continuous program improvement.

Assessment and continuous improvement go hand in hand. Program staff relied on various forms of data to understand students' backgrounds and needs, including student surveys and conversations with current and past program participants. Regularly seeking students' feedback on their program experiences can also guide real-time and future program improvement. It may be useful to collect data on various components of the holistic support program, such as summer programs, peer mentoring sessions or the first-year seminar, in addition to overall measures of program satisfaction and belonging. Data need not be restricted to formal sources such as administrative data, surveys, or focus groups, and can include listening sessions, post-event assessments, informal conversations, and program administrators' own institutional experiences.

Conclusion

The first year of college is a critical period for most students that influences their success at the institution and beyond. This study contributes to the growing body of evidence on the benefits of holistic support programs for historically underrepresented students. The findings and reflections shared throughout this report highlight the promise of tailored interventions such as peer mentoring, first-year seminars and summer transition programs for improving the first-year experience. Through intentional and flexible program design, effective collaboration with institutional stakeholders, and responsiveness to student needs and feedback, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative has created an environment for its first-year scholars that fosters a sense of belonging to the institution, improved academic preparedness, and a greater understanding of the unspoken norms of higher education. Additionally, program participants demonstrate increased engagement with the program, stronger peer connections, and heightened awareness of available institutional resources and support services.

These benefits of participation, and students' accounts of their positive program experiences, signal the potential of these programs to address the academic and social challenges that many FGLI students face in their first year of college. These accounts also highlight areas for improvement and the complexities of delivering comprehensive support. Addressing challenges such as ensuring equitable, inclusive, and asset-based support for all participants, maintaining student engagement in program activities, and accommodating students' diverse personal and academic needs within resource constraints will be important for effectively delivering these programs to meet students' needs. The Kessler Scholars Program provides numerous opportunities and forms of support to participating students. Looking ahead, future evaluation activities will examine which elements of program participation are most closely linked to improved student outcomes.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A: The Kessler Scholars Program

The Kessler Scholars Program is a comprehensive, four-year, cohort-based program designed to provide holistic support for FGLI students across the four-year experience. The program operates at 16 colleges and universities across the country, combining financial resources with cohort-based engagement and individualized guidance to provide FGLI students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed and thrive in college. Kessler Scholars at each partner institution are supported by a cohort of fellow first-generation limited income students and by professional staff who provide individualized academic, personal, and social support.

Campus programs are in turn supported by the Kessler Scholars Collaborative, a nationwide network launched in 2020 that guides program development and implementation, facilitates practice sharing across partner institutions, and provides students with opportunities to connect with other first-generation scholars across the country. Drawing on the collective impact model, the Collaborative aims for Kessler Scholars across its partner institutions to exceed national persistence and

graduation rates for first-generation students, to develop a strong sense of belonging and mattering at their institution, and to engage in high-impact practices shown to promote success outcomes and close equity gaps. Support for the Collaborative and campus-based Kessler Scholar Programs comes from the Judy and Fred Wilpon Family Foundation, working in partnership with Bloomberg Philanthropies.

To be eligible for the Kessler Scholars Program, individuals:

1. must identify as first-generation college students (neither parent/guardian has earned a four-year bachelor's degree);
2. demonstrate financial need;
3. show a strong commitment to community service and giving back; and
4. display potential to enrich and benefit from the diverse Kessler Scholars community.

While specific selection and recruitment processes vary across campuses, guidance provided by the Collaborative indicates that at least 60 percent of students selected for each cohort must be Pell-eligible, and most participating students should come from families with lower-income backgrounds. Additionally, campus programs are encouraged to maintain a gender balance within cohorts and strive to have a higher representation of underrepresented students of color in the Kessler Scholars Program than the host institution.

All Kessler Scholars benefit from a core set of evidence-based program activities designed to build a sense of community within the program, improve year-to-year persistence and degree completion, and enable students to develop in three outcome areas—college navigation and academic self-efficacy, sense of belonging and mattering, and leadership and professional development. These core program activities include one-on-one meetings with a Kessler Scholars staff member, general and cohort-based meetings and workshops, peer mentorship in the first year of college, leadership opportunities within the program and broader campus community, and community service projects. These programs are designed to support FGLI students as they navigate and make sense of

the hidden curriculum of higher education, that is, the unwritten rules and expectations implicit to academia.[33]

To complement these core activities, campus partners also develop tailored programming appropriate to students at each stage of the college journey. To support their transition from high school to college, first-year scholars receive programming designed to help them develop a sense of belonging to the Kessler Scholars Program and campus community, establish academic habits, and identify campus resources to support their success. These program supports include:

- Pre-enrollment summer support programs to support the transition from high school to undergraduate study.
- Program orientation events and Kessler Scholars Coin ceremonies to welcome students to campus and the Kessler Scholars Program community.
- Peer mentoring programs that connect first-year students with upper-level first-generation students and/or Kessler Scholars.
- First-year seminars to orient Kessler Scholars to college-level learning and equip them with strategies for navigating the campus environment.
- Regular workshops and social events to build a sense of community and foster growth in academic and social self-efficacy, social-emotional learning, and wellness.

Subsequently, upper-year scholars receive support throughout their college journey to select a major and define professional goals; develop leadership skills by serving as peer mentors or student advisory board members; engage in high-impact practices like study abroad, internships, or undergraduate research, and effectively prepare for life after college.

These evidence-based practices are linked to retention and have been shown to enhance students' sense of belonging, improve their confidence in navigating college, and increase academic achievement, especially for FGLI students.[34] The program model across the 16 partner schools is

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[33] Marcia Chatelain, "We Must Help First-Generation Students Master Academe's 'Hidden Curriculum,'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 21 October 2018, https://www.chronicle.com/article/we-must-help-first-generation-students-master-academes-hidden-curriculum/?sra=true.

[34] Joseph A. Kitchen, Rosemary Perez, Ronald Hallett, Adrianna Kezar, Robert Reason, "Ecological Validation Model of Student Success: A New Student Support Model for Promoting College Success among Low-Income, First-Generation, and Racially Minoritized

similar, but each campus may tailor programming supports to align with their specific campus contexts and institutional needs

Appendix B: Participation and Methods

This report employs a variety of quantitative and qualitative data sources collected as part of a broader multi-year evaluation that assesses whether and how participation in the Kessler Scholars Program influences students' college experiences and their psychosocial and academic outcomes. This longitudinal mixed-methods evaluation aims to understand students' perspectives and experiences within the program and at their institutions, identify needs for programming support to improve implementation, and maximize impact across the entire network and at each of the 16 participating institutions. Assessment and data collection activities include student surveys and focus group discussions, staff surveys, and interviews, administrative data pulls from participating institutions, and program implementation tracking. This appendix describes the data collected and the methodology used for this report.

Students," *Journal of College Student Development* 62, no. 6 (2021): 627-642, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/850733; Stephanie R. Lane, "Addressing the Stressful First Year in College: Could Peer Mentoring be a Critical Strategy?" J*ournal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 22, no. 3 (2020): 481-496. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025118773319; Katharine Moffat, "Critical Conversation Nine: They're Here. Now, What can we do to Keep Them?" in *At the Intersection: Understanding and Supporting First-Generation Students*, eds. Robert Longwell-Grice and Hope Longwell-Grice (Routledge, 2021), 260-265; Paul B. Thayer, "Retention of Students from First Generation and Low Income Backgrounds," *Opportunity Outlook: The Journal of the Council for Opportunity in Education*, May 2000; Sean Plaskett, Diksha Bali, Michael J. Nakkula, and John Harris, "Peer Mentoring to Support First-generation Low-income College Students," *Phi Delta Kappan* 99, no. 7 (2018): 47-51, https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721718767861.

Quantitative Data

Student Surveys

First-year scholars are surveyed twice during the academic year—first in the fall just a few weeks after the academic term begins, and again in the spring, just before the end of the academic term. Both surveys were developed to collect information about scholars' backgrounds, institutional experiences, engagement with the Kessler Scholars Program, and needs for program support. The surveys cover several domains and issue areas such as institutional satisfaction, sense of belonging, feelings of mattering, engagement in high-impact practices, self-efficacy, basic needs, career and professional development, and cohort-specific experiences of first-year and graduating students.

To participate in these surveys, students must be Kessler Scholars enrolled at the 16 partner institutions of the Collaborative and 18 years or older. We verified eligibility using student rosters provided by program staff at each institution, which included students' names, dates of birth, enrollment status, and university email addresses. Surveys were administered online through the Qualtrics survey platform. To increase response rates, we encouraged campus program teams to send reminders to non-respondents at each institution and sent regular email reminders via Qualtrics while the survey was active. As an incentive, the Collaborative sponsored a pizza (Fall) and study break (Spring) party for students at the institutions with the highest response rates.

Both surveys conducted in the 2023-24 academic year had high response rates. Of the 405 first-year students enrolled across the 16 participating institutions of the Kessler Scholars Collaborative, the fall survey received 360 responses (89 percent response rate), and the spring survey received 376 responses (93 percent response rate). Additionally, we received 660 responses on the Spring 2024 Kessler Scholars Survey, an 88% response rate for all scholars (n = 752). The insights presented in this report are based on the sub-sample of survey respondents who answered each question as applicable.

Key Item Measures

We measure institutional satisfaction and sense of belonging based on students' expressed degrees of agreement with three survey items measured on a 5-point likert scale (i.e. 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 =

neutral, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). For institutional satisfaction, these survey items were modified from the Institutional Integration Scale (IIS) developed by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980): "I am confident that I made the right decision to attend my institution," "I wish I were at another college or university," and "I have considered transferring to another college."[35] For sense of belonging, these items draw on research by Bollen and Hoyle (1990) and Hurtado and Carter (1997) and were modified from the 2020 National Survey of Student Engagement: "I feel comfortable being myself at my institution," "I feel valued by my institution," and "I feel like part of the community at my institution."[36]

We measure college readiness through the following question modified from the Johns Hopkins University 2018 Survey of New Students: "In the coming year, you will face a number of new social and academic situations. How well prepared do you feel you are to succeed academically or get along socially at your institution," measured on a 4-point Likert scale (i.e. (1=Unprepared, 2=Somewhat Prepared, 3=Quite Well Prepared, 4=Very Well Prepared).[37]

Administrative Data

As part of our evaluation efforts, we also accessed administrative data from participating institutions which included demographics, enrollment status, and academic outcomes for the 2022-23 academic year. We descriptively analyzed patterns in enrollment and short-term academic outcomes.

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[35] Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, "Institutional Integration Scale (IIS)," [Database record], APA PsycTests, 1980, https://doi.org/10.1037/t05853-000.

[36] Kenneth A. Bollen and Rick H. Hoyle, "Perceived Cohesion: A Conceptual and Empirical Examination," *Social Forces* 69, no. 2 (1990): 479–504, https://doi.org/10.2307/2579670; Sylvia Hurtado and Deborah Faye Carter, "Effects of College Transition and Perceptions of the Campus Racial Climate on Latino College Students' Sense of Belonging," *Sociology of Education* 70, no. 4 (1997): 324–345, https://doi.org/10.2307/2673270.

[37] "Student Affairs Surveys," Johns Hopkins University, https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/viceprovost/assessment-analysis/student-affairs-surveys/.

Qualitative Case Studies

To contextualize the survey findings and explore the mechanisms contributing to program effectiveness, we conducted qualitative case studies involving student focus groups and staff interviews at selected study sites. Study sites were selected through purposive sampling, to explore the diversity of support offered across the Collaborative.

Staff Interviews

We conducted virtual, semi-formal interviews with program staff members at six participating institutions between February and April 2024 to explore first-year seminars and summer transition programs. The goal of these conversations was to understand how program staff designed and tailored these supports to the needs of students on their campus, their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of student participation, and lessons learned for other institutions seeking to provide these supports. All interviews lasted 60-minutes, with one or two program staff members participating from each institution. We used the same protocols across institutions to facilitate comparative analysis.

Student Focus Groups

To explore pre-enrollment summer support programs, we conducted four virtual, semi-formal focus group discussions with first-year Kessler Scholars at four campuses in February and March 2024. The goal of these discussions was to gain an in-depth understanding of student's needs for summer support, their experiences in the program, and their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of these programs. We identified potential participants from a list of fall survey respondents at the selected study sites who said they had attended a summer transition program in 2023, in consultation with program teams. We invited all eligible students at selected sites to attend a 60-minute virtual focus group via email. Out of 99 scholars who attended summer programs at the four institutions, 19 scholars attended the focus group sessions, with four to five participants attending each site discussion. Focus group participants primarily identified as female (74 percent), and persons of color (95 percent). We used the same protocols across institutions to facilitate comparative analysis. All focus group participants received gift cards of nominal value for their attendance.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and the research team took field notes to record their observations. To analyze this data, we coded transcripts and notes thematically based on our understanding of the literature, and emerging themes from the data.