



ISSUE BRIEF

Improving First-Year Outcomes for First-Generation Students through Summer Engagement Programs

Lessons from the Kessler Scholars Program

Ifeatu Oliobi
Kristen Glasener
James Dean Ward
Elizabeth Davidson Pisacreta
Caroline Doglio
Dillon Ruddell

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Navigating the Transition from High School to College

The transition from high school to college is an exciting yet challenging period for many students, characterized by new academic expectations and social experiences. Many first-year students struggle with feelings of self-doubt and financial strain and may have difficulty balancing coursework with other responsibilities, all of which can contribute to attrition. First-generation students, in particular, face additional obstacles compared to their peers with college-educated parents. They are often less academically prepared, have fewer financial resources, are more likely to work or care for family members while attending school, and struggle with feeling like they are part of the broader campus community.¹ Compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students are more likely to leave college within their first year, and to leave post-secondary education without earning a credential.²

Addressing these challenges through targeted support programs is essential to ensuring that all students—regardless of background—can persist and succeed in higher education. Many colleges and universities offer summer bridge or extended orientation programs that expose newly

¹ 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>; Carmen Tym, Robin McMillion, Sandra Barone, and Jeff Webster, "First-Generation College Students: A Literature Review," TG (Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation) (2004), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED542505.pdf>; 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, https://heritage.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Research_Related_to_Success_of_First_Generation.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>;

² Emily Forrest Cataldi, Christopher T. Bennett, and Xianglei Chen, "First-Generation Students: College Access, Persistence, and Postbachelor's Outcomes," *National Center for Education Statistics*, 2018, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018421.pdf>; "First Year Experience, Persistence, and Attainment of First-Generation College Students," *NASPA*, 2019, <https://firstgen.naspa.org/files/dmfile/FactSheet-02.pdf>.

admitted first-year students to college-level academic work and the campus environment and provide early socialization opportunities before they begin college.³ Although these programs often vary in length and incorporate a variety of curricular approaches, researchers have found them to yield a variety of benefits for students, including improved academic performance, sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and retention, among others.⁴

Summer Transition Support through the Kessler Scholars Program

The Kessler Scholars Program, a four-year comprehensive support program designed for first-generation limited-income students, is one model that is showing early promise in improving students' high-school-to-college transition and supporting them to graduation.⁵ Through the program, more than 1,000 Kessler Scholars across a national network of 16 institutions supported by the Kessler Scholars Collaborative benefit from financial support, cohort-based engagement, and individualized guidance to help them succeed and thrive at each stage of their college journey.

³ Adrianna Kezar, "Summer Bridge Programs: Supporting All Students," ERIC Digest, 2000, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED442421.pdf>

⁴ Beverly 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, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1221221>.

⁵ 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>.



Incoming first-year Kessler Scholars receive various forms of summer transition support designed to help them cultivate a sense of belonging, improve academic self-efficacy, and navigate the campus environment.⁶ Depending on the campus context, existing institutional programs, and students' needs, these programs take different approaches, including summer bridge programs, orientation programs, or peer mentoring during the summer months. While some institutions design tailored programs exclusively for Kessler Scholars, others leverage existing institution-led programs that target first-generation, limited-income, ethnic/racial minorities, or students who attended under-resourced high schools.

⁶ Ifeatu Oliobi, Dillon Ruddell, and Caroline Doglio, "Tailored Support for First-Year, First-Generation College Students: Findings from an Evaluation of the Kessler Scholars Program," *Ithaca S+R*, 19 December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.321866>.

This Study

Using a multiple case study approach, we draw on data from staff interviews, student focus groups, and document review to examine the role that summer transition programs play in shaping incoming, first-year students' sense of belonging and college preparedness at the 16 colleges and universities that offer the Kessler Scholars Program. We also identify gaps in, or barriers to, participation in these programs and explore the perceived benefits of the program from the perspective of students and staff.

Key Findings

Many first-year scholars arrived on campus with limited awareness of academic success strategies, campus resources, and social connections. These students sought a supportive environment to learn more about the academic expectations of college classes, connect with peers, and navigate a new institution.

“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.” - Kessler Scholar

Program staff and administrators at participating campuses tailored summer programs to meet the needs of first-generation limited-income students on their campus by 1) intentionally designing programming to help students to succeed both academically and socially at college, and develop a sense of belonging to the institution and the program; 2) proactively anticipating and addressing students' needs to ensure inclusion and accessibility of programming; and 3) leveraging strategic partnerships with other campus units for program delivery.

“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.” - Kessler Scholars Program Staff

Students who attended summer programs say these programs eased their transition to college by fostering a sense of community and connection, enhancing their understanding of campus resources, and improving their academic preparedness. Program staff also observed that students who attended summer programs were more engaged with the program and institution, demonstrated a stronger connection to their cohort, and communicated more frequently with staff once the academic year was underway, compared to non-participants.

“[The summer program] helped me learn about taking classes, doing research, tips and tricks to succeed on campus, and ways to make friends.” - Kessler Scholar

Practical Strategies for Improving the Effectiveness of Summer Transition Programs

- 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.
- 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.
- Adequately allocate resources to meet students' basic needs and attendance costs to increase accessibility.
- 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.
- Consistently gather student input and feedback to identify their needs, any barriers to participation, and feedback on program experiences.