

How First-Generation Students Engage with Comprehensive Support

Lessons from an Evaluation of the Kessler Scholars Program

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March 5, 2026



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Introduction

First-generation college students—those whose parents did not earn bachelor’s degrees—demonstrate remarkable resilience in pursuing higher education, yet they face greater obstacles to degree completion than their continuing-generation peers. These challenges include fewer financial resources to pay for education and living expenses, lower levels of academic preparation, and limited guidance to help them navigate the complex environment of higher education.¹ As a result, first-generation students are less likely than their continuing-generation peers to persist from year to year, graduate within six years, and participate in enriching college experiences that foster belonging, academic, and professional development.² A growing body of evidence suggests that comprehensive approaches that address the multifaceted barriers that students face through financial aid, academic advising, mentoring, and cohort activities are most effective for improving student outcomes.³

¹ Jennifer Engle and Vincent Tinto, “Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students,” *The Pell Institute*, 2008, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED504448.pdf>; Jeremy Redford and Kathleen Mulvaney Hoyer, “First-Generation and Continuing-Generation College Students: A Comparison of High School and Postsecondary Experiences,” *National Center for Education Statistics*, 2017, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018009.pdf>.

² Jennifer A. May-Trifiletti, Ashley B. Clayton, and Robert K. Toutkoushian, “College Success for First-Generation College Students From One-Parent Households,” *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice*, ahead of print, January 31, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251251315470>; “First-Generation College Students’ Achievement and Federal Student Loan Repayment,” *First-Gen Forward*, 2024, https://www.firstgenforward.org/hubfs/FGF%20Fact%20Sheets/15405_FactSheet-05_final.pdf?hsLang=en; “First-Generation College Graduates’ Participation in Extracurricular and Co-Curricular Activities as Undergraduate Students” *Center for First-Generation Student Success*, 2021, <https://www.firstgenforward.org/hubfs/FGF%20Fact%20Sheets/First-generation%20College%20Graduates%E2%80%9999%20Participation%20in%20Extracurricular%20and%20Co-curricular%20Activities%20as%20Undergraduate%20Students.pdf?hsLang=en>; Robert K. Toutkoushian, Jennifer A. May-Trifiletti, and Ashley B. Clayton, “From ‘First in Family’ to ‘First to Finish’: Does College Graduation Vary by How First-Generation College Status is Defined?” *Educational Policy* 35, no. 3 (2019): 481-521, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818823753>.

³ Sarah Reber, “Supporting Students To and Through College: What Does the Evidence Say?” *Brookings Institute*, December 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp->

The Kessler Scholars Program is a comprehensive, cohort-based program that provides financial support, as well as academic, professional, and personal guidance to transform the college experience for first-generation limited-income college students. Launched in 2020 with support from Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Judy and Fred Wilpon Family Foundation, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative now supports Kessler Scholars Programs across 16 institutions, serving over 1,000 Kessler Scholars annually. The Collaborative aims for Kessler Scholars 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. To achieve these goals, campus-based programs provide scholars with financial support, dedicated advising, peer mentorship, cohort-based workshops and events, and structured opportunities to engage in experiences such as study abroad, internships, and undergraduate research. The Collaborative's program model is organized around a four-year developmental arc, progressing from building belonging and academic habits in the first year, through exploration and leadership development, to preparation for life after graduation in the fourth year.

Ithaka S+R has led the external evaluation of the Kessler Scholars Program since 2022, aiming to inform continuous program improvement and contribute to a broader understanding of what works in supporting first-generation student success.⁴ Our prior evaluation publications have documented the Collaborative's support for its network of campus programs, assessed the effectiveness of targeted interventions provided to first-year Kessler Scholars, and examined how program adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic enabled first-generation students to

[content/uploads/2024/12/20241211_CESO_Reber_CollegeSupports_1c.pdf](#);

Alexander Mayer and Kate Tromble, "Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success: Evidence-Based Approach to Increasing College Completion," *MDRC*, April 2022, <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/comprehensive-approaches-student-success-evidence-based-approach-increasing>.

⁴ Lia Lumauig and Ifeatu Oliobi, "Announcing a New Partnership with the Kessler Scholars Collaborative," *Ithaka S+R*, June 6, 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>.

navigate disruption and persist toward degree completion.⁵

In this brief, we leverage newly available data on students' program participation, year-to-year persistence, and completion rates to answer three key research questions:

- To what extent are Kessler Scholars across the Collaborative's partner institutions engaging in the core program activities expected by the Collaborative?
- How do Kessler scholars and program staff perceive the value of core program activities?
- To what extent is the Collaborative making progress toward its collective impact goals of closing persistence and graduation gaps, improving the student experience, and fostering a sense of community among scholars?

To answer these questions, we analyze data from a variety of sources, including surveys of Kessler Scholars and campus program teams, program participation data provided by partner institutions, administrative data from institutional research offices at partner campuses, participant observation of Collaborative meetings and events, and interviews with Collaborative leadership. More information about each data source and the key measures derived from these data sources can be found in the appendix.

The remainder of this brief is organized as follows. First, we describe the diverse community of students that the Collaborative supports and connects across its 16 partner institutions. Next, we examine scholars' participation in core program activities, including one-on-one advising, peer mentoring, cohort-based workshops and events, and leadership roles, and their perceptions of these experiences. Then, we assess the core indicators of the Collaborative's progress towards its collective impact goals, including retention and graduation rates, sense of belonging, and

⁵ Ifeatu Oliobi, Caroline Doglio, and Dillon Ruddell, "Evaluating the Kessler Scholars Program: Findings from the Academic Year 2022-23," *Ithaka S+R*, July 11, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.320987>; 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," *Ithaka S+R*, December 19, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.321866>; Ifeatu Oliobi, "Supporting First-Generation Students in a Time of Crisis: Lessons from the Kessler Scholars Program Response to COVID-19," *Ithaka S+R*, September 24, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.323673>.

engagement in high-impact practices. We conclude with recommendations for sustaining and strengthening support for first-generation students.

Who are Kessler Scholars?

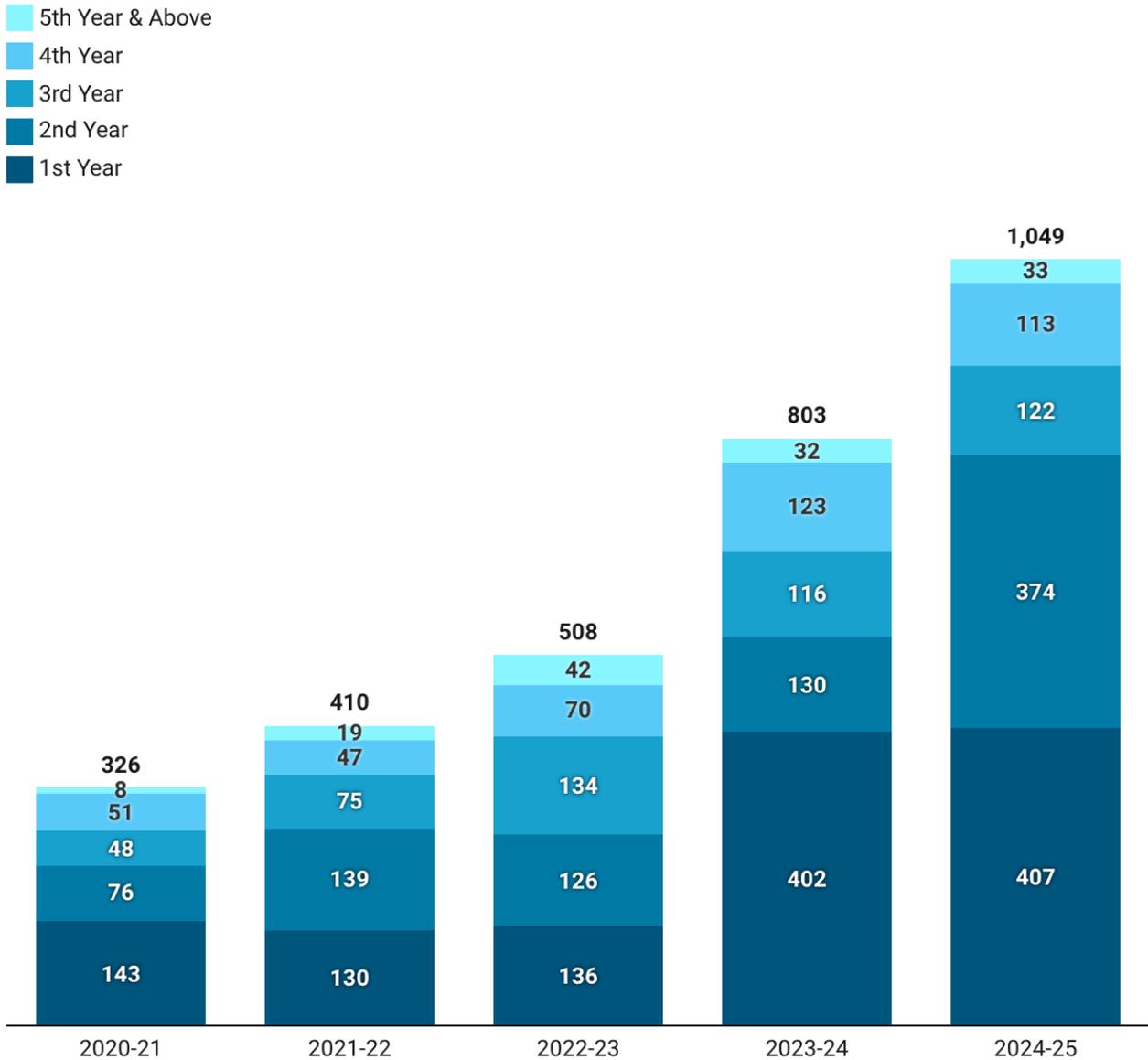
The Kessler Scholars Collaborative has served over 1,200 students and alumni across its partner institutions since its launch in 2020. The majority of scholars served over the years have identified as first-generation students, Pell Grant recipients, women, and students of color, as shown in a recently released [public dashboard](#).⁶ Figure 1 shows the number of students served across the Collaborative each year since 2020. The line represents the total number of students served in each academic year, and the bars break this number down by cohort.

The number of Kessler Scholars served has increased each year, with a particularly large increase in the 2023-24 academic year when the 10 newer partner institutions enrolled their first cohort.⁷ The addition of these 10 campuses also accounts for the high proportion of first- and second-year students in the past two years. In the 2024-25 academic year, 407 of the Collaborative's 1,049 scholars (39 percent) were first-years and another 374 (36 percent) were second-years. Enrollment of third- and fourth-year students will continue to grow as scholars at the 10 newer Collaborative institutions progress through college. In the meantime, readers should note that the findings in this brief largely reflect the experiences of first- and second-year students.

⁶ The dashboard can be accessed at <https://tools.sr.ithaka.org/kessler/home>.

⁷ "Annual Report Kessler Scholars Collaborative," *Kessler Scholars Collaborative*, 2024, <https://kesslerscholars.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Kessler-Scholars-Collaborative-Annual-Report-2023-2024-FNL.pdf>.

Figure 1: Number of Kessler Scholars served by cohort and academic year, 2020-21 to 2024-25.
 Sources: Institutional and Kessler Scholars Program administrative records



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Note: Three institutions offered Kessler Scholars Programs prior to the Collaborative’s founding in 2020. Three additional institutions enrolled their first cohort in the 2020-21 academic year, and 10 institutions enrolled their first cohort in the 2023-24 academic year.

Table 1 describes the background characteristics of Kessler Scholars served during the academic year 2024-25, based on available survey and administrative data. The vast majority of Kessler Scholars come from lower-income backgrounds. Ninety percent of scholars with valid data had received a Pell Grant at some point during their enrollment. Among the subset of scholars for whom self-reported family income data were available, 70 percent reported a family income below \$60,000 and another 23 percent reported a family income between \$60,000 and \$100,000.⁸

Kessler Scholars represent diverse regions and communities across the United States. All regions were represented, though most scholars were from the Great Lakes (34 percent) and or the Mid-Atlantic (32 percent), which largely reflects the location of the Collaborative's partner institutions.⁹ Forty-one percent of scholars were from suburban hometowns, 35 percent from urban hometowns, and 17 percent from rural areas. A majority (79 percent) attended public high schools.

Additionally, 76 percent of scholars identified as students of color, including 26 percent who identified as Hispanic or Latino, 20 percent as Black or African American, 17 percent as Asian, and 13 percent as two or more races. A majority (64 percent) identified as women.

⁸ Family income data are from Fall First-Year Kessler Scholars Surveys. We did not collect family income as part of the Fall 2022 First-Year Kessler Scholars Survey, contributing to a relatively large “Unknown” category (43 percent) for that variable.

⁹ Six partner campuses are located in the Mid-Atlantic region (Cornell University, Johns Hopkins University, Queens College, St. Francis College, Syracuse University, and the University of Pittsburgh), and four are in the Great Lakes region (University of Michigan, The Ohio State University, University of Dayton, and Saint Mary's College). See <https://kesslerscholars.org/our-approach/#partners> for a full list of Kessler Scholars partner institutions.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of Kessler Scholars served in the 2024-25 academic year.

	Number of Scholars	Percent of Scholars
<u>Region</u>		
Great Lakes	354	34%
Mid-Atlantic	337	32%
Southeast	111	11%
Far West	96	9%
West (Southwest & Rocky Mts)	55	5%
New England	38	4%
Plains	18	2%
International & US territories	23	2%
Unknown	17	2%
<u>Hometown</u>		
Suburban	435	41%
Urban	372	35%
Rural	183	17%
Unknown	59	6%
<u>High School Attended</u>		
Public	825	79%
Private	144	13%
Other	23	2%
Unknown	57	5%
<u>Family Income</u>		
Less than \$30,000	204	19%
\$30,000 to \$59,999	217	21%
\$60,000 to \$99,999	139	13%
\$100,000 or more	42	4%
Unknown	447	43%
<u>Pell Grant Recipients</u>		
Ever received a Pell Grant	772	74%
Did not receive a Pell Grant	168	16%
Unknown	109	10%
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>		
Hispanic	268	26%
White	186	18%
Black or African American	213	20%
Asian	183	17%
Two or more races	140	13%

	Number of Scholars	Percent of Scholars
Other	42	4%
Unknown	17	2%
Gender		
Women	675	64%
Men	329	31%
Other	35	3%
Unknown	10	1%
Total	1049	100%

Sources: Most data are from the Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey, except for family income which comes from the all First-Year Kessler Scholars Surveys.

Note: We imputed data for non-respondents using data from prior Spring Surveys, Fall Surveys, or Institutional administrative records, in that order, where possible. Remaining missing data are classified as Unknown. We did not collect family income data as part of the Fall 2022 First-Year Kessler Scholars Survey, contributing to the relatively large “Unknown” category for that variable.

Are Kessler Scholars engaging in the Collaborative's core program activities?

All Kessler Scholars are expected to engage in a core set of evidence-based program activities designed by the Collaborative to build a sense of community among scholars, support their academic, personal, and career development, and promote year-to-year persistence and degree completion.¹⁰ At a minimum, actively enrolled Kessler Scholars at participating institutions are expected to:

¹⁰ Joseph A. Kitchen, Zoe Corwin, Gwendelyn J. Rivera, Ronald Hallett, and Darnell Cole, “Proactive Advising Practice Guide: How Advisors Can Support At-Promise Student Success with Proactive Advising Strategies,” *Pullias Center for Higher Education*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.25035.67369>

- Attend at least three cohort-based programs or Kessler workshops, events, and social activities per semester
- Meet individually with Kessler Scholars professional staff members at least twice per semester
- Participate in the peer mentoring program (required for scholars in their first year at the institution)
- Engage in community service, leadership opportunities (e.g., as a peer mentor, member of their campus's Kessler Scholars Student Advisory Board, their campus's representative on the Collaborative's Student Leadership Board, or as a student leader in another campus organization), and high-impact practices (e.g., undergraduate research, study abroad, or internships) during their time in the program
- Maintain good academic standing, as determined by campus partners

Individual scholars may be exempt from these program requirements if they are not actively enrolled in a particular semester or if their campus program has adapted these requirements. For instance, scholars may be inactive if they are studying abroad or on a leave of absence. Additionally, three campus programs do not currently require their scholars to complete community service, while another campus only requires third- and fourth-year students to meet with Kessler Scholars program staff once per semester, given their other commitments.¹¹

¹¹ The three campuses that do not currently require community service are newer members of the Collaborative whose programs are still growing to scale. All plan to offer community service opportunities and require service hours or projects in the future.

Comprehensive support at each stage of the college journey

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative encourages campus partners to develop programming that is appropriate for each year of the undergraduate journey. The Collaborative provides a framework for year-specific goals and suggested activities that can be adapted based on student needs and institutional contexts:

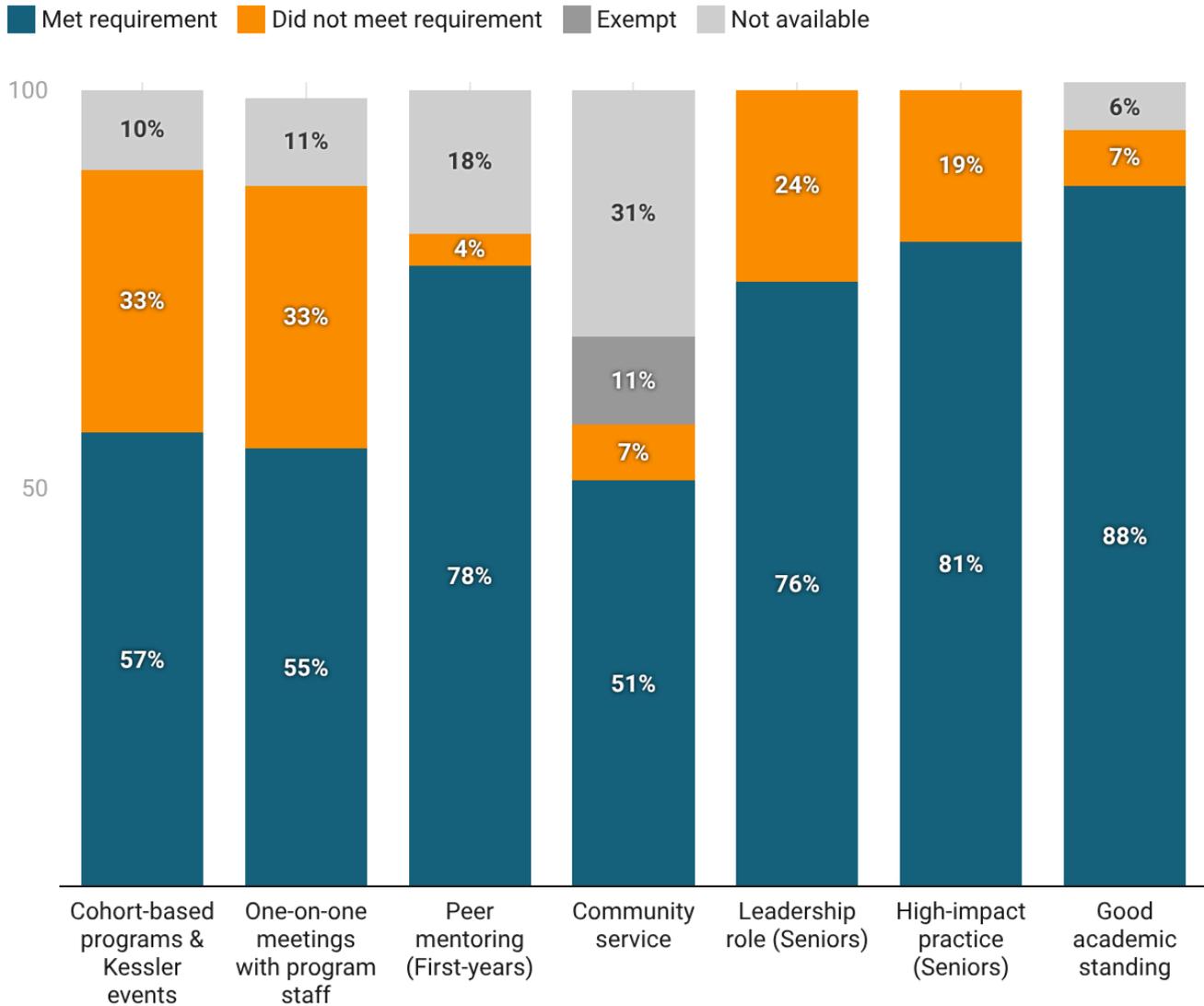
- **Year One (Connect):** First-year programming should focus on developing a sense of belonging to the Kessler Scholars Program and campus community, establishing healthy academic habits, and identifying campus resources. Activities include orientation events, peer mentoring, summer bridge programs, and weekly workshops or first-year seminars.
- **Year Two (Explore):** Second-year programming should emphasize cultivating a sense of self and purpose, selecting a major, and beginning to define professional goals. Scholars are encouraged to explore their values, beliefs, and social identities; take on leadership roles within the program (such as serving as peer mentors or advisory board members); and begin building their professional networks through career services partnerships and the Kessler Scholars and Alumni LinkedIn group.
- **Year Three (Empower):** Third-year programming should center leadership development and engagement in high-impact practices such as study abroad, internships, and faculty-mentored research projects. Scholars participate in enrichment activities aligned with their academic and professional interests and begin goal-setting for post-graduation plans, including career and graduate school exploration.
- **Year Four (Embark):** Fourth-year programming prepares scholars for life after college by providing transitional life skills, supporting progress toward graduation, and fostering connections with Kessler alumni. Activities include workshops on navigating job searches and graduate school applications, as well as programming to introduce scholars to opportunities for continued engagement with the Kessler community beyond graduation.

Figure 2 describes Kessler Scholars' participation in core program activities, drawing on program administrative data and student surveys. Participation is reported in four categories: Kessler Scholars who met, did not meet, were exempt from a participation requirement, or for whom participation data is not available.¹² Our analysis includes students in the exempt or data not available categories in the denominator to provide insights into how actual participation compares to the Collaborative's guidance, and to highlight potential improvements.¹³

¹² Data may be missing for core activities if students did not respond to the relevant survey question or if program staff had limited access to the infrastructure necessary to track specific participation requirements on their campus. Further details on data sources are provided in the appendix.

¹³ Excluding students who were exempt or for whom data was not available from the denominator: The majority of scholars were in good academic standing (93 percent). Most scholars received peer mentoring in their first year (96 percent), and had engaged in a high-impact practice (81 percent) or served in a leadership role (76 percent) by their senior year of college. Around two-thirds half of all scholars met with program staff at least twice per semester (62 percent), attended at least three events per semester (64 percent), or engaged in community service.

Figure 2: Kessler Scholars' engagement in core program activities during the 2024-25 academic year.
 Source: Program administrative records and Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey (n = 1,045 students)¹⁴



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¹⁴ Data on one-on-one meetings, cohort and all-Kessler Scholars meetings, peer mentoring, community service, and good academic standing are from program administrative records submitted by program staff. Data on internships, study abroad, undergraduate research, and student leadership roles (peer mentors, student advisory board members, and leaders in student organizations) are from the Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey.

Figure 2 highlights the variation in scholars' engagement across core program activities during the academic year. The majority of scholars were in good academic standing (88 percent). Most scholars had received peer mentoring in their first year (78 percent), and engaged in a high-impact practice (81 percent) or served in a leadership role (76 percent) by their senior year of college. However, only about half of all scholars met with program staff at least twice per semester (55 percent), attended at least three events per semester (57 percent), or engaged in community service. In the remainder of this section, we assess student engagement in core activities and how they can meet expectations.

Engagement within the program community

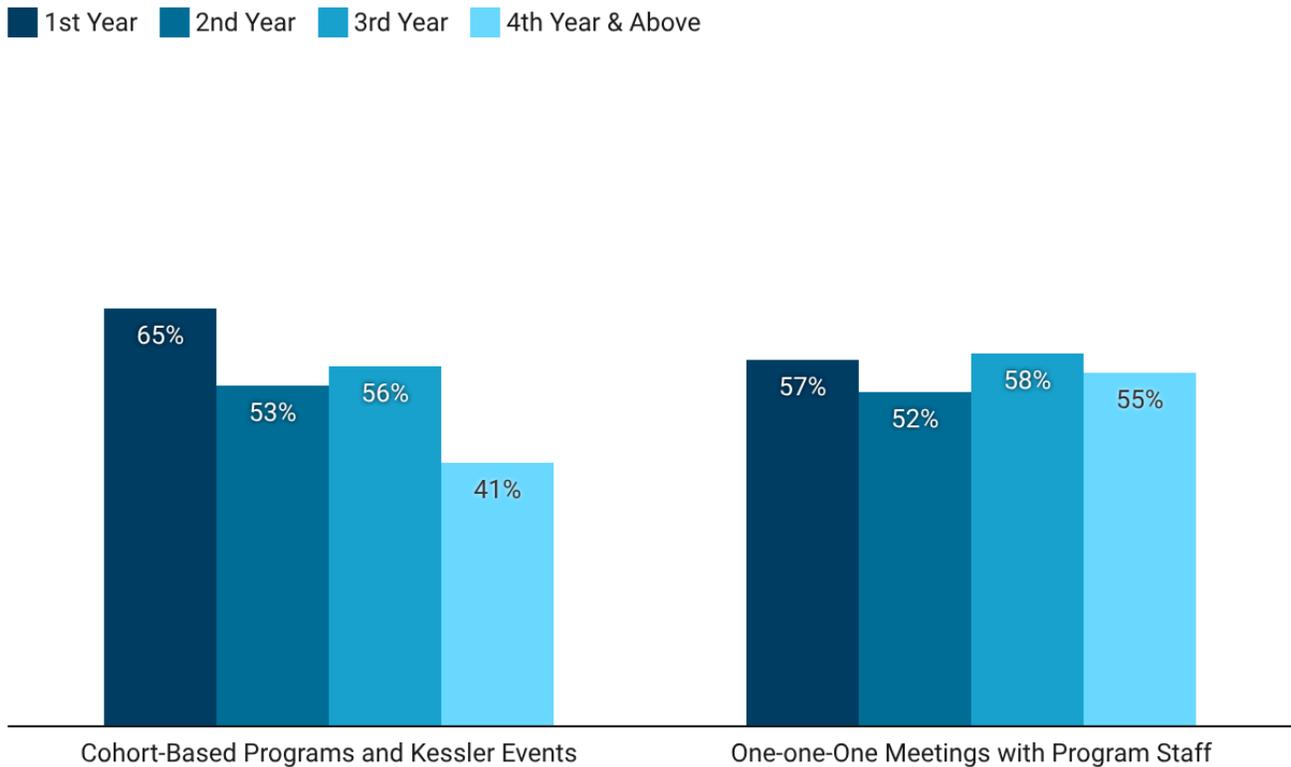
Regular meetings with other scholars and program staff are key to establishing meaningful connections within the Kessler Scholars community. Individual meetings with program staff provide an opportunity to reflect on scholars' academic, social, and personal development, and enable staff to monitor scholars' progress and address any challenges they may be facing. Cohort-based programs and Kessler events and workshops facilitate learning and skills development in areas such as academic self-efficacy, leadership, and wellness and provide opportunities for scholars to build community within their cohort. About half of all scholars met with program staff at least twice per semester (55 percent), or attended at least three program events per semester (57 percent).

Engagement in program activities is especially high among first-year scholars. Most first-year scholars (78 percent) received peer mentoring, and Figure 3 below shows that first-year scholars engaged in core program events and meetings with program staff at a higher rate than other cohorts.¹⁵ That said, peer mentoring is a requirement for first-year scholars, and 22 percent did not report receiving this support, suggesting room for improvement in ensuring full engagement across campuses.

¹⁵ As noted in the enrollment section of the brief, the program participation data for third- and fourth-year scholars only applies to the six inaugural institutions while results for first- and second-year scholars include all 16 partner institutions.

Figure 3: Kessler Scholars' engagement within the program community, by cohort. Percentage of students who met the requirement.

Source: Kessler Scholars Program administrative records (n = 1,045 students)



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In contrast to first-year scholars, it can be challenging for upper-level students with significant commitments outside of the program, such as work, athletics, or involvement in other campus activities, to fully engage with core program activities.¹⁶ Indeed, in a survey of program staff, 74 percent of respondents identified student engagement and turnout as one of the top three challenges they faced in administering the Kessler Scholars Program. Staff indicated that it was especially challenging to engage upper-level students, who often struggle to attend Kessler events due to time spent in internships, research, or leadership roles. One staff member observed,

¹⁶ Our analysis of self-reported data from the Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey indicates that around 59 percent of all scholars were employed, compared to 82 percent of upper-year scholar.

The hope is for students to take on leadership opportunities and engage in high-impact activities, which means they become more constrained with time. It will definitely be a challenge to require 3rd and 4th year students to participate in X amount of events and advising meetings.

In student surveys, respondents suggested that greater flexibility in scheduling might increase their participation. For instance, one student requested “more events that students can participate in if they are heavily involved on campus.” However, program staff noted that finding times to hold events that work with all or most students’ schedules can be difficult. Additionally, staff turnover and transitions can temporarily impact programs’ ability to offer events or meet individually with students. These challenges help explain lower engagement in specific program activities and point to areas where the program model could be adapted to better reflect the evolving needs and commitments of upper-level students.

Participation in community service, leadership opportunities and high-impact practices

With support from the program, Kessler Scholars are encouraged to serve in various leadership capacities within the program and in the broader campus community during their college experience, and to give back to their communities. Several leadership opportunities are available within the program, including serving as a peer mentor to first-year scholars, a member of their campus’s Kessler Scholars Student Advisory Board (KSAB), or their campus’s representative on the Collaborative’s Student Leadership Board. In the Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey, 76 percent of graduating scholar respondents at the inaugural institutions reported that they had served as peer mentors or advisory board members in the program, or held a leadership role in a student organization at some point (see Figure 2).¹⁷ Program staff reported that about 51 percent of all Kessler Scholars participated in a community service project or completed

¹⁷ This likely underestimates the true percentage of seniors who served in a program leadership role because we did not collect information about membership on the Collaborative’s student leadership board in the survey.

required service hours during the 2024-25 academic year.¹⁸

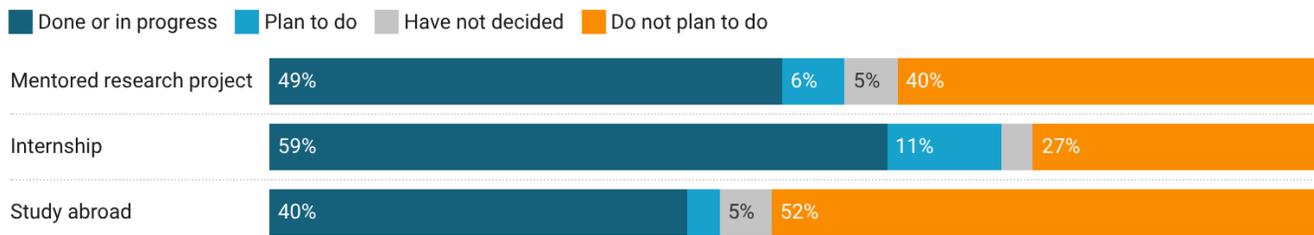
Based on self-reported data from the Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey, a majority of graduating senior respondents at the inaugural institutions (81 percent) had participated in at least one of three high-impact practices during their time in college: studying abroad, completing an internship, or participating in a mentored research project. These high-impact experiences have been linked to a variety of college outcomes, including persistence and degree completion, sense of belonging, and academic and personal development.¹⁹

Figure 4 breaks down senior survey respondents' engagement in high-impact practices by type of practice. Senior survey respondents most often completed an internship, with 59 percent having done so at the time of survey administration and another 11 percent planning to do so. About 49 percent worked on a research project with a faculty member and 40 percent studied abroad.

¹⁸ This might underestimate the true percentage of scholars who engaged in community service as data on community service participation were not available for 31 percent of scholars. When excluding these scholars from the calculation, 74 percent of students performed community service. See the appendix for more information about data availability.

¹⁹ Anthony C. Ogden, Hsiu-Zu Ho, Yeana W. Lam, Angela D. Bell, Rachana Bhatt, Leslie Hodges, Coryn Shiflet, and Donald Rubin, "The Impact of Education Abroad Participation on College Student Success Among First-Generation Students," *Journal of Higher Education* 95, no. 3 (2024): 285-312, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2023.2182569>; Cindy A. Kilgo, Jessica K. Ezell Sheets, and Ernest T. Pascarella, "The Link Between High-Impact Practices and Student-Learning: Some Longitudinal Evidence," *Higher Education* 69 (2015): 509-525, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9788-z>; Georgie D. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008), <https://navigate.utah.edu/resources/documents/hips-kuh-2008.pdf>; Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, *High-Impact Practices: Interrogating Quality and Equity* (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2020), <https://nsse.indiana.edu/research/annual-results/2020/hips/index.html>.

Figure 4: Kessler Scholars' engagement in select high-impact practices
 Source: Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey (n = 63 graduating seniors)



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While participation rates in leadership roles, community service and high-impact practices may be underestimated due to survey self-reporting and missing participation data, campus programs can ensure that all scholars meet expectations for program participation by conducting targeted outreach to scholars who have not yet participated in these experiences by their junior year.

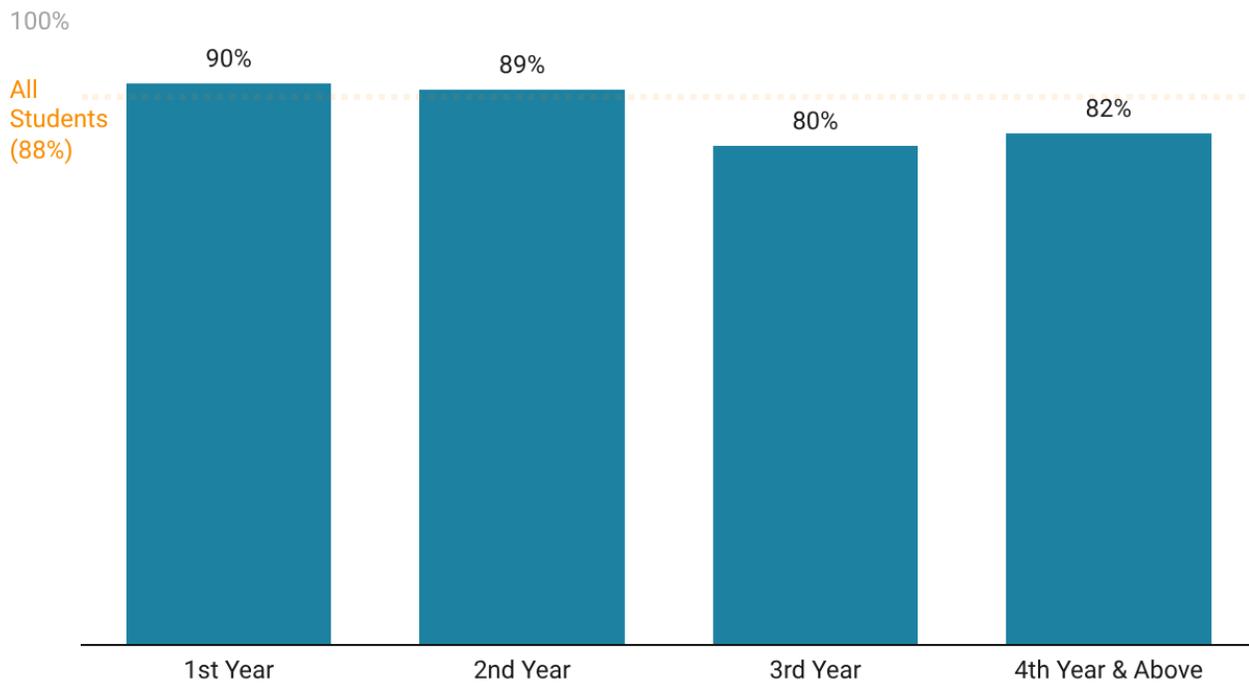
Maintaining good academic standing

Satisfactory academic performance is critical for retention, graduation, and post-college success. Kessler Scholars are expected to maintain good academic standing throughout their time in the program, and program staff regularly monitor and support scholars who are struggling to meet academic expectations. As shown in Figure 5, program staff reported about 88 percent of all actively enrolled Kessler Scholars were in good academic standing at the end of the academic year.

Figure 5 also shows that a slightly higher percentage of first-year (90 percent) and second-year students (89 percent) were in good academic standing compared to third-year (80 percent) and fourth-year students (82 percent).

Figure 5: Percentage of Kessler Scholars in good academic standing at the end of the 2024-25 academic year, by cohort.

Source: Kessler Scholars Program administrative records (n = 1,045 students)



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Note: At the time of data collection, spring grades were not available at two institutions, so academic standing for students at these institutions was based on fall grades. 10 of the 16 institutions did not have students enrolled in the 3rd year or above during the academic year.

To further understand scholars' academic performance, we compared the average cumulative grade-point averages (GPAs) of Kessler Scholars with their first-generation peers at inaugural institutions through the 2023-24 academic year, the most recent year for which institution-wide administrative data is available.²⁰ Kessler Scholars had an average cumulative GPA of 3.40, compared to 3.12 among all first-generation students at the same institutions. This comparison is descriptive and does not account for differences in pre-college academic preparation or other

²⁰The analysis of average cumulative GPA is based on inaugural institutions only. At the time of the analysis, only the inaugural institutions had four cohorts of Kessler Scholars, which was necessary for an appropriate comparison to the institution-wide GPA data provided by campus IR offices.

Additionally, due to data limitations, the analysis of average cumulative GPA is based on four out of the six inaugural institutions.

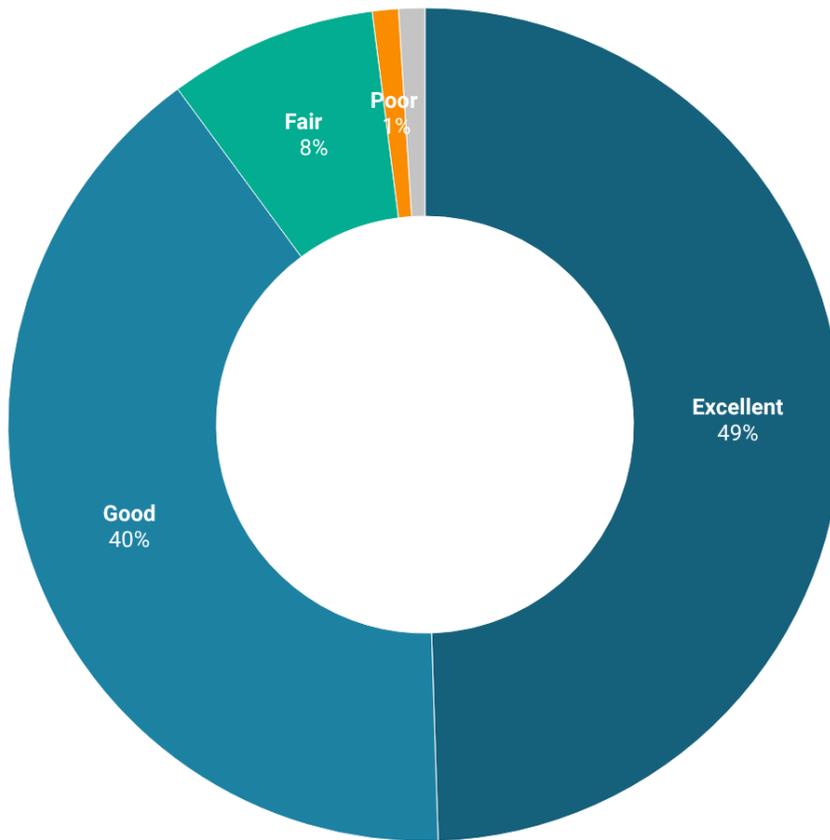
characteristics that may influence selection into the Kessler Scholars Program.

How do Kessler Scholars and program staff perceive the value of core program activities?

Most Kessler Scholars reported a positive overall experience within the program. As shown in Figure 6, 94 percent of survey respondents rated their overall program experience as good or excellent. In this section, we describe scholars' perceptions of their experiences with the core program activities, drawing on responses to the Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey. We also report on program staff's perceptions of the effectiveness of core program activities at improving outcomes for scholars.

Figure 6: Respondents' rating of their overall experience in the Kessler Scholars Program.
Source: Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey (n = 880 students)

■ Excellent ■ Good ■ Fair ■ Poor ■ No response



Created with Datawrapper

Student perspectives on the value of core program activities

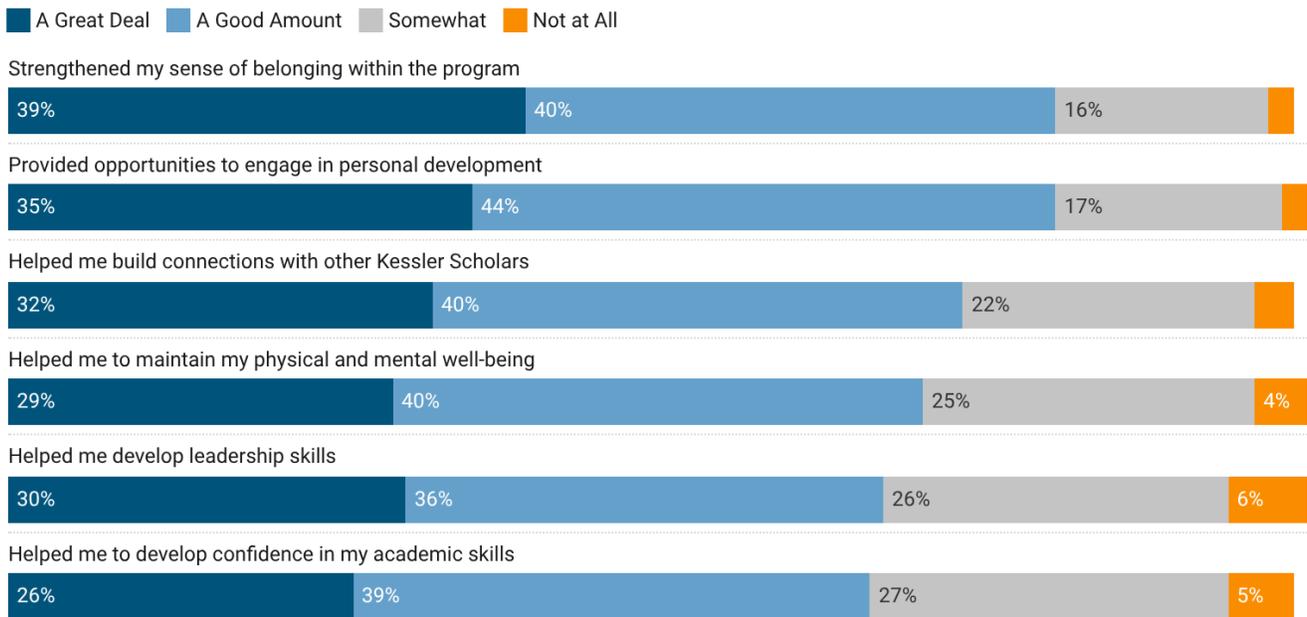
Across program activities, Kessler Scholars reported deriving value from attending program events and activities, engaging with other scholars, and receiving support from program staff.

Cohort-based programs and Kessler events

As shown in Figure 7, 72 percent of scholars who responded to the Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey reported a great deal or a good amount of benefit from participating in program events. Respondents were especially likely to indicate that these events strengthened their sense of belonging

(79 percent), supported their personal development (79 percent), and helped them build connections with other Kessler Scholars (72 percent). Smaller percentages of respondents reported that program events helped them develop leadership skills (66 percent) or build confidence in their academic skills (65 percent). The relative strength of belonging-related outcomes compared to leadership and academic confidence is a pattern that recurs across other program activities, as we discuss below.

Figure 7: Please indicate the extent to which your participation in Kessler Scholars meetings, events, and workshops has done the following. (4=A Great Deal; 3=A Good Amount; 2=Somewhat; 1=Not at All)
 Source: Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey (n = 880)



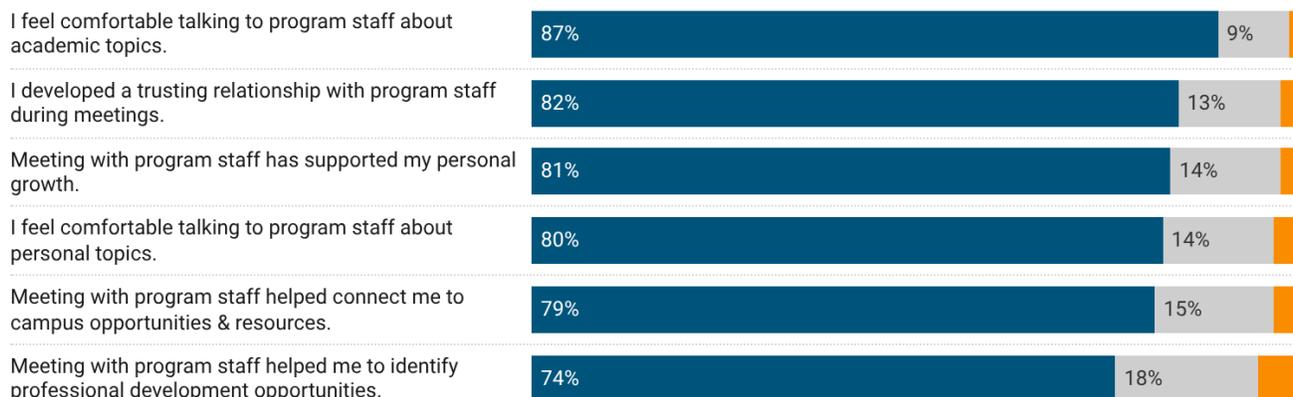
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One-on-one meetings with program staff

Kessler Scholars also indicated positive perceptions of the effectiveness of one-on-one meetings with program staff. On average, 81 percent of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that one-on-one meetings with program staff were useful (Figure 8). Respondents reported strong interpersonal connections with program staff: 87 percent felt comfortable talking to program staff about academic topics, and 82 percent reported that they trusted program staff. Respondents were least likely to indicate that meeting with program staff helped them identify professional development opportunities, though 74 percent still strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.

Figure 8: We are interested in learning more about your experience with one-on-one (individual) meetings with Kessler Scholars professional staff. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. (5=Strongly Agree; 4=Agree; 3=Neutral; 2=Disagree; 1=Strongly Disagree)

Source: Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey (n = 880)



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Peer mentoring for first-year scholars

Most first-year respondents who were assigned a peer mentor reported positive experiences of their interactions with their mentors.²¹ Over 70 percent of peer mentees say they actively participated in meetings with their mentors (79 percent), developed trusting relationships (74 percent), and were comfortable discussing both personal (73 percent) and academic (84 percent) topics with their mentors (Figure 9).

When asked about the most valuable aspect of the peer mentoring program, many first-year respondents highlighted the value of a relationship with an upper-level student who shared a similar background and had successfully navigated their first year of college. For instance, one respondent said, “The most valuable aspect was hearing what my mentor did and would've done differently in his or her first year.” Another respondent echoed this sentiment, saying, “Connecting with an individual who was in a similar position academically and socially was a comforting feeling, and helped me to feel better immersed in my college experience.”

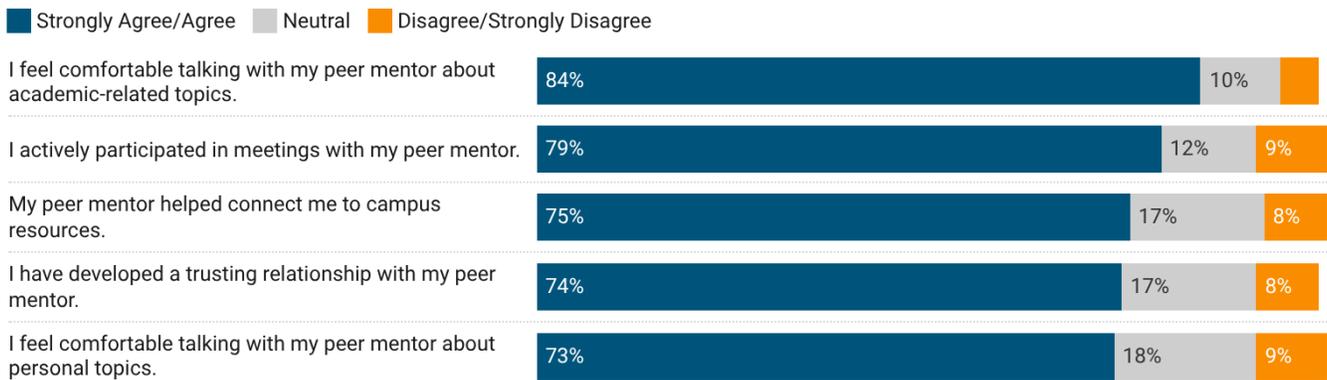
Respondents also said that their mentors provided them with useful information about campus resources and navigating academic and social situations. Common examples included help with course selection,

²¹ Eighty-five percent of first-year respondents reported that they were assigned a peer mentor in the Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey.

information about study abroad, and advice on balancing academics and other commitments. Respondents also turned to their peer mentors to help them navigate specific challenges. For example, one respondent commented, “I have an upperclass student I can always contact to ask questions.”²²

Figure 9: We are interested in learning more about your experience in the peer mentoring program. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements. (5=Strongly Agree; 4=Agree; 3=Neutral; 2=Disagree; 1=Strongly Disagree)

Source: Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey (n = 296 first-year scholars who indicated that they had been assigned a peer mentor).



Created with Datawrapper

Staff support for students serving in program leadership roles

Program staff provide training and support for students serving as peer mentors or Student Advisory Board members within the program. Overall, student survey respondents who served in these roles reported high levels of support from program staff (Figure 10). Large majorities of respondents (over 80 percent in most cases) reported that they knew what was expected of them, that they had opportunities to engage in leadership responsibilities, and that they felt supported. A key goal of these opportunities is to facilitate the development of students’ leadership skills, and 88 percent of peer mentors and 85 percent of campus student

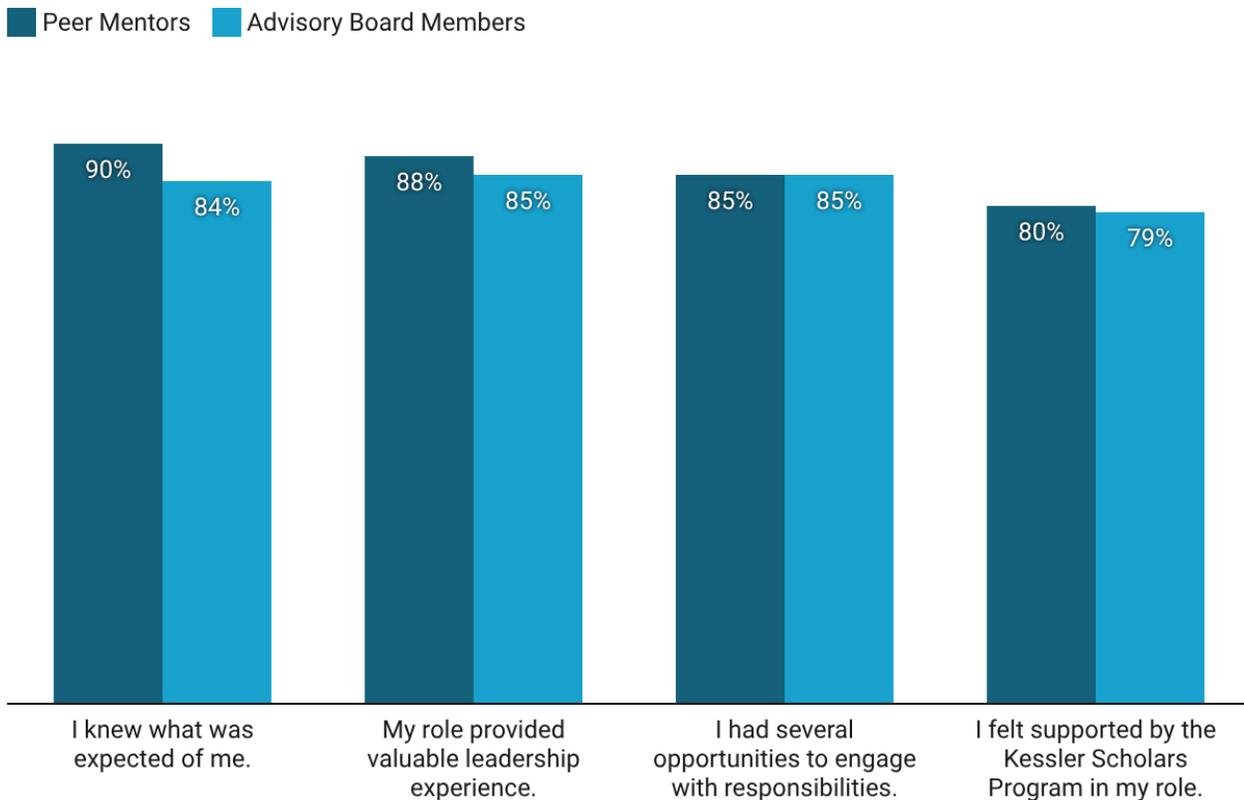
²² For more information about peer mentoring and other best practices for first-generation students in their first year of college, see Ifeatu Oliobi, Dillon Ruddell, and Caroline Doglio, “Tailored Support for First-Year, First-Generation College Students: Findings from an Evaluation of the Kessler Scholars Program,” *Ithaca S+R*, December 19, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.321866>.

advisory board members reported that their roles provided valuable leadership experience.

Multiple graduating senior respondents identified the development of leadership skills as one way that the Kessler Scholars Program prepared them for their post-graduation plans. One graduating senior noted, “It [the Kessler Scholars Program] provided workshops to understand my strengths and improve my leadership skills.” Another commented, “It helped me learn valuable skills like communication, leadership, and time management.”

Figure 10: Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements. Percentage of respondents who indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with each item.

Source: Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey (n = 177 peer mentors and n = 94 advisory board members)



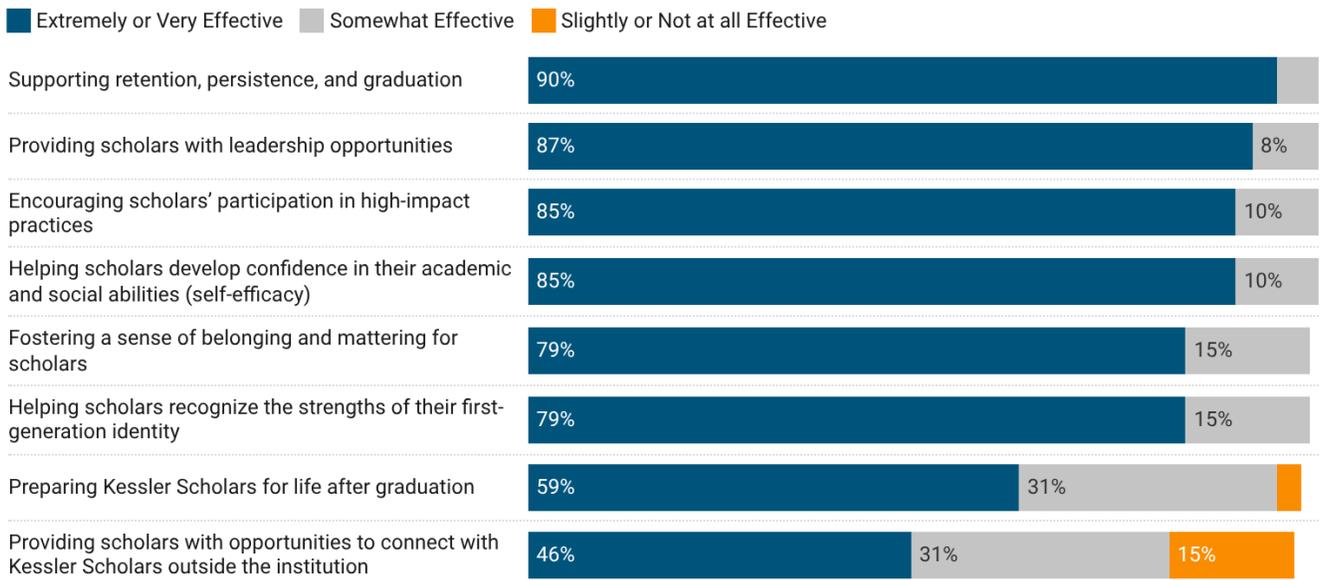
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Program staff perspectives on the value of core program activities

Staff perceptions of the value of core program activities, collected through the Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Staff Survey, largely align with scholars' self-reported experiences. As shown in Figure 11, program staff rated core program activities as extremely or very effective in supporting retention, persistence, and graduation (90 percent) and providing students with opportunities for leadership (85 percent) and engagement in high-impact practices (87 percent). Staff also rated program activities highly for helping scholars develop confidence in their abilities (85 percent) and fostering a sense of belonging and mattering (79 percent).

Despite strong alignment between core program activities and most outcomes, staff identified two areas where program activities were notably less effective: preparing scholars for life after graduation (59 percent) and fostering connections with Kessler Scholars at other institutions (46 percent). Direct feedback from staff reinforced these patterns, with several respondents noting the need to better address the interests and developmental needs of upper-year students. One staff member suggested that programming would "benefit from more career exploration opportunities," while another noted that "we're adjusting our programming to better fit a student lifecycle approach."

Figure 11: In its current form, how effective is the Kessler Scholars Program model in the following areas? (5=Extremely Effective; 4=Very Effective; 3=Somewhat Effective; 2=Slightly Effective; 1=Not at all Effective)
 Source: Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Staff Survey (n = 38)



Created with Datawrapper

Is the Kessler Scholars Collaborative making progress toward its collective impact goals?

Each year, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative establishes a set of shared collective impact goals across its partner institutions, oriented toward improving outcomes for first-generation students. Table 2 summarizes the Collaborative's collective impact goals for the 2024-25 academic year and its performance relative to those goals. Several factors are important to consider when interpreting these results. may influence these performance measures. First, since 10 of the 16 institutions admitted their first cohorts of Kessler Scholars in fall 2023 and account for the majority of enrollment (48 percent of all scholars in the 2024-25 academic year attend these 10 institutions), performance for most goals

primarily reflects the experiences of first- and second-year students. Second, goals relating to graduating students, such as the four-year graduation rate and participation in high-impact practices, are based on the inaugural partner institutions only, as the remaining institutions will not graduate their first cohort until the 2026-27 academic year.

Table 2: The Collaborative's progress toward its collective impact goals, 2024-25 academic year.

Outcome measure	Goal	Actual	Gap	Status
Four-year graduation rate	70%	74%	4	Exceeded
First-year scholars report that the program met or exceeded expectations	90%	94%	4	Exceeded
First-to-second year retention rate	94%	94%	0	Met
Program satisfaction rate	94%	90%	-4	Not yet met
Sense of belonging to the Kessler Scholars community	90%	85%	-5	Not yet met
Feelings of mattering within the Kessler Scholars Program	92%	88%	-4	Not yet met
Graduating scholars complete at least one high-impact practice	90%	81%	-9	Not yet met

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Our analysis of administrative data shows that the Collaborative met its goals for retention of first-year students. Ninety-four percent of Kessler Scholars in the fall 2023 entering cohort returned to their initial institution in the fall of 2024, meeting the Collaborative's 94 percent benchmark (Table 2). This represents a small decrease from prior cohorts: 96 percent for the fall 2022 cohort and 97 percent for the fall 2021 cohort. However, Kessler Scholars' first-year retention rate continues to compare favorably to those of other first-generation students nationwide, where between 80

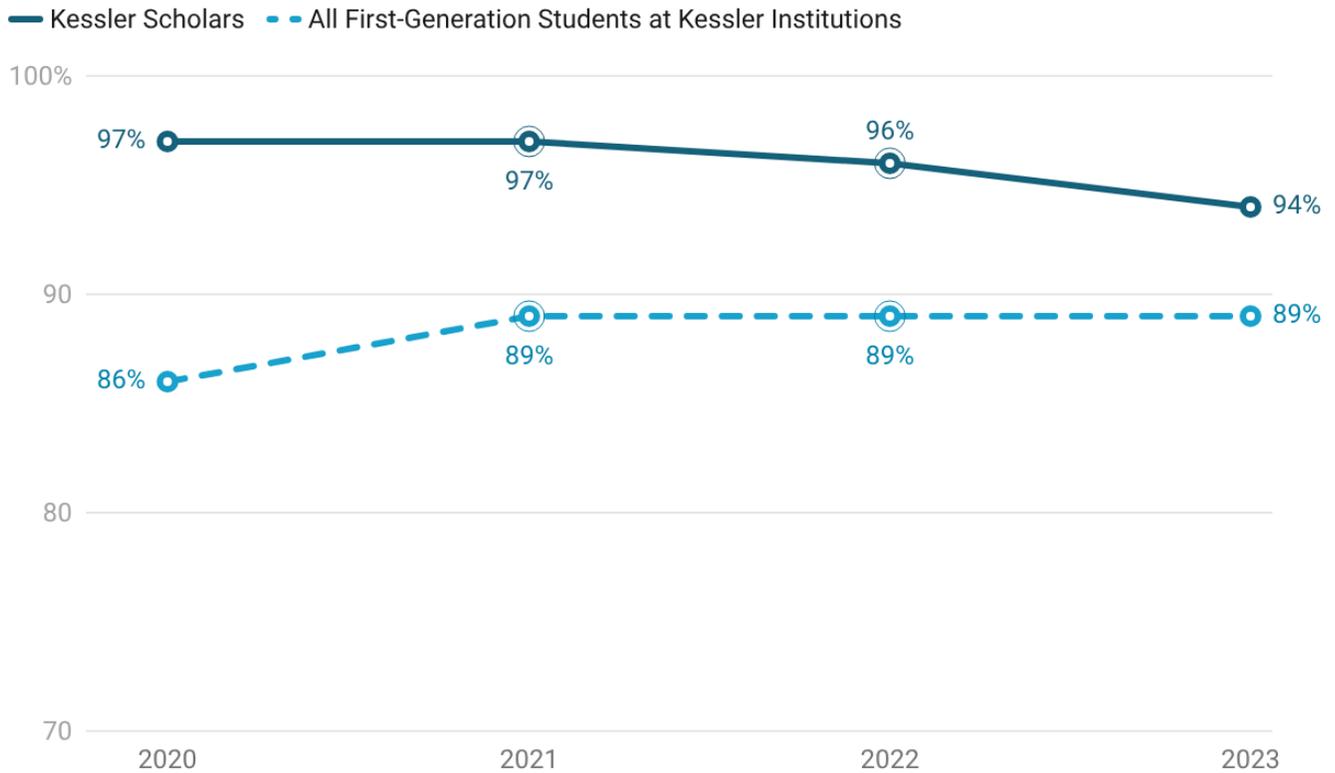
and 82 percent of first-generation students return to their institution for their second year.²³

Across participating institutions, first-year Kessler Scholars were more likely to return for their second year than their first-generation peers at the same institutions, on average, although this advantage has narrowed over time (Figure 13). Prior to the 2023-24 academic year, the Collaborative served students at only six institutions, with relatively small first-year cohorts of just over 100 students each, meaning that the outcomes of a small number of students could produce outsized variation in cohort-level retention rates for those cohorts. Beginning in fall 2023, when 10 new institutions enrolled their first cohorts, the annual first-year cohort increased to approximately 400 students, providing a more stable basis for assessing retention trends going forward. Further analysis is needed to determine whether this narrowing reflects changes in the Kessler Scholar population, improvements among first-generation peers, broader institutional investments in first-generation student support, or some combination of these factors.

²³ “First Year Experience, Persistence, and Attainment of First-generation College Students,” Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019, <https://www.firstgenforward.org/hubfs/FGF%20Fact%20Sheets/First-Year%20Experience%2c%20Persistence%2c%20and%20Attainment.pdf?hsLang=en>.

Figure 13: First-to-second-year retention rates for Kessler Scholars and all first-generation students at Kessler participating institutions, by cohort.

Source: Institutional administrative records



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The Collaborative has also exceeded its four-year graduation goal. Seventy-four percent of the fall 2020 entering cohort at the inaugural institutions earned bachelor’s degrees within four years, surpassing the Collaborative’s 70 percent goal. Kessler Scholars outperformed their first-generation peers at the same institutions, who graduated at a rate of 59 percent on average.²⁴ This 15 percentage point advantage over first-generation peers at the same institutions is among the Collaborative’s most promising indicators of progress to date, particularly given that this cohort navigated the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic during their

²⁴ We previously reported a provisional graduation rate of 78 percent for the 2020 cohort, derived from the data that were available at the time of publication. (See: Ifeatu Oliobi, “Supporting First-Generation Students in a Time of Crisis: Lessons from the Kessler Scholars Program Response to COVID-19,” *Ithaka S+R*, September 24, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.323673>). After completing data verification, we can now report a final graduation rate of 74 percent for the 2020 cohort.

first two years of college.²⁵ While this comparison is descriptive and does not account for differences in pre-college characteristics that may influence selection into the program or other factors that influenced the likelihood of graduation, it suggests that Kessler Scholars are persisting and completing degrees at rates well above those of their first-generation peers. By the end of summer 2025, 84 percent of the fall 2020 entering cohort had graduated, placing the Collaborative on track to meet its six-year graduation goal of 85 percent.

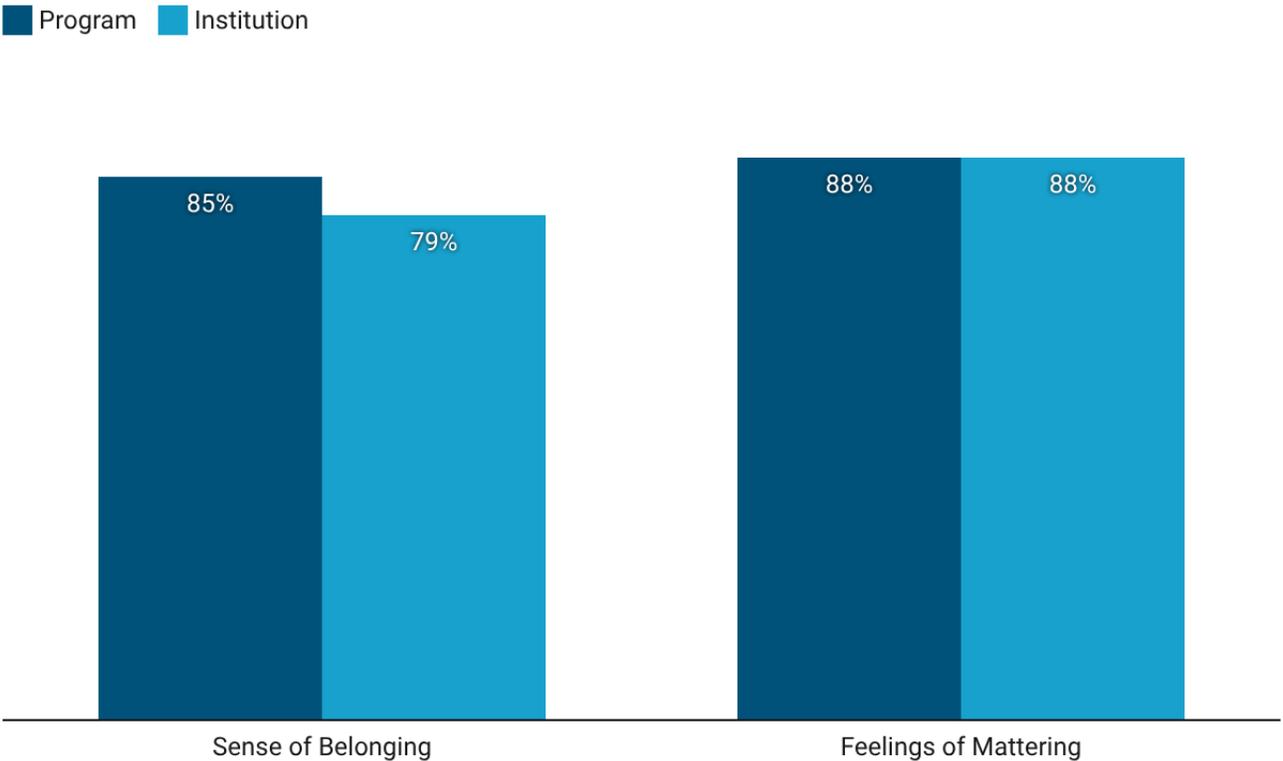
Survey data present a more mixed picture on the Collaborative's goals for improving scholars' college experiences. At the start of the program, the Collaborative exceeded its goal for the percentage of first-year scholars indicating that program support met or exceeded their expectations (94 percent versus a goal of 90 percent). This rate has been high across years, 96 percent in 2022-23 and 97 percent in 2023-24. However, in 2024-25, the overall program satisfaction rate fell to 90 percent, slightly below the 94 percent goal.

Scholars' sense of belonging and feelings of mattering within their campus's Kessler Scholars community are important indicators of the program's effectiveness. In the 2024-25 academic year, 85 percent of survey respondents felt that they belonged, and 88 percent felt that they mattered to the program, both slightly below the Collaborative's goals of 90 percent and 92 percent, respectively. Both measures increased modestly from the prior year (84 percent and 87 percent in 2023-24), suggesting gradual progress even as the Collaborative has not yet reached its targets. Importantly, as shown in Figure 14, scholars reported the same or higher levels of belonging and mattering within the program than at their institutions overall (79 percent reported a sense of belonging and 88 percent reported feelings of mattering to the institution, respectively). This gap reinforces the value of the program community as a distinctive source of support and connection for first-generation scholars, and is consistent with evaluation findings from the previous academic years.

²⁵ Ifeatu Oliobi, "Supporting First-Generation Students in a Time of Crisis: Lessons from the Kessler Scholars Program Response to COVID-19," *Ithaka S+R*, September 24, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.323673>.

Figure 14: Respondents' sense of belonging and feelings of mattering within the Kessler Scholars Program and at their institutions.

Source: Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey (n = 880 students)



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Conclusion

The findings presented in this brief offer insights into how comprehensive cohort-based support programs can advance persistence and completion for first-generation limited-income college students, while also identifying areas where such programs can be strengthened as they scale and mature. The Kessler Scholars Collaborative's inaugural cohort achieved a 74 percent four-year graduation rate, 15 percentage points above the average for first-generation students at the same institutions. This is particularly noteworthy given the diversity of institutional contexts represented across the inaugural partner campuses, and the significant disruptions to learning and college experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The program's holistic approach, which combines financial support, high-touch advising, cohort-based programming, peer mentoring, and leadership development, addresses potential barriers to student success along multiple dimensions. Most scholars reported positive experiences with core program activities and indicated that participation strengthened their sense of belonging, connected them to campus resources, and supported their personal and academic development. Scholars also reported stronger connections to the Kessler Scholars community than to their institutions overall, reinforcing the value of intentional program communities as a source of validation and support for first-generation students navigating campus environments where they may otherwise feel marginalized. By the time they graduated, many scholars had successfully completed at least one high-impact practice linked to student success, and gained valuable leadership experience within the program.

At the same time, our evaluation identified areas where program activities could be strengthened, particularly in sustaining engagement as scholars progress through college, preparing scholars for life after graduation, and closing remaining gaps in participation in high-impact practices. Readers should note, however, that findings related to upper-level scholars are based primarily on the inaugural institutions, which were the only campuses with third- and fourth-year students during the 2024-25 academic year. These institutions differ in important ways from the 10 newer partner campuses, including in institutional type and how they came to be part of the Collaborative. As the newer institutions graduate

their first cohorts in 2026-27 and beyond, the Collaborative will have a much broader evidence base from which to assess how effectively program activities serve scholars across all four years of college.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations for the Kessler Scholars Collaborative and its campus partners, as well as for institutions and programs seeking to provide effective support to first-generation students more broadly:

Consider ways to differentiate program expectations by year of study.

Participation in core program activities, including one-on-one advising, cohort events, and peer mentoring, is central to the Kessler Scholars approach and plays an important role in building community and fostering belonging. Our data show that participation in these activities declines among upper-level scholars, particularly as their outside commitments increase. Given that findings on upper-year engagement are currently drawn from the inaugural institutions only, these patterns should be monitored as the newer campuses begin to graduate their first cohorts.

In the meantime, the Collaborative should consider revising expectations for upper-year scholars that maintain meaningful connection to the program while acknowledging their growing commitments. Options might include reducing the number of expected events for upper-year students, offering virtual or asynchronous participation options, or creating cohort-specific programming that addresses career exploration and post-graduation preparation. Program staff could also design cohort-based events that connect directly to students' existing commitments, such as structured opportunities for discussion and reflection about internship or community service experiences.

Future evaluation activities will examine the relationship between participation levels and student outcomes to better understand how much and what kinds of engagement are most strongly associated with program goals. For other comprehensive support programs, these findings underscore the importance of designing participation structures that

evolve alongside students' developmental trajectories, rather than applying uniform expectations across all years of study.

Strengthen career development and post-graduation support.

Despite strong alignment between program activities and most outcomes, both scholars and staff identified professional development and post-graduation preparation as areas where the program could do more. Program staff rated core activities as least effective in preparing scholars for life after graduation (59 percent) and fostering connections with Kessler Scholars at other institutions (46 percent). Furthermore, when asked how core program activities like cohort programming and one-on-one meetings with program staff relate to their outcomes, scholars consistently rated career and skill-building outcomes lower than belonging and relational outcomes.

Given these patterns, the Collaborative should prioritize developing resources and programming focused on career exploration, job search strategies, and graduate school preparation for upper-level scholars. The strong perceptions of leadership development reported by scholars in formal program leadership roles (peer mentors and student advisory board members) suggest that dedicated experiential opportunities may be a particularly promising model for delivering professional development to the broader scholar population. Additionally, as the program's alumni network grows, the Collaborative has an opportunity to formalize alumni engagement through mentorship programs, networking events, and professional development opportunities that leverage the nationwide network. Building a robust alumni infrastructure will strengthen cross-institutional connections and professional networking opportunities for scholars beyond graduation.

Implement targeted strategies to increase participation in high-impact practices.

Eighty-one percent of graduating scholar survey respondents at the inaugural institutions reported completing at least one high-impact practice, study abroad, an internship, or faculty-mentored research, during their time in college. This is just short of the Collaborative's 90 percent goal and nearly identical to the prior year's rate of 82 percent. Reaching the target will require proactive outreach to scholars who have not yet engaged in a high-impact practice prior to their senior year. This might include dedicated advising on high-impact opportunities, emergency or

supplemental funding to offset participation costs, and partnerships with campus offices to create pathways designed for first-generation students. Research consistently shows that first-generation students participate in high-impact practices at lower rates than their continuing-generation peers, often due to financial constraints, lack of information, and limited social networks.²⁶ The Collaborative can support these efforts by tracking student-level engagement in high-impact practices each year, and supporting campus partners to share best practices for addressing obstacles to participation.

Strengthen data infrastructure and shared definitions across the network.

Inconsistencies in both adoption of core program activities and data tracking systems across campuses limited our ability to assess fidelity to the Collaborative's expectations for student participation and measure progress towards collective impact goals. For example, several newer members of the Collaborative are still in the process of scaling up requirements for community service and their ability to track community service participation. Flexibility and responsiveness to institutional context will continue to be a core strength of the program. That said, establishing clearer shared definitions of program expectations around activities such as community service and investing in consistent data infrastructure for tracking participation across campuses would strengthen the Collaborative's capacity for shared learning and accountability.

The Kessler Scholars experience is instructive for other multi-site programs navigating the tension between local adaptation and coherence, or for institutions seeking to replicate existing comprehensive programs in new contexts. Such programs should also consider the infrastructure

²⁶ "First-Generation College Graduates' Participation in Extracurricular and Co-Curricular Activities as Undergraduate Students," Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2021, <https://www.firstgenforward.org/hubfs/FGF%20Fact%20Sheets/First-generation%20College%20Graduates%E2%80%99%20Participation%20in%20Extracurricular%20and%20Co-curricular%20Activities%20as%20Undergraduate%20Students.pdf?hsLang=en>; Anthony C. Ogden, Hsiu-Zu Ho, Yeana W. Lam, Angela D. Bell, Rachana Bhatt, Leslie Hodges, Coryn Shiflet, and Donald Rubin, "The Impact of Education Abroad Participation on College Student Success Among First-Generation Students," *Journal of Higher Education* 95, no. 3 (2024): 285-312, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2023.2182569>.

necessary to track student engagement in their various services and programs at the outset of program implementation.

Looking ahead

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative has made substantial progress in its first five years, building a growing nationwide network of scholars and alumni across diverse institutions, curating positive college experiences for participants, and closing gaps in retention and graduation outcomes between first-generation students and their peers. The recent grant renewal extending funding through 2032 provides an important opportunity to build on this foundation, refine programming, and deepen the program's contribution to scholars' long-term success. Sustaining progress towards collective impact goals will require continuous learning and adaptation across the network. The Collaborative's collective impact approach, which emphasizes shared goals, practice-sharing, and evaluation for continuous improvement, is well suited to this work.

Once the 10 newer partner institutions graduate their first cohorts of scholars in 2027 and beyond, the evaluation will be positioned to draw on a much richer and more representative evidence base. Future evaluation activities will examine the meaningful variation in program implementation and outcomes across campus partners to identify which program features and institutional contexts are most strongly associated with positive outcomes. We will also investigate leadership development within the program, the experiences of first-generation students who transfer from community colleges, barriers to engagement in high-impact practices, and the relationship between program participation and long-term academic outcomes, among other topics.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Elizabeth Pisacreta, Kristen Glasener, and Kimberly Lutz for thoughtful contributions and feedback on this work. The authors sincerely appreciate the Kessler Scholars and program staff who participated in the surveys conducted as part of the program evaluation. Any errors or omissions remain the fault of the authors.

The evaluation of the Kessler Scholars Program is made possible through the generous support of Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Judy and Fred Wilpon Family Foundation. Views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the funders.

Appendix: Data sources and key measures

The analysis in this brief relied on several data sources collected as part of Ithaca S+R's multi-year evaluation of the Kessler Scholars Program. The longitudinal mixed-methods evaluation includes data collected through student surveys and focus group discussions, staff surveys and interviews, administrative data pulls from participating institutions, and program administrative records. Below, we describe the data sources and define the key measures featured in this brief.

General notes on analysis sample

Unless otherwise indicated, the population sample for the results presented in this brief includes Kessler Scholars who were enrolled in the 2024-25 academic year. Any longitudinal references to Collaborative-wide enrollment include students enrolled at the inaugural member institutions between 2020-21 and 2022-23, and thereafter include students enrolled at all 16 member institutions. Only the inaugural campuses had third- and fourth-year students as of the 2024-25 academic year so results specific to these students are representative of these six campuses whereas results for first- and second-year students are representative of the entire Collaborative.

Throughout the brief, survey results are based on the sub-sample of respondents who answered specific survey questions as applicable, and analysis of administrative data are based on all active enrolled Kessler Scholars. Some percentages do not sum to 100 percent due to rounding or survey item nonresponse.

Kessler Scholars student surveys

In collaboration with the Kessler Scholars Collaborative and campus partners, Ithaca S+R administers two surveys to enrolled, active Kessler Scholars who are at least 18 years of age during each academic year. The

first (the Fall First-Year Kessler Scholars Survey) is administered to first-year students shortly after they arrive on campus for their first term. This survey focuses on the backgrounds, expectations, early experiences, and needs of first-year Kessler Scholars. The Fall 2024 First-Year Kessler Scholars Survey had a response rate of 97 percent (n = 361).

The second (the Spring Kessler Scholars Survey) is administered to Kessler Scholars across all years of study. This survey includes questions about students' backgrounds, program experiences, engagement in high-impact practices, sense of belonging, and feelings of mattering. There are also questions specific to first-year students, graduating students, and students who hold leadership roles in the Kessler Scholars Program, such as peer mentors and student advisory board members. The Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Survey had a response rate of 88 percent (n = 880). In this brief, survey results specific to first-year or graduating students are limited to those respondents whose year of entry was consistent with first-year or graduating student status and who self-identified as first-year or graduating students. To identify students in leadership roles, we relied on survey respondents' self-reported information.

Key survey item measures

An important collective impact goal is the percentage of first-year scholars who report that the program met or exceeded their expectations at the start of the program. We measure this goal in the Fall 2024 First-Year Kessler Scholars Survey with the following question: "How does the current level of support from the Kessler Scholars Program compare to what you expected before you started college?" measured on a 3-point scale (i.e. 1 = "There is more support from the Kessler Scholars Program than I expected", 2 = "There is about as much support from the Kessler Scholars Program as I expected", and 3 = "There is less support from the Kessler Scholars Program than I expected.")

We also include several key measures from the 2025 Spring Kessler Scholars Survey in this brief. First, we measure program satisfaction as the percentage of respondents who selected "excellent" or "good" for the question, "Please rate your overall experience with the Kessler Scholars Program." (The other response options were "Fair" and "Poor.")

Next, we measure Kessler Scholars' sense of belonging and feelings of mattering to the program and their institution based on students' expressed degrees of agreement with sets of survey items measured on a

5-point Likert scale (i.e., 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). The four items for sense of belonging are “I feel comfortable being myself in the Kessler Scholars Program [institution]” “I feel valued by the Kessler Scholars Program [institution],” “I feel like part of the Kessler Scholars community [institution],” and “I feel like there are others like me in the Kessler Scholars Program [institution].” The three statements used to measure feelings of mattering are “There are people in the Kessler Scholars Program [institution] who are generally supportive of my individual needs,” “There are people in the Kessler Scholars Program [institution] who seem happy about my accomplishments,” and “There are people in the Kessler Scholars Program [institution] who are genuinely interested in me as a person.” We then averaged the percentage of respondents who strongly agreed or agreed with each item to obtain overall measures of sense of belonging and feelings of mattering to the Kessler Scholars Program and the institution.

Finally, we rely on self-reporting by graduating students who responded to the survey to measure participation in high-impact practices (study abroad programs, internships, and mentored research projects) and program leadership roles (Kessler Scholars peer mentor or student advisory board member). Among graduating student respondents, there were no instances of item nonresponse to these five items.

Kessler Scholars staff survey

Ithaca S+R surveys program staff at all 16 partner institutions at the end of every academic year. The survey includes questions about staff members’ backgrounds and expertise, their institutional environment, and their experiences working with the Kessler Scholars Program. It also asks respondents to assess the effectiveness of the Kessler Scholars Program Model and the Kessler Scholars Collaborative’s support. Staff survey results included in this brief are from the Spring 2025 Kessler Scholars Staff Survey, which had a response rate of 93 percent (n = 38).

Kessler Scholars Program administrative records

Ithaka S+R collects several types of administrative data from program staff at the 16 partner institutions. For this brief, we drew on two types of program administrative data: enrollment information and student participation records.

Each fall and spring, program staff provide Ithaka S+R with a roster indicating the current enrollment status (i.e., active in the program, on a leave of absence, departed the program, departed the institution, graduated) of all current and former Kessler Scholars. We corroborate enrollment information against institutional administrative records, described in the next section, to calculate program enrollment and four-year graduation rate.

Program staff also report whether each active, enrolled student met the minimum requirements for program participation each term or throughout the year. These requirements include attending at least three cohort-based programs and Kessler events per term, meeting with program staff twice per term, participating in peer mentoring in their first year, completing community service hours or projects annually, and maintaining good academic standing (as defined by each institution). Program staff report students' participation in one of four categories: students who 1) met the minimum expectation for a specific program requirement, 2) did not meet the minimum expectation for that requirement, 3) were exempt from that requirement, or 4) for whom participation data is not available. Students categorized as not meeting the requirements might have engaged in the activity in some way, but did not fulfill the minimum expectation. In most cases, students who are exempt from requirements are studying abroad or experiencing exceptional circumstances (e.g., medical leave of absence). For community service, the "exempt" category also includes students at three newer members of the Collaborative that do not yet require community service. All three plan to require community service in the future.

In most cases, data on a particular requirement are not available because program staff have limited access to the infrastructure necessary to track specific participation requirements on their campus. This typically occurs at newer Collaborative partner institutions that continue to build systems for measuring student progress toward meeting requirements.

Institutional administrative records

Each year, the Institutional Research (IR) offices of Kessler Scholars partner campuses provide Ithaka S+R with institutional administrative data to support its evaluation of the Kessler Scholars Program. These data include student-level information on Kessler Scholars, such as demographics, enrollment status and academic outcomes, and aggregated data about other students at the institution, such as total institutional enrollment and first-generation student retention rate.

For this brief, we used institutional administrative records to construct several measures, including first-to-second year retention rate, four-year graduation rate, and cumulative grade-point average (GPA) for Kessler Scholars and all first-generation students at partner institutions.

We define first-to-second year retention rate as the percentage of students in an entering cohort who re-enroll at the same institution at any point in their second academic year. Due to data limitations, we calculated the retention rate based on five out of the six inaugural institutions for the 2020 through 2022 entering cohorts, and 15 out of 16 institutions for the 2023 cohort.

Four-year graduation rate is defined as the percentage of Kessler Scholars in an entering cohort who earn a bachelor's degree from their initial institution within four years of entry (i.e., before beginning a fifth fall term). To calculate the four-year graduation rate for Kessler Scholars, we drew on both program and institutional administrative data. Four-year graduation rates for all first-generation students were based on the institutional administrative data only. In this brief, we calculated the four-year graduation rate for the inaugural members of the Kessler Scholars Collaborative only, as newer members of the Collaborative will not graduate their first cohorts until spring 2027. The four-year graduation rate for all first-generation students was based on data from four out of six inaugural institutions.

Cumulative GPA relies on individual institutions' definitions and calculations. The data allowed us to compare the cumulative GPAs of all Kessler Scholars at the inaugural institutions to all first-generation students at the same institutions. At the time of data collection, most institutions were able to provide cumulative GPA for Kessler Scholars and all first-generation students at their institution through fall 2024 only, though some reported cumulative GPA through spring 2025. As with

retention and graduation, not all institutions were able to provide cumulative GPA data, and so the analysis featured in this brief is based on four of the six inaugural institutions.

Note that the first-to-second year retention rate, four-year graduation rate, and cumulative GPA for all first-generation students at partner institutions are weighted by institution-by-cohort enrollment.