

Proven Model for First-Generation Student Success Expands to 10 Additional Four-Year Institutions Nationwide with a Five-Year, \$10 Million Investment

16 diverse colleges and universities now form the Kessler Scholars Collaborative, a national network united in its comprehensive, cohort-based support of first-generation students.

Ann Arbor, MI (April 12, 2022) More than a third of students in higher education today are the first in their families to attend college. Yet, they persist and graduate at far lower rates than their continuing generation peers, with just [27 percent](#) attaining their degrees within four years. That gap has significant consequences at a time when [nearly all of the new high-wage jobs](#) created by 2030 will require bachelor's degrees. **Today, the Kessler Scholars Collaborative will dramatically expand its capacity to close the gap**, leveraging a \$10 million investment from Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Fred and Judy Wilpon Family Foundation to add 10 [American Talent Initiative](#) (ATI) members to a network of diverse four-year institutions that includes ATI members Cornell University, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Michigan, as well as Queens College, St. Francis College, and Syracuse University.

The 10 new campuses include **Bates College, Brown University, Centre College, Saint Mary's College (IN), The Ohio State University, University of California-Riverside, University of Dayton, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, University of Pittsburgh, and Washington University in St. Louis**. Each of these institutions will receive a \$1 million grant to adopt the proven, comprehensive, and cohort-based Kessler Scholars model, advancing their ATI goals to broaden postsecondary access and success. This expansion comes at a time when thousands of first-generation students nationwide have struggled to pursue their higher education aspirations during the pandemic, [more likely](#) to experience severe financial hardship, navigate mental health challenges, and confront the digital divide. Re-engaging these students will be vital to the bachelor's degree attainment needed for a national recovery.

Founded in 2008 at the University of Michigan, the Kessler Scholars Program provides a roadmap for first-generation, limited-income students to excel, offering access to critical resources and opportunities across campus, including individualized support and programming designed to foster academic, professional, and personal growth. Students benefit from **high-touch, personalized advising** from staff and peer mentors and **cohort-based activities** throughout their college experience, **reinforcing their sense of belonging and elevating their unique strengths**.

Early results at Michigan indicate that the model can be a potential blueprint for campuses nationwide, with the Kessler Scholars graduating cohort in 2021 attaining a four-year graduation rate of 83%—**eight percentage points higher** than their first-generation peers (75%) and at pace with their continuing-generation peers (84%).

“As the first in my family to attend college, graduating from the University of Michigan would not have been possible without a tight-knit community of peers, faculty, and staff and robust support,” said Fred Wilpon, a New York-based business executive, real estate developer, former owner of the New York Mets, and founder of the Wilpon Family Foundation. “With today’s expansion of the Kessler Scholars Collaborative, we can now provide hundreds of additional students nationwide with that same level of community and resources they need to achieve their promise.”

Over the next five years, ATI will help amplify this blueprint to its collective of 128 high-graduation-rate colleges and universities. The network will meet regularly to elevate resources, best practices, and strategies that can help advance first-generation student success nationwide.

“Through ATI, we are committed to providing colleges with new, innovative, and evidence-based resources and support they need to bridge the gaps in access and success that have grown in the wake of the pandemic,” said Jenny Sharfstein Kane, who leads Bloomberg Philanthropies’ college access and success portfolio. “This new partnership with the Kessler Scholars Collaborative provides members with a powerful strategy to realize the promise of first-generation students and accelerate opportunity.”

In the first year of the grant, the 10 new campuses will each receive onboarding guidance, curricular resources, and technical support to implement the Kessler Scholars model. The first cohort of up to 20 Kessler Scholars will then arrive on each campus in Fall 2023, with three additional cohorts of students expected to follow through the 2026-27 academic year. As part of a commitment to address the financial barriers first-generation students were more likely to experience during the pandemic, each Kessler Scholars institution will also devote at least \$400,000 to direct student aid over the five-year grant.

“Today’s announcement represents an exciting new chapter for the Kessler Scholars Collaborative,” said Gail Gibson, executive director of the Collaborative. “Over the past several years, we have proven that a comprehensive, cohort-based approach can help close equity gaps and promote a sense of belonging for first-generation students. In partnership with the American Talent Initiative, I’m thrilled to bring this approach to 10 new campuses across the country—and support a growing movement to tap into the promise of the more than one-third of students attending college for the first time.”

The Kessler Scholars Collaborative is an initiative of the Judy and Fred Wilpon Family Foundation intended to promote success for first-generation college students nationwide. The Collaborative currently supports and connects Kessler Scholars programs at Cornell University, Johns Hopkins University, Queens College, St. Francis College (McGuire Scholars), Syracuse University, and the University of Michigan, where the first Kessler Scholars was established in 2008. As part of an exciting collaboration with the American Talent Initiative and Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Collaborative is expanding to 10 additional institutions nationwide.

All of these institutions, and the professional staff working together through the Kessler Scholars Collaborative, are dedicated to supporting students who are the first in their families to pursue a four-year college degree. Our cohort-based program model provides financial, academic, professional, and personal support to help first-generation college students thrive across their undergraduate experience. To learn more about the initiative, visit www.kesslerscholars.org

The American Talent Initiative (ATI) is a [Bloomberg Philanthropies-supported collaboration](#) between the [Aspen Institute College Excellence Program](#), [Ithaca S+R](#), and more than 125 top colleges and universities nationwide committed to enrolling, supporting, and graduating more than 50,000 talented students from lower-income backgrounds by 2025. To realize this milestone, ATI facilitates research, practice-sharing, and communications campaigns around presidential leadership, access and affordability, community college transfer, student veteran engagement, and student success and equity in the academic experience. With this support, members can make measurable progress toward aspirational lower-income student enrollment goals and minimize equity-based graduation gaps by 2025. To learn more about ATI, visit www.americantalentinitiative.org.

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