

EXECUTIVE RESPONSE TO YEAR THREE REPORT: Evaluating the Kansas City Scholars College Scholarship Program

Third-Party External Evaluation Conducted by: W. E. Upjohn Institute
for Employment Research

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The Upjohn Institute has completed the third-party evaluation of KC Scholars from launch in September 2016 through FY19. Evaluators prepared a Year-One, Year-Two, and Year-Three Executive Summary and Full Evaluation Report. Reports are viewable at <https://kcscholars.org/impact/> and describe the evaluation methodology and findings.

KC Scholars hosts an annual community stakeholder meeting at which findings are transparently shared. The Report is also shared with the KC Scholars' staff and Board of Directors, the Kauffman Foundation leadership, current and potential donors, Postsecondary Network campuses, and Scholars and their families. The President & CEO meets annually with the Kauffman Foundation to discuss how findings are used to drive program improvement.

This Executive Response describes how KC Scholars utilized findings from the Year-Three Evaluation Report (dated November 14, 2019) to drive continued program improvement. The Executive Response is intended to accompany the Evaluation Report in institutional records.

General Statement of Response:

KC Scholars is a data-driven, outcomes-based program, including:

- a rigorous 10-year evaluation plan built into the program planning process and referenced in the business plan,
- a dashboard of key indicators (target and actual) that is updated annually,
- monthly receipt and analysis of data trackers provided by support service collaborators regarding Scholars' participation in college advisement and college-planning activities, and
- ongoing internal analysis and synthesis of data and trends.

KC Scholars embeds the collection, analysis, and use of data into its daily culture, with "Data-driven results and evaluation" being among the organization's four core values. In sum, KC Scholars values and utilizes evaluation processes and findings to ensure it is on track to achieve the program's stated goals and to implement modifications that make the program more accessible to potential applicants while preserving the integrity of program design.

Findings Were Drivers of Continued Program Improvement:

The President & CEO facilitated the staff studying and understanding findings. Report findings and learnings from practice drove these key adaptations:

1. **We added an early award Adult Learner application cycle in Fall 2019.** For the first time, adult learner scholarship applicants could apply during October and November – and be awarded in December – OR apply during the regular nine-week application process that starts each January 1. The early award cycle was designed to:

- Allow a greater number of potential Adult Learners the opportunity to apply, better ensuring reaching the program goal of 200 awardees per year/cycle.
- Provide awardees more time to complete all processes necessary to re-enroll in college and additional time for college advisement before returning to college. The extra time also addresses the challenge shared by campuses each year that they need more time to process returning adults' admissions and enrollment.

KC Scholars engaged Network campuses with a high number of Adult Learner awardees when planning the early award process.

December awardees are required to enroll in college by Fall 2020 (the same timeframe/guideline currently in place). December awardees, however, are approved to enroll in college in spring and/or summer semesters – without financial support from KC Scholars – and are required to meet KC Scholars' eligibility requirements to remain eligible for KC Scholars' funding starting in fall. This allows the student to get a head-start, if ready to re-start college, and honors the KC Scholars funding cycle.

For applicants that started the application but did not submit during the early award cycle, their work in the online application portal is saved for them to resume completion during the regular cycle.

The early award process was a success, with 86 Adult Learner scholarships awarded in December 2019, with another 100+ that completed part of the application process in October and November having a head-start on the regular cycle.

As a point of context, for the year-three (2019 application cycle), KC Scholars expanded Adult Learner scholarship eligibility to include associate degree earners that had not been actively enrolled in college the previous academic year. This change had increased number of applicants and awardees.

2. **We conducted outreach to middle school personnel, students, and students' families in the six-county service region to make them aware of the 9th grade College Savings Account/Match opportunity that awaits them.** When KC Scholars was being designed, starting the College Savings Account/Match opportunity earlier than 9th grade was considered. The decision was made to award at 9th grade based on the complexity, scale, and newness of the KC Scholars: we were marketing a new program to near 120 high schools (public, private, charter) and homeschoolers. To have added another 240-300

feeder middle schools to marketing efforts would have diminished program visibility and early success. And, having 9th and 11th grade awards helped strengthen college-going cultures in regional high schools.

In the first three program years, however, we have not met the goal of seeding 500 College Savings Accounts – although have achieved an increase each award cycle. Starting and continuing middle school outreach should drive up number of applications in future years, increase awareness of the 529 CSA program, and help KC Scholars reach more families.

KC Scholars continues to examine the structure of 9th grade awards. Practice demonstrates that having incentives increases participation and college savings rates, spurring thinking about potentially incentivizing a greater number of awards. KC Scholars is active in national, regional, and state 529, CSA, and IDA work so remains abreast of current research and practice – this knowledge, as well as outcomes achieved and practice learned in the early years of KC Scholars, will inform future modifications.

3. **The look of the online scholarship application portal was modified to reflect the rebranded design look of KC Scholars.** The new design makes the portal more appealing and better mirrors the look of the website which is the entrance point for the portal.
4. **As part of ongoing efforts to make the application process more user friendly, we discontinued use of the word “essays” and instead are using the words “personal statements”.** During ongoing discussions and focus groups regarding encouraging more young males to apply, we heard that using the term essay is intimidating – especially to males. Last year, we broke multiple prompt essays into single prompts, **all** of which were required to be answered. This ensured that applicants addressed all prompts and provided reviewers a more complete understanding of why completing college was important to the applicant. The language “personal statement” more accurately describes the applicant experience and may diminish intimidation that may prevent an applicant from applying or from starting but not completing an application.
5. **We continue to seek input and advice about how to increase the number of male applicants, particularly young males of color.** Each of the first three years, males were disproportionate as a % of applicants and awardees, compared to female applicants and awardees.

KC Scholars has acted the last two cycles and now for the 2020 cycle to encourage more males to apply: greater outreach to male-focused non-profits and work with largest school districts. A community-based group was formed to work alongside KC Scholars to craft strategies to encourage more males to apply. KC Scholars facilitated a session at the *Annual Summit for College Access, Persistence, and Completion for Students of Color* to invite ideas for

actions to be taken. KC Scholars worked with two large convenings of young men of color to share more about KC Scholars and collaborated with additional organizations to increase program visibility. KC Scholars added “Train the Trainer” sessions to train community stakeholders on engaging groups of students and families in the application process – individuals helping on encouraging more males to apply were invited to these sessions.

- 6. We restructured our support for Adult Learner scholarship awardees.** While Adult Learner Scholars are persisting in college at a rate near 35 percentage points higher than the national average, non-financial support is critical to adults returning to college. Evaluation findings affirm that adults are balancing home life, jobs, and college and it is uniquely challenging. With an increasing number of adults in the program, KC Scholars designated a staff member as the Adult Learner Scholar Manager and brought two KC Degrees Navigators to sit with and work alongside KC Scholars – in full-time roles as Adult Learner Coaches. We also created campus cohorts for each Coach, resulting in:
- One point of contact for Scholars and campuses
 - Coaches becoming more familiar with their campuses’ people, policies, and resources
 - Decreased delay in communication or action as the Coaches and Manager are physically together and fully managing all Scholars’ caseloads

KC Scholars plans to add another Adult Learner Coach in FY20, in preparation of 200 additional adult Scholars (86 of which were awarded in December 2019 and currently receiving advisement and support).

Supplemental Study Findings:

Among the most validating findings were those from a special evaluation designed to answer the question, “Do KC Scholars engage in college-planning/intending activities during 12th grade at a greater rate than scholarship applicants that did not receive the scholarship?” Findings demonstrated that scholarship recipients, as compared to applicants that were not awarded, were:

- 8 percentage points more likely to have applied to at least 1 college
- 12 percentage points more likely to have been admitted to college
- 20 percentage points more likely to have submitted the FAFSA
- 27 percentage points more likely to have met with their college adviser at least 3 times
- 27 percentage points more likely to have toured a campus

These findings mirror/support data received monthly by KC Scholars from our student support provider collaborators about Scholars’ engagement with their college adviser, submission of FAFSA, participation in campus tours and campus rep visits, and college admissions applications and admittances. Findings underscore the importance of the wrap-around college advisement and supports provided to Scholars as part of the program and from their first days/month as a KC Scholar.