

EXECUTIVE RESPONSE TO YEAR FOUR REPORT: Evaluation of the Kansas City Scholars Program

Third-Party External Evaluation Conducted by: WestEd

Executive Response Written by: Dr. Beth Tankersley-Bankhead,
President & CEO, KC Scholars

WestEd completed the Year-Four Part I external evaluation of KC Scholars and prepared the Evaluation Report, available at: <https://kcscholars.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Year-4-Report-final-.pdf>

The Upjohn Institute completed the third-party evaluation and prepared the Year-One, Year-Two, and Year-Three Evaluation Reports, viewable at: <https://kcscholars.org/impact/>.

KC Scholars uses evaluation findings to drive continuous program improvement and 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-Four Part I Evaluation Report (dated 2020). 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:

Report findings and learnings from practice over the years drove these key adaptations that have remained in place, with the impact having been further validated:

1. **The early award Adult Learner application cycle, begun in Fall 2019, has increased access to KC Scholars for busy adult learners.** In Fall 2019 and 2020, adult learner scholarship applicants could apply in 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 create greater access for busy adults and provide the awarded adults and campuses more time for Scholars to become enrolled/re-enrolled at a postsecondary institution.

The early award process has achieved intended outcomes. Having adults enter the program at two different times each year has a) created smaller and more-individualized orientations, b) resulted in a smaller number of new awardees at the same time – allowing for more individualized advising when they enter the program, and c) resulted in less of a scramble to get new awardees enrolled/re-enrolled to start college the following fall. Of the 2020 and 2021 awardees, 164 of 358 (46%) applied and were awarded during the early award 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 enrolled in college the previous academic year. The change was made to also create greater access for adult learners and increased number of applicants and awardees and since 2019, near 35% of awardees entered with an earned associate degree.

2. **Outreach to middle school personnel, students, and students' families in the six-county service region has broadened awareness of the 9th grade College Savings Match opportunity.** With fostering a college-going culture across the region as a goal of KC Scholars, increasing outreach to lower grades is achieving the desired impact. KC Scholars is increasingly known each year.

As a point of context, the College Savings Account/Match program was modified for the 2021 cycle: 250 awards were made (as compared to 500 previously) all 250 awards are in the Match program (previously only 50 annually were). For the first time in 2021, there were more applicants than awardees. This modification also resulted in a higher percentage of Black, Hispanic/Latino, and multiracial awardees than in the past four award cycles and the second highest percentage of male awardees across five award cycles.

3. **In 2020, KC Scholars discontinued use of the word “essays” and instead uses the words “personal statements” to make the application process less intimidating.** Using shorter prompts requires applicants to address every prompt, provides reviewers complete information, and allows KC Scholars to

modify prompts to address overall goals to keep the process fresh and relevant. For example, in 2021 we re-wrote a prompt to address the program goal that Scholar graduates stay in the region to live and work, with them sharing about how they want to give back to their home region.

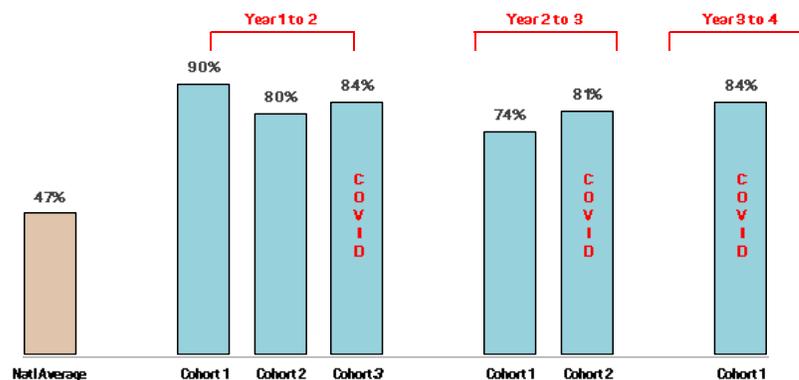
As a point of context, for the 2020 scholarship application cycle, KC Scholars converted multiple essay prompts from among which applicants could choose into single shorter, concise prompts, **all** required to be answered.

4. KC Scholars restructured support for Adult Learner scholarship awardees.

Adult learner Scholars juggle much while enrolled in college: childcare and eldercare, working full time or in several part-time jobs, transportation challenges, psychological fear of failure, and this past year – the pandemic which drove all instruction and communication online.

Evaluation findings affirm that adults are persisting in college at rates near 35% above the national average for returning adult learners – even during the pandemic as shown in the table below. These results validate the importance of support provided by KC Scholars and its Network campuses.

Adults Continue On While Juggling Much



Source: Graduate Network

As a point of context, in 2019-2020, KC Scholars designated an Adult Learner Scholar Manager and brought two KC Degrees Navigators in-house to work alongside KC Scholars. Navigators – called Adult Learner Coaches – had caseloads by campus. These changes created seamless communication between Scholars and campuses and KC Scholars, all which cite the positive impact of the modification. In 2020-21, KC Scholars added an additional Adult Learner Coach to work with deciding students and in July 2021, the previous KC Degrees Navigators will become full-time KC Scholars staff – creating even greater collaboration and support.

Findings Are Drivers of New Modifications Aimed at Program Improvement:

Year-Four Evaluation Report findings drove these new modifications aimed at continued program improvement:

1. **KC Scholars has increased efforts annually and involved community stakeholders to increase the number and percentage of male applicants, particularly young males of color and for the 2021 application cycle, for the 11th grade scholarship opportunity.** For the 2021 application cycle, KC Scholars invited community stakeholders – during our annual sharing of Year-Three Evaluation results – to help outreach to males and a board ad hoc task force was formed to focus on male outreach. Efforts resulted in community members serving as advocates and outreaching on behalf of the KC Scholars opportunity. KC Scholars also reached more deeply into schools and to coaches and teachers that work predominantly with males – we hosted multiple train the trainer workshops for our volunteers. KC Scholars also intentionally included in its 2021 marketing materials images of and videos from male Scholars encouraging other males to apply. KC Scholars will continue its intentional work to keep increasing the number and percentage of male applicants annually.

As a point of context, from the first cycle, males have been disproportionate as a % of applicants and awardees, compared to female applicants and awardees. For the 2021 application cycle, the % of male applicants rose to 34 – as compared to 31% in 2020 and 30% or less the first three years. A gain of three percentage points from 2020 to 2021 is movement in the desired direction.

2. **During the 2021 scholarship application cycle – amidst a pandemic during which school personnel and students were remote from one another – KC Scholars provided schools a list of their student applicants every other week and twice the week of the deadline for submission.** On each previous evaluation, school leaders expressed a desire to receive a list of which students were applying during the application period so they could follow-up with students and encourage them to complete. KC Scholars decided to provide the list in 2021, although making it very clear that the list would be partially outdated when received. School leaders indicated that having the list helped them reach out to students – critical during the pandemic where school staff could not physically encourage students in person as would have been the case in previous years.

The support of school staff was instrumental in achieving over 1,600 applications in 2021. Number of applications received was down from previous years due to the pandemic but not as low as anticipated. KC Scholars will continue to provide a list of student applicants to schools each year going forward and will thoughtfully decide on how often and when.

3. **New to the 2020 Evaluation Report was a comparison of KC Scholars and the regional adult and school level population.** Previous evaluations did not provide these comparative data. The 2020 report also summarized demographic

outcomes of all four scholarship award cycles. Having these comparative and trend-line data is immensely helpful to KC Scholars and provided an alternate and additional lens through which to view impact and outcomes. This regional-based comparison revealed that:

- The share of Black Adult Learner awardees is five X larger than the Black population in the 6-county service area.
- The share of Black and Hispanic/Latino 11th grade awardees is almost twice the share in the KC-area high school population.
- As compared to the six-county service area high school population, 9th grade awardees are lower economic status and higher proportionally Black and Hispanic/Latino.

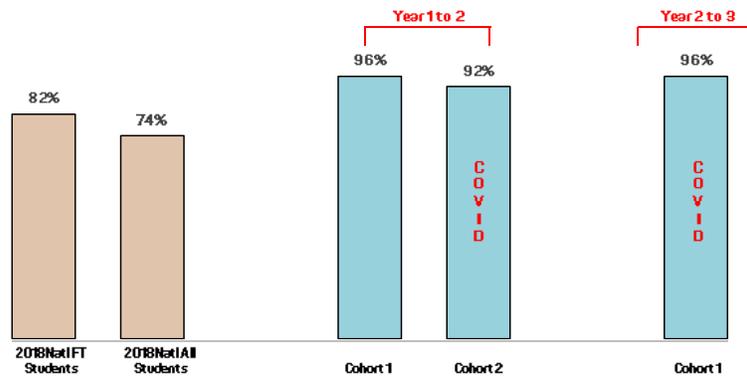
KC Scholars will continue to reference trends as we tell the KC Scholars story and share program impact.

College Experiences and Impact of COVID Supplemental Study:

Pages 26-36 of the Evaluation contain findings of a supplemental qualitative examination of how COVID impacted Scholars. Near 1,000 Scholars participated in the study that surfaced the greatest challenges and most helpful supports while adjusting to remote, online courses and interactions.

The supplemental study showed that Scholars were staying on course and not letting COVID deter their college completion plans. This resolve and tenacity are evident in Scholars’ persistence rates from one year of college to the next – as shown on the table below for 11th grade awardees and the table on page three for Adult Learners.

Our Scholars Return to College



Source: National Student Clearinghouse

KC Scholars had collected some of the earliest, more comprehensive findings about impacts of COVID and supports needed. Findings were shared with regional and national audiences and augmented an evaluation conducted by the Urban Education Research Center and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, along with KC

Scholars and funded by The DeBruce Foundation, that resulted in a national best-practices guide for supporting Adult Learners during a pandemic.

Involvement of Board of Directors in Evaluation:

Congruent with how KC Scholars approaches, values, and utilizes external evaluation findings, the Board of Directors was heavily involved in the third-party evaluation process this year. WestEd presented to our board about their national work, the evaluation plan, and program impact. An ad hoc board task force was formed to learn more about the evaluation process, facilitate the evaluator's sharing with the board, and make recommendations about sharing evaluation results with community stakeholders. Having a board of directors that is informed and excited about the program's evaluation is both unique and beneficial.