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# EVALUATION OF THE KANSAS CITY SCHOLARS PROGRAM: YEAR 4 REPORT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Kansas City Scholars Program (KC Scholars) was launched in 2016 in the bi-state Kansas City metropolitan area, which includes the six counties of Cass, Clay, Jackson and Platte in Missouri, and Johnson and Wyandotte in Kansas. Its aim is to help low- and modest-income students enroll in and complete higher education and, ultimately, to strengthen the regional economy. The program targets students from 128 high schools and adults who are returning to college and it seeks to reduce racial and ethnic gaps in higher education access and completion.

This is a summary of the Year 4 evaluation of the Kansas City Scholars Program that was conducted by the WestEd Evaluation Team (hereafter referred to as the evaluation team).

**The program consists primarily of the following three components:**

### Traditional

In this component, the program awards college scholarships of \$5,000 to \$10,000 per year to students in 11th grade. The top-scoring applicants receive a scholarship award to attend any of the program's 17 two-year and four-year partner institutions of higher education and their branch campuses. For applicants who score just below the cutoff established for eligibility, additional Traditional scholarships are awarded to attend either the University of Missouri–Columbia or the University of Missouri–Kansas City.

### Adult Learner

In this component, the program provides college scholarships of \$5,000 per year for learners aged 24 or older who have accumulated at least 12 college credits and have not earned a bachelor's degree. Beginning with Cohort 3 (the 2019 award cycle), applicants with an associate's degree became eligible to apply.

### College Savings

In this component, the program offers two different college-savings tracks. In the *seeded accounts*, KC Scholars contributes to a tax-free 529 college savings plan for high school freshmen awardees. For 50 of those awardees, the program also matches any additional student savings at a rate of 4:1, up to \$5,000, with up to an additional \$2,000 for students in this group of 50 who achieve college preparation milestones throughout their subsequent high school years.<sup>1</sup> The awards for these 50 students are referred to as *matched accounts*. College Savings awardees are not automatically awarded a Traditional scholarship. When they reach the 11th grade they must apply for a scholarship.

Funding for all three scholarship components is paid directly to the 17 partner colleges and universities attended by the awardees. Each scholarship is renewable for up to five years.

## KC Scholars 2020 Awardee Characteristics

In spring 2020, KC Scholars completed its fourth award cycle (the 2020 award cycle) for students entering or reentering college during the 2019/20 academic year. During this period, the program received a total of 2,231 eligible applications for its three components: Traditional, Adult Learner, and

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<sup>1</sup> Starting with the 2021 application cycle, there will be 250 College Savings awards each year. All awardees will be seeded at \$50 and matched up to \$1,000, plus \$100 per year for a maximum of \$1450 per student.

College Savings. Among applicants, 32 percent were awarded a Traditional scholarship, and 100% of the Adult Learner and College Savings applicants were offered awards (Table 1).

TABLE 1

### Applicants and Awardees From the 2020 KC Scholars Award Cycle by Program Component

	Applicants	Awardees
Traditional	1,625	527
Adult Learner	200	200
College Savings	406	406 (356 seeded, 50 matched)
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,231</b>	<b>1,133</b>

*Note.* This table represents the evaluation team's analysis of KC Scholars administrative data. The Traditional scholarship awardees include students who receive a scholarship to attend the University of Missouri–Columbia or the University of Missouri–Kansas City.

## Demographics of Awardees

**The composition of applicants and awardees in all three program components was racially and ethnically diverse.**

- The largest racial/ethnic group for the Traditional scholarship awardees was Hispanic/Latino (hereafter identified as Hispanic). The majority of Adult Learners consisted of persons of color, with the largest proportion identifying as Black. The awardees in the seeded-account subgroup and matched-account subgroup were distributed approximately evenly across the three largest race/ethnicity groups: Black, Hispanic, and White.
- The percentage of Black and Hispanic awardees in the Traditional scholarship component was greater than that of the public school population of the six KC Scholars counties. The seeded-account and matched-account awardees had a higher percentage of Black and Hispanic students compared with the public student population in these counties.

**Applicants and awardees in all program components were from low- or modest-income families.<sup>2</sup>**

- The average expected family contribution (EFC) among the Traditional scholarship applicants and awardees was significantly below the cutoff to be eligible for an award.
- The percentage of Traditional scholarship applicants and awardees who were eligible for the federal free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) program was higher than the average FRL rate of public high schools in the six KC Scholars counties.
- More than half of the Adult Learner awardees reported having no resources to pay for college. Among Adult Learner awardees, 70% reported that financial reasons contributed to why they had not completed a degree when they previously attended college.

<sup>2</sup> The KC Scholars program defines low- or modest-income families as those with a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) expected family contribution (EFC) of \$12,000 or below.

- Both matched-account and seeded-account awardees reported low EFCs and high percentages of FRL. The matched-account awardees had a lower economic background than the seeded-account awardees.
- The percentage of awardees from all three program components with parents who completed at least a bachelor's degree was lower than that of the adult population with at least a four-year degree in the six-county Kansas City region served by the program.

**Females were overrepresented among applicants and awardees for all three program components.**

- About three-quarters of the Traditional, Adult Learner, and seeded-account awardees identified as female. About two-thirds of the matched-account awardees reported being female.

**Academic and Employment Status of Awardees**

**Awardees had high levels of academic achievement.**

- The mean high school grade point average (GPA) for Traditional scholarship awardees was 3.6, slightly higher than that of eligible non-awardees (3.3).
- When they received a KC Scholars award, most Adult Learner awardees had accumulated between 61 and 70 college units. And, on average, their high school GPA was 2.5 when they were enrolled in college previously.
- Both seeded-account and matched-account awardees were high academic achievers who were engaged with their family, their community, and the workforce. The mean high school GPA was 3.5 for seeded-account awardees and 3.8 for matched-account awardees.

**When they applied to KC Scholars, most awardees were employed, and the highest percentage lived in Jackson County, Missouri.**

- Of Traditional scholarship awardees, 58% reported they were employed in either a full-time job, a part-time job, or more than one job.
- Most Adult Learner awardees, 60% reported they worked full-time, 16% reported part-time employment, and 14% reported having more than one job.
- Given that the matched-account and seeded-account applications are submitted the spring of freshman year in high school, when most students are 14 or 15 years old, it is not surprising that only 22% of matched-account and six percent of seeded-account awardees reported working in paid employment.
- The largest group of awardees from all three of the program's components were from Jackson County, Missouri. Additionally, 47% of Traditional scholarship awardees, 55% of Adult Learner awardees, and 45% of seeded-account and 44% of the matched-account groups were from that county. The share of awardees from Jackson County has remained roughly similar over time, except for a steady decrease of the Adult Learner awardees each year.

## High School Partners' Perceptions of KC Scholars Traditional Component and Its Influence on the School's Culture

The following findings represent the perceptions of principals and counselors from a small sample of KC Scholars high school partners, based on interviews conducted in fall 2020.

### Perceptions of the KC Scholars Program

High school staff have high regard for the KC Scholars program and have gained a deeper understanding of the program over time.

The KC Scholars program is attainable for students, giving them hope and confidence.

Most students and families have information about KC Scholars and value the program but access to program information may be hampered by limited English language proficiency, access to technology, and access to information.

### Communication and support

The amount of information about KC Scholars that schools share with students increases as students move from 9th to 11th grade.

Schools employ multiple communication modalities to inform their students and families about KC Scholars, including class presentations, meetings with counselors, sessions at a college and career center, and through informal conversations with other students, teachers, and counselors.

Supports for students to complete the program application include helping them write essays, complete forms, access technology, stay on track to complete the application (through monitoring and reminders), and navigate the program website to submit the application. Challenges reported by the interviewees include families with school/home language barrier,

### Factors influencing KC Scholars Program application

Males, students of color, and recent immigrants are less likely to apply to KC Scholars.

Students who have high academic achievement, good connections with school staff, parental support, and/or a belief that the financial award is attainable are more likely than others to apply to KC Scholars.

Students are unlikely to apply if they think they are ineligible, believe that the program is not aligned with their future plans, and/or perceive the application process to be difficult.

### Influence of KC Scholars Program on college-going culture

The interviewees reported that the KC Scholars program has strengthened the college-going culture at their high schools.

The average FAFSA submission and completion totals for KC Scholars high schools was slightly higher in 2019/20 than in the year prior to the program's launch.



The number one factor for kids to apply is if they see someone they know or someone who lives in their neighborhood get the scholarship.

## **Influence of COVID-19**

The transition to virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in adjustments to counseling support but did not deter awardees from attending college.

## **Improving KC Scholars Program implementation**

Respondents provided the following recommendations about ways KC Scholars can support schools to share program information and recruit students:

- Encourage higher education partners to discuss KC Scholars when they come to the high school campus to recruit college applicants.
- Ensure that College Advising Corps advisers and school partners have a deep understanding of all facets of the KC Scholars program, especially the College Savings component, so they are able to share the information with students and their families.
- Host family meetings and information sessions targeting those with a student who would be the first in the family to attend college. This helps families understand the benefits of the program.
- Update KC Scholars information sheets with more detailed information on each program component, so schools can share this information with families.

## Traditional Scholarship and Adult Learner Awardees' College Experiences, and COVID-19 Impact

At the end of an academic year, a survey is administered to all KC Scholars who are enrolled in college that year. Responses to the survey questions about their academic progress, the support they received from their college or university, the challenges they faced when COVID-19 began in spring 2020, the resources they found helpful, and the impact that the pandemic had on their postsecondary plans are summarized here.

### Student progress and experiences

**The majority of respondents reported having achieved their desired academic progress.**

Students with Traditional scholarship awards, White non-Hispanic students, and female students had the highest percentages of agreeing that they had made the academic progress they wanted to make.

**Although almost three quarters of all respondents mostly or completely agreed that they felt comfortable on campus, higher percentages of Traditional scholarship awardees and White non-Hispanic students reported feeling this way.**

**About 80% of all respondents mostly or completely agreed that they knew they could approach their professor for help and knew where to get other help with classes.**

A higher percentage of White non-Hispanic students reported knowing that they could get help from their professors. A larger share of Traditional scholarship awardees (compared to Adult Learner awardees), and White non-Hispanic and Asian awardees (compared to Black and Hispanic awardees) reported knowing where they could get help with classes beyond any help from professors.

**Seventy percent of respondents mostly or completely agreed that they knew where to get non-academic support, such as counseling, financial support, and general guidance.**

A smaller percentage of Black students reported this than other race/ethnicities.

**Eighty-three percent of Traditional scholarship and Adult Learner awardees mostly or completely agreed that they felt supported by the KC Scholars program during their college experience.**

When disaggregated by gender, the responses show that a higher percentage of males, 88%, than of females, 82%, reported feeling supported by the program.

## COVID-19 impact

**Almost half of the respondents reported facing financial issues due to COVID-19, which resulted in academic challenges, mental health issues, and increased levels of employment.**

- Respondents reported that their academic performance was impacted negatively when they shifted to online learning. Specifically, they reported having difficulty remaining focused and motivated, lacking a suitable home environment for online classes, feeling disconnected from their professor and classmates, and finding the coursework to be more demanding and time-intensive than in-person courses. Some students reported that they withdrew from the semester, dropped classes, or had classes or labs canceled.
- Students reported that as a result of such factors, they failed or dropped courses (*all* courses for some students), adjusted their schedules, or expected that their graduation would be delayed. Others reported that COVID-19-related effects on their academic life may lead to a change in major, college, or career.

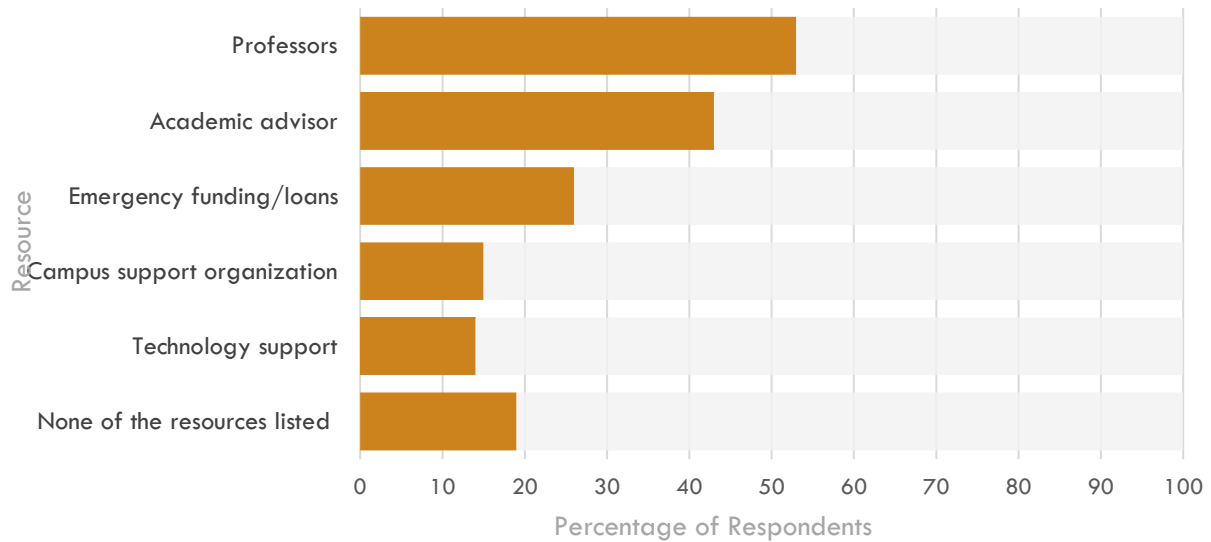
**“ COVID-19 changed my plans and affected my learning and mental health. I had family members who were infected, [I] lost track in online school, [I had] health problems, job problems, and loss of motivation.**

**When asked to rank the challenges they faced during COVID-19, respondents reported that the most challenging factors were, on average, online learning, communication (too much or too little), and emotional wellness/mental health.**

**The most frequently cited resources as helpful during the transition to online learning were professors and academic advisors.**

About a quarter of all respondents reported that emergency funding and loans were helpful. Campus support organizations and online emotional and mental health supports were considered helpful resources for some student groups (Figure 1). Nearly 20% of all survey respondents did not identify any of the listed resources as helpful for the transition to online coursework.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents Reporting That a Resource Was Helpful by Resource**



*Note. This figure represents the evaluation team’s analysis of KC Scholars survey data. The total percentage exceeds 100 because there was no limit to the number of resources respondents could select. n = 867*

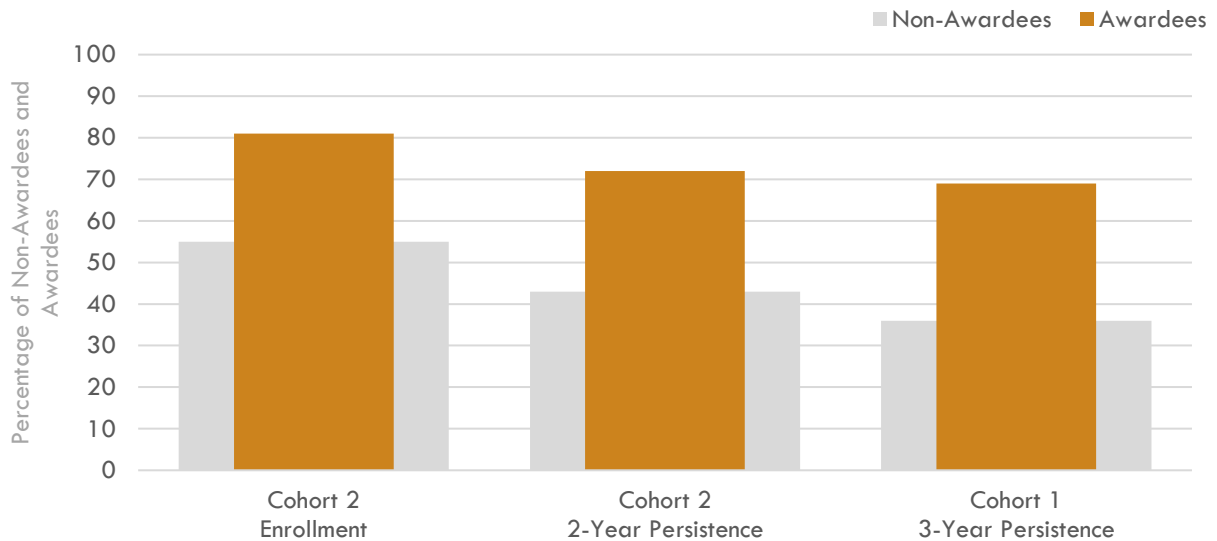
## The Impact of KC Scholars on Traditional Scholarship and Adult Learner Awardees' Outcomes

### Impact of Traditional Scholarship award

To estimate the impact of receiving a Traditional scholarship offer on awardees' college enrollment and persistence outcomes, the evaluation team used a regression discontinuity design (RDD) to compare Traditional scholarship awardee outcomes with those of eligible applicants who were not awarded a scholarship. Two cohorts of Traditional scholarship awardees were examined in this analysis, corresponding to the program's first and second award cycles.

- Awardees in both cohorts enrolled and persisted in partner institutions at higher rates than non-awardees, but these differences were not statistically significant (Figure 2). However, the three-year persistence rate among Black and first-generation cohort 1 awardees was significantly different from those of non-awardees.

**Figure 2. Percentage of Traditional Scholarship Awardees and Non-Awardees who Enrolled and Persisted in a KC Scholars Partner Institution by Cohort and Year**



*Note. This figure represents the evaluation team's analysis of data from the KC Scholars program and the National Student Clearinghouse. Cohort 1 n = 1,017. Cohort 2 n = 1,323.*

- Traditional scholarship awardees enrolled in four-year institutions at higher rates and two-year institutions at lower rates than non-awardees.
- Black, Hispanic, male, and first-generation awardees enrolled and persisted at higher rates than non-awardees. The three-year persistence rates among Black and first-generation awardees were significantly different from those of non-awardees. None of the other differences among subgroups was significant.
- A higher percentage of Cohort 2 Black, Hispanic, male, and first-generation awardees enrolled in four-year institutions, and a lower percentage attended two-year institutions, compared to non-awardees.
- Although the majority of the differences between Traditional scholarship awardees and non-awardees were not found to be significant statistically, the awardees had higher persistence and completion rates than non-awardees.

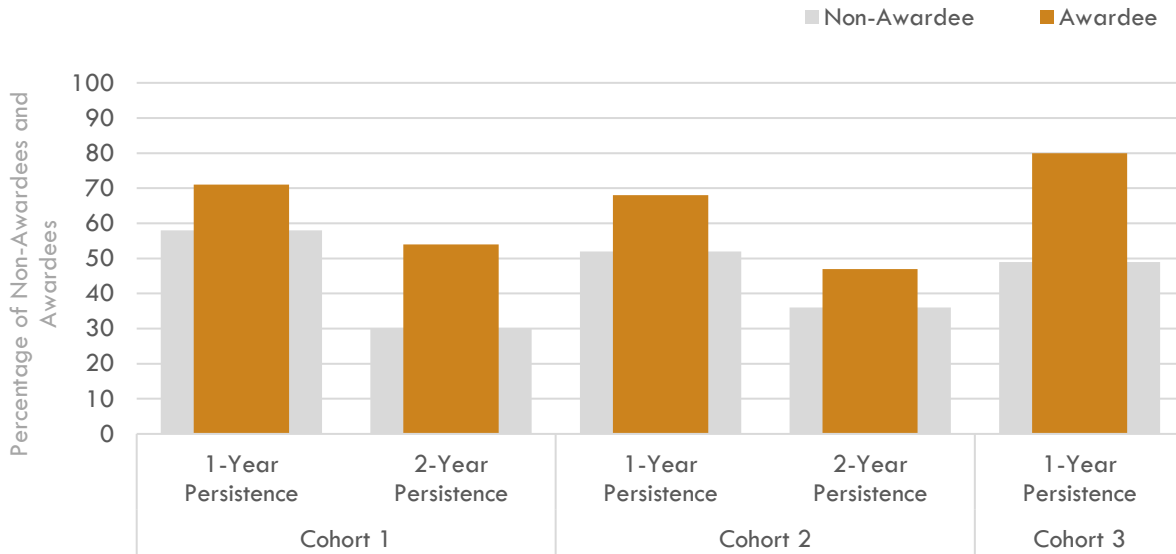


### Impact of Adult Learner award

A series of linear probability regression models were used to estimate the impact of receiving an Adult Learner scholarship on awardees’ college persistence and completion. Cohorts 1, 2, and 3 were included in the analysis. The control group sample was constructed by National Student Clearinghouse researchers to mirror the Adult Learners on covariates which included the year they reentered college, the college they enrolled in, their level of enrollment (full-time/part-time), gender, race/ethnicity, and age.

- Adult Learner awardees in all three cohorts persisted in partner institutions at higher rates than non-awardees (Figure 3).
  - The one-year persistence rates for Adult Learner awardees in Cohorts 2 and 3 were significantly higher than those of the control group.
  - Adult Learner awardees in Cohort 1 were significantly more likely to persist into year 2 than were control group students.

**Figure 3. Percentage of Adult Learner Awardees and Non-Awardees Who Persisted in a KC Scholars Partner Institution by Cohort**



*Note. This figure represents the evaluation team’s analysis of data from the KC Scholars program and the National Student Clearinghouse. Cohort 1 n = 138, Cohort 2 n = 214, Cohort 3 n = 271.*

Of the 69 Adult Learner awardees from Cohort 1 (2017 awardees), 22% earned a certificate, 29% earned an associate’s degree, and 20% earned a bachelor’s degree after reentering college.

- Adult Learner awardees were more likely to earn an associate’s degree than non-awardees.
  - The difference in associate’s degree attainment between the Cohort 1 Adult Learner awardees and non-awardees was significant statistically.
- Adult Learner awardees were neither more nor less likely than non-awardees to earn certificates or bachelor’s degrees.

## Workforce Outcomes of Adult Learner Awardees

The following findings summarize the results from an Adult Learner workforce survey that was administered on March 5, 2021, to Adult Learner awardees who had completed their postsecondary education. The surveys were sent to the 67 of the 228 Adult Learner awardees from Cohorts 1 and 2 who graduated prior to the survey administration. Twenty-four of the 67 Adult Learner awardees completed a survey, resulting in a 33% response rate.

The “All respondents” findings are based on the data from all 24 of the respondents. The “Longitudinal employment analysis” findings are from the 14 respondents who provided sufficient employment information to compare data from the time that they applied to the KC Scholars program against the time that they completed the survey, up to four years after they reenrolled in college.

### All respondents

- All but two of the 24 Adult Learner awardees were working when they applied to the KC Scholars program.
- The majority who were working were employed in permanent positions for more than 40 hours per week and worked in the Kansas City metro area.

### Longitudinal employment analysis

- Most Adult Learner awardees remained in the same major occupation group after they completed their education.
- Job satisfaction increased over time for half of the Adult Learner awardees and remained the same for about 20%.
- Most Adult Learner awardees worked 40 hours per week after they participated in KC Scholars.
- The majority of Adult Learner awardees reported a wage increase over time.
- Nearly all Adult Learner awardees earned more than minimum wage before and after their participation in KC Scholars.
- When they applied to KC Scholars, and when they completed the survey, nearly all Adult Learner awardees had income that met or exceeded the minimum living wage for a single adult. For most of them, however, their income did not meet or exceed the living wage for one adult and one child.