
EVALUATION OF THE KANSAS CITY SCHOLARS PROGRAM: YEAR 5 REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Kansas City Scholars Program (KC Scholars) was launched in 2016 to help low- and modest-income students in the six-county Kansas City metropolitan area enroll in and complete higher education and, ultimately, to strengthen the regional economy.¹ 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 5 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.

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. Applicants with an associate's degree are eligible to apply.

College Savings

In this component, the program has historically offered two different college-savings tracks. In the *seeded accounts*, KC Scholars contributed to a tax-free 529 college savings plan for high school freshmen awardees. For 50 of those awardees, the program also matched 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 throughout their subsequent high school years achieve college preparation milestones. The awards for these 50 students are referred to as *matched accounts*. Beginning with the 2021 award cycle, the program awarded matched accounts only and increased the number of awards to 250. College Savings awardees are not automatically awarded a Traditional scholarship; when they reach the 11th grade, they, like all other 11th graders, must apply for a scholarship.

Funding for all three scholarship components—Traditional, Adult Learner, and College Savings—is paid directly to the 17 partner colleges and universities attended by the awardees. Each scholarship is renewable for up to 5 years.

¹ The six counties served by KC Scholars are Cass, Clay, Jackson, and Platte in Missouri and Johnson and Wyandotte in Kansas.

Applicant and Awardee Characteristics: Combined 2017-2021 Award Cycles, and 2021 Award Cycle

Five annual award cycles have been completed since the inception of the KC Scholars program, with a total of 9,280 applicants and 5,356 awardees (table 1). The first cohort was awarded scholarships in 2017, and the most recent award cycle was in 2021. To provide overall trends, the demographics of 5 years of Traditional, Adult Learner, and College Savings applicant pools and awardee cohorts were combined and to highlight changes over time, the demographic data was separated by year.

TABLE 1

Applicants and Awardees of the KC Scholars Program, by Program Component, 2017–2021 Award Cycles

Program Component	Applicants	Awardees
Traditional	6,609	2,962
Adult Learner	782	782
College Savings	1,889	1,612
Total	9,280	5,356

Note. This table represents the evaluation team's analysis of KC Scholars administrative data. All Adult Learners who applied to KC Scholars were awarded a scholarship.

Demographic data from the most recent cohort, the 1,550 applicants and 932 awardees from the 2021 award cycle were also summarized (table 2) and compared to the demographics of the regional population.

TABLE 2

Applicants and Awardees From the 2021 KC Scholars Award Cycle, by Program Component

Program Component	Applicants	Awardees
Traditional	1,037	524
Adult Learner	158	158
College Savings	355	250
Total	1,550	932

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

Demographics

Applicants and awardees in all program components were from low- or modest-income families.²

- The average expected family contribution (EFC) among the applicants and awardees over the five award cycles (2017-2021) varied by program component but was less than \$2,000, far below the \$12,000 EFC cutoff for program eligibility.
- On average, Traditional and College Savings awardees consistently had lower average EFC (i.e., greater need) than applicants.
- The percentage of Traditional and College Savings 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.

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

- The Traditional and College Savings awardees were fairly evenly distributed (between 25 and 30 percent) among Black, Hispanic, and White groups, whereas the Adult Learners were predominately Black (60 percent).
- Over time, the racial and ethnic composition of students in the Traditional component remained the same whereas there was an increase in the percentage of Hispanic and a decrease in the percentage of White applicants and awardees in the Adult Learner and College Savings components.
- In the 2020 and 2021 award cycles, there was a larger proportion of Black and Hispanic applicants and awardees than there was in the six-county Kansas City region.³
- In the 2021 cohort, there was about two times the proportion of Black and Hispanic applicants and awardees in the Traditional and College Savings components than there was in the Kansas City–area general high school population. In the Adult Learner component, there was about four times the proportion of Black applicants and awardees than there was in the general population, but about the same proportion of Hispanics.

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

- The proportion of female applicants and awardees is overrepresented compared with that of the general population, with more than 70 percent of female students in each of the three components.
- There was a slight increase in the percentage of male applicants and awardees in the Traditional component from 2017 to 2018. The proportion of female applicants and awardees in the Adult Learner and College Savings components has remained fairly consistent over time.

A small percentage of applicants and awardees in all program components had a parent with a 4-year college degree.

- Over the five award cycles (2017-2021) the average percentage of applicants and awardees from all program components who reported that they have at least one parent with a 4-year degree was less than 30 percent.

² 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.

³ Analyses comparing the characteristics of KC Scholars applicants and awardees to the population in the KC Scholars service area was conducted with data from the 2020 and 2021 award cycles.

- Over time, a smaller percentage of Traditional and College Savings awardees reported that they had a parent with a 4-year degree; the percentage remained about the same for Adult Learners.
- Compared with the general population, the proportion of awardees who had a parent with a 4-year college degree was lower in all three components.

Residential, Academic, and Employment Status

The majority of applicants and awardees in all three program components resided in Jackson County, Missouri.

- Since the beginning of the KC Scholars program, the majority of applicants and awardees from all three components (Traditional, Adult Learners, and College Savings) resided in Jackson County, Missouri. The next largest, but much smaller, proportion of applicants and awardees came from Johnson County, Kansas, and Clay County, Missouri.
- From 2017 to 2021, there were slight increases in the proportion of applicants and awardees from Clay County, Missouri (Traditional), Cass County, Missouri, and Johnson County, Kansas (Adult Learners), and Clay County, Missouri, and Johnson County, Kansas (College Savings).

Applicants and Awardees in all three program components had high levels of academic achievement.

- On average from the 2017 to 2021 award cycles, 94 percent of Traditional awardees and 85 percent of College Savings awardees earned a 3.0 GPA or higher when they applied.
- Adult Learners had lower levels of academic achievement, with only 32 percent earning a prior postsecondary GPA between 2.5 and 3.0.
- The average GPA of the applicants and awardees from all three components increased over time.

Most Traditional and Adult Learner awardees were employed when they applied to KC Scholars.

- About 65 percent of Traditional awardees reported being currently or previously employed when they applied to the KC Scholars program. From 2017 to 2021, an increasing percentage of students reported working part-time or full-time and working in more than one job.
- When they applied to KC Scholars, only 1 percent of Adult Learners reported that they were not working and had never been employed in the past. About 60 percent reported working full time, and another 16 percent reported working part time. Over time, the percentage of Adult Learners who were not employed when they applied to the program increased and the percentage of awardees who were working full time decreased.
- Almost 90 percent of College Savings awardees were neither working nor had ever worked when they applied to the program, which is not surprising given their young age. Employment patterns of College Savings awardees were consistent over time.

Characteristics of the High Schools Attended by 2021

Traditional Scholarship Awardees

In the 2021 award cycle, the 524 Traditional awardees were enrolled in one of 69 public high schools when they applied to the KC Scholars program. To explore the extent to which attending a high school with certain characteristics may be correlated with becoming an awardee, the evaluation team compared several characteristics of awardee schools with those of other public schools in the region that did not have an awardee in the 2021 cycle.

Findings

- The levels of student financial need, measured by eligibility for Title I services, and the proportion of students who were eligible for FRL, were higher in awardee schools than they were in non-awardee schools, but the difference was not statistically significant.
- The differences in the racial and ethnic composition of the student body at awardee and nonawardee schools did not differ significantly.
- Awardee schools had, on average, significantly higher student–teacher ratios than did nonawardee schools, at 16 students per teacher compared with 12 students per teacher, respectively.
- Schools with higher number of awardees had, on average, higher proportions of students with financial need and who identified as Hispanic.
- Awardee schools had more than twice the number of FAFSA submissions and completions than did non-awardee schools, and this difference was statistically significant.

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. Three cohorts of Traditional scholarship awardees were examined in this analysis, corresponding to the program's first, second, and third award cycles.

Traditional scholarship awardees enrolled and persisted at KCS partner institutions at higher rates than non-awardees.

- Across all cohorts and student subgroups, awardees enrolled at four-year institutions at higher rates than non-awardees, and enrolled at two-year institutions at lower rates than non-awardees
- Cohort 3 Traditional scholarship awardees were significantly more likely to enroll in college than non-awardees, and were more likely than non-awardees to enroll in four-year institutions.
- Cohort 3 Black awardees were significantly more likely to enroll in college than Black non-awardees, and were more likely than Black non-awardees to enroll in four-year institutions.
- Cohort 3 first-generation awardees were significantly more likely than first-generation non-awardees to enroll in four-year institutions.
- Cohort 1 Black awardees were significantly more likely to persist into their fourth year of college compared to Black non-awardees from the same cohort.

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, 3, and 4 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 four cohorts persisted in partner institutions at higher rates than non-awardees.

- Adult Learner awardees in cohorts 2, 3, and 4 were significantly more likely to persist through the first year of college (one-year persistence) than non-awardees. Cohort 1 awardees had higher rates of one-year persistence, but the difference was not significant
- Adult Learner awardees were significantly more likely to persist through two years of college (2-year persistence) than non-awardees when all cohort data was combined. The difference in two-year persistence between awardees and non-awardees was positive for each cohort and significant for all cohorts except cohort 2.
- When data from all cohorts were combined Adult Learner awardees were significantly more likely to earn an associate's degrees compared to non-awardees. The difference in the Cohort 3-only analysis was sensitive to analytic technique, likely due to the small sample size.
- When the Adult Learner cohorts were analyzed together and separately by cohort, awardees were more likely than non-awardees to earn a certificate, but the differences were not significant.
- Adult Learners in Cohorts 1 and 2 combined were more likely, but not significantly more likely than non-awardees to earn a bachelor's degrees, but the difference was not significant.