



First Scholars Program

Mission

The mission of The Suder Foundation (TSF) is to dramatically improve the graduation rate of selected first-generation college students — the First Scholars — by providing them financial, academic, personal development, and social integration assistance at selected state universities throughout the United States. Our First Scholars Program will help bridge the gap for its Scholars by developing practical skills and providing resources they need to earn their college degrees and build a solid foundation for successful lives, both during college and long after graduation.

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Executive Summary

First-generation students face multiple challenges in obtaining a college degree. The First Scholars Program is designed to address these needs in four major focus areas — financial, academic, personal development and social integration. Our holistic approach provides financial aid in the form of multi-year scholarships, coupled with comprehensive individualized guidance and resources to aid in Scholars' success in college life and, ultimately, degree attainment.

The First Scholars Program is being implemented through a national network of individual, Scholar Development Sites located on the campuses of selected partner universities. The network will operate much as a business franchise would. The Suder Foundation (TSF) will provide centralized leadership, program model, systems and standards, start-up funding and scholarships for new Sites, long-term ongoing program evaluation and refinement and national network connections. In turn, each university partner will provide the hands-on operation and administration of its own Site, contributing additional resources and eventually assuming full funding responsibility.

TSF and its initial university partners are designing the program components and centralized support systems — incorporating best practices, standards, tools, training, and support for the Scholars and staff. Subsequent Sites will help TSF refine and add to the existing practices and body of knowledge. Each Site will leverage its Program in combination with its existing campus resources to deliver individualized support for each Scholar.

A key component of the Scholar selection process involves applicants taking the Student Strengths Inventory[®], an evidence-based assessment for predicting college student graduation outcomes. Applicants' assessment results will be used in the local selection process to determine those individuals in need of support and most likely to benefit from and embrace the support the Program will offer. The assessment results will also recommend action steps and support services that will form the foundation of the student's Scholar Assessment Profile. The Profile will also include personal history, academic ability, financial situation, interviews, essays and other applicant information.

Once a Scholar is selected, this Profile will be expanded to enable the Scholar and his or her First Scholars Advisor to formulate the Scholar's Personal Strategic Plan in each of the four major focus areas—financial, academic, personal development, and social integration. The Plan's recommended strategies will address areas of Scholar need and enhance the Scholar's individual strengths, talents and special interests. Over the succeeding years, the Scholar and Advisor will update both the Profile and Plan to create continuous support and direction as needed to ensure progression along each Scholar's path to graduation.

The First Scholars Program will also serve as a central resource to connect Scholars to other programs and organizations on campus and throughout the local community which support the Scholar's Plan.

A cornerstone of the Program is its Pay-It-Forward component. All First Scholars will give back through mentoring or tutoring other Scholars and by volunteering and participating in campus and community organizations.

The Program's primary objective is to proactively create a sense of belonging and integrate Scholars fully into campus life. Entering Scholars will be grouped in cohorts and enrolled in at least one common class. Each Scholar will be required to join and actively participate in at least one campus group. The Program will also include special social events and workshops for Scholars.

Another important component of the First Scholars Program is its data-driven, evidence based focus. Measurable results will enable TSF and its university partners to demonstrate the Program's impact and success. A comprehensive data collection process will capture and measure core outcomes across Program Sites in the network. This data will enable TSF to analyze, develop, expand, and enhance the Program's performance at key levels —Scholars, individual Program Sites, and the TSF Network as a whole.

TSF will launch each new Program Site by seed funding scholarships for the initial cohort of students as well as funding Site staff and Program services. Each selected university will contribute toward its Site by providing physical space and other resources such as additional scholarships to expand the cohorts, housing, or administrative staffing. The ongoing responsibility for raising future scholarship dollars and operational funding will transition in phases to each university as its Program matures, with a goal of self-sufficiency by the fifth year.

As each Site achieves self-funding, TSF will continue its ongoing leadership support by providing best practices for program refinement and expansion, further developing national program standards, monitoring performance via data tracking, measuring outcomes, as well as providing strategic and tactical oversight.

TSF is developing a detailed plan for each phase of its growth. TSF will initially self-fund the Program model development, pilot Sites and additional Sites in the network. As the Program matures, data demonstrating the model's success will enable TSF and its university partners to expand their bases of support.

Summary

TSF's First Scholars Program will provide financial assistance and personalized support to enable first-generation students to succeed in college. Investing in its Scholars through this holistic approach will be measurably more effective, and have a greater life-changing impact, than providing scholarships alone.

First-Generation Students

TSF defines *first-generation students* as those whose parents have no education beyond high school (irrespective of other family members, such as older siblings or aunts and uncles).

Such students are less likely to have been groomed for college, and many will have overcome great odds simply to gain acceptance by a university or college. Once enrolled, just 24% of first-generation students will ultimately earn a bachelor's degree. This is only about one-third of their peers' graduation rate of 68%.

Compared to other college students, first-generation students are more likely to be:

- Minorities.
- Enrolled on a delayed basis.
- From lower-income families and/or no longer dependent on parental support.
- In need of scholarships, grants, student loans, and/or other financial aid.
- Working full- or part-time.
- Less academically prepared, having taken less rigorous curricula in high school.
- Expecting to receive less from their education.

Once enrolled, first-generation students:

- Tend to have limited access to information about the college experience, either firsthand or from relatives.
- Are likely to lack knowledge of time management, college finances, budget management, and the bureaucratic operations of higher education.
- May lack family support and may encounter a cultural conflict between home and the college community.
- Are susceptible to doubts about their academic and motivational abilities, causing them to think they are “not college material.”
- May struggle to balance family, work, and school responsibilities.
- Experience lower academic and social integration into the college environment — they are less likely to attend career-related lectures, meet with advisors or faculty, or participate in study groups and campus organizations.
- Require more remedial coursework and assistance.
- Complete fewer credits.

- Are more likely to withdraw from, or have to repeat, courses they attempt.
- Have difficulty choosing and sustaining their choices for majors.

Source: *First Generation Students in Postsecondary Education: A Look at their College Transcripts*, X. Chen, National Center for Education Statistics, August 10, 2005.

First Scholar Development Sites

A national network of individual First Scholar Development Sites is being founded by TSF, located on the campuses of state universities across the United States. Currently, partner institutions are selected through a competitive grant process.

Each partner university will provide a physical space on campus dedicated to the First Scholars Program enabling staff to provide an open, nurturing environment with ease of access that will encourage Scholar participation and sense of belonging. Each Site will have a full-time dedicated director/senior advisor to coordinate Scholar activities and monitor progress, and additional advisors as the number of Scholars increases. The Site will serve as a central clearinghouse for information about other campus, government, and community programs available to assist First Scholars as part of each Scholar's Personal Strategic Plan.

The Program will collect data to facilitate and track activity and communications of the Scholars, advisors, various Sites and the network as a whole. This process will yield the measured results and metrics TSF will use to continuously refine the Program as a whole and expand the network and its base of support.

Scholarships and Scholar Qualification

Each recipient may qualify for a total of four (4) one-year scholarships provided he or she continues to meet the requalification criteria each year. The scholarships are up to \$5,000 per year.

Scholar Qualification Criteria

The First Scholars Program will assist first-generation students with financial need and sufficiently high grades and standardized test scores for admission who need and desire expanded support to insure and measurably enhance their success. The recipient must be a first-generation student who:

- Meets all admissions requirements to be accepted to the university;
- Demonstrates financial need;
- Demonstrates academic ability as evidenced by ACT and/or SAT scores and high school GPA;
- Is eligible for in-state student tuition;
- Intends to live on campus;
- Is eligible to receive federal financial aid (be either a U.S. citizen or a qualified non-citizen as defined and permitted under Federal law);
- Completes and submits the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA);
- Completes the Student Strengths Inventory©.

Scholar Re-qualification Criteria

Beyond freshman year, each First Scholar will be granted up to three (3) additional one-year Scholarships toward undergraduate studies, provided he or she meets the following criteria:

- Maintains a full-time student status (as defined by the school);
- Maintains a cumulative GPA of 2.5 or higher;
- Is on track to graduate on schedule;
- Has participated fully in developing and implementing his or her Personal Strategic Plan;
- Has met their Pay-it-Forward requirements for the academic year.

Core Program—Scholars Critical Path

Scholar Selection and Scholar Assessment Profile

As the central tool of the Scholar selection process, each Scholar applicant will take the Student Strengths Inventory© (SSI), an evidence-based assessment for predicting post-secondary student outcomes. The SSI measures students' attitudes toward education and other activities in seven areas that are critical to college success. The variables measured are:

- Academic engagement –commitment to school work and value placed on academics
- Academic self-efficacy – confidence in own academic achievement and college success
- Social comfort – ability to communicate with others and comfort in social situations
- Resiliency – approach to challenging situations and stressful events
- Educational commitment – dedication to obtaining a college degree
- Campus engagement – connection to the school and involvement in campus activities
- Receptivity to support services—willingness and desire to receive and participate in the hands-on support of the First Scholars Program

Based on the scale scores and two risk indices, students' risk areas and suggested action steps are identified. The SSI results will be the cornerstone of Scholar selection. University partners will also incorporate other considerations such as student essays and/or interviews, personal history, and prior academic performance, financial need, etc. All these combine to form the basis of each applicant's Scholar Assessment Profile.

Scholar Personal Strategic Plan

Once selected, each Scholar will work closely with the advisor to expand his or her Scholar Assessment Profile. Knowing and understanding the Scholar as a whole person — incorporating his or her strengths, talents, and personal interests as well as family and academic background — will enable the advisor and Scholar to design his or her Personal Strategic Plan of focused action steps. The plan will address all four major focus areas: financial, academic, personal development and social Integration. Then the advisor will assemble the Scholar's personal support team and resources needed by the Scholar to maximize personal development and academic success.

Each Scholar's plan will be updated annually and become a dynamic tool to measure progress. This process will provide the ongoing framework of nurture, communication, accountability, and growth for each Scholar. The guidance, career planning, tracking and connection will be the hallmark of each Scholar's ongoing relationship with the Program. These elements will enable the Scholar's full integration into the Program and campus life during his or her college career, and potentially beyond.

Scholar Campus Integration

Each new Scholar will be paired with an upper-class Scholar who will serve as a peer mentor. Incoming Scholars will form a cohort, enrolling in at least one common class and attending certain required activities together, thus building relationships with their peers. Advisors and peer mentors will assist each Scholar in selecting, joining and becoming active in at least one student organization or structured activity based on their interests and the results of their Profile. Finally, each Site will offer special social events and workshops to further equip and connect its Scholars.

Technology Access

TSF and each institution will ensure that each entering Scholar has access to computer technology for academic use and program interaction. Options may include use of university facilities, a dedicated TSF computer lab, or individual laptop computer. TSF will also use current social media resources for communications, such as Facebook and Twitter.

Pay-It-Forward

A key Program component is the Pay-It-Forward model. Each Scholar is expected to actively give of him or herself by assisting others in the Program. Incoming Scholars will receive tutoring and mentoring; as they become upperclassmen, Scholars' responsibilities will shift to providing this support to incoming students. All Scholars will further give back by volunteering in campus and community organizations. The primary examples of the eligible Pay-It-Forward activities are:

Mentoring

TSF upperclassmen can serve as a peer mentors for incoming First Scholars, encouraging their integration into campus life.

Tutoring

Returning Scholars may provide tutoring to other Scholars in a subject in which they are qualified.

Volunteering

Each Scholar will volunteer in campus or community programs, non-profit organizations, or other form of volunteerism. A list of organizations will be developed by the Site Director. Additionally, each Scholar will be encouraged to seek out other organizations that can be added to the approved list.

In order to initiate peer mentors or peer tutors during the opening of a new Site or to augment an existing Site, qualified upperclassmen who are first generation students will be recruited to fill those roles until First Scholars are able to assume the responsibilities.

University Selection

Partner universities must clearly and consistently demonstrate a commitment to improving the graduation rate of their first generation students.

Currently, four-year public universities with enrollments between 10,000 and 25,000 undergraduate students provide an ideal environment to pilot the model.

In addition, demonstrated commitment to the co-investment strategy and long-term sustainability of the program by university leadership such as the President or Provost is required.

University Commitments

Senior Leadership Support and Program Champion

Support of senior campus leadership is essential to the creation and ongoing success of each new Site. Appointment of a senior level liaison as the Program champion to interface between the Site and key institutional constituencies will facilitate the Program implementation and help establish the integrated foundation of campus-wide support, awareness and participation.

In addition, early stage involvement of senior university development staff is essential to ensure the Program's ongoing success. TSF will work with each university to develop a long-term strategic funding plan involving diverse sources such as individual donors, corporations and local foundations.

Co-Investment Model

TSF will initially launch each new Site by providing start-up funding for staff and programming along with scholarship support for an initial cohort of twenty (20) students. Conditioned upon the university's contributions and successful efforts in achieving ongoing measurable benchmark results, TSF will continue to provide scholarship support for those Scholars. Additionally, TSF will fund scholarships for new cohorts of up to 20 Scholars per year in the subsequent three years. The university will then be responsible for securing other funding sources to assume and continue the ongoing scholars and begin adding new cohorts in year 5.

In addition, in the first four years, TSF will fund start-up expenses for program operations including director's salary, student workshops, events, follow-up assessment tools, data systems for communication and tracking, *etc.* University partner investments in its Program are required from the outset of the Program Site. Partners will contribute a graduated percentage of the program costs from the initial operational year. TSF and the university partner for each Site will develop an operational budget necessary to successfully operate the program, taking into consideration the foundation's contributions along with in-kind support provided by the university.

University contributions can include scholarships for additional cohort members, housing, administrative staffing, and/or other support. Each university will raise an increasing portion of its ongoing funding from local donors and foundations, with the goal of reaching financial self-sufficiency by the fifth year.

After a Site becomes self-funding, it will remain in the national TSF Network conforming to best practices, continued Network development and standards, program evaluation and outcome measurement, and benefitting from Program refinement and expansion as well as strategic and tactical oversight provided by TSF.

Infrastructure Model

To fulfill its national vision, TSF will invest in its own organization and systems infrastructure model to research, develop, and fully support the comprehensive Program. TSF will build its own staff and systems so as to provide excellence, consistency, and centralized support to individual Sites as well as the Site network. TSF believes continual model enhancement and expansion will emerge from the practical, on-the-ground experience at the various campus Program Sites. TSF will share these innovations across the network of Sites, and incorporate them into the existing and new campus roll-out programs.

Model Research, Development, and Systems Support

Three grants to research success factors of first generation students, effective support services, and assessment tools were awarded in May 2009. The University of Utah, Morehead State University and Texas Tech University were awarded the Scholar Profile Assessment grants. In June 2009, grants were awarded to the University of Utah and University of Kentucky for initial research and development of the Program and Site Models.

As a result of their work during this process, the University of Utah and University of Kentucky were chosen for the first two pilot Sites, beginning in fall 2010.

TSF has contracted with C-Sync, LLC, developers of the Student Strengths Inventory[®], to add an additional construct to the SSI to assess students' receptivity to support services. Career and Educational Consulting Services is developing the comprehensive program evaluation process, beginning with the first Scholar selections in spring 2010. The consistent measurement of core program outcomes will enable TSF to refine the effectiveness of the Program. The measured success will enable TSF and its partner universities to tangibly demonstrate the Program's value and expand the network of future Sites and secure local and national funding.

The current phase of program development includes the award of two additional planning grants to new university partners for two potential Program Sites. The spring 2010 planning grant will fund a two-fold process: first, further develop the Program's materials to add to the body of knowledge about first-generation student success initiatives including effective service delivery, and, second, to secure campus collaborations needed to launch new Sites at each of the selected universities in August, 2011.

Long-term Scholar Studies

The Program assessment includes a longitudinal Scholar study, starting with each Scholar's acceptance and extending through graduation and possibly beyond. The result will be a continuing study of TSF's nationwide body of first-generation Scholars, and the proven effectiveness of the Site and Program's methods and resources. This will enable The First Scholars Program to track and demonstrate its Scholars' success rates from their college life through graduation and potentially into their post-graduation careers.

Strategic Roll-out Plan

The long-term strategic plan is to grow and scale in the following phases:

- **Phase I:** Research and develop the service delivery, funding, and programming models; develop and establish the Scholar, Program and Site models, including staffing, communication, tracking tools and support systems.
- **Phase II:** Open a small group of pilot Sites at selected universities; improve and expand the model.
- **Phase III:** Begin scaling of the Sites into a nationwide network.
- **Ongoing:** Refine the Program through analysis of the comprehensive assessment results and continued expansion of the Program, Sites, and national network.

Conclusion

Scholarship support is essential for first-generation students. However, TSF's holistic approach provides comprehensive individualized Scholar development and financial support to ensure higher graduation rates, as well as have greater lasting impact on the lives of its Scholars. The program's data-driven model will ensure continuous program improvement and documentation of Scholars' progress. The evidence demonstrating success will attract local and national interest, thereby enabling TSF to grow its national network of Sites, and expand its reach to an ever-increasing number of Scholars.