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Putting First Gen First

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Putting First Gen First

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Monday July 24, 2023

By Eric F. Spina

There's something magical about walking into a room of incoming first-year students, especially when they are all the first in their families to pursue a college degree. It's a piece of the American dream.

I felt hope, promise — and, yes, a little bit of nerves among the new students — in the air at Sinclair Community College on July 16 during a kick-off “coin ceremony” and dinner for the inaugural class of Kessler Scholars.

As I walked between tables to chat with the students and their proud families, I encouraged the students in this new UD Sinclair Academy program to find their “posse” — and be assured that everyone in the program will be rooting for them and offering support, from this very moment to the finish line at their graduation in four years.

And while I could have given them two hours worth of advice when I spoke to them formally, I limited it to two words: show up. Actually, what I said was “SHOW UP, show up, show up, show up.”

When you show up (to class, to team meetings, to office hours, to study sessions, etc.) and persevere, you will succeed, I told them. And, looking at their loved ones, I said, “Two degrees. Four years. That’s hard to beat.”

This month, the 17 Kessler Scholars are learning what it means to be part of a close-knit community that cares deeply about their success. They’re learning about pathways to a college degree and building a network of support through a weeklong orientation program. As part of the UD Sinclair Academy, they will be students at both institutions from day one with advisors on both campuses and plentiful outside-the-classroom opportunities, such as working alongside a faculty mentor in a research lab or playing the trombone in the Pride of Dayton marching band — all while taking classes at the community college.

We’re blessed by a \$1 million gift from two prestigious organizations — the Judy and Fred Wilpon Family Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies — which has made us an integral part of the groundbreaking [Kessler Scholars Collaborative](#), a diverse national network of 16 colleges and universities who are putting first-generation students first.

Nationally, more than one-third of all entering undergraduates — nearly 5 million students — identify as being the first in their family to pursue a four-year college degree, according to the Kessler Scholars Collaborative. These students graduate at lower rates because some feel out of place on a college campus and don’t readily know how to navigate through the unwritten rules of higher education.

We’re helping to write the script on how to help underrepresented students be successful and will apply those practices to this program. It all comes down to one word: support.

From significant financial assistance to success coaches to leadership opportunities to help highly talented students from underserved backgrounds reach their potential, we’ve developed a model that works.

In the [Flyer Promise Scholars Program](#), for instance, 92 percent of students graduate in four years compared to 47 percent nationally, making UD [a national leader](#) in college access and success for lower-income students. And as families look for ways to reduce the cost of college, the [UD Sinclair Academy](#) is putting a bachelor’s degree in reach of talented students from all ZIP codes.

At the celebration dinner, I watched with joy as each Kessler Scholar received a “challenge coin” to welcome them into the program and create an *esprit de corps* among the group.

That coin signifies much more. It’s our pledge. We will support you. We will help you realize your dreams.