

Community Partners Valuable to 21st Century Scholars Program

Targeted outreach is critical to increasing participation and awareness of scholarship

By Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education Teresa Lubbers

As high school seniors around the state prepare for graduation this spring, nearly one in 10 of the students who will cross the stage will be a [21st Century Scholar](#). Of those graduating Scholars, nearly 90 percent of them will continue their education at a college or university.

Many more students, however, could be following that path of graduating as a Scholar and heading to college with their tuition paid for by the state of Indiana.

The 21st Century Scholars program is Indiana's early college promise program that provides income-eligible Hoosiers up to four years of paid tuition at a participating Indiana college or university. It's a promise to students that no matter life's circumstances or obstacles, college can be an option for everyone.

Since its creation in 1990, the 21st Century Scholars program has significantly improved Indiana's education attainment with more than 45,000 Hoosiers earning a college degree with the scholarship. In fact, Scholars are the only group to close the college-going achievement gap across all races and ethnicities. The Scholar Success Program also ensures that students are not only going to college but are prepared when they arrive.

[Testimonials](#) from Scholar alumni share how the scholarship allowed them to graduate with little to no debt, pursue advanced degrees and secure gainful employment. While the scholarship has been significant to students and families for over three decades, our biggest challenge – awareness and participation in the program – remains.

According to the [21st Century Scholars Report](#) recently released by the [Indiana Commission for Higher Education](#), 40 percent of middle school and high school students are financially eligible for the program. However, of that 40 percent who are eligible, only about half enroll in the program. Eligible students are leaving this life-changing scholarship on the table by missing the enrollment period during their seventh and eighth grade years.

We recognize that the Commission and our eight outreach coordinators cannot reach every student on our own. We also understand that different messengers resonate with different students and families. Counselors and teachers are extremely valuable partners, but so are faith-based organizations, community organizations and business leaders.

Just as there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to helping students find the right educational pathways, there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes promoting the 21st Century Scholars program. We must lean on the right messengers to meet our students and families where they are and help them enroll in the program.

The Commission already partners with several organizations including the Starfish Initiative, Indiana Black Expo, Indiana Latino Institute, Indy Achieves, Indianapolis Urban League, Center for Leadership Development, the Community Foundation of St. Joseph County and others to reach students and families around the state. Additionally, our [Padres Estrellas](#) connect with Hispanic and Latino families to increase enrollment. But we know there is additional outreach to be done.

That's why we're calling those who are in contact with seventh or eighth grade students or their parents to inform them not only of the 21st Century Scholars program, but the benefits of education beyond high school. Higher education is one of the best ways to achieve greater economic opportunity and personal prosperity, and the 21st Century Scholarship is the state's best resource to make pursuing higher education affordable.

If you're a Scholar alum, you're the program's biggest influencer. You're a testament of the power of the 21st Century Scholars program. I urge you to [share your story](#) of how the program impacted you personally and/or professionally. Your success may be what resonates with students of today and tomorrow.

While it isn't the silver bullet, 21st Century Scholars is one of Indiana's best tools in the state's quest to close equity and achievement gaps. Join us in getting more eligible seventh and eighth grade students [enrolled](#) in the program.

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