



INDIANA COMMISSION *for* HIGHER EDUCATION

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Record Number of Students Become 21st Century Scholars through Automatic Enrollment

With recent legislation, eligible students are automatically enrolled in Indiana's college promise program.



INDIANAPOLIS – The [Indiana Commission for Higher Education](#) announced that more than 90,000 students have been automatically enrolled in the 2027 and 2028 cohorts of the [21st Century Scholars](#) program, Indiana's nationally-recognized early college promise program. In the 2028 cohort, more than 50,000 students were initially enrolled while nearly 46,000 students have been initially enrolled in the 2027 cohort.

Cohorts are defined by projected high school graduation year. Students are now automatically enrolled on June 30 after completing eighth grade.

Created in 1990, the 21st Century Scholars program is Indiana's key to narrowing gaps in educational attainment. The scholarship covers up to full tuition at eligible two- or four-year Indiana colleges and universities for students from low-income backgrounds.

Central to the Commission's strategy, the program has seen significant change the past two years with legislation that allows the Commission to automatically enroll all financially eligible students into the program. HEA 1449-2023 was signed into law after receiving bipartisan support from the Indiana General Assembly. Students who are automatically enrolled in the program must still meet necessary requirements during high school to obtain the scholarship.

Prior to this legislation, enrollment ranged from 16,000 to 19,000 students per cohort, with automatic enrollment effectively more than doubling the cohorts. Students who are income-eligible for the National School Lunch Program are automatically enrolled in the 21st Century Scholars program through a partnership with the Indiana Department of Education.

Gaps in educational attainment call for intentional, focused action

Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education Chris Lowery has repeatedly called attention to the college-going rate for low-income, Black, and Hispanic or Latino students from his appointment in 2022, during the 2023 [State of Higher Education Address](#), and beyond.

"The college-going rate for students from low-income households who are not part of the 21st Century Scholars program is 30 percent," Lowery said. "When multiplied by their on-time college completion rate of 27 percent, those students have a roughly eight percent likelihood of graduating from high school and completing college on time. This is unacceptable, and in my view, deserves the bold and urgent attention that has been provided by this important change to the 21st Century Scholars program."

For Indiana, the 21st Century Scholars program tackles disparities impacting students from low-income households. The Commission's [2024 college-going data](#) shows that 81 percent of Scholars attended college in 2022 compared to 30

percent of their non-Scholar, low-income peers. Furthermore, the 2021 [21st Century Scholars Report](#) showed that although college-going gaps persist across racial and ethnic groups, the gap is all but closed among students in the Scholars program.

In addition to providing a way to manage the cost of college, the 21st Century Scholars program gives students a support system, ensuring students have what they need to be successful in college.

“The 21st Century Scholars program is more than a scholarship; it’s a resource hub for student success,” said Lowery. “Financial assistance is one of many benefits that the program provides to students. In collaboration with support programs offered by our higher education institutions, the program ensures students have the tools they need to enroll in and successfully complete their postsecondary education.”

Historically, the Commission has set programs and resources in place to support enrollment into the 21st Century Scholars program. With the new system of automatic enrollment, the agency has begun to introduce and shift capacity to college enrollment and completion efforts for higher risk student groups, including those enrolled in 21st Century Scholars.

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About the Indiana Commission for Higher Education

Created in 1971, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education plans, coordinates, and defines Indiana’s postsecondary education system to align higher learning with the needs of students and the state. The Commission also administers Indiana’s financial aid programs, including the 21st Century Scholars early college promise scholarship, which celebrated 30 years in 2020.