

Understanding the Logic and Aims of Rutgers Future Scholars: A College Access Program Providing Hope and Opportunity to New Jersey

Adrian Gale, Kim Williams, and Aramis Gutierrez

Abstract

This article describes the Rutgers Future Scholars (RFS) program, established in 2007 to address the daunting challenges that hinder access to higher education for low-income, first-generation students. RFS spans 5 crucial years, offering academic and summer programming, mentorship, family support, and college tours. This comprehensive approach aims to enhance college readiness, identity development, social skills, academic achievement, and high school persistence, ultimately leading to college enrollment. RFS's commitment to scholars is unwavering and aligns with restorative justice practices, emphasizing relationship-building and support over punitive measures. It serves as a beacon of hope for underserved communities. RFS seeks to create systemic changes within educational systems and empower students to overcome barriers to higher education by fostering partnerships, tailoring programs to unique contexts, and leveraging multisite locations. The article sheds light on the transformative potential of programs like RFS in reshaping the trajectories of underrepresented youth and expanding access to higher education.

Keywords: college access, academic programming, adolescence, educational equity



In the United States, a college degree provides access to multiple quality of life markers, including higher employment, better health, and a more stable family (Lawrence, 2017). For far too many Americans, achieving a college degree is almost impossible because of a lack of financial resources or knowledge about the college application process (Greenfield, 2015). In response to issues of college access, universities; local, state, and national governments; and nonprofit organizations have established college access programs (CAPs), which promote educational and economic equity by empowering historically disadvantaged youth from low-income households. CAPs provide resources, support, and experiences (academic mentoring, financial counseling for students and their families, test preparation courses, and tuition assistance) that supplement the college readiness support students may or may not receive in their educational or familial settings (Ward, 2006).

Involvement in CAPs enables students to engage in academic and social activities on college campuses rather than work in areas unrelated to their academic careers (Allen et al., 2008; Hune & Gomez, 2008). Students who participate in CAPs have better odds of completing advanced college preparatory curricula such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses than non-college-access-program participants (Domina, 2009; St. John et al., 2008, 2011). Likewise, studies have found that CAP participants are more likely to enroll in college (Bowman et al., 2018; Glennie et al., 2014), have higher GPAs in reading and math (Cabrera et al., 2006; Ellis & Helaire, 2018), SAT and ACT scores (Morgan et al., 2015), and academic motivation and critical thinking skills (Beer et al., 2008; Gale, 2021) than non-college-access-program participants.

Participating in CAPs also enables students to develop networks with school personnel and program staff, providing them with

academic resources and strategies for college success (St. John et al., 2011). Over the past 20 years, many universities, such as Rutgers University, have implemented initiatives to increase access to higher education for underrepresented students in their respective regions. University-sanctioned college access initiatives combine merit-based (i.e., meeting academic requirements to access programs and receive financial funding) and need-based (i.e., identifying students who are socioeconomically in need of resources) approaches to help students access programs to increase access to their institutions. Rutgers Future Scholars (RFS) is a unique and ambitious CAP that combines a tailored approach to programming with an unconditional commitment to program participants. The purpose of this article is to describe the logic model that undergirds RFS, as well as outline this program's aims. This article also describes how RFS has sought to empower and transform the lives of underrepresented and lower income youth and their families through programming.

Rutgers Future Scholars Program Overview

In response to the scarcity of opportunities for first-generation and underserved youth in the vicinity of Rutgers University's campuses in New Brunswick, Piscataway, Newark, Camden, and Rahway (established in 2016), the RFS program was established in 2007. The institution supports this university-wide initiative and aims to equip promising students from low-income backgrounds, who will be the first in their families to attend college, with the necessary preparation for college admission. Spanning 5 years, from eighth to 12th grade, RFS operates during both the school year and the summer. The program employs a range of strategies, including summer programming, mentorship, family academies, college tours, and social-cultural enrichment trips throughout the school year, with the ultimate goal of enhancing college and workforce readiness, fostering identity and social skill development, and improving student achievement and persistence in high school, ultimately leading to college enrollment.

Upon successful completion of the 5-year program and acceptance into Rutgers University, students can receive assistance with tuition. In some cases, they may also access financial aid from other universities

through state and federal grants and private scholarships. This comprehensive approach exemplifies the commitment of RFS to empower students and provide them with the necessary resources and support to overcome barriers to higher education, ensuring their successful transition into college and beyond.

RFS Theory of Change

RFS employs a comprehensive and sequential multiyear curriculum that encompasses various components, such as academic enrichment, university programming, social-cultural enrichment, counseling and support, mentoring, and academic coaching, throughout the 5-year program. RFS aims to motivate scholars in academic, social, and personal domains by providing the hope and promise a college education offers. This targeted programming strives to increase the likelihood of high school completion, postsecondary institution application, and enrollment, as depicted in Table 1, which depicts the program's logic model.

Figure 1 illustrates the structure of the Rutgers Future Scholars experience, including core supports provided across the five program years and expected pathways toward college enrollment.

The overarching goals that guide the mission of RFS are threefold. The program's primary goal is to increase the graduation rate of promising students from low-income backgrounds who are traditionally underrepresented in college, ensuring a successful transition into higher education. Second, RFS invests in the Newark, Camden, Piscataway, New Brunswick, and Rahway communities. Newark, Camden, Piscataway, and New Brunswick are home to Rutgers University's main campuses; Rahway is the first expansion site not home to a Rutgers campus. RFS fosters partnerships between educational institutions, school districts, community-based organizations, government entities at the state and local levels, and the business community. Finally, RFS seeks to establish a flexible model that encourages other higher education institutions to collaborate with various stakeholders, effectively creating educational opportunities for underserved youth from low-income communities and catalyzing systemic changes within the surrounding educational systems.

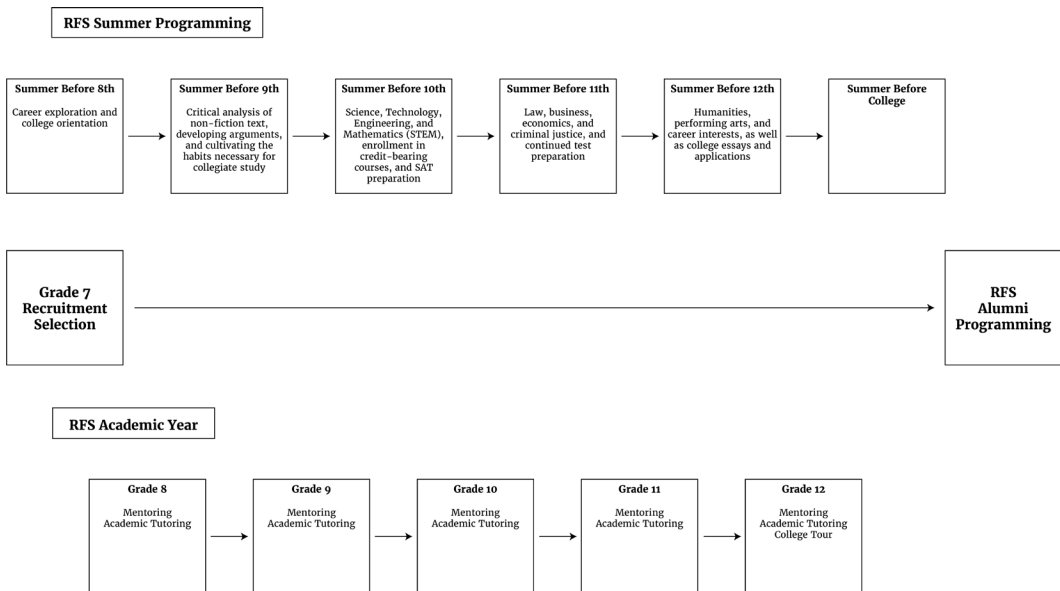
Who Are RFS Scholars?

Since its establishment in 2007, the RFS

Table 1. Logic Model of Rutgers Future Scholars

Inputs & resources	Interventions & activities	Outputs	Short-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding • RFS staff; Director; Mentors; Summer instructors • Rutgers University facilities • Middle and high schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summer programming • Academic year program • Social and emotional skill development • College exposure • Academic, college, and career counseling • Art and cultural enrichment • Parent engagement and college knowledge • Student/family support (as needed) • Alumni support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 215 new Scholars 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase GPA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumni graduating and enrolling in college • Alumni successfully complete coursework and earn degrees

Figure 1. The Rutgers Future Scholars Experience



program has served over 3,000 students, offering them valuable services. The current group of RFS scholars consists of 44% Latin/Hispanic, 35% Black/African American, 8% Multiracial, 6% Asian/Pacific Island, 4% White, and 3% belonging to other racial categories. Regarding gender distribution, 55% of RFS scholars are female, and 45% are male. To become an RFS scholar, students face a competitive selection process, as the program receives hundreds of applications annually. With limited capacity, each year RFS can accept only 215 seventh-grade students, who hail from over 40 schools in New Jersey.

To be eligible for consideration to RFS, youth must fulfill specific criteria. First, they must attend a public school governed by the district's Board of Education, excluding charter schools. Additionally, students must demonstrate good academic standing or exhibit academic promise as of 7th grade. Financial need is also a crucial factor, determined by participation in a reduced-price lunch program. Furthermore, applicants must obtain recommendations from either school faculty or community members. Finally, preference is given to students who would be the first in their families to pursue higher education. RFS program staff meticulously review each application, considering factors such as academic potential, financial need, and personal circumstances to select the final cohort of scholars. The application review process involves professionals from RFS and representatives from Rutgers University departments, including admissions, financial aid, undergraduate support programs, and partnering school districts.

Context Matters: RFS Home Communities

One of the major considerations for RFS is the role of context and student location in program delivery. RFS programming operates in five school districts across New Jersey, each with unique characteristics. RFS school districts differed concerning (1) the socioeconomic status of the city (income and education of residents) and (2) community structure (see Table 2 for a more detailed description of these demographics). The populations of Camden, New Brunswick, and Newark represent some of the lowest socioeconomic statuses in New Jersey. In addition, Camden, New Brunswick, Newark, and Rahway's 4-year high school graduation rate is lower than the New Jersey state average of 90.4%. Concerning urbanicity, Newark schools are the most urban and

have the highest public school population, at 41,510 students. In the Newark district, 73.5% of students qualify for the free/reduced-price lunch program; in New Brunswick, all students are on free/reduced-price lunch (Snyder et al., 2019).

On the other hand, Camden is the least urban of the RFS school districts, with a public school population of 7,487. New Brunswick school system has a total population of 10,217 students, of which 48% qualify for the free/reduced-price lunch program. Piscataway is a suburban town with a public school population of 7,137. It has the lowest percentage of free/reduced-price lunch, 33.5%. Since 2016, RFS has expanded to include enrolling and serving students in the Rahway, New Jersey school district. Rahway has the smallest school district of the RFS districts, with 4,054 students and 56.6% of students receiving free/reduced-price lunch (Snyder et al., 2019).

Finally, in addition to the issues described above, each school district has unique issues that must be considered when developing programming. For example, approximately two thirds of the New Brunswick school district students speak a second language at home, reflecting the city's diversity (New Brunswick Public Schools, n.d.). Piscataway is the only RFS district designated as a "Highly Effective School District" by the New Jersey Department of Education after evaluating the district's operations management, personnel, instruction and program, and governance and fiscal management. The multisite nature of RFS allows the program to tailor programming to meet each community's needs. Further, these differences in the school population and environment create opportunities to generate knowledge about how to serve low-income, first-generation students in various contexts and identify opportunities for building networks and pooling resources across schools and school districts.

Academic Year Programming

The academic year programming of RFS is structured around a 5-year personal development plan designed to support scholars from the summer before eighth grade until college preparation in the final senior year. Each year focuses on specific aspects of academic and personal enrichment and growth. Scholars engage in workshops and events, facilitating identity formation in the first year. Subsequent years target self-

Table 2. Rutgers Future Scholars School District Demographics

Campus	District information (2018–2019)	Economic status	Graduation/postsecondary achievement
Camden Campus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of traditional public schools: 19 • Total enrollment: 7,487 • Student to teacher ratio: 9:1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free lunch: 53.2% • Reduced-price lunch: 0.3% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four-year graduation rate: 69.1% • College enrollment: 35.2%
New Brunswick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of traditional public schools: 11 • Total enrollment: 10,217 • Student to teacher ratio: 13:1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free lunch: 47.9% • Reduced-price lunch: <0.1% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four-year graduation rate: 78% • College enrollment: 56.5%
Newark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of traditional public schools: 61 • Total enrollment: 41,510 • Student to teacher ratio: 14:1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free lunch: 69.3% • Reduced-price lunch: 4.2% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four-year graduation rate: 76.1% • College enrollment: 53.7%
Piscataway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of traditional public schools: 10 • Total enrollment: 7,137 • Student to teacher ratio: 13:1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free lunch: 26.6% • Reduced-price lunch: 6.9% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four-year graduation rate: 94.4% • College enrollment: 84.6%
Rahway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of traditional public schools: 6 • Total enrollment: 4,054 • Student to teacher ratio: 12:1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free lunch: 46.6% • Reduced-price lunch: 10% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four-year graduation rate: 87.6% • College enrollment: 73.3%

Note. District-level demographic data (e.g., enrollment, number of schools, student–teacher ratios, and free/reduced-price lunch eligibility) were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (Snyder et al., 2019). Graduation and postsecondary outcomes were retrieved from the New Jersey Department of Education’s 2020–2021 School Performance Reports (New Jersey Department of Education, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d).

empowerment, social and civic engagement, career and workplace exploration, and college preparation. These targeted objectives enable scholars to confront and overcome challenges, enhance their test-taking skills for college entrance exams, and explore various career paths. Scholars participate in mentoring, college readiness, enrichment, tutoring, academic support, and team-building seminars to support their academic journey.

Recognizing the unique circumstances of each school district’s location, the program tailors its programming to address each community’s specific challenges and opportunities. Recognizing the unique opportunities in each location, RFS in Newark leverages the city’s strong network of community-based organizations and emphasis on STEM education by collaborating

with local universities, tech incubators, and corporate partners to offer mentorship and hands-on STEM programming, such as coding workshops or engineering design challenges. In Camden, where proximity to major health care institutions aligns with a growing focus on public health and social services, the program may provide specialized exposure to health care careers through internships, shadowing opportunities at Cooper University Hospital, and partnerships with local nonprofits focused on community wellness. Meanwhile, in New Brunswick/Piscataway, home to Rutgers University’s main campus, RFS students may benefit from increased access to university faculty, research labs, and college-level courses, with opportunities for dual-enrollment programs, extended summer residential experiences, and direct mentoring from Rutgers students.

RFS provides a structured and supportive environment designed to foster academic, social, and personal development, ensuring scholars are well-prepared for college and career success. Scholars are provided with an active and focused environment that fosters academic, social, and personal development by offering workshops, events, and seminars. The program equips scholars with the necessary skills for college entrance exams and career exploration and creates a supportive space for their growth. Through these efforts, RFS acknowledges and addresses each school district's unique challenges and opportunities, ensuring a customized approach that maximizes the potential for scholar success.

Summer Institute

During the summer, RFS scholars engage in specialized programs hosted at local Rutgers campuses. These summer programs have a dual objective: enhancing scholars' academic skills and providing exposure to various career paths and college majors, particularly in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), as well as liberal and performing arts. The experience of living on a college campus further immerses scholars in the college environment. The curriculum of the summer programs includes both credit and noncredit courses and activities that foster connections between classroom learning and real-world applications. The structure of the summer programming aligns with the academic year curriculum, with each year building upon the knowledge and skills acquired in the previous year. In the first year, the focus is on identity formation. Year 2 centers on critically analyzing nonfiction texts, argument development, STEM, and cultivating study habits essential for college-level education. Year 3 focuses on law, business, economics, criminal justice, and SAT preparation. In Year 4, career exploration and college orientation are accompanied by ongoing test preparation support. Finally, the summer before senior year concentrates on humanities, performing arts, career interests, college essay writing, and college application guidance.

RFS offers summer programming that enables scholars to enhance their academic competencies and explore diverse career opportunities. Scholars can develop their academic skills through these programs while gaining valuable exposure to various career paths. Scholars are encouraged to

bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application by integrating theme-based projects into the curriculum. The structured progression of the summer programs ensures a systematic approach to preparing scholars for college and beyond. From exploring personal identity and self-awareness as individuals and RFS scholars to subject-specific studies, focused test preparation in later years, and career exploration with college orientation, the summer programs offer scholars a well-rounded educational experience. By incorporating STEM, arts, and humanities courses; credit-bearing classes; and critical thinking exercises, the program provides scholars with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel academically. Moreover, the diverse range of subjects explored in the program's later years enables scholars to explore potential fields of interest and make informed decisions about their future pursuits. The culmination of the summer programming in the senior year involves a comprehensive focus on humanities and college application support, ensuring that scholars are well-prepared for the transition to higher education and their desired career paths.

The RFS Promise: Unconditional Commitment

One of the unique features of RFS is its motto, "Once a Scholar, always a Scholar," which shows RFS's commitment to scholars. RFS guarantees an unconditional commitment to scholars and their families, setting it apart from the punitive zero-tolerance policies in many urban schools. School districts implemented these policies to create safer school environments. However, unlike zero-tolerance approaches, RFS focuses on providing consistent support and opportunities for scholars to thrive. Although zero-tolerance policies initially addressed serious drug and weapon offenses, these policies have expanded to include minor disciplinary infractions (Schiff, 2018; Skiba & Rausch, 2006a). Schools sometimes respond to minor student violations with punishments like those in the criminal justice system (Cribb Fabersunne et al., 2023; Giroux, 2003). This punitive approach disproportionately affects students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and those with disabilities, often pushing them out of the education system and into cycles of academic disengagement and criminalization (Payne & Welch, 2017). In contrast, RFS fosters a culture of belonging and long-term investment in students'

success, ensuring that scholars are supported through challenges rather than penalized and excluded.

Students who experience overly harsh discipline are more likely to do poorly in school, develop negative attitudes toward education, and drop out (Payne & Welch, 2017; Skiba & Rausch, 2006b). Because of the harm that historically underrepresented populations like Black and Latino students have experienced through zero-tolerance policies, the RFS mantra of “Once a Scholar, always a Scholar” is based on restorative justice practices that focus on building relationships and repairing harm rather than punishments that encourage repetition (Payne & Welch, 2015; Welch & Payne, 2018). People generally respond better in environments that foster social engagement rather than social control (Payne & Welch, 2017). Unlike zero-tolerance policies, restorative justice in schools seeks to bring students closer to the community rather than alienate them. RFS believes in supporting the students through hardships and triumphs and promises to serve as a constant resource, always believing in scholars’ ability to succeed. Restorative justice techniques include discussions in safe environments, such as student conferences and peer mediation, which allow students to guide others through a restorative process (Payne & Welch, 2017). Within the RFS model, many of these components are involved in building stronger, supportive relationships with scholars.

Schools implementing restorative justice practices have witnessed positive outcomes, including reduced suspensions and expulsions, fewer disciplinary infractions, fewer office referrals, and improved academic achievement (Payne & Welch, 2017). Although the implementation of restorative justice programs in schools has been limited, educators and practitioners acknowledge the potential of these programs to support students in their educational journey while addressing racial disparities in disciplinary policies and outcomes (Schiff, 2018). Through its unwavering dedication to restorative justice approaches, the RFS program has never dismissed a student, highlighting its commitment to fostering a supportive and inclusive environment.

Expected Impact of RFS

The overarching goal of RFS is to enhance college access for all participants, accompanied by intermediate short-term and

long-term goals for scholars’ postcollege acceptance. Through the 5-year program, RFS empowers scholars to excel academically, personally, and socially during middle and high school. Regarding long-term objectives, RFS aims to increase college acceptance and promote college persistence and completion. Moreover, RFS strives for eventual local policy and practice changes that positively impact educational access and success for low-income and first-generation students. RFS seeks to foster enduring transformations in educational opportunities and achievements for marginalized communities by actively pursuing these comprehensive goals.

Internal analysis of outcome data has shown that RFS substantially impacts the educational achievement of its participants, particularly in terms of high school retention, graduation rates, and college enrollment. Findings from a 2017 internal report revealed that an impressive 99% of RFS scholars were actively enrolled and making progress toward their graduation. Notably, these students exhibited remarkable academic performance, boasting an average GPA of 3.3, with over 50% actively engaging in honors and advanced courses. These outcomes highlight the effectiveness of the RFS program in providing support and empowerment to low-income and first-generation students, nurturing a culture of academic excellence, and facilitating access to higher education opportunities.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of RFS

Led by the lead author of this article, each summer for the past 4 years, Rutgers Future Scholars has assessed the psychosocial impacts of its programming, such as self-efficacy, grit, confidence in academic abilities, future orientation, and communication, using a 30-minute survey. This project received IRB approval through Rutgers University (IRB# E12-427). These assessments have shown that strong social support networks significantly enhance students’ academic performance, self-efficacy, and well-being. Mentorship and peer support have emerged as critical factors in helping students navigate academic challenges and stay motivated. The findings from these assessments will be used to improve the programming, ensuring it effectively supports students’ needs and fosters their success.

The ongoing evaluation of RFS will be expanded to assess the program’s effectiveness

further and ensure its continued success and impact. Building on current evaluation efforts, this expanded assessment will track students' outcomes from entering the program in eighth grade through high school graduation and beyond. RFS will continue to analyze key metrics such as academic performance, college persistence, career achievements, and overall life satisfaction. These insights will not only help identify strengths and areas for improvement but will also guide future program enhancements and strategic planning.

A crucial aspect of this expanded evaluation will be the systematic collection and analysis of data that highlight the program's long-term impact on participants. By leveraging scholar feedback, academic records, and postgraduation tracking, RFS will refine its support structures to meet the needs of underserved students better. This continuous, data-driven assessment will ensure that RFS remains a transformative force in improving educational and career outcomes while adapting to the evolving challenges scholars face.

Next Steps for Expanding RFS

Building on its success, RFS is committed to expanding its reach by developing a comprehensive framework for replication across universities and institutions. This expansion strategy will ensure that more underserved students benefit from the program's proven model while upholding the core principles that define RFS. Establishing strong partnerships with university administration, faculty, and student organizations will be central to this effort, creating a supportive infrastructure that fosters sustainability and enhances student success.

By leveraging existing university resources—such as academic support services, mentorship programs, and community engagement initiatives—RFS will seamlessly integrate into diverse institutions. The effectiveness of this approach is demonstrated by its successful adaptation at peer institutions, including the University of Michigan,

James Madison University, the University of Toronto, Stony Brook University, Louisiana State University, and Temple University. Through targeted outreach, professional development, and strategic planning support, RFS will empower partner institutions to cultivate a culture of educational equity and opportunity, ultimately building a national network to advance college access and success for first-generation, low-income students.

To support further expansion, RFS will prioritize securing sustainable funding through grants and partnerships with local businesses. Additionally, RFS will develop training workshops and webinars to equip university staff with the skills needed for successful program implementation. RFS aims to transform higher education cultures and ensure that first-generation and low-income students reach college and thrive by continuing to foster a nationwide network of institutions committed to educational equity.

Conclusion

RFS is an ambitious college access program dedicated to supporting high-achieving youth from low-income households in New Jersey to attain admission to colleges and universities. The program accomplishes this objective by providing comprehensive financial, social, and academic assistance through the collaboration of RFS staff, peers, and families. To further these goals, RFS implements a range of purposeful interventions, including summer and academic-year programs, the development of social and emotional skills, college exposure opportunities, mentorship, and academic coaching. The program's unwavering commitment to scholars' success and its tailored programming for specific locations enhance the effectiveness of RFS in facilitating college access. Ultimately, the RFS program holds immense potential in transforming life trajectories and opening doors to new opportunities for its participants.



About the Authors

Adrian Gale is an assistant professor at the Rutgers School of Social Work. His research focuses on identifying promotive and protective factors for Black youth who have experienced racial discrimination within educational settings. Dr. Gale earned his PhD and MSW from the University of Michigan.

Kim Williams serves as the director of the Rutgers Future Scholars Program. She is dedicated to increasing college access for underrepresented youth and has been instrumental in guiding similar initiatives at other universities. Ms. Williams holds a BA in psychology and a master's in social work from Rutgers University.

Aramis Gutierrez is the assistant vice president for educational access and success and the executive director of the Educational Equity and Excellence Collaborative at Rutgers University. His work centers on developing and overseeing programs that promote educational equity and support for underserved student populations.

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