

DIVERSITY IN ACADEME

At Illinois College, a Fellowship Helps Students Succeed



Illinois College

Ryan Flynn (right, in the library archives at Illinois College), says the Yates Fellowship Program gave him connections other students didn't have.

By Ben Gose | MAY 18, 2015

Nearly half of the students at Illinois College are the first in their families to go to college. But only 18 of the roughly 275 freshmen who enroll each year at the private institution in Jacksonville, Ill., are admitted to the Yates Fellowship Program, a yearlong "learning community" designed to help first-generation students succeed.

The college uses student essays and recommendations from high-school teachers to choose students for the program, which aspires to include both at-risk students and higher-achieving students who can serve as role

models. About 40 students per year apply for the 18 slots.

Diversity in Academe: First-Generation Students

Check out the rest of our special report on efforts to help this growing group of students succeed.

The centerpiece is a two-week summer session, held just before the fall semester starts, during which students work on writing and math, get tips on organizational and study skills, and learn how a liberal-arts degree can help them achieve career and life goals.

Students' pride in winning a spot often turns to concern when they arrive and discover just how much time the Yates program requires. The summer session is chock-full of activities, from 8 in the morning until 11 at night, says Andrew Jones, the college's dean of student success. "The students are a bit shocked and dismayed about that," he says.

The program's requirements continue throughout the year.

During the fall semester, Yates students are required to take two courses together — one on speech fundamentals and another on exploring identity. They live in the same dormitory, participate in social events and study halls together, and take a third course together during the spring.

The program appears to be working. Yates participants consistently outperform other Illinois College students who were eligible for the program, Mr. Jones says.

The program was started in 2008 with a \$100,000 grant from the Walmart Foundation. Illinois College was one of 50 members of the Council of Independent Colleges — an association of liberal-arts colleges — to receive a Walmart grant through a special program designed to help first-generation students succeed. The college's

success with the Yates program helped it land a much larger grant in 2010 from the federal TRIO student-support program, worth about \$1.1 million over five years.

One reason for the Yates program's effectiveness, says Mr. Jones, is the large number of Illinois College instructors — nearly a third of the total faculty — who were first-generation students themselves. Every Yates student has an informational interview with a faculty member before the first semester.

Ryan Flynn, who plans to graduate this month, says the biggest benefit he received from the program was learning how to network and to locate campus offices that could help him succeed. Mr. Flynn's father works in a retail setting, stocking products in stores, while his mother is an administrative assistant.

"I grew up with parents who were very independent," Mr. Flynn says. "They know how to figure stuff out on their own. That's how a lot of first-generation students are — you'll opt to figure it out on your own, or not pursue help at all."

But the Yates program provided a different perspective. During the two-week summer session, he says, he made contacts with other students and faculty and staff members who helped him get through the first year. "Those were people you felt like you could reach out to," Mr. Flynn says. "Most students didn't have those connections."

Many first-generation students pursue a college degree in a quest for a better-paying job, but the Yates program introduces the idea that college is about far more than earning a credential. During the summer session, students are asked to write short "This I Believe ... " essays, after the former NPR show of the same

"That's how a lot of first-generation students are — you'll opt to figure it out on your own."

name.

Beth Capo, an English professor who teaches the writing component of the program, says she prods students to reflect on why they have chosen to take the bold step of becoming the first in their families to pursue a college degree.

"By the end, they see that writing is for a purpose," she says, "and that it can be a much more important purpose than 'I have to do a paper for a class.'"

This article is part of:

Diversity in Academe: First-Generation Students

