Developing Scholars Program Vision Statement

In 2000 Kansas State University launched the Developing Scholars Program for undergraduate students who are first generation of any background or are a member of a group that has been historically underrepresented in higher education with the goal to increase access and facilitate the highest levels of academic achievement by matching incoming students with top-flight faculty research mentors.

The results have been incredible. Developing Scholars have received Goldwater and Fulbright awards, among the most selective and prestigious available, as well as admission to the nation’s most recognized graduate and professional schools, as it were, from Stanford to Columbia. With an impressive 83 percent 5-year graduation rate over its first 15 years, nearly 350 undergraduate students have benefited from the Developing Scholars Program’s mentoring, coaching, financial support, and peer community of scholars.

The Developing Scholars Program works so well because it facilitates effective working relationships between students with considerable untapped academic and leadership potential, faculty with a strong desire to open doors and nurture undergraduate research excellence, and a staff whose considerable expertise is grounded in years of varied experience working with ethnically, racially, and economically underrepresented and underserved students. Indeed, the founder of the Developing Scholars Program, Anita Cortez, combined lessons learned from her work with the Kaufman Foundation’s Project Choice initiative, the Kansas State University PILOTS freshman retention program, and federally-funded TRIO support services, to form a new type of undergraduate enrichment program which seeks serious-minded, high-achieving, historically underrepresented students in order to match them with the type of faculty mentors they need, and provide them with the type of opportunities for creative inquiry they need, so that they might, with the right motivation and mentoring, achieve their lofty academic and scholarly aspirations.

So impressive have been these results that, in 2014, Kansas State University founded its Office of Undergraduate Research & Creative Achievement with the Developing Scholars Program at its core, and promoted Anita Cortez to the position of director with a charge to bring benefits similar to those available to Developing Scholars to as many undergraduates as possible. Anita’s leadership, and the leadership provided by the faculty mentors in every undergraduate college, accord with K-State 2025: A Visionary Plan, in which Kansas State University sets its sights on achieving recognition as a top 50 U.S. public research university by 2025. All public research universities enrich the undergraduate experience with the results of research, but the most recognized also enlist undergraduates in the creative process itself.

One of only eight university-wide benchmark measures enshrined in K-State 2025 is “Percentage of Undergraduates Involved in Formalized Research.” This quantifiable goal, and the prominence accorded it, acknowledges the importance of discovery, faculty mentoring, active learning, and student creativity at the heart of the University’s plans to strengthen undergraduate education. Research, broadly understood to include the creative inquiry which is part of every academic discipline at the university, informs and is essential to the highest quality undergraduate education. As a university who strives to lead, Kansas State University promotes and facilitates undergraduate research and creative inquiry as formative, high-impact learning and enrichment. As a land-grant institution committed to provide opportunity for those historically underrepresented and underserved, K-State aims to bring these opportunities to all students.