



Brennan Scholars Program Class of 2027 Freshman Year Reflection

The 2027 cohort of Brennan Scholars have successfully completed their freshman year. A total of 15 scholars have now met GPA requirements and are in good standing to maintain their scholarship for the 2024-2025 academic term in August.

This annual update highlights the academic progress, personal achievements and challenges these new students faced, in addition to plans for continuous improvement as the next cohort of first-generation Lois Lyons Brennan Scholarship recipients are welcomed.

The Brennan Scholarship, complemented by structured program activities, significantly enhances student preparedness. By providing essential financial support and resources, the scholarship empowers them to excel academically and develop leadership skills. The wrap around support and service-learning projects offer enrichment tailored to their professional goals, ensuring they are well equipped for future endeavors and long-term success.

Adjusted Program Structure

The scholars program was structured to increase the number of contacts with each cohort this year. To help minimize struggles with a successful transition to campus life, a mentorship component was added in addition to regular meetings to enhance effectiveness and promote cohesiveness. Monthly check-ins were required in addition to individually requested sessions. The office corresponded with advisors via Canvas more frequently and coordinated wrap-around support tailored to meet each student's academic, social-emotional, and mental health needs. We also set up an information session with the financial aid office to help students better understand the scholarship benefits and requirements. Students were responsible for any additional follow up needed.

We've learned a holistic support system for freshman students from under-resourced families ensures that they are not only academically prepared, but also prepared to take on leadership roles and thrive once in their intended careers. This comprehensive approach fosters long-term success by addressing their academic, personal, and professional development along their journey.

Admissions counselors recruited and selected the scholars for the fall semester in May. A student roster was presented to this writer in August.

Several scholars attended the summer orientation in July, received an early introduction to the Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement, and were given a brief overview of the scholarship program activities and expectations.

On Sept. 6, all 16 students were invited to attend a meet-and-greet in the Marian House. Not all could attend due to schedule conflicts. We started the one-hour weekly meetings the following week. Workshops were once again facilitated by various campus staff. The sessions cover topics such as academic success, communicating with professors, midterm preparation, joining student clubs, self-care, program expectations, civic engagement, and mentorship. Meeting attendance was inconsistent, as the freshmen learned to juggle schedules and sophomores were increasing course loads to attach minors to their degree programs.

The spring semester was focused on the development of a Brennan Scholars Supporter/Supportee

component, scholarship maintenance, input for a scholarship handbook, leadership skills training, becoming part of the NU Student Government Association, participating in high-impact practices, usage of the Impact Connects system, and utilization of campus and local community resources.

Academic Performance

When considering their academic journey throughout the first year, the persistence and determination of each scholar are to be commended. While some scholars excelled through to sophomore year, several students faced serious challenges in the first semester, leading to academic probation. The difficulties encountered reflect the adjustment to campus life and the rigorous nature of their chosen major, compounded by additional hurdles that students from under-resourced school districts often experience. Understanding the need to coordinate multilayered support is crucial to their academic recovery and long-term success.

Overcoming obstacles and setbacks is fundamental for growth and positive development. The scholars' responses to various hardships demonstrate their gratitude, resilience, and steadfast determination to succeed despite the barriers they may face.

Importance of the Brennan Scholarship

Despite the challenges experienced by the scholars, it is essential to emphasize their tenacity and resilience. Each student has shown a strong commitment to their education, persevering through difficulties and striving to improve their academic performance. Their dedication and determination are a testament to the transformative power of the Brennan Scholarship.

The experiences of these students further emphasize the importance of the Brennan Scholarship program. The program's focus on providing exceptional educational opportunities to academically talented students becomes even more crucial in supporting students through challenging periods. The scholarship provided this elite group of students with financial support and a comprehensive system that nurtured and guided them as they navigated their academic journeys.

Community Service Projects

College Conversations – Niagara Falls High School Early College program visits

In addition to five service hours for club participation, the scholars participated in college table talk sessions with Niagara Falls High School students enrolled in the NU Early College Smart Scholars program coordinated by Levesque Institute staff. The scholars interacted to discuss topics such as financial aid, resident life, campus activities, degree programs, occupations, and study skills.

The Community Services Resource Fair was held on campus during Heritage Week as a service project. More than 20 vendors were invited to showcase both volunteer and employment opportunities. The resource fair introduced students to local resources, human services, and opportunities to address needs in neighboring communities.

Freshman Kalia Portuguese explains what a day in the life of a college student is like for NFHS freshmen in the Early College program.



Alannah Soloman, Heidi Pauta, and Violet Printup plan their sophomore service project.



Junior Achievement Training

In February 2024, scholars completed Junior Achievement training facilitated by education director Alycia Ivancie to become program volunteers for local schools. JA volunteer training will be offered each semester.



2027 Brennan Scholar Cohort

Martha Beltran (Nursing)

Coordinator Statement: Martha entered the nursing program underprepared for the rigors of chemistry and lab. She self-disclosed lacking good study skills and being overwhelmed by the course materials after attending the first week of classes. She admittedly failed to complete the suggested preparatory course packet sent to her over the summer.

Martha missed the first two weekly scholar meetings with Academic Support Services and sophomore scholars Janasia Hayward and Heidi Pauta, who were also in the nursing program.

By midterm, Martha attended chemistry tutoring sessions with chemistry professor Dr. Mary McCourt, coordinated by this writer. She was also paired with Heidi Pauta and met with her nursing program advisor for additional skill-building support. She joined the Student Nurse Association to study with fellow nursing students regularly. She participated in several health-related service-learning activities, on and off campus through student club projects and required coursework. Martha improved her study skills, raised her GPA, and finished the semester successfully.

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Despite the ongoing challenges, I showed dedication and adaptability in completing these hard courses. Next semester I will take my first actual nursing course. I'm so nervous but excited. I've always been a 4.0 student in high school. I always participated in nursing clubs and even got phlebotomy certified. Now that I'm in college, it's hard to see my GPA lower. But I will keep working to bring it up and I know I can do it. Next semester I'll have a new roommate, but I'll get to keep making memories with my new friends, I still have my job back home at Strong Memorial as a nurse assistant, all thanks to this Brennan scholarship. I couldn't be more grateful.

Being a Brennan Scholar opened many doors for me that people like me usually don't get to experience. We're a family, we make things fun, and I love being a part of it. My whole family is so happy and proud to see me standing where I am today. College is an experience! I look forward to the next 3 years being a Brennan Scholar. I can't wait to see where life takes me. Proud to be a future first-generation graduate.

Freshmen and scholars viewing “The Highwaymen: Black Artists of the Florida Coast” exhibit at the Castellani Art Museum in October 2023.



Mehgan Burke (Psychology)

Coordinator Statement: Mehgan has consistently demonstrated exceptional commitment to her academic and extracurricular activities and rarely voiced struggles with her coursework. Mehgan had perfect attendance at our meetings and actively participated in several Early College Program sessions. Her involvement in multiple service-learning projects through the Levesque Institute showcases her passion for community service. Additionally, scheduling regular meetings with her sophomore scholar mentor, who was enrolled in two of her courses, exemplifies her proactive approach to learning and support. Mehgan's reflection highlights the positive impact of the Brennan Scholarship on her freshman experience. Being an awardee not only alleviated financial stress, but also provided her with invaluable opportunities for personal and academic growth. Her gratitude and recognition of the scholarship role in her success is truly commendable. Mehgan embodies the essence of the Brennan Scholars program.



Alannah Soloman with freshman Pasi Migisha volunteering at the inaugural meat raffle for Empower of WNY.

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I was not sure how I was going to be able to handle the adjustment. However, I feel as though I can attribute much of my success and accomplishments of my first year to my Brennan Scholarship. I have reason to believe that this scholarship allowed me to strive and succeed to the best of my abilities during the fall and spring semesters.

Obviously, not having to worry about finances was a huge stressor lifted off not only mine, but also my family's shoulders. However, this factor brought about many other unexpected opportunities. The most important one being that it allowed me to dedicate all my time toward my studies. Many may disagree, but I feel as though the pressure from having to maintain certain standards is what motivates me to succeed. It is hard to tell if I would have been able to do so well without the specific standards that this scholarship outlines; and for that I am increasingly grateful. It was also extremely beneficial during the fall semester to have all the help provided on campus outlined for us during our weekly meetings, along with having a superior student partner with me in case I ever had an issue.

The second unexpected opportunity was my ability to dedicate time toward helping the community. Community service has always been something that I have enjoyed doing. It was a blessing to get in touch with not only the Buffalo community in my hometown, but also the new community in Niagara Falls. It is always reassuring to know that the opportunity to help my community is always out there, and this scholarship has led a helping hand in proving that to me.

Elijah Delgado (Business)

Coordinator Statement: Elijah recognized early on that he lacked the study skills needed to maintain the level of academic success he achieved in high school. Elijah sought help through club membership and regular communication with professors just prior to midterms.

His ability to lead was demonstrated early on. He was voted freshmen class president and joined two student clubs just weeks into the semester. Elijah participated in interactive activities with Niagara Falls High School Early College students and became a trained Junior Achievement volunteer to help facilitate ongoing presentations in local school districts. Facilitation of Junior Achievement lessons is a high impact practice directly aligned with Elijah's major.

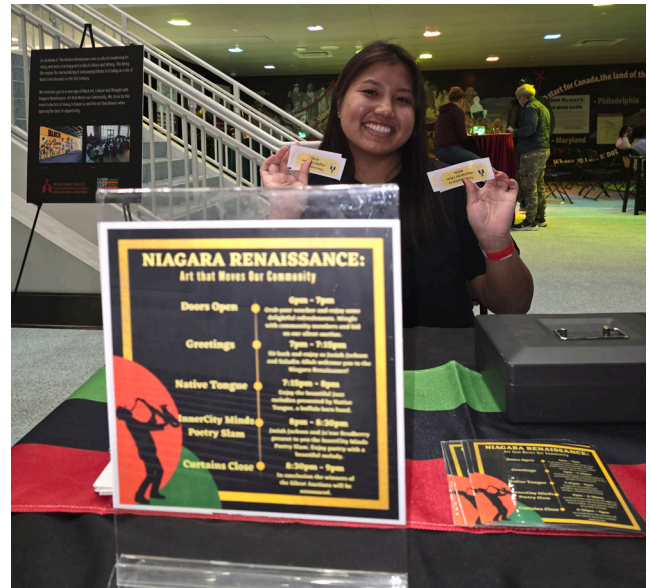
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Reflecting on the past year, I am incredibly grateful for the support of the Brennan Scholarship. It has been instrumental in my academic and professional endeavors. I am eager to apply the knowledge and skills I have gained this year to my future studies and work experiences.

This year was a significant one for my academic journey. I began with a major in social media and digital marketing and a minor in web design. As my interests expanded, I decided to double major in communications and media studies. My academic efforts were successful, with my GPA rising from 3.1 in the fall semester to 3.6 in the spring, a testament to my dedication and adaptation to the rigorous university environment. I was freshman class president in the Student Government in the fall semester. I decided to step down during the spring semester to focus more on my studies. Nonetheless, I was also involved in the Niagara University Marketing Association (NUMA) and the African Caribbean Student Alliance (ACSA).



Elijah Delgado paints a mural at the Underground Railroad Heritage Center as a Heritage Week service-learning project.



Kintway Ye attended the Black History event at the Underground Railroad Heritage Center as an experiential learning opportunity.

Marland Garcia (Communication and Media Studies)

Coordinator Statement: Marland showed a great level of maturity in her capability to navigate the college landscape throughout her freshman year. Majoring in communications and media studies, Marland faced initial challenges, including regular meeting attendance, participation in service-learning projects, and balancing a heavy course load. Despite these hurdles, she made meaningful connections with peers and faculty, fostering a supportive community at Niagara University. Her involvement with Latino Unidos, though briefly, and her proactive approach to seeking academic support demonstrates her strong commitment to success. Marland's appreciation for the Brennan Scholarship and its role in providing essential resources and motivation to excel is clear. Her cognizance to seize opportunities and willingness to help future Brennan Scholars reflects her deep appreciation and sense of responsibility. Marland's journey exemplifies the lasting impact of the Brennan Scholarship, showcasing its ripple effect on student success and community building this fall.

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I would say I enjoyed my first year a lot! I feel like I definitely made a lot of connections with a lot of people in Niagara University. I made a good small group of friends, as well as making a ton of acquaintances, which made me not miss home at all and feel more at home in Niagara instead of back in Buffalo. I tried to join a club, but countless of them had fees I was not prepared to pay. I joined Latinos Unidos. Toward the end, I dropped it due to it clashing with my schedule. I did need a lot of academic support, especially in the fall semester, but I soon got the hang of it in the next semester and hardly needed help on the homework. Rhonda did help a lot in the fall semester as I was getting used to being in college. I kept accidentally forgetting or not receiving messages which is my fault, not Rhonda's.

During the spring semester, she helped me get my community service hours. Thank God for her! I'm accountability for myself to do it ahead of time instead of the end of the semester.

To have the Brennan Scholarship is a blessing because many people like me do not have the resources to get an education and having this scholarship makes you want to work harder to prove that earning this scholarship is a stepping stone to a higher education from a school that prioritizes their students and helps them. To me it's important to work harder to make the people who gave me this opportunity proud that they chose the right person, with the right intentions of being a successful adult with a life they never thought they'd get the chance to live. I've grown a lot as a person in such a short time, which makes me excited. Yes, it was uncomfortable, but you can't grow if you're not moving, so it was trial and error. I'm spending this summer with my family and trying to get a summer job so I can get money since that was the reason I was limited to certain activities on campus, and it's something to keep me busy since I don't have many friends at home.

Yes, I am crazy for the fall semester to start. I can't wait to go back to classes, meet the professors, see who's in my class, see my friends again, and have those long nights. I want to help the next group of Brennan Scholars by telling them tips like going to office hours, making a connection with the professor and classmates, if they feel comfortable coming to me.

My major is marketing. I really enjoy it. I took more core marketing classes since I love the idea of already getting hands-on marketing information. I love my marketing professors and Niagara University. I'm happy I made it and feel blessed to be a Brennan Scholar. I want other people to be blessed with it too!

Parcia Migisha “Pasi” (Computer Information Science)

Coordinator Statement: Pasi’s reflection beautifully captures the essence of the Brennan Scholars community: academic excellence, supportive relationships, and a commitment to service. It’s very heartening to see how the scholarship, coupled with active involvement in student clubs and community service, enriched his college experience. Pasi proved to be a dedicated and enthusiastic scholar who took the initiative to seek and utilize help from classmates and professors. He also took advantage of the opportunity to be mentored by a fellow sophomore CIS scholar.

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When I first started college, I had mixed feelings of excitement and apprehension. I thought I would be by myself and college life would be a struggle to maintain my grades. However, my experience turned out to be far better than I could have ever imagined.

In my first year, I quickly found a supportive community of friends and mentors who made the transition much smoother. I joined the men’s rugby club and the African Caribbean Club, which helped me build strong relationships and feel connected to the campus community. Additionally, I briefly joined the tennis team during the fall semester, but had to step back due to my busy schedule.

The coursework was challenging, but it was also stimulating and rewarding. My professors were approachable and passionate about their subjects, which made learning enjoyable. I took a variety of classes, including Introduction to Poverty, Philosophy and Religion, and several courses related to my major in computer information science. Each course expanded my knowledge and critical thinking skills. The academic rigor pushed me to develop better study habits and time management skills, which are invaluable.

Being a Brennan Scholarship recipient was a significant advantage. The financial support eased the burden of tuition fees, allowing me to focus more on my studies and extracurricular activities. Rhonda Bivins-Talley, the Brennan Scholarship coordinator, was incredibly helpful, offering guidance and support whenever I needed it. The regular check-ins and workshops organized by Rhonda provided additional resources and a sense of community among fellow Brennan Scholars.

Community service was an integral part of my freshman year. I volunteered for the Empower Meat Raffle fundraiser with Ms. Rhonda and a sophomore scholar. They raised \$10,000 in one night for people with disabilities. I also helped with some of the Red Cross blood drives. It was a fulfilling experience and taught me the importance of giving back to the community. I will continue volunteering at a local nonprofit organization over the summer. I wanted to take a few summer courses to stay ahead in my academic plan, but could not because of financial constraints with the scholarship & FAFSA. I am excited about the classes I’m taking in the fall. I will possibly take on a leadership role in the clubs I am part of. Additionally, I will become a mentor for the next cohort of Brennan Scholars. I want to give back to the program that has given me so much by supporting new students in their transition to college life.

In summary, my freshman year as a Brennan Scholar was a very enriching experience! The combination of academic challenges, supportive relationships, and opportunities for personal growth has exceeded my expectations. I am grateful for the financial support, mentorship, and community that the Brennan Scholarship has provided, and I am eager to continue making the most of my college journey.

Zinat Mohammadi (Biology)

Coordinator Statement: A tumultuous start in her freshman year led to academic probation in the biology program. Her initial challenges were adjusting to college life, chemistry, rugby, numerous social activities, self-discipline, service-learning projects, and regular class attendance, which were significant hurdles. Zinat readjusted her course schedule toward the end of the semester with assistance from her professors and advisor. She was assigned a lab partner to help her get caught up on assignments. She registered for an online summer course to increase her GPA. Zinat decided to take advantage of support through the Academic Exploration Program in the upcoming fall semester.

A reflection was not provided, despite multiple written requests. The phone number recently changed.

Kalia Portuguese (Nursing)

Coordinator Statement: Kahlia's journey and achievements did not come easy. Her progression to sophomore year in the nursing program shows commitment to her education and the hard worker she is. Her gratitude for the Brennan Scholarship highlights the significance of the impact of elevating financial burdens, allowing her to focus on the academic and career goals she set. Her involvement in volunteer activities, from making blankets for Oishei Children's Hospital, serving breakfast at Heart, Love, and Soul, and being on the Make-A-Wish planning committee, exemplifies her commitment to giving back to the community. Kalia's growth and her readiness to mentor new scholars are truly inspiring. She embodies the values of perseverance and service that the Brennan Scholars program promotes. Kahlia is a Niagara Falls High School graduate and serves as a remarkable role model for students enrolled in the Niagara Falls High School Early College program, demonstrating that with support and determination, success is within reach.

She is currently a member of the Student Nurses Association.



I am beyond grateful to be accepted to Niagara University's nursing program, but much more of my appreciation goes to the Brennan Scholarship. Being able to obtain this scholarship means so much to me because I feel like I have been finally recognized as a hard-working student. Knowing that my college expenses are being taken care of for me puts me at ease because I know one of the most stressful things that comes with college is finances. I can focus more on my academics now that a financial stressor is out of my way. This means a lot because I take my academics into a lot of consideration. I have longed to be a nurse for over 5 years and the courses I took this year allowed me to realize that I am on the right path. I learned that patience is the key to success, and it's okay that not everything is meant to go perfectly. I can't wait to go into hospital settings because the knowledge I am learning will better prepare me as a future professional nurse.

Thanks to the Disney Club, I was able to help make no-sew blankets donated to Oishei Children's Hospital and it makes me feel so good giving something to children in need. I have also served breakfast at Heart, Love, and Soul, talked to high school students about college, and raised money for the Student Nurses Association club by selling food and other items. Volunteering has connected me to many more people, and I want to participate even more every year. Becoming a Brennan Scholar has allowed me to network with others and help me figure out who I am, which has made me honored that I am a fellow NU student. I am super excited to become a mentor to the new cohort to let them know everything will be okay if they are nervous about starting this new journey. I can't wait to help them realize that this opportunity was well worth the wait and that they are recognized as brilliant young minds ready to take on the new generation.

Khintway Ye (Nursing)

Coordinator Statement: Khintway is to be commended for her resilience and persistence. Despite a rocky start in her freshman year, which led to academic probation in the nursing program, Khintway has shown remarkable growth and accountability. Our initial challenges, including adjusting to college life, managing her responsibilities, and self-care, were significant hurdles. However, with the support of her nursing advisor and this writer, she created a follow-through on a plan to get back on track. Khintway's reflection on her visit to Thailand was a pivotal moment, reminding her of the value of her education and the opportunity she has been given. Her disciplined approach in the spring semester resulted in impressive academic improvements, with A&B grades in her classes. She took two summer courses and will take nursing classes in the fall. Khintway's journey highlights the value of communication, utilizing resources, and maintaining a balanced schedule. Her transformation is inspiring. She plans to share her lived experience to help prepare the incoming cohort of scholars.

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I've made a lot of mistakes since finishing my first year of college, but I've also learned from them and have improved. I also know I need to take greater responsibility for myself, now that I'm in college. It was challenging to adjust to my new chapter and make the shift during the fall semester. Since my parents were not around to discipline me, I would stay in my dorm and sleep. College teaching in comparison to high school was more challenging. I also didn't take advantage of any of the resources offered. My actions ultimately caused me to withdraw from all my required nursing courses, and I had poor grades in the two general education classes I took. In the fall semester, I signed up for rugby as a club sport. I had a great time, although it did have some negative effects on my grade. After a few weeks of the spring semester, rugby began.

Although I had managed my daily schedule with school, I hadn't balanced it with rugby. My grades began to rise after I took a break and dedicated myself completely to my studies with the plan my nursing advisor and Miss Rhonda helped me with. I also think that returning home on the weekends had a positive effect. On the weekends, I work and earn extra money for myself. I rewarded myself by being able to return home. On Fridays, I would complete all my schoolwork before leaving for home.

I took a trip back to our homeland in Thailand during winter break. It was a blessing to go back because after a week we went to the poverty side of where we came from, I was told that some of the kids couldn't go to school, even kindergarten, because their parents couldn't afford it. They worked alongside their parents when they were 7 or 8 years old. It was eye-opening and that's when it clicked on me. I got into a great school with a great scholarship and I'm over here just taking advantage and barely doing anything but disappointing my family. After my vacation, I was more prepared for the start of the spring semester because I knew what to expect and used all the tools available to me. It was discipline, not motivation. Realizing I had a great scholarship, I decided to start over. Despite having two weeks to complete my work, I consistently completed it ahead of schedule during the spring semester. I was happy. I received A and B grades for each class. I will never take my education for granted because what I have is a blessing. Going home was a wonderful reward because living with a roommate wasn't ideal.

To sum up my first year of college experience, it was a wild ride, but at least I learned from my mistakes and developed as a result. I am excited to begin my 2024 fall semester. Being a Brennan Scholar is something I'm so thankful for because without these experiences, I would not be developing the great person I am today.

Retaining Our Scholars: Developing a Best-Practice Model

The 2026 class of Brennan Scholars have completed their first year at Niagara University, with all eight scholars returning for the next academic term. While some students faced challenges and required additional support, we celebrate their accomplishments as we continue stressing the importance of the Brennan Scholarship. The program's commitment to supporting the scholars through academic probation, degree program changes, mental health challenges, and wrap-around services, demonstrates its dedication to the success and well-being of each scholar. The Brennan Scholars program practices served as a transformative force, providing exceptional educational opportunities and fostering the growth of its scholars at Niagara University.

Class of 2028 Cohort

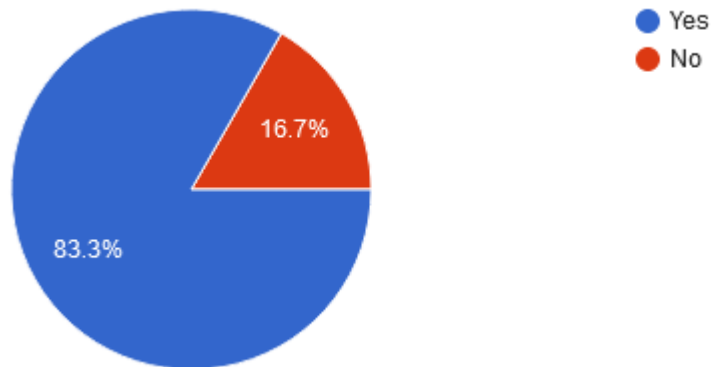
A new cohort of eight high-achieving high school students will soon be selected and expected to attend the summer orientation in July. As a result of the FAFSA delays this year, the process was delayed. All 23 recipients will be invited to a meet-and-greet in Marian House coordinated through Levesque Institute, Student Affairs, and Admissions in August.

The freshmen cohort will meet weekly during the upcoming fall semester. Sophomore scholars mentor the freshmen cohort and meet with their mentees bi-monthly. The junior cohort will meet with the sophomores monthly and plan a service-learning project each semester.

Brennan Scholar Survey

Have you met GPA requirements for your scholarship each semester?

12 responses



Did you feel welcomed and have a sense of belonging within the scholar community?

12 responses

