

GUIDANCE TO GRADUATE



PERSIST

2024-2025
ANNUAL REPORT



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LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In 2024, Persist Nashville entered a new chapter.



As I reflect on my first year as Executive Director, I am proud to share how our organization matured in both structure and strategy—building on a foundation of trusted relationships to deliver deeper, more scalable impact for the students we serve. This year, **we advanced our technology infrastructure, streamlined our coaching systems, and extended our reach beyond Nashville** by advising peer organizations across the country in designing effective persistence programs rooted in equity and care.

We did this at a time when higher education is being questioned, and opportunities for historically marginalized students are being increasingly restricted. In the face of these challenges, Persist doubled down on its mission: to ensure that more MNPS graduates—particularly first-generation students and students of color—not only access college, but complete it.

THE RESULTS SPEAK VOLUMES.

- Over **1,250 students** received individualized coaching through key milestones like FAFSA completion and course registration.
- We celebrated with **258** students as they crossed the finish line to earn their degrees or certificates.
- Our coaching model informed persistence strategies in other communities, **expanding our influence** beyond Nashville.

Our work is grounded in the belief that every student deserves the support and guidance to achieve their postsecondary goals. That belief, combined with your ongoing support, made this year possible.

We are growing with clarity and conviction—because our students' futures demand nothing less.

With deep appreciation,

Jennifer Hill
Executive Director



CLOSING GAPS, OPENING DOORS:

Supporting First-Generation Students from Summer to Graduation - DR SHELBY ROGERS

In today's evolving higher education landscape, the path to college is increasingly complex—especially for first-generation students. These students often face barriers well before they step on campus, questioning not just how to get to college, but whether it's even possible. At Persist, we believe this journey should be filled with support, clarity, and momentum.

By 2031, 72% of jobs in the U.S. will require some form of postsecondary education or training (FirstGen Forward, n.d.). First-generation students—now over half of all undergraduates (8.2 million nationally)—are **critical to building a competitive, diverse, and equitable workforce**. Their success is not just a personal milestone, but an economic necessity.

Yet these students often face challenges such as navigating enrollment,

completing financial aid, working while studying, and accessing career prep—without the inherited knowledge many of their peers take for granted. The transition from high school to college is especially high-risk.

Persist meets students where they are.

Last year, our first-generation students exchanged nearly 5,000 text messages with our coaches—asking about FAFSA, tuition bills, class registration, and more. Our real-time, tech-enabled support model directly addresses “summer melt,” helping students enroll at technical colleges, community colleges, and universities across Tennessee.

Our support continues well beyond day one. We partner with colleges, community organizations, and MNPS to provide **high-touch, data-informed**



coaching throughout the first year and beyond. This is essential: while one-third of students are first-gen, only 27% earn a degree within four years (Whitley, Benson, & Wesaw, 2018).

The long-term payoff is powerful: **first-gen college success could produce 4.4 million additional graduates and \$700 billion** in economic impact (FirstGen Forward, n.d.). With bold partnerships and shared commitment, we can close opportunity gaps—and open doors for generations to come.

REFERENCES:

FirstGen Forward, (n.d.). Home. FirstGen Forward. www.firstgenforward.org

Whitley, S.E., Benson, G., & Wetsaw, A. (2018). First- generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs and Services at Four-year Institutions. Washington, DC: Center for First- generation Student Success, NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and Entangled Solutions.

DOUBLING DOWN TO DOUBLE THE RATE

75%

of students who participate in College Enrollment Coaching opt-in to College Persistence Coaching for their first year in college.

85%

of TCAT students coached by Persist will earn a certificate or degree.

50%

of community college students coached by Persist Nashville will earn a degree within four years of high school graduation.

75%

of college students coached by Persist Nashville through their sophomore year will complete a degree within six years of high school graduation.

PERSIST BY THE NUMBERS



258

2024-2025
graduates



440

academic
challenges resolved



10

peer programs
supported



687

student
meetings
completed



85%

of students attend an
institution within 200
miles of Nashville



1,261

students served



HERE WE GROW:

Scaling Impact
Outside of Nashville

Since coaching the very first Persist Scholars back in 2019, we have made it our mission to create an organization that could support students for years to come. One piece of consistent guidance we received in the early days was to begin building a “Fee for Service” program, so that Persist had a diversified stream of financial support. Fee for Service can take on many different meanings within different organizations. At Persist, the goal of Fee for Service is to **empower fellow non-profit organizations to more effectively serve their students**. We do this work in two primary ways: through providing coaching and/or licensing access to our Salesforce platform. This past year, we are proud to have expanded our work to seven partnerships, spread across four states and the District of Columbia.

- Ann Richards School
- Centro Hispano
- City Leadership
- Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga
- Denver School of Science and Technology
- DCPS Persists
- KIPP Forward

CASE STUDY: Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga

The Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga (CFGC) has provided scholarships to over 5,000 students since 1992. According to CFGC, these scholarships usually go to often overlooked students. One such program is the Together We Can scholarship, which supports students who are the first in their family to attend college and who are considered low income, as measured by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The Together We Can (TWC) scholarship is unique among CFGC's scholarship portfolio because it provides holistic support that goes far beyond financial aid. Starting this year, CFGC, led by Dr. Stephanie Young, Director of Scholarships, and Quentin Lawrence, Vice President of Community Investment, have partnered with Persist to provide Together We Can scholars with their own coach to support them as they navigate college. Persist is now working with **over 70 scholars on their paths to becoming not only the first in their families to attend college**, but the first in their families to graduate from college.

EVENT REVIEW

Persist was proud to host several impactful events during the 2024–2025 program year, each designed to foster community, strengthen brand awareness, and ensure students feel supported throughout their college journey.

In July 2025, Persist hosted our **3rd annual College Con**, a dynamic preparation event for incoming college freshmen. Students participated in interactive workshops, engaged with a panel of community partners and education professionals, and received personalized support from our coaching team to ensure they felt confident and ready for their first day on campus.

In August 2025, we launched our charity breakfast, **Sunrise to Success**. This inspiring event featured a panel of industry professionals and student leaders who shared personal stories and insights

on the significance of first-generation college success. Sunrise to Success served as a powerful platform to celebrate student resilience, highlight community partnerships, and raise awareness about the ongoing work of Persist.

The **2024 Persister Golf Tournament**, held in October at Ted Rhodes Golf Course, was a tremendous success. From beautiful weather to strong community turnout, the day exceeded expectations. We were thrilled to welcome sponsors, supporters, and guests for a memorable day of golf and giving.

Special thanks to our Director of Advancement, Emma Volpe, for leading event planning efforts and cultivating impactful community partnerships. We're



EVENT REVIEW

also grateful to the staff at Ted Rhodes Golf Course for their outstanding support and hospitality.

During the month of January, In response to the growing issue of food insecurity—affecting over 50% of college students nationwide (FirstGen Forward)—the Persist team volunteered with **Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee**, helping assemble food boxes for local residents. Together, we supported the distribution of over 4,000 meals across the Nashville community, reinforcing our commitment to addressing basic needs and ensuring students have the resources necessary to thrive in and out of the classroom.

The **2025 Spring Persist Employment & Internship Fair** was a powerful day of

connection and opportunity, bringing together first-generation college students, recent graduates, and 15 leading employers from across Nashville. Designed to help Persisters take the next step in their professional journeys, the event featured resume reviews, one-on-one networking, and direct access to internships and job openings across multiple industries. We are especially grateful to our employer partners and volunteers for sharing their time, insights, and support to make this event a success.

Lastly, we held our **2nd annual Stand-Up For Students Charity Comedy Event** during the month of April 2025. Thank you to our event partners at 800lb Gorilla, the staff at Nashville Zanies, and our wonderful comedians for helping us raise money for continued support of First Gen students.





STUDENT SPOTLIGHT: MWAFRICA BALIRE

2025 Graduate,
Cumberland University,
Bachelor of Business Administration

What would you say to a friend to encourage them to join Persist? I'd tell my friends to take the chance and connect with Persist—you don't have to go through college or life after graduation alone. Persist was with me the whole way through college. Whether I needed help with classes or just some motivation to get through a tough day, they were there. Even a simple text from them could lift my mood. They really make sure you never feel stuck or unsupported, and that means everything.

In what ways has Persist helped you have success in your college journey? The Persist Team helped me with getting books and emergency resources..They

“

...they made
my college
journey
so much
easier...

-MWAFRICA B.

would ask me if I needed school supplies and if I needed them they would help him as well. They would also pay me a visit and check up on me and talk about how college life is and they made my

college journey so much easier knowing that there is a place I could go for help.

How has Persist helped you be successful AFTER college? After graduating this May, I reached out to the Persist Team for support with my job search—and I'm so glad I did. They connected me with a coach who's been incredibly helpful and encouraging every step of the way. Right now, we're actively working together to find the right job that aligns with my goals. From resume help to motivation, they've had my back. I'm truly grateful to have Persist in my corner as I take this next step toward building a successful future.

What's your next step since you've graduated? Since graduating, my next big step is launching my career in Business Administration. Right now, I'm working as a security officer and a soccer coach—both roles that have taught me discipline, leadership, and teamwork. But I'm ready to take what I've learned in the classroom and apply it to the professional world. I'm excited to find opportunities that align with my degree, grow my experience, and start building the future I've worked so hard for.

OUR SUPPORTERS

STUDENT SUCCESS PARTNERS

Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga
Ann Richards School
Denver School of Science and Technology
City Leadership
Centro Hispano
KIPP Forward
Tennessee College Access and Success Network
Motivate Labs

PERSIST LEADERS: \$5,000+

Katie & Lewis Agnew
AllianceBernstein
Amazon
American Family Insurance
Dreams Foundation
Bill & Chrissy Haslam
Foundation
The Carolyn Smith Foundation
City Fund

Clay Thompson
Don Cochran
Devine Majors Foundation
Rob & Anne Marie Elliot
Dr. Sarah and Mr. Ryan Flury
Geodis Foundation
Greg Hagood
Jackson Corporate
Philanthropy

Joe C. Davis Foundation
Marlene and Spencer
Hays Foundation
The Michaels Family
Foundation
Pinnacle Financial
Pam & Wayne Powers
TN SCORE
Vanderbilt University

PERSIST PARTNERS: \$1,000-\$4,999

800 Pound Gorilla Media
The Amy & Kirk Tanksley
Family Foundation
Asurion
Lee Barfield
Camel Car Wash
Egly Agency
Eshelman Construction
Equitable Trust Company
Crystal Churchwell Evans
& Victor Evans
Fifth-Third Bank
Hannah Sears
HCA Healthcare/TriStar Health
Mike, Lev, and Eliana Hill

Jefferson Bridge Capital
Kevin Keeton
Neal Lampley
Leslie CPA
Lipscomb University
Amy McDaniel
Brett Michaels
Hunter Mobley
Mockingbird Title
Nashville Predators
Foundation
Brian Nock
Outfront Media
Jonathan & Jessica Pahl
pFW

Pinnacle Bank
Rebecca Pitt
Rehnberg Family Foundation
Rhinodart
Slim and Husky's
Jake & Caroline Smith
Studio Bank
Target Circle
Tennessee Builders Alliance
Charitable Fund
Tennessee Orthopedic
Alliance
Anne & Dan Toomey
Total Wine
Whiskey House Nashville

PERSIST SUPPORTERS: \$500-\$999

AF Foundation
Mike Bannon
Belmont University
Neily & Wilson Boyd
Chris Camp
Dr. & Mrs. Andre Churchwell
Michael Dahlke
Edley's BBQ
Ben & Carey Elmore
Entertainment Arts

Josh Gregory
Rachel & Stefan Hubbard
Intevity
Joe H. Wilson
Testamentary Trust
Debbie King
LBMC Employment Partners
Leigh Lindsay
Jay Lurie
Todd & Joanna Matherly

John Maxwell
Jeff Mimms
Mircosoft
Nashville Analytics
Nashville State
Community College
Aggie & Rob Riley
Clint Smith
Jason Weiss (Symphony Six)
Randell & Tamika Williams
Stephen & Jamaica Zralek

“

Persist's ongoing support and the strong network I've built have been crucial to my professional success.

-DAVID H.



LEARN MORE



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www.persistcoaching.org