



Today's Students Coalition Student Ambassadors Fellowship Names Inaugural Cohort



(From left) Kaylee Brard, Marist College; Barbara Gooch, University of Maine at Presque Isle; Juan R. Pantoja-Patiño, Loyola University Chicago; Aalyhia Shillow, University of North Texas.

WASHINGTON (August 31, 2022) – Today's Students Coalition (TSC), a collective of 37 higher education policy, advocacy, and membership organizations, announced its inaugural cohort of Student Ambassador Fellows today. The four student ambassadors selected – Kaylee Brard, Barbara Gooch, Juan R. Pantoja-Patiño, and Aalyhia Shillow – will each receive a one-year fellowship to expand their advocacy and leadership skills while deepening their knowledge of federal postsecondary education policy.

Through the fellowship program, which started recruiting in June and officially launches in September, TSC Student Ambassadors will help elevate the stories and lived experiences of today's students directly to policymakers while gaining firsthand experience in shaping federal policy. The program will feature policy and advocacy training, mentorship and professional development opportunities, and direct engagement with key decision-makers and policymakers in Washington.

“Politics and policymaking too often miss a critical stakeholder: learners,” said Julie Peller, executive director of TSC's parent organization Higher Learning Advocates. “The fellowship program will connect student leaders with the resources and opportunities to share their experiences and create real change – at home and in our nation's capital.”

In its inaugural year, the fellowship received dozens of applications from students nationwide. Following a rigorous application process, candidates were chosen for their commitment to equity and their desire to elevate the student voice in policymaking and enact sustainable change in their communities. Students in the cohort represent learners from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds including first-generation students, student-athletes, advanced degree students, returning adult students and student leaders.

Meet the 2022-2023 fellows:

Kaylee Brard (she/her), a junior majoring in political science with minors in global studies and social work at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York, moved across the country from Northridge, California, to pursue her dream of playing Division I water polo. Brard, who spent the past two years leading her school's team as co-captain, has also served as the varsity student representative for the Student Government Association at Marist, advocating on behalf of student-athletes on campus.

Barbara Gooch (she/her), who anticipates a May 2023 graduation with a bachelor's degree in business administration from University of Maine at Presque Isle (UMPI) and an associate degree in communication and political science from Volunteer State Community College in Tennessee, currently takes classes online at UMPI. A first-generation college student, Gooch served as a student representative on the instructional assessment committee and a Phi Theta Kappa member while attending Vol State.

Juan R. Pantoja-Patiño (he/him), a Ph.D. candidate enrolled in the counseling psychology program at Loyola University Chicago, has a focus on multiculturalism and social justice in his work as a therapist, educator, researcher, and advocate. As a therapist serving students at University of Notre Dame Counseling Center, Pantoja-Patiño helps marginalized students navigate systems of higher education. He is actively involved in research, particularly in eradicating systems of oppression among sexual minorities of color, receiving national recognition by the American Psychological Association. He also currently serves as an ad hoc consultant for Loyola's Race and Culture Ethnicity Chapter.

Aalyhia Shillow (she/her), a senior Honors College student at the University of North Texas (UNT), is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in education. At UNT, Shillow serves as the student body vice president and lead coordinator of the Black Student Experience, amplifying the voices of historically marginalized communities. Since freshmen year, she has held roles with several organizations such as the First Generation Student Organization, Black Student Union, the North Texas Top 40 Leaders Foundation, UNT Housing, and Student Alumni Association and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority memberships. Shillow is also a recipient of the Student Government Association Alton Thibbideaux Award and the Black Student Union's Beautiful Spirit Award for her dedication to promoting diversity and multiculturalism on UNT's campus.

About Today's Students Coalition

Today's Students Coalition (TSC) is a cross-cutting group of policy, advocacy, and membership organizations who have joined forces to push for urgently needed policy changes that will better serve today's students. The Coalition is forging new consensus across a diverse group of organizations focused on the needs of working adults, parent learners, veterans, first-generation students, and all postsecondary learners.

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