In the fall of 2014, the Orfalea College of Business welcomed its first cohort of 20 freshmen from the Cal Poly Scholars program. The program provides scholarship funding, advising support, computers and academic resources to outstanding high school seniors from underrepresented communities.

It does much more than offset costs for new students, though. According to Kris McKinlay, program administrator and assistant dean of the college, the program aims to strengthen the learning community of Cal Poly business students with diverse perspectives, new ideas, and different leadership styles.

According to the scholars themselves, they still have a lot in common. “The scholarship has allowed me to be part of a community of students passionate about education,” said Jordyn-Joyce Mendoza, a business administration freshman. Cal Poly Scholars was founded in 2012 in the College of Engineering to connect the university with students at California high schools that serve communities with large proportions of first-generation and low-income students. This is the first time the program has included business students.

The scholarship has been specially adapted for students in the Orfalea College of Business to support its goals for four-year graduation. As part of the Freshman Success Program, each of the Cal Poly Scholars majoring in business completed BUS 100: Student Orientation and College Success, which helps students navigate available resources in the college as they plan for a successful academic career. The Cal Poly Scholars can also tap into study abroad opportunities in the Orfalea College of Business if they plan to graduate on time.

Most importantly, the program has fostered a tight-knit cohort environment among students who live together in the Cerro Vista residence hall on campus. The living/learning community has been a big support outside of the classroom, complementing personalized advising resources that keep students on track.

“I have taken advantage of the added resources, including the career fair workshop and advising,” Mendoza said. “I hope to go on to pursue my MBA and eventually start my own company that works with other nations to help better and integrate their information systems.”

The college plans to continue the program into the future, welcoming new cohorts each fall from different communities throughout the state.