

Policy Brief

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Expanding Promise: Depicting the Ecosystems of Support and Financial Sustainability for First-Generation Students

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Background

The National Center for Education Statistics defines first-generation college students as “students who enroll in postsecondary education and whose parents do not have any postsecondary education experience” [12]. However, researchers and policymakers have varying ideas on what it means to be a first-generation student. Using data from a longitudinal study begun in 2002, researchers identified eight definitions of the term “first-generation” and found that the number of students who could be called first-generation in a 7,300-student sample ranged from 22% to 77% [13]. While some may include in their definition of “first-generation” students who only have one college-educated parent, others define the term based on their idea of what “went to college” means, the type of institution the parent attended, or who is considered a parent [16]. How we define first-generation can impact the types of support available to students.

Introduction

Among experts and researchers of higher education in the United States, it has become nearly commonplace to argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the systemic inequities and underlying barriers facing first-generation college students. Yet emergent studies on the impact of the crisis on first-generation students agree that these new challenges are coming to rest on old inequities that kept first-generation college students from attending college. A recent study concluded that for every 100 low-income and first-generation students who enrolled in college in 2011-2012, only 26 earned a four-year degree within six years [1]. Prior to the pandemic, first-generation students were already challenged by financial, bureaucratic, and institutional obstacles, but amidst the COVID crisis, the range of obstacles to first-generation student success was broadened by an increasing wealth gap and a digital divide. In order to better serve first-generation students, institutions must first embrace a consistent definition of first-generation student status, realize the barriers facing first-generation students, and implement program and policy changes that will increase the success of first-generation students.



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Research and Project Overview

This report examines six barriers unique to the journey of first-generation students: 1) disparities in preparation for college-level work, 2) navigating the transition to higher education, 3) financing a college degree, 4) raising student awareness of services, 5) degree attainment, and 6) employment and earnings.

Disparities in Preparation for College-Level Work

Inadequate preparation for college-level work is a major impediment facing most students attending open-admission colleges. In most states, more than half the students attending open-admission colleges fail college placement exams and are required to take remedial courses [16]. Even with additional academic support, most of these students leave college without credentials – after about five years, only 25% obtain a degree [3].

Navigating the Transition to Higher Education

First-generation students often report lacking a sense of belonging and support as they transition to college [4]. The norms or unwritten rules of college, as well as the complex jargon and unfamiliar acronyms, leave many first-generation students feeling isolated in their postsecondary journey. The importance of creating and sustaining supports specifically targeted at bolstering first-generation college success remains critical to leveling the playing field and increasing their college completion rates [4]. A recent NASPA study reports 62% of first-generation respondents use general campus supports rather than more targeted guidance [7]. Simply stated, first-generation students often do not possess the cultural capital necessary for successfully navigating college and may feel like outsiders and may fear being othered by faculty and peers.

Financing a College Degree

The Postsecondary National Policy Institute cites in a 2021 pre-pandemic study that first-generation students had a lower median household income (\$37,565) compared to non-first-generation students (\$99,635), and the same study revealed that first-generation students are borrowing from the federal government at increasingly higher levels [11]. Student financial aid for postsecondary education comes in many different types – grants, work-study, loans, and scholarships – and the type of aid first-generation students receive can have implications for whether or not they borrow to pay for their education. One study found that the more types of financial aid first-generation students received, the more likely they were to persist through higher education at four-year institutions [6].

Raising Student Awareness About the Range of Services Offered

Knowing about and making use of on-campus services, such as academic advising and career planning and placement opportunities, could potentially benefit first-generation students. Internships are one such experience that can be quite important for students, however, first-generation students are overrepresented amongst those who have never experienced an internship and underrepresented in paid internships [10]. First-generation students are also less likely to make use of advising services, as one study found that 55% of first-generation students met with an academic advisor during their first year in college, compared with 72% of continuing education students [2].

Degree Attainment

First-generation students have lower rates of bachelor's degree completion (20%) than their non-first-generation peers (42%), but higher rates of associate's degree completion (13% vs. 8%). The reasons provided by first-generation students for dropping out include lack of money (54%), preference for working and making money (46%), a change in family status (42%), and conflicts with demands at home (31%) [12].

Employment and Earnings of Degree Holders

First-generation students do not experience the upward mobility they expect by earning a degree, especially compared to their non-first-generation counterparts. For example, job searches are often not as successful as non-first-generation college students, with non-first-generation students frequently experiencing higher salary offers than first-generation [5].

Analysis and Recommendations

Our recommendations for the education community are presented in three areas: (1) research and data collection, (2) implications for practice and (3) implications for policy.



Research and Data Collection

The K-12 and postsecondary education communities need to reach consensus on a standard, formal definition of a “first-generation college student.” A standard definition should assist institutions in determining student program eligibility, as well as increase comparability of data. Also, first-generation students can be further categorized into subgroups identified as “first-gen plus,” which is a term used by researchers to recognize a first-generation student’s intersectionality – that is, the ways in which a student’s first-generation status intersects with other aspects of their identity [7]. Given that first-generation status encompasses a diverse array of subgroups of people of varied backgrounds and experiences, an increased focus on the vast intersectional first-generation identities and groups is urgently needed.

Implications for Practice

In order to reduce the cost associated with college and provide a pathway to employment, institutions should develop paid internship programs for first-generation students that combine paid apprenticeships with course credits, which can provide a pathway to a good job without the burden of student loan debt [8]. Institutions should develop a diverse and targeted set of supports, both academic and financial, to meet the unique needs of first-generation students, including dedicated scholarships, peer mentoring opportunities, and trained advisors and/or coaches. Direct student support activities such as increased grant aid, peer mentoring, and college/career counseling have been repeatedly linked to improvements in student enrollment, retention, and graduation [15].

Policy Recommendations

Stackable credentials have emerged as an innovative pathway to empower first-generation working students to gainful employment, and currently 10 states require community colleges to offer stackable credit options [9]. Workforce needs are also better served by developing a stackable credentials policy, and with increased funding and coordination with state and local governments, first-generation students could potentially return to community college for a second credential in an effort to fill an industry need. Also, since first-generation students often carry the additional burden of financially supporting parents, siblings, and/or children, institutions should find ways to offer financial assistance for non-tuition costs such as child and sibling care supports, books, housing, food, and transportation [14].

Discussion and Conclusion

Institutions have an opportunity to meet the diverse needs of first-generation students. While all students faced challenges as a result of the COVID crisis, first-generation students were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Each of the identified barriers has been exacerbated by the subsequent shutdowns and economic fallout as a result of COVID. Without concerted and continued efforts by government, institutional, and social actors to bridge the gap between first-generation and non-first-generation students, first-generation students are likely to remain marginalized.

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