



Our Vision

FirstGen Forward aspires to be a transformational partner for higher education, FirstGen students, and all who care about them, working to maximize the success of the FirstGen student population in education, career, and life.

If you walk around a college campus today, chances are many, if not most, of the students passing you by are the first in their families to forge a path to a degree. In fact, more than half (54%) of America's undergrads are first generation college students (FirstGen students). And their numbers are growing. They're from city neighborhoods and rural communities. They're as diverse as America itself. These students are ambitious, smart, resilient, and they've often beat the odds just to get to campus.

There is a catch, however. FirstGen students currently graduate and receive a degree at a rate of 20%. That contrasts with a 49% graduation rate for continuing generation students, or those with at least one parent with a bachelor's degree or a higher level of educational attainment. We must close that gap.

Our country benefits from the experience, determination, and economic potential of FirstGen graduates in the workforce and our communities. If more FirstGen students graduate, their options will multiply - and their impact on our economy and society will grow exponentially. FirstGen student success benefits the economic mobility of the students and the missions of the colleges. It has a positive impact on families for multiple generations.

Indeed, the promise of our country, that you can start anywhere and find your way to success, may be kept alive and well through the journeys of these students. This is an opportunity for us to show that the American dream is still within reach. Our expectations are high because the need for FirstGen students to succeed is great.

The commitment to FirstGen students is not new. But the opportunities and challenges of today demand an urgent, coordinated approach. No single organization can ensure FirstGen student success on its own. That's why FirstGen Forward is committed to being a partner, leader, and a convener, helping to elevate the whole conversation about FirstGen students, and sustaining a high-functioning, cross-sector team working to provide the necessary support for students to thrive.

The future is FirstGen.

The work begins today.

We are going to do this together.

The Opportunity to be Captured

Higher education remains one of the most powerful pathways to opportunity in America. The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce notes: "by 2031, 72% of jobs in the US will require postsecondary education and/or training. Between 2021 and 2031, there will be 18.5 million job openings per year on average, and some 12.5 million of these annualized openings will require at least some college education." College degrees offer graduates better job prospects and higher earning potential that lead to a higher quality of life. And for many, the benefits will extend far beyond any individual student. While the opportunities are seemingly available to all, not everyone has the same chances at finding success. Some need different support to succeed.

FirstGen Students - Unlimited Opportunities

The population of undergraduate students is heavily weighted with FirstGen students, and growing rapidly. They are applying to college at twice the rate of students from households with a parent or guardian with a degree (continuing generation). What do we know about them?

- FirstGen students make up 54% of all undergraduates.
- FirstGen students are majority-minority (54% FirstGen vs 39% continuing generation); and are more likely to be Black (18% vs 12% continuing generation) or Latino (25% vs 14% continuing generation).
- FirstGen students are 67% of students enrolled at American Indian/Alaska Native/Pacific Islander-serving Institutions, 65% at Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and 60% at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).
- 62% of college students who are Veterans are FirstGen.

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Today, one out of every 2 undergraduates—8.2 million total—identifies as FirstGen. Compared to their continuing generation peers, FirstGen students are older and have fewer financial resources (\$41k median parental income vs. \$90k), pursue postsecondary education at lower rates (72% vs. 93%) and, as previously stated, attain four-year degrees at lower rates (20% vs. 49%).

Achieving unprecedented FirstGen student success will have a life-changing impact across generations, as college completion is a significant contributor to education, workforce, and life success for the families of graduates.

FirstGen students are trailblazers. They are the first in their immediate family to attend - and graduate - college. They become professionals with varying socioeconomic backgrounds, life experiences,

skills, and talents helping to diversify and improve our workforce and our communities. And when one generation in a family attains a college degree, their average income rises, and subsequent generations not only benefit, but are more likely to attend college themselves.

We know, for example, that those who complete a college degree:

- Are 88% more likely to be employed.
- Earn higher wages.
- Are twice as likely to be civically engaged, evidenced by higher rates of voting, volunteering in the community.

To promote upward economic mobility, arguably the best opportunity for FirstGen students is to obtain college degrees at the same rate as their continuing generation peers.

The U.S. economy faces a significant shortfall of skilled workers to fill important roles. Companies need more prepared workers, with diverse experiences and skill sets. There are 8.5 million unfilled jobs in the United States. Eliminating the graduation gap between FirstGen and continuing generation students would deliver 4.4-million more-degree holders and over \$700 billion in net benefit to the U.S. economy.

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The Job to Be Done

In 2009, the Suder Foundation established First Scholars® as a living laboratory across a group of eight carefully selected universities. Students were provided scholarships and surrounded by a network of support. After nearly a decade of measuring progress, the data confirmed that compared to FirstGen and continuing generation peers, First Scholars students demonstrated significantly higher rates of academic performance, retention, and graduation.

In 2017, the Suder Foundation and NASPA partnered to establish the Center for First-generation Student Success to dramatically scale impact and serve more students around the country. The Center evolved the original First Scholars model into a new approach that prioritizes student outcomes and guides systemic changes for institutions to sustain and grow commitments to FirstGen students. Having demonstrated that the model works and is scalable, the time has arrived for the next chapter.

Today, FirstGen Forward directly supports dozens of schools, and more broadly contributes to the work that hundreds of institutions of higher education are doing to redesign their systems and cultures to effectively support FirstGen students campus wide. First Scholars has evolved into the FirstGen Forward Network.

- **Strengthening and Expanding the FirstGen Forward Network:** FirstGen Forward offers a national model for scaling holistic FirstGen student success by engaging and assisting hundreds of higher education institutions to transform the first-generation student experience, advance academic and co-curricular outcomes, and build more inclusive institutional structures. Our customized approach is evidence-based and designed to help participating institutions transform their offerings to better support FirstGen students. It also includes professional development, coaching, and peer group learning. This is the core of our work, which we will continue to prioritize.

- **Serving as an Indispensable Resource for the Entire Field:** Additionally, there are thousands of institutions outside of the Network looking for additional support with the redesigning of their systems and culture as they work to serve millions of FirstGen students. Not every school requires, or is ready to receive, tailored support. Our field work will ensure that any school looking for support has a path forward. Through convenings, resource guides, online training, and other methods, we will help to accelerate and scale changes throughout higher education.

- **Enhanced Focus on Data Insights and Sharing Best Practices:** FirstGen Forward endeavors to be the premiere source for data and understanding about FirstGen students in education, work, and life. All schools working to support FirstGen students must be consistent and transparent about tracking progress on key metrics related to FirstGen student success: enrollment, retention, credit-completion, transfer rates from community colleges to four-year institutions, and of course, graduation rates. Through diagnostic tools and ongoing data analytics, as well as evergreen research, we help schools measure their impact and identify where to strengthen their approaches for advancing FirstGen outcomes.

To complement the data collected from schools relating to their work with FirstGen students on campus, FirstGen Forward will measure the success of our scholars after graduation day – employment, wages, promotion rates – and analyze the connections. We will use this data, along with evergreen research, to help shape how the country thinks about FirstGen students and their opportunities post-graduation, ensure policymakers consider FirstGen students a priority, and generate necessary support for the work being done across sectors.

- **Building and Sustaining a Multi-Sector Coalition:** FirstGen Forward is working to build a broad coalition of FirstGen student advocates and allies across the public and private sectors. Every school that participates in this work contributes and collectively the entire effort will grow stronger over time. FirstGen Forward will also engage with organizations beyond higher education - corporations, media, government, philanthropists, and others - to ensure support for FirstGen students can tackle the full scope of challenges while in school, and take advantage of the broad range of opportunities present beyond campus.

Additional Lanes

There are additional projects that FirstGen Forward will use to drive FirstGen student success - which also present new opportunities for the sector as a whole. These include:

- **Career Success:** FirstGen Forward is committed to helping schools connect to employers, federal and state governments, and other sectors to form partnerships that help improve FirstGen student employment opportunities and experiences. As an example, FirstGen Forward is currently in discussion with several Fortune 100 companies to establish programs that help ensure FirstGen students have the appropriate skills and experience to move seamlessly into available roles post-graduation.
- **State Partnerships:** FirstGen Forward is bringing together a diverse group of schools within individual states to demonstrate how the multi-sector collaborative approach can work at scale. As an example, FirstGen Forward partners with thirty Texas institutions (as of Aug. 2024) that serve 31% of the state's 1.3M undergraduates. All schools will be engaged as members of our FirstGen Forward Network, with support tailored to meet state-specific challenges. Over the next five years, our team will double the number of total institutional partnerships in Texas, leading to thousands of additional FirstGen students graduating from Texas institutions.

The Future is FirstGen

Our vision is to help the country better serve FirstGen students in education, work, and life. These students, in turn, will change the country.

The mission is clear.

The outcomes are within reach.

To help FirstGen students reach their full potential will require full engagement from colleges and universities. We will need those who are investing philanthropic dollars to fully embrace the challenges and opportunities and invest with long-term transformation as the goal. We need the media to share FirstGen stories. And we need elected officials to provide the public policy backdrop to help us succeed.

This is not a short-term endeavor, it's a commitment to a whole generation of students, and those who follow in their footsteps.

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