

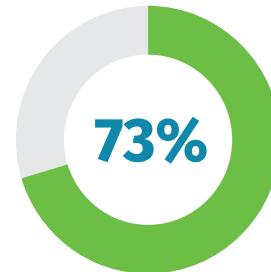
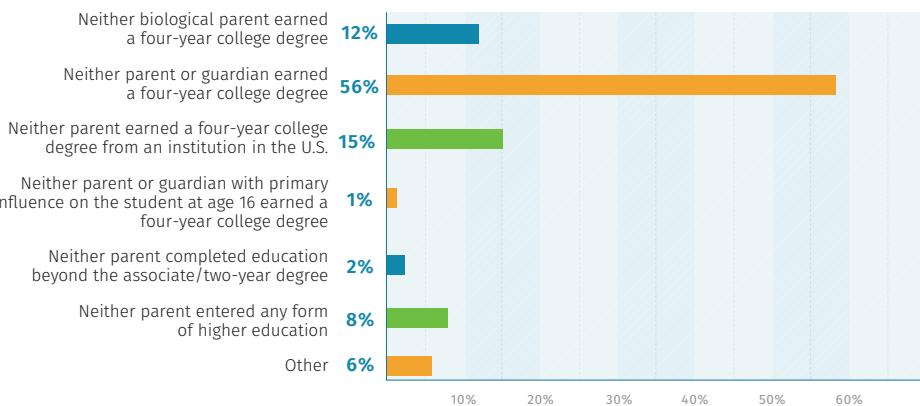
# UNDERSTANDING THE FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT IDENTITY

First-generation students make up a third of all college students<sup>1</sup>, but only 27% will attain their degrees within four years. For four-year institutions to drive systemic change that improves student success and completion, they must first understand the first-generation student identity.



## DEFINING FIRST-GENERATION

Who is a first-generation student? Being aligned on this definition is just as important as providing offerings as it affects eligibility for services, drives decision-making, impacts data collection, and tracks efficacy.



*Percentage of surveyed institutions with a formal definition of first-generation yet, this does not indicate this definition is being used consistently across programs and services; an important consideration.*



## INTERSECTIONALITY – OR “FIRST-GENERATION PLUS”

While the “First-generation Plus” identity can increase campus-wide engagement, it can also unintentionally lead to gaps in service provision. Intersectional identity often drives where support programs are located, and given the diverse nature of first-generation students, it’s important to consider whether those resources are appropriately placed.

## STUDENTS MAY BE

First-generation  
First-generation + minority  
First-generation + LGBTQI  
First-generation + low income...  
or a host of other identities important for consideration.



## SHIFTING FROM A DEFICIT TO ASSET-BASED LENS

Often, the challenges that first-generation students face are erroneously perceived as inherent shortcomings. Institutions are uniquely placed to shift this negative narrative to an asset-based lens that celebrates the unique strengths of these students and encourages them to use their talents to enhance the college experience.

*“We need to help first-generation students understand the assets they bring to the academy, their job, and society so that they can begin to see that being an outsider is an asset.”*

**William Durden,**  
President Emeritus, Dickinson College

Visit [firstgen.naspa.org](http://firstgen.naspa.org) to download our Landscape Analysis of First-generation Programs and Services at Four-Year Institutions.

<sup>1</sup> Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; Skomsvold, 2015