

# Increasing Financial Resources for First-generation College Students

Ensuring access to higher education for first-generation college students is essential for promoting social equity and economic mobility.<sup>1</sup> First-generation college students are defined as those whose parents did not obtain a bachelor's degree.<sup>2</sup> These students are more likely to use student loans (both federal and private), credit cards, scholarships and grants, and money earned from working a job than continuing-generation students, and are less likely to use income from parents or family members to pay for their education.<sup>3</sup>

Lack of resources is often cited as a reason that precludes first-generation college students from enrolling in or continuing their education. For many of these students and families, the lack of familiarity with the college experience can affect their knowledge of financial aid and scholarship options along with the appropriate timelines for applying for these resources.

A 2022 survey of first-generation college students reported that 31% of these students wanted their institutions to “offer financial aid process help geared toward first-generation students.”<sup>4</sup> Increasing their social capital about policies and procedures governing eligibility for financial assistance is a first step toward contributing to increasing these students’ access to financial assistance for their education.

For many students, exposure to the various types of financial resources available to subsidize higher education such as scholarships or federal and state financial aid begins with the college application process. In contrast to continuing-generation students, first-generation students and their families may be learning these processes and procedures in real-time along with application cycles and may be unaware of or miss key due dates to apply for these funds.

## How can financial resources for first-generation college students be increased?

- ▶ **EARLY EDUCATION ABOUT OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES.** In 2022, the National College Attainment Network [reported](#) that \$3.6 billion in Pell Grants went unclaimed because eligible students did not complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Promoting informational opportunities at local high schools, especially in inner-city or inner-ring suburbs, can spread the word to students who may not always be on the radar of institutions of higher education or have access to college fairs or admissions counselors to provide them with information about available funding.

1 College Board. (2020, November 4). A college education pays off: New College Board report. <https://newsroom.collegeboard.org/college-education-pays-new-college-board-report>

2 RTI International. (2019). First-generation College Students: Demographic Characteristics and Postsecondary Enrollment. Washington, DC: NASPA. Retrieved from <https://firstgen.naspa.org/files/dmfile/FactSheet-01.pdf>

3 Rehr, Tori I.; Regan, Erica P.; Abukar, Zayd; Meshelemiah, Jacquelyn C. A., College Student Affairs Journal, *v40 n1* (2022)

4 [Student Voice survey](#) conducted by Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse with support from Kaplan, June 2022

- ▶ Connecting high school students to peer mentors to provide guidance throughout their academic journey, such as members of the [College Advising Corps](#), can increase knowledge about the college experience and how to finance it.
- ▶ Initiatives such as workshops, webinars, and information sessions can educate prospective first-generation college students and their families or supporters about the benefits of higher education, available financial resources, how processes work, and due dates for filing applications.
- ▶ **SHARE SUCCESS NARRATIVES ABOUT FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS.** If first-generation students are willing to share their success stories, these narratives can be powerful stories to share with potential donors.
  - ▶ Pairing data about an institution's percentage and number of first-generation students with stories of how financial support contributes to persistence and degree attainment highlights the positives of investing in these students.
- ▶ **OFFER ASSISTANCE IN MEETING BASIC NEEDS.** Many students require assistance with meeting basic needs to complete their education. For example, a recent report by the California Community College League<sup>5</sup> found that two of every three California community college students face at least one basic needs insecurity, including lack of food and housing. The findings noted that students are often making choices between purchasing textbooks needed for class and paying for food, rent, or utilities.
- ▶ **BE MINDFUL OF LEGISLATIVE FUNDING AGENDAS.** Funding to support first-generation college students can also come from state-sponsored programs. Programs may be field-specific, such as the [Choose Ohio First Scholarships](#), or general, such as the [Colorado First Generation Award](#). Monitoring statewide budget discussions and whether or not scholarship funds are earmarked for budget cuts or funding increases opens an opportunity for advocacy efforts with representatives.

## What can you do to increase financial assistance for first-generation students?

- ▶ Advocate for clear language about available financial resources, the cost of attendance in institutional material and on websites, and due dates for financial aid and scholarship applications.
  - ▶ Conduct a jargon audit of materials provided to first-generation students about the cost of attendance, financial aid eligibility, and application cycles and due dates.
  - ▶ Ensure that institutional websites are updated regularly with current application forms and due dates.

5 The RP Group and the Chief Executive Officers (CEO) Affordability, Food & Housing Access Taskforce (2023). Real College California: Basic Needs Among California Community College Students. Community College League of California

- ▶ Research and promote financial resources available to first-generation students.
  - ▶ Review institutional web pages about financial aid and scholarships to determine if they contain clear eligibility criteria and explanations of the various types of federal assistance that may be available to students.
  - ▶ Promote community-based resources or organizations that provide assistance with scholarship applications or FAFSA form completion.
  - ▶ Direct students to [state higher education department websites](#) or [local governmental websites](#) which can detail state aid available to students.
- ▶ Directly reach out to first-generation students about the new [Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#) which is expected to increase Pell Grant eligibility and provide additional aid to more students. First-generation students applying for and receiving federal and state financial aid will likely increase if you make announcements that the FAFSA has opened and send reminders regarding important FAFSA due dates.
- ▶ Engage in advocacy campaigns to increase, or at a minimum, retain current funding levels of federal and state financial aid funds.
  - ▶ Write your federal representatives about the importance of [Federal Pell Grants](#), [Federal Work-Study](#) funds, and student loan programs and how a reduction in the budget for these programs can negatively affect first-generation college students.
  - ▶ Use available channels to connect with your state's legislators; constituent feedback on issues is critical, and especially important during election years.

#### **ABOUT ISSUE BRIEFS**

The Center for First-generation Student Success will periodically release briefs highlighting issues of importance to the success of first-generation students. These resources are designed to provide an overview of the specific topic, include supporting information or resources relevant to the issue, and outline recommendations for action.