

Improving Retention and Completion for First-generation College Students

First-generation college students (defined as “students whose parents do not have a bachelor’s degree”) comprise 56% of today’s college student population.¹ Given the large segment of today’s higher education population they represent, retention and completion is critical for both students and their institutions. Yet, national data sets reveal concerns about the success of these students:

- ▶ **5%** of first-generation bachelor’s degree students departed from their post-secondary education without a credential or degree after their first year and did not enroll again.
- ▶ **40.8%** of first-generation students did not persist through the 2016-17 academic year compared to **22.3%** of their continuing-generation counterparts who did not attain a degree and did not plan on returning to college.²

The data comparing first-generation student’s retention and completion to continuing-generation peers identify a need to ensure first-generation students are enrolled in higher education environments that support their success.

How can institutions of higher education develop supportive environments for first-generation college students to persist on their path to degree attainment?

- ▶ **REVIEW RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP:** A review of the literature on first-generation student academic success categorizes practices that can transform students’ learning.³ This review identified three types of academic practices that can support first-generation students learning:
 - ▶ promoting an institutional interdependent learning culture,
 - ▶ providing explicit support for academic learning, and
 - ▶ creating learning experiences that center communal goals, while outlining a list of specific practices higher education institutions can institute.⁴

In *An Annotated Bibliography On First-Generation College Students: Research From 2008–2019*,⁵ the authors summarize research about Classroom Teaching and Pedagogy and Student Success⁶ from which strategies to support first-generation college students can be drawn.

1 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>.

2 RTI International. (2019). First Year Experience, Persistence, and Attainment of First-generation College Students. Washington, DC: NASPA. Retrieved from <https://firstgen.naspa.org/files/dmfile/FactSheet-02.pdf>.

3 Milagros Castillo-Montoya & Jillian Ives (2021) Transformative Practices to Support First-Generation College Students as Academic Learners: Findings From a Systematic Literature Review, *Journal of First-generation Student Success*, 1:1, 20-31, DOI: 10.1080/26906015.2021.1890948.

4 Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 22, 27-28.

5 Baldwin, A., Rease Miles, L., Boyd, W. D., Bruner, D. L., Foote, S. M., & Gutierrez, M. (2021). *An Annotated Bibliography on First-generation College Students: Research from 2008-2019*. Center for First-generation Student Success; NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. <https://firstgen.naspa.org/journal-and-research/an-annotated-bibliography-on-first-generation-college-students-research-from-2008-2019>.

6 Baldwin, et al., 23, 120.

- ▶ **CONSIDER INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES:** Especially important is considering the intersectional identities of first-generation college students. These students encompass a variety of races and ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and hail from urban, suburban and rural areas. The first-generation identity intersects with those taking a traditional path from high school to college as well as those students attending part-time, returning after a break in attendance, attending following serving in the military, or managing work, childcare, caregiving, and other responsibilities. Understanding the needs of an institution's particular first-generation student population and tailoring support strategies to those students is important to the overall goal of increasing degree attainment.
- ▶ **LISTEN TO STUDENTS:** Learning directly from first-generation college students about their needs and priorities can be an asset in allocating resources. In a survey of first-generation students about the support institutions could provide to help them reach their goals, students reported familiarity with a number of typical services that institutions offer.¹ However, respondents indicated prioritization of the following would be most beneficial:
 - ▶ “Help for first-gen students on how to complete the financial aid process.”
 - ▶ “First-gen-specific orientation programs.”
 - ▶ “A center specifically for first-gen students.”
- ▶ **OFFER ASSISTANCE IN MEETING BASIC NEEDS:** Many students require assistance with meeting basic needs in order to complete their education. In a new report by The California Community College League, two of every three California community college students face at least one basic needs insecurity, including lack of food and housing.² The findings noted that students are often making choices between purchasing textbooks needed for class and paying for food, rent, or utilities.
- ▶ **FOSTER A SENSE OF BELONGING:** The development of a sense of belonging on campus is one of the main drivers of retention among first-generation college students.³ For first-generation college students of color, their sense of belonging is correlated with involvement in extracurricular activities, exposure to diversity on campus, and difficulty with academics.⁴

¹ Student Voice survey conducted by Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse with support from Kaplan, June 2022.

² 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.

³ Salusky, I., Monjaras-Gaytan, L., Ulerio, G., Forbes, N., Perron, G., & Raposa, E. (2022). The Formation and Role of Social Belonging in On-Campus Integration of Diverse First-Generation College Students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251221092709>.

⁴ Carly W. Thornhill, Caroline M. Wied, Mikaela M. N. Spooner, Aileen Terrazas & Tyler S. Evans (2023) Factors of College Involvement and Belonging for First-Generation Students of Color, *Journal of First-generation Student Success*, 3:1, 20-32, DOI: 10.1080/26906015.2022.2156826.

What can you do to improve retention and degree attainment of first-generation college students?

Opportunities exist to advocate for a variety of supports that enable first-generation college students to stay enrolled and continue on their path to degree completion:

- ▶ Contact your government representatives, both [federal](#) and [state](#), to emphasize the importance of passing legislation that supports that supports intersectional identities of the first-generation student population.

Retaining government funding for programs like the [Child Care Access Means Parents in School \(CCAMPIS\)](#) program or the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#) can aid first-generation students who are parents or those who are low- or limited-income.

- ▶ Advocate for sustaining and expanding federal funding for the [Student Support Services](#) program which includes programming such as academic development, assisting students with basic college requirements, and motivating first-generation, low-income, and students with disabilities toward the successful completion of their postsecondary education.
- ▶ Advocate for maintaining or increasing funding for [Federal Pell Grants](#) and/or [state grants](#) or financial aid programs.
- ▶ Develop a strategic communications plan for ensuring that first-generation students are informed about resources that could mean the difference between staying in school and dropping out.
 - ▶ Advocate for [emergency aid funding or grants](#) to assist first-generation students with unexpected expenses.
 - ▶ Offer a process to connect students with resources for [basic needs funding](#) to assist with food, utilities, rent payments, counseling, or other social services.
- ▶ Analyze institutional data to determine if correlations emerge between various first-generation student identities and stop-out points to determine appropriate interventions.
 - ▶ Ensure processes and support can be accessed by first-generation students such as transfer students and/or upperclassmen who may not realize they fit the first-generation identity until later in their educational experience.
 - ▶ Use the data to demonstrate to administrators or senior leaders that the investment in first-generation student supports will benefit the institution's return on investment.

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.