

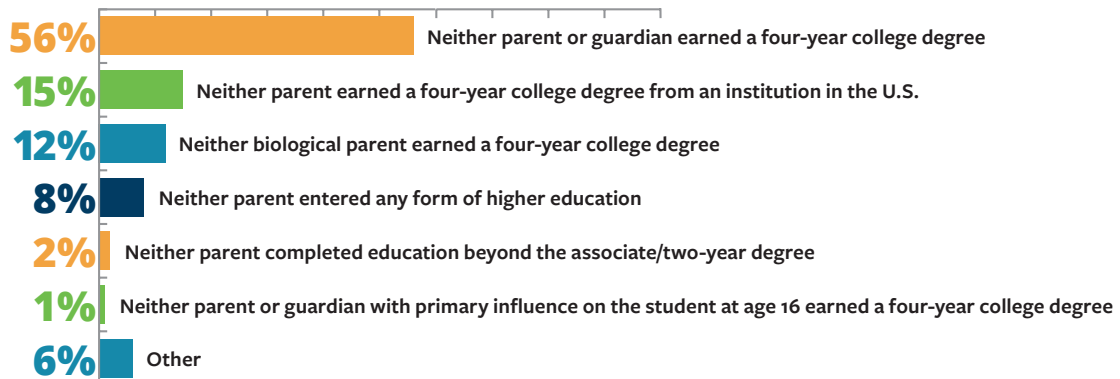
Higher education remains a benefit to society despite [recent questions](#) about its value and cost. From research and development to advancing local economies, higher education provides value beyond what is gained by individual students. Providing access to postsecondary educational opportunities for students is important to students’ success, institutions’ bottom line, ongoing research and development, and economic growth.

Overall enrollment in higher education is declining or remaining flat, although certain sectors have been less impacted than others.¹ According to Common App, “first-generation applicants increased by 43%, more than twice the rate of continuing-generation applicants” from 2019 to 2022². As of the academic year 2015-16, 56% of undergraduates nationally identified as first-generation college students, and 59% of these students were also the first sibling in their family to go to college³.

Enrolling and retaining students is critical for everything from an institution’s economic health to a robust student experience. Given these numbers, increased attention to first-generation students’ success is growing.

When referring to first-generation college students, who do we mean?

Several varying definitions are used by institutions of higher education and related organizations to describe students whose families do not have a history of participating in education beyond high school. The more common definitions include:⁴



This table lists the most commonly used first-generation definitions identified by the Center for First-generation Student Success’ 2018 landscape analysis of four-year, degree-granting institutions. Whitley, S.E., Benson, G., & Wesaw, A. (2018). *First-generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs and Services at Four-year Institutions*. Washington, DC: Center for First-generation Student Success, NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and Entangled Solutions.

As knowledge about first-generation students grows, the definition has evolved with a growing number of institutions using the definition “neither parent earned a four-year college degree from an institution in the United States.”⁵ Despite the differences in the definitions listed, the common thread is a lack of connection to or experience with postsecondary education for students and their families or support systems. Without this knowledge base, navigating college policies, procedures, jargon, and expectations can lead to insurmountable challenges.

1 Overview: Spring 2023 Enrollment Estimates, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Spring 2023)

2 Deadline update: first-year application trends through November 1, Common App Data and Analytics, November 15, 2022

3 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>

4 Whitley, S.E., Benson, G., & Wesaw, A. (2018). *First-generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs and Services at Four-year Institutions*. Washington, DC: Center for First-generation Student Success, NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and Entangled Solutions.

5 Whitley, et al., 20.

How can access to higher education be improved for first-generation students?

The stakes for students' retention and completion are higher, given the growing costs of higher education.¹ Yet, a number of opportunities to increase access for first-generation college students exist. Advocating for sustaining and/or expanding several types of programs can provide increased access to higher education for first-generation students:

- ▶ **FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE.** While funding a national program for free community college has struggled with passage by Congress², according to the Campaign for Free Community College Tuition, over [30 states](#) offer some type of free community college program. Making available educational opportunities with little or lower costs for first-generation students provides an entry point to a variety of postsecondary options. Community colleges offer certificates, workforce training programs, and pathways to obtain credits to transfer to four-year institutions. All of these avenues can lead to higher-paying jobs and careers for first-generation students.
- ▶ **WORKFORCE TRAINING PROGRAMS.** Federal workforce development programs make available funding to a variety of populations, many of which intersect with the first-generation identity.³ The federal government offers funding to states for various workforce programs directed at job seekers, veterans, those with disabilities, and skilled immigrants among others.
 - ▶ At the state level, investments in workforce pathways are popular. Many governors used their annual [State of the State addresses](#) to tout investments in these types of programs.
- ▶ **SHORT-TERM PELL GRANTS.** The [Federal Pell Grant Program](#) is one of the most well-known ways to help low- and limited-income students pay for college. Roughly half of first-generation college students and student parents, and almost 40% of student veterans, are Pell Grant recipients.⁴ At this point, these grants can only be applied to postsecondary programs that last longer than 15 weeks. A [number of bills](#) have been introduced into the 118th Congress with different provisions related to expanding this type of funding which could provide increased access to postsecondary credentials for first-generation students seeking shorter-term credentials.
- ▶ **FEDERAL TRIO PROGRAMS.** Programs such as [Upward Bound](#) prepare first-generation and low-income high school students to succeed in college and, ultimately, in higher education. The [Talent Search](#) program provides academic, career, and financial counseling to its participants who are underrepresented in higher education and provides programming to assist in high school degree completion and enrollment in postsecondary education.
- ▶ **STATE AND LOCAL FUNDING.** Many state and local governments offer a variety of scholarship programs for students. The requirements of these programs include [place-based programs starting in middle school](#) and [merit- and need-based programs](#). These types of programs play a critical role in ensuring access to affordable higher education and must be adequately funded to ensure eligible students receive the financial aid they need to enroll and succeed in college.

6 National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Price of Attending an Undergraduate Institution. Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

7 [U.S. Department of Education Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Summary](#).

8 Federal Sources of Workforce Funding, Local Workforce System Guide, [The Urban Institute](#).

9 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).

What can you do to increase access to higher education for first-generation students?

Opportunities exist to advocate for programs that create increased access for first-generation college students:

- ▶ Contact your government representatives, both [federal](#) and [state](#), to emphasize the importance of approaches that expand access to higher education for first-generation college students. Thank them for their past support, and request their continued help with maintaining and expanding support.
 - ▶ Identify success stories of students who are willing to share their experiences that show a direct, positive impact on constituents.
 - ▶ Provide data about the importance of local higher education institutions to the local economies in your state.
 - ▶ Provide information about the value of an educated workforce to the state or local economy.
 - ▶ Advocate for maintaining or increasing funding for federal and/or state grant or financial aid programs.
- ▶ Participate in national events or days of celebration to raise awareness of the first-generation identity and possibilities for engagement in postsecondary education.
 - ▶ The [National First-Generation College Celebration](#) is observed each year on November 8, to commemorate the signing of the Higher Education Act (“HEA”) of 1965 which created federal financial aid programs to fund students’ educations and made key investments in colleges and universities. A variety of resources are available to plan and celebrate the first-generation identity.
 - ▶ On February 24, 1986, a congressional resolution (H. Con. Res. 278) declared Saturday, February 28, 1986, as “[National TRIO Day](#)” to commemorate the annual achievements of the [Federal TRIO programs](#) in communities across the country. Each year, the fourth Saturday in February is celebrated as National TRIO Day, an opportunity to recognize the Federal TRIO programs which promote postsecondary access, retention, and completion for today’s limited-income, first-generation college students.
- ▶ Identify and support like-minded partners that advocate for greater access to postsecondary education for first-generation college students.
 - ▶ Formal organizations such as the [National College Attainment Network](#) (NCAN) or [Coalition for College](#) can be powerful advocates due to the large number of member organizations.
 - ▶ Grassroots efforts or ad hoc partnerships that mobilize around an issue are other ways to show widespread support.

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.