

First-generation College Graduates' Transition to Graduate School and Employment

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Among students who graduated with a bachelor's degree in academic year 2015–2016, 42% were first-generation college graduates, meaning that their parents did not complete a bachelor's degree. This issue brief presents national statistics about first- and continuing-generation graduates' transition to further education and employment. The brief describes the graduates' use of career planning services and extracurricular participation when they were undergraduate students. The brief also discusses graduates' further postsecondary education, employment, and financial status within the year after earning a bachelor's degree. First-generation students' experiences can differ by race/ethnicity and age, and the brief illustrates some of these differences. Finally, the brief highlights the implications of these statistics and provides recommendations for practitioners, particularly college faculty, staff, and administrators who support first-generation students.

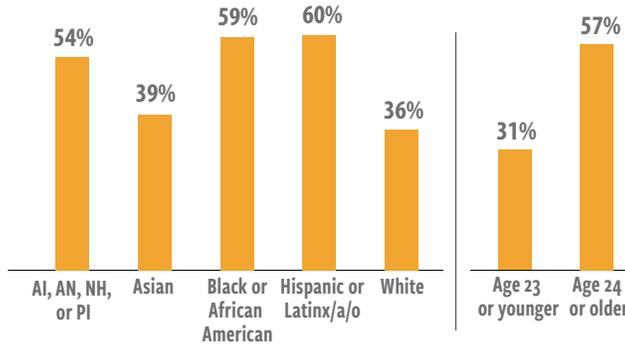
The statistics were calculated using data from the 2016/17 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B:16/17), a national survey of bachelor's degree recipients sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (Wine et al., 2019). The survey represents individuals who received a bachelor's degree in academic year 2015–16 from a Title IV postsecondary institution. The total survey sample size is 19,490. B&B:16/17 collected data about bachelor's degree recipients' background, postsecondary experiences while working on the bachelor's degree, and postbaccalaureate enrollment and employment.



First-generation College Graduates by Race/Ethnicity and Age

First-generation college graduates' experiences and outcomes are not uniform and vary according to other characteristics and identities (Mechur Karp, Cormier, Whitley, Umbarger-Wells, & Wesaw, 2020; Whitley, Benson, & Wesaw, 2018). The percentage of graduates who were first-generation differed by race/ethnicity and age. Most American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander (AI, AN, NH, or PI), Black or African American, and Hispanic or Latinx/a/o college graduates were first-generation. By comparison, 39 percent of Asian graduates and 36 percent of white graduates were first-generation. More than half of college graduates who were age 24 or older when they graduated were first-generation, compared to 31 percent of those who were age 23 or younger.

Percentage who were first-generation college graduates, by race/ethnicity and age at graduation



Use of Career Planning Services as Undergraduate Students

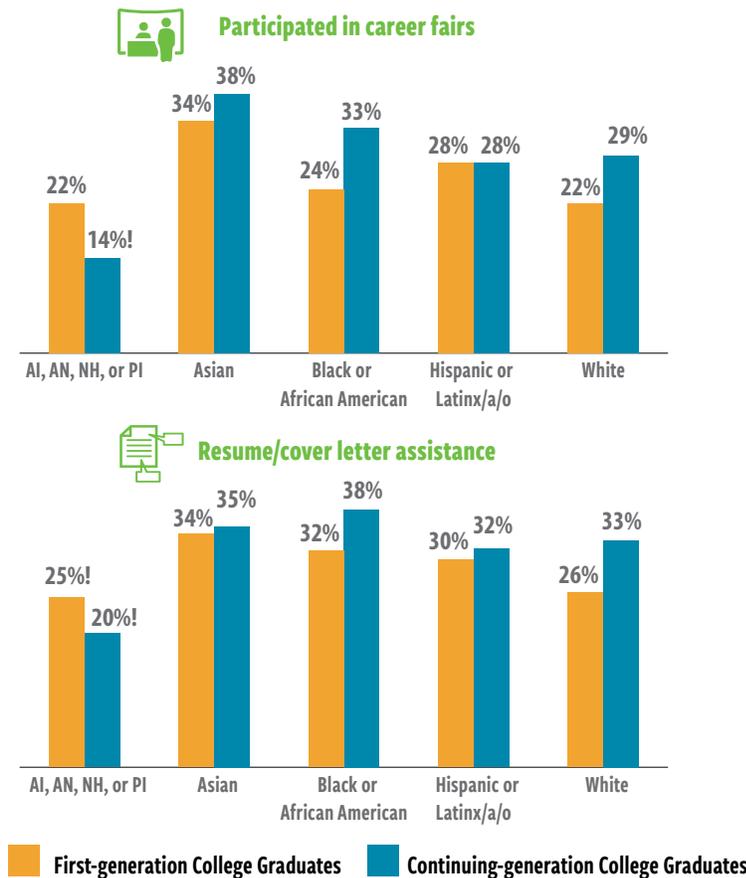
College career planning services can help students prepare for and find employment and other opportunities upon graduation. When compared with continuing-generation peers, fewer first-generation college graduates used career planning services when they were undergraduate students. Twenty-four percent of first-generation graduates and 30% of continuing-generation graduates had participated in career fairs. The percentage of first-generation graduates who had participated in career fairs differed by race/ethnicity. At the high end, 34% of Asian first-generation graduates had participated in career fairs, compared with 22% of AI, AN, NH, or PI and white graduates at the other end of the range.

The degree of difference in career fair participation between first-generation and continuing-generation graduates varied by race/ethnicity. Among Black or African American graduates, 9% fewer first-generation than continuing-generation

graduates had participated in career fairs, which was the largest generation gap among racial/ethnic groups. By contrast, there was no participation gap between first-generation and continuing-generation Hispanic or Latinx/a/o graduates.

Fewer first-generation than continuing-generation graduates received resume or cover letter assistance from career planning services when they were undergraduate students. Twenty-eight percent of first-generation graduates received resume or cover letter assistance, compared with 34% of continuing-generation graduates. Among first-generation graduates, Asian graduates were the largest percentage of those who received resume or cover letter assistance (34%), while white and AI, AN, NH, or PI graduates had the lowest percentages (26% and 25%, respectively). The gap between first-generation and continuing-generation graduates was largest among white graduates (7 percentage points) and smallest among Hispanic or Latinx/a/o and Asian graduates (2 and 1 percentage points, respectively).

Percentage of first-generation and continuing-generation college graduates who used career planning services, by race/ethnicity



Implications for practitioners

- ◆ When promoting career planning services, consider creative opportunities for reaching first-generation students to include offering services outside of traditional work hours, virtually, and for both residential and commuting students as well as elevating partnerships through intersectional identities (i.e., multicultural center, veteran services, financial aid).
- ◆ Review messaging for the use of asset-based language and elimination of jargon and select a platform popular with students to promote career planning services.
- ◆ Consider first-generation-specific offerings for career planning to include first-generation-specific resume writing workshops, interview preparation opportunities, and connections with employers seeking first-generation graduates.
- ◆ Many career services offices provide valuable resources for first-generation students including access to clothing and accessories for interviews, support with travel arrangements and child care, and mentoring with first-generation alumni. Services should be well advertised and clearly accessible.

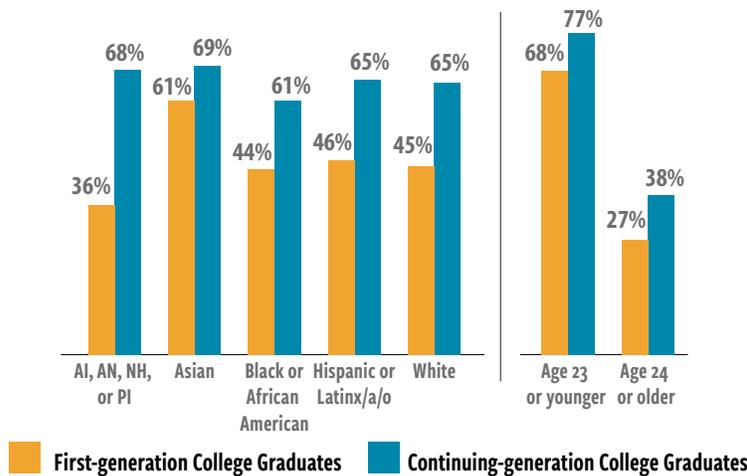


Participation in Extracurricular and Co-curricular Activities as Undergraduate Students

Extracurricular and co-curricular activities often play an important role in college students' development. They help students prepare for careers and graduate school by introducing them to occupations and fields of study as well as providing skills and experiences that employers and graduate programs look for in candidates. Fewer first-generation than continuing-generation college graduates had extracurricular and co-curricular experiences as undergraduate students. A lower percentage of first-generation than continuing-generation graduates held a formal leadership role (31% compared with 44%), participated in a research project with a faculty member (23% compared with 30%), or held a paid internship (23% compared with 33%).

Forty-six percent of first-generation graduates participated in an extracurricular club, fewer than the 65% of continuing-generation graduates. Extracurricular club participation among first-generation graduates differed by race/ethnicity. Less than half of AI, AN, NH, or PI; Black or African American; Hispanic or Latinx/a/o; and white first-generation graduates participated in an extracurricular club, but 61% of Asian first-generation graduates participated. The participation gap between first-

Percentage of first-generation and continuing-generation college graduates who participated in an extracurricular club as undergraduate students, by race/ethnicity and age at graduation



Implications for practitioners

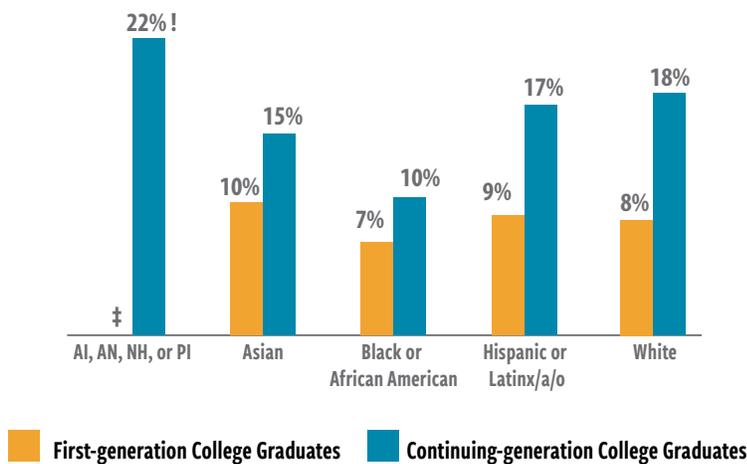
- ◆ Funding is often available, yet not widely communicated, through career services to support first-generation students with graduate school preparation courses and exams, clothing or travel to interviews, or stipends during internships.
- ◆ Often, career services and personal wellness workshops continue to be available to students after completion. Seek partnerships to communicate these free resources widely.
- ◆ For all of these resources and opportunities, it is imperative that faculty, particularly those who serve as advisors, are aware, share information, and feel comfortable referring students. Include this information as early as during new faculty orientation. Provide faculty with an asset-based statement that provides an overview of all career planning services for inclusion on syllabi.

generation and continuing-generation graduates was smallest among Asian graduates (8 percentage points) and largest among AI, AN, NH, or PI graduates (32 percentage points).

In addition to race/ethnicity, extracurricular club participation was very different according to age group. Much higher percentages of both first- and continuing-generation graduates who were 23 or younger at the time of graduation participated in an extracurricular club than graduates who were 24 or older. Sixty-eight percent of younger first-generation graduates participated in an extracurricular club, compared with 27% of older first-generation graduates.

Fewer first-generation than continuing-generation college graduates studied abroad as undergraduate students. Eight percent of first-generation graduates studied abroad, compared with 17% of continuing-generation graduates. The percentage of first-generation graduates who studied abroad did not vary much by race/ethnicity, but the gap between first- and continuing-generation graduates did. A lower percentage of Black or African American continuing-generation graduates studied abroad in comparison with continuing-generation graduates from the other racial/ethnic groups. Consequently, the gap in study abroad between first- and continuing-generation graduates was smallest among Black or African American graduates (3 percentage points). By contrast, among white graduates, 10% more continuing-generation graduates had studied abroad than first-generation graduates.

Percentage of first-generation and continuing-generation college graduates who studied abroad as undergraduate students, by race/ethnicity



Implications for practitioners

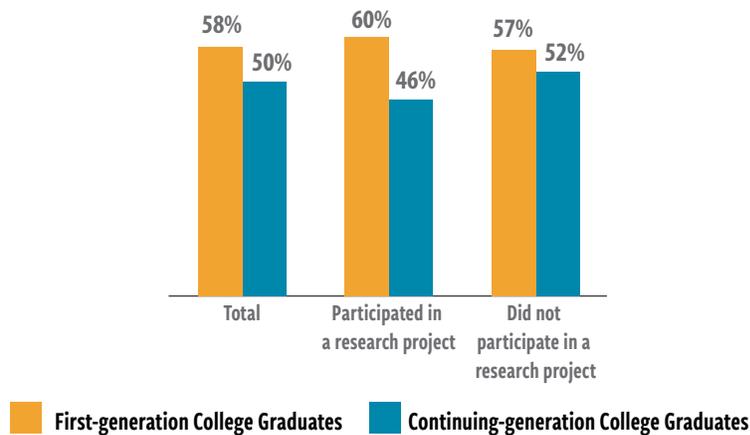
- ◆ Opportunities for first-generation students to get involved outside the classroom leads to improved institutional relationships and strengthened sense of belonging. Introduce first-generation students to extracurricular and co-curricular experiences that align with strengths and interests while being considerate of other needs such as employment and family obligations.
- ◆ When supporting first-generation students with academic decision-making, encourage engagement with academic and strengths-related campus involvement as an additional means of considering options and fit.
- ◆ Provide first-generation students with intentional pathways to pursue campus leadership positions. Collect data on first-generation students leading student organizations or holding campus leadership roles and celebrate these accomplishments.
- ◆ Offer opportunities for first-generation students to engage in undergraduate research with a faculty member. Increased exposure to research may lead to higher graduate school enrollment rates, especially in doctoral programs.
- ◆ Tailor opportunities to study abroad to the specific needs of first-generation students and consider preparation, finances, family engagement, academic support, and poststudy reentry.

Graduate School Enrollment

Around one year after earning a bachelor's degree, when asked about their highest expected level of education, first-generation graduates reported a lower expected level of attainment than continuing-generation graduates. A higher percentage of first-generation graduates did not expect to earn a graduate degree (36% compared with 32% of continuing-generation graduates). About equal percentages of first- and continuing-generation graduates expected to earn a master's degree (45% and 46%, respectively), but fewer first-generation graduates expected to earn a doctoral degree (19% compared with 22% of continuing-generation graduates). Lower expectations for attaining a graduate degree aligns with the finding that fewer first-generation college graduates had taken a graduate or professional entrance exam within a year of earning a bachelor's degree (15% compared with 23% of continuing-generation graduates).

Within a year after earning a bachelor's degree, about equal percentages of first- and continuing-generation graduates had enrolled in postsecondary education again (23% and 24%, respectively), but they enrolled in different kinds of degree programs. Among those who enrolled, more than half of first-generation graduates enrolled in a master's degree program (58%), higher than the percentage of continuing-generation graduates (50%).

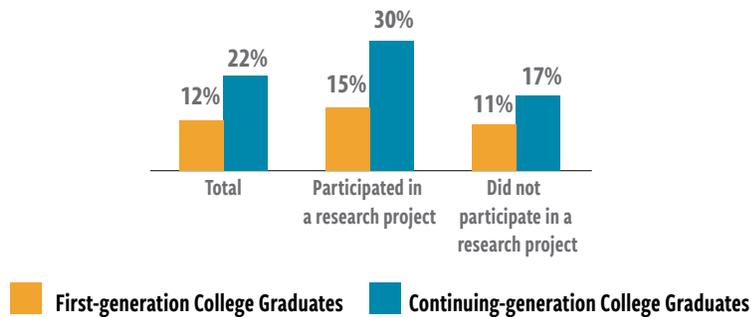
Percentage who enrolled in a master's degree program among those who enrolled again within a year of graduating, by participation in a research project with a faculty member as an undergraduate student



Some undergraduate students participate in a research project with a faculty member, which can prepare them for graduate education. A higher percentage of first-generation graduates who participated in a research project enrolled in a master's degree program than those who had not participated. The opposite was the case for continuing-generation graduates, among whom a lower percentage of those who had participated in a research project enrolled in a master's degree program. The reason for this difference between first-generation and continuing-generation graduates may be that continuing-generation graduates who had participated in a research project were more likely to enroll in a doctoral degree program, rather than a master's degree program.

Among those who enrolled in postsecondary education again within a year after earning a bachelor's degree, fewer first-generation than continuing-generation graduates enrolled in a doctoral degree program (12% compared with 22%). The gap was even larger among graduates who had participated in a research project with a faculty member as an undergraduate. Among those who participated in a research project, 15% of first-generation graduates and 30% of continuing-generation graduates enrolled in a doctoral program.

Percentage who enrolled in a doctoral degree program among those who enrolled again within a year of graduating, by participation in a research project with a faculty member as an undergraduate student



Implications for practitioners

- ◆ Introduce opportunities to pursue graduate education to first-generation students and demystify admission and funding while making career pathways clear.
- ◆ If your institution offers a McNair Scholars Program, identify first-generation students who may benefit from engaging with it and create intentional connections with program staff (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).
- ◆ Identify opportunities for mentorship specific to graduate education to include intentional partnerships for first-generation students with faculty or establishing mentorship between first-generation graduate students and undergraduates interested in graduate education.
- ◆ Offer tailored first-generation graduate preparation experiences followed by graduate school orientation and summer bridge experiences to dismantle barriers and establish support systems.
- ◆ Provide first-generation students with the necessary capital for academic and personal decision-making regarding graduate education. Consider family needs, support for balancing employment or child care, and insight on personal finance and health insurance.

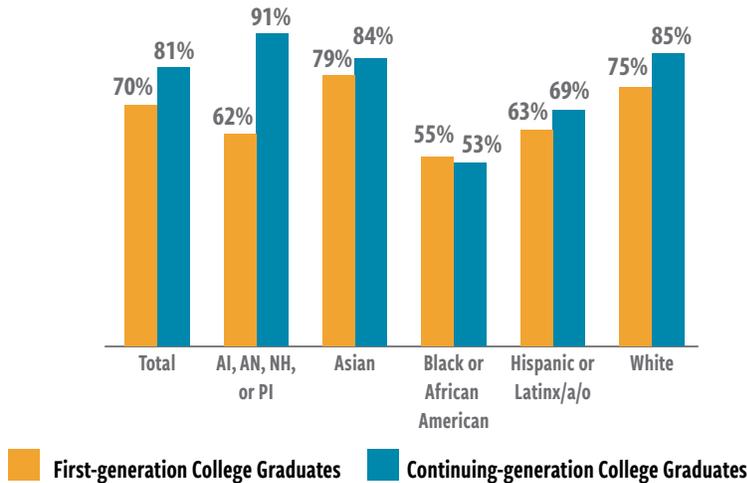


Employment and Finances After Earning a Bachelor's Degree

The same percentage of first- and continuing-generation graduates were employed a year after earning a bachelor's degree (80%); however, they had different types of jobs. Fewer first-generation than continuing-generation graduates held a job that requires a bachelor's degree (44% compared with 52%). In addition, fewer first-generation than continuing-generation graduates worked at a for-profit company (51% compared with 59%). More first-generation graduates worked at a nonprofit company or organization (16% compared with 14% of continuing-generation graduates) or for local, state, or federal government (19% compared with 14% of continuing-generation graduates).

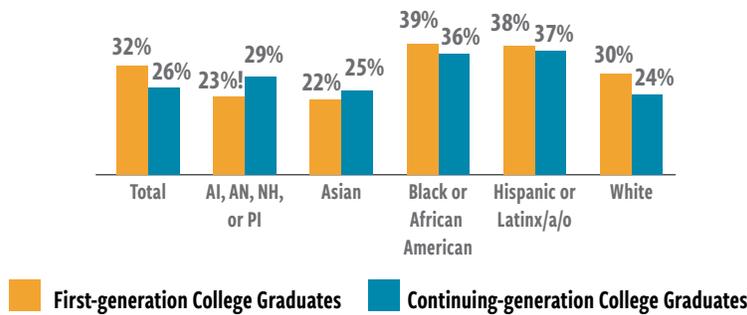
Although the same percentage of first- and continuing-generation graduates were employed a year after earning a bachelor's degree, first-generation graduates had fewer financial resources. Seventy percent of first-generation graduates reported that they could come up with \$2,000 if an unexpected need arose within the next month, compared with 81% of continuing-generation graduates. The percentage of first-generation graduates who could come up with an extra \$2,000 varied considerably by race, ranging from 79% of Asian first-generation graduates to 55% of Black or African American first-generation graduates. Among Black or African American graduates, the difference between first-generation and continuing-generation graduates was negligible. Around half of both first- and continuing-generation Black or African American graduates did not have the financial safety net of an extra \$2,000.

Percentage who reported that they could come up with \$2,000 if an unexpected need arose within the next month, by race/ethnicity



Around one year after earning a bachelor’s degree, more first-generation than continuing-generation graduates reported that the cost of postsecondary education was a reason that they had taken a job instead of enrolling in additional education (32% compared with 26%). Among first-generation graduates, Black or African American and Hispanic or Latinx/a/o graduates had the highest percentages who took a job instead of enrolling (39% and 38%, respectively). By comparison, 30% of white first-generation graduates and 22% of Asian first-generation graduates took a job instead of enrolling, for financial reasons. Among Hispanic or Latinx/a/o graduates, the difference between first-generation and continuing-generation graduates was negligible, suggesting that both groups were similarly sensitive to the cost of education.

Percentage who took a job instead of enrolling in additional education due to the cost of undergraduate and graduate education, by race/ethnicity



Implications for practitioners

- ◆ Encourage first-generation alumni to host first-generation undergraduate students for paid internships, or postcompletion employment, and include intentional personal and professional development specific to career preparation.
- ◆ Support academic departments in having intentional conversations with first-generation students regarding career paths associated with particular majors and disciplines and associated salaries and benefits.
- ◆ Offer intentional workshops for first-generation students on personal finance and wellness, employment negotiations, and understanding benefits with consideration of other factors, such as providing family support.
- ◆ Partner with campus services that support intersectional identities as a method for scaling information to more students.
- ◆ Implement formal institutional data collection regarding first destination after college, alignment with academic degree programs, salary, benefits, and intention to return for graduate education.



Implications for College Leadership

Critical to first-generation students' success in college is prioritization by and advocacy from senior institutional leadership. While programs and services may exist, dismantling silos, achieving a networked approach, and scaling efforts are often thwarted without thoughtful consideration and visible support from those leading institutional decision-making. As leaders consider how they may shape priorities for first-generation students, following are recommendations:

- ◆ Be a champion among senior leader colleagues. Encourage others in leadership to identify as first-generation, support and finance efforts to help first-generation students, incentivize engagement with these efforts, and align them with institutional priorities.
- ◆ Identify and empower staff and create dedicated positions to lead institutional first-generation efforts and guarantee sustainability and scale. Engage in strategic priority setting to align with overall institutional planning.
- ◆ Conduct listening sessions or focus groups with first-generation students and use insights to make decisions and amplify students' strengths.
- ◆ Make data a priority. Ask institutional research offices to include first-generation metrics when reporting data and to share reports and findings widely.
- ◆ Commission policy, procedure, data, and jargon audits across areas of oversight with a keen eye toward dismantling barriers for first-generation students.
- ◆ Increase dedicated funding for first-generation students throughout campus, particularly in emergency aid programs, student affairs, career centers, and other institutional touchpoints.
- ◆ Make career and workforce development a central priority in leadership. Commit to expanding access to career resources, including paid internships, extra- and co-curricular activities, research opportunities, and formal leadership roles for students.
- ◆ Partner with local businesses, engage alumni, and identify key stakeholders where internships, co-ops, career mentoring, and employment specific to first-generation students may be possible.
- ◆ Demystify the graduate and professional school experience for first-generation students so that avenues are clear and available.
- ◆ Partner with nonprofit organizations that are dedicated to supporting first-generation students and that provide scholarships, case management, and other community resources.
- ◆ Ask development and communications offices to create materials that highlight the experiences of first-generation students and opportunities for donors and stakeholders to share their time, talents, and resources.

Conclusion

As of 2015–16, almost half of students who earned a bachelor's degree were first generation. First-generation college graduates had different undergraduate and postcompletion experiences than continuing-generation graduates. Fewer first-generation than continuing-generation graduates used career planning services as undergraduates, and fewer participated in extracurricular and co-curricular activities. Among those who enrolled again within a year after graduating, more first-generation than continuing-generation graduates enrolled in a master's degree program, but fewer enrolled in a doctoral degree program. Among those who were employed a year after graduating, fewer first-generation graduates held a job that required a bachelor's degree. In addition, fewer first-generation than continuing-generation graduates had the financial safety net of an extra \$2,000, and more first-generation graduates chose to take a job instead of enrolling in additional education because of financial reasons.

This issue brief highlights that graduates' experiences and outcomes can vary significantly by race/ethnicity and age. For example, for some outcomes, such as having the safety net of an extra \$2,000, differences by race/ethnicity may be just as large, if not larger, than the gap between first-generation and continuing-generation graduates. Or, there may be a difference between first-generation and continuing-generation graduates among some racial/ethnic groups, but not among others. For example, the same percentage of Hispanic or Latinx/a/o first- and continuing-generation graduates had participated in career fairs as undergraduates, whereas there was a 9-percentage-point gap between first-generation and continuing-generation Black or African American graduates. These findings indicate that, when considering interventions for first-generation students, practitioners should take into account the intersectional identities of first-generation students and graduates.

References

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Technical Notes

“AI, AN, NH, or PI” refers to American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander. “!” means interpret the statistic with caution due to a large standard error. “‡” indicates that data could not be reported due to low sample size or a coefficient of variation of 50% or greater. Percentages are rounded. The population represented in this issue brief is individuals who received a bachelor’s degree in academic year 2015–16 from a Title IV postsecondary institution. In this brief, a first-generation college student or graduate is defined as an individual whose parents do not have a bachelor’s or higher degree. A continuing-generation college student or graduate is defined as an individual who has at least one parent with a bachelor’s or higher degree. The data source is U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016/17 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B:16/17). B&B:16/17 was released in 2019 and is the most recent cohort of B&B. The total sample size is 19,490. The weighted sample size (population size) is 2 million.