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New National Analysis Examines Support for First-generation Students at Community and Technical Colleges

Research from the Center for First-generation Student Success, an initiative of NASPA and The Suder Foundation, and Phase Two Advisory finds significant variation in first-generation student experiences and how supports are provided at community and technical colleges.

WASHINGTON, DC (November 17, 2020) – Today, the [Center for First-generation Student Success](#), an initiative of NASPA and The Suder Foundation, and [Phase Two Advisory](#) has released a mixed-method analysis of community and technical colleges, which finds a complex landscape for identifying and tracking first-generation students alongside myriad approaches for intentionally supporting this population. Concurrently, this analysis finds a desire from leaders and practitioners to better understand, serve, and celebrate first-generation students and to elevate the significant strengths and talents each brings to the community.

"First-generation students now make up a third of students nationwide, many of whom are attending community and technical colleges, yet student outcomes in many areas continue to lag behind continuing-generation peers" said Dr. Sarah E. Whitley, assistant vice president with the Center for First-generation Student Success. "Yet, little is known as to the specifics of how community and technical colleges, all critical to higher education access, are understanding first-generation students and delivering services imperative to success. This [report](#) seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of first-generation student experiences and what approaches are particularly successful in advancing student outcomes."

Key findings of this research, released today in [First-generation Students in Community and Technical Colleges: A National Exploration of Institutional Support Practices](#), include:

- **Identifying first-generation college students is a complex and complicated challenge for many community and technical colleges.**
 - In order to support first-generation students, institutions must define their population, develop criteria for inclusion, and employ mechanisms for identifying students, and track data over time.
 - Reciprocally, work is needed to help community and technical college students understand their first-generation identity in ways that will encourage use of services.

- **First-generation college students bring substantial strengths to their community and technical colleges.**
 - Resilience, ambition, a track record of beating the odds, and fresh viewpoints that enhance the broader academic community are all qualities that community college educators emphasized when talking about first-generation students.
 - Community and technical college educators recognize the positive intergenerational impact of attending college and the ability of a college degree to improve students' economic circumstances.
 - Colleges must acknowledge and build on the strengths first-generation students bring to institutions while dismantling deficit-based approaches found across higher education.
- **Community and technical colleges support first-generation students in many ways.**
 - As community colleges increasingly shift toward being “student-ready,” they must scrutinize how their structures and practices can elevate the strengths and overall success of first-generation students.
 - Institutions must reconsider how they take an asset-based approach in how they do business. Findings suggest that colleges should consider how and to whom the service is delivered, and the content of the supports and services.
 - The majority of colleges support first-generation students through a combination of general and specific or targeted supports. These include:
 - cohort-based programs, consisting of discrete programs for a group of students, with identity-based affinity programs being popular;
 - non-cohort-based, targeted supports targeted toward all first-generation students rather than a subset;
 - general campus supports available to all students; and
 - intentional universal design, in which colleges create or redesign services with the specific needs of first-generation students in mind and then open to the broader campus.

In addition to key findings, the report includes lessons learned from participating community and technical colleges as well as recommendations for advancing first-generation efforts and success.

"This new research provides critical insight for community and technical college leaders and practitioners to think critically about how they position and prioritize support for first-generation students," said Dr. Kevin Kruger, president of NASPA. "As community and technical colleges continue to serve large numbers of first-generation students and create opportunities for generational change within their communities, understanding the unique needs of this population and how to serve them at scale is imperative. This report features the perspectives of administrators and student services practitioners who work daily to improve first-generation student outcomes at institutions that are imperative to providing necessary access to higher education."

The executive summary, full report, and supplemental materials are available, at no charge, by visiting firstgen.naspa.org. This report on community and technical colleges follows the widely cited [*First-generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs and Services at Four-year Institutions*](#) also available at firstgen.naspa.org.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This report presents findings from a national exploration conducted by the Center for First-generation Student Success, an initiative of NASPA and The Suder Foundation, in partnership with Phase Two Advisory. The purpose of the study was to understand the current state of programs and services that are offered to first-generation college students at community and technical colleges across the United States. This includes positioning of programs within the institution, human and financial resources, program content and delivery methods, communication strategies, data use strategies, and institutional successes and challenges.

Because first-generation student success programs take on a variety of characteristics and often engage in varying areas of the institutional community, a mixed-methods approach provides a depth and breadth of quantitative and qualitative insights. This approach included stakeholder interviews, student focus groups, and a survey of community and technical colleges staff from across the country. A detailed methodology, data tables, and a complete list of participating institutions are included in the appendix of the full report.

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ABOUT THE CENTER

The Center for First-generation Student Success, an initiative of NASPA and The Suder Foundation, is the premier source of evidence-based practices, professional development, and knowledge creation for the higher education community to advance the success of first-generation students. The Center, launched in 2017, is the primary destination for scholarly discussion, information sharing, networking, and program development.

ABOUT NASPA

NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education is the leading association for the advancement, health, and sustainability of the student affairs profession. NASPA serves a full range of professionals who provide programs, experiences, and services that cultivate student learning and success in concert with the mission of our colleges and universities.

ABOUT PHASE TWO ADVISORY

Phase Two Advisory works with colleges, foundations, and improvement networks to translate research evidence into reform strategies. Phase Two Advisory provides strategic planning and implementation support, just-in-time research, and professional learning opportunities to leaders and practitioners throughout the higher education sector as they shepherd transformative change on their campuses.