Transitioning from a diverse high school in Boston to Union College in upstate New York—which enrolls about one-quarter students of color, who may also be part of the one-quarter who are first-generation students—was a culture shock for Ashley German Soto. “I did anticipate it was going to be a challenge, but I didn’t know it was going to be this white,” says German Soto, now a junior who has found pockets where she fits in the most, such as the intercultural affairs office. There, she’s been able to meet “those who look like me, first-generation Black kids. I don’t feel like I belong in classroom settings. Sometimes I’m the only Black student.”

Well before her first semester, she had connected formally, in trainings, with her cohort of Posse Scholars—recipients of full-tuition leadership scholarships, weekly faculty mentoring and other support from Union, one of the Posse Foundation’s 64 partner institutions. “I always knew I wanted to go to college, but I didn’t know how I was going to afford college,” says German Soto. She found additional scholarships to help with room and board—and the opportunity to meet other incoming first-generation students at a preorientation for that group. Now she’s got a mix of first- and continuing-generation friends.

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German Soto knows that her mother, who immigrated to the U.S. at age 18, can’t relate to campus life, but she feels her mom’s pride and support. “I honestly don’t think my mom even gets what ‘first-generation’ means. I just think she’s had to figure stuff out on her own all her life, so she’s like, ‘If I can do it, you can do it.’”

While German Soto’s story is her own, several of her experiences coincide with common responses to the latest Student Voice survey, conducted in mid-June by *Inside Higher Ed* and College Pulse with support from Kaplan. The survey of 1,073 first-generation undergraduates from 94 colleges and universities reveals that:

- Eight in 10 feel like they belong on campus, yet one-third of students only have a sense of belonging in certain spaces.

- Fifty-five percent have at least a few friends whose parents did not graduate with a four-year degree, either; an additional one-quarter aren't sure of their friends' first-generation status. Three-quarters of first-generation students reveal that characteristic to professors and classmates only sometimes.
- The top two factors contributing to initial interest in their college were affordable tuition (49 percent) and generous financial aid (38 percent).
- One-quarter of students are at colleges with first-generation orientation programs; about the same percentage of respondents' colleges hold events for these students to meet one another.

First-generation students from racially diverse high schools generally have a harder time finding their place at many colleges, compared to those from predominantly white high schools, says RaJhai Spencer, Colgate University's assistant dean of administrative advising, who leads the First@Colgate program that supports its 10 percent of students who are first gen. At Colgate, a house for the Office of Undergraduate Studies scholars, mainly first generation, is open to students outside that program who need a place to hang out. It includes study spaces, a living room and a kitchen.

Some students whose institutions would consider them first generation don't identify that way. One in five survey respondents only define it as being first in both their immediate and extended family to attend college, while 44 percent see it as being first in their immediate family. As an example of the latter, Linda LeMura, president of Le Moyne College in New York, did not consider herself first generation back in college since older siblings had taken that step, making her postsecondary entrance "a natural course of events."

About one-third of survey respondents agree with the most common first-generation definition: having parents who did not complete college.

"Institutions are not clearly identifying what they mean by 'first generation' or it's not trickling down to students," says Sarah Whitley, vice president of the Center for First-Generation Student Success at NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. Even the way officials define it and how the question is asked on admissions applications are often different, she adds.

“This worries me, because it means some students are not identifying, and that prevents them from accessing services, attending events or being part of programs.”

Definition debate aside, few would question that first-generation student supports are prominent in higher education conversation. Yet what frustrates Jane De León Griffin, the first to fill Bentley University’s new associate provost for student success role, is how higher ed leaders at predominantly white institutions will reference first-generation populations making *them* better by diversifying their campuses.

“All of that is true, but it’s still ‘how are they beneficial to us?’ as opposed to ‘why are we beneficial to them?’” says Griffin, who has been asked to pay particular attention to the success of this population in her work. First-generation students are “resourceful, hardworking, have tons of experience, are typically scrappy and entrepreneurial and creative. We should be telling them to come to Bentley because this is the place where you’re going to thrive.”

The Student Voice survey offers a snapshot of what it’s like to be a first-generation college student today, how they look at their future and what supports they may need in making connections between actions now and success later.

Institutional Attraction

Colleges and universities with robust first-generation supports may tout efforts via their admissions page. On the admissions site for Wichita State University in Kansas, for example, one of four main sections about the student experience, titled “Unmatched Support for First-Gen Students,” includes a link to the F1RST-GEN Shockers website.

“We’re very up front about it,” says Bobby Gandu, assistant vice president of strategic enrollment management at the university, where last fall’s 12,700 undergraduates included 40 percent first-generation students. “Even if

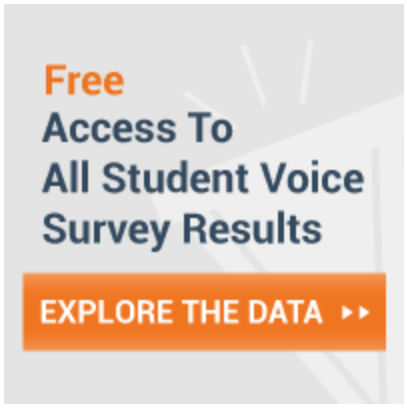
relatively few first-generation students are in an audience, we want to make sure those students know we celebrate first-generation students."

Gandu will also share the first-generation webpage with high school counselors in cities from which the institution draws students, especially in a local school district with a large percentage of low-income students. One program, aimed at increasing high school graduation for local men, provides them with student IDs so they can access the university library and discounts at community businesses. During COVID shutdowns, these teens met for remote learning in a lounge at Wichita State, and Gandu heard about their reluctance to give up that experience when their schools reopened.

Asked about 12 factors that may have contributed to interest in their college, one in five Student Voice respondents affirmed that a reputation for welcoming first-generation students drew them in. But more practical factors—affordable tuition and location close to home—had a bigger impact.

"This breaks down some of the narrative we have that students will aspire to the most prestigious college. This shows more logical thinking," says Cecilia M. Orphan, an associate professor of higher education in the University of Denver's Morgridge College of Education, whose course content includes how public and organizational policies affect first-generation students' experiences. "We still have the dominant entrenched idea that students go off to college and leave home. That's not true for most Americans."

In a February 2022 Student Voice survey of 2,001 first-generation and continuing-generation students, which explored college choice more broadly with 26 possible factors, proximity to home came out as the top nonacademic reason students had for choosing their college.



Although fewer than one in 10 students in the current survey cited a first-generation club as a reason for interest, Whitley from NASPA says these clubs are “everywhere,” with some of them aimed more at policy and institutional change than others. And while a lot of colleges—especially among the 277 institutions that have partnered with her center to commit to serving first-generation students—have first-generation information webpages, they often aren’t easy to find. “We have a long way to go in that work,” she says.

Gaining attention of prospective first-gen families can mean flying them in. That’s one way Centre College in Kentucky attracts finalists for the Grissom Scholars Program, which offers 10 high-achieving first-generation students a full-tuition scholarship plus $5,000 in educational enrichment funds. “We pay for parents, not just students, to come to campus,” says program director Sarah Scott. In her nine years of working with first-generation students at the college (where currently about one in five students are first gen), she has found that parents have a “willingness to understand the whole college system.”

Visions of Success

In her new role at Bentley, Griffin will examine current supports for first-generation and all students so that efforts can be more synchronized and barriers minimized. With project managers, she will establish “a clear vision for what student success looks like here” and develop metrics to determine the effectiveness of student success efforts.

Student Voice responses to a question probing personal definitions of success in college cover a variety of areas—from wanting to grow knowledge in a subject they're passionate about (52 percent) and being a well-rounded person with knowledge in a number of areas (45 percent) to leaving college with a job in their desired field (55 percent) that allows them to support themselves (55 percent). But simply graduating (73 percent) got identified most—and was the top response to the next question about the most important indicator of success.

Carleton College in Minnesota, recognized as a First-Gen Forward institution by the Center for First-Generation Student Success, once organized a panel with students who are among the 13 percent of first-generation students there. When asked if they would consider taking a year off to explore options before committing to working or postgraduate studies, "all three panelists said, 'no way. We don't have time to waste—we have to support our families,'" recalls Carolyn H. Livingston, vice president for student life and dean of students.

"The idea that graduating is the most important indicator of success has been a source of challenge for us," says Claude Taylor at Monmouth University in New Jersey, who leads First to Fly: First Generation at Monmouth. "Part of what we're trying to do is get students to get the most out of their education."

That involves helping students "build their social and cultural capital," adds Taylor, director for academic transition and inclusion at the Center for Student Success. "[But] the more we try to program around broadening that experience, we see little uptake in utilization. Part of it is because our first-generation students seem laser-focused on graduating."

Advisers at Monmouth, a First-Gen Forward institution, have noticed these students centering semester planning around this question: "What do I need to check off to get closer to graduation?" Taylor would rather see a focus on "What should I or could I be involved in to get the most out of this?" He believes obligations and commitment to representing their families well "can cloud some of their perception of our efforts to support them."

LeMura at Le Moyne is worried about the finding that students are about twice as likely to put value on simply graduating than on graduating on time. “Students are concerned about financing higher education, as all students should be. But this is not in sync with concerns regarding costs.”

Perhaps they need help building “confidence that with the right supports, they *can* graduate on time,” she adds. “Anything that delays them costs them significantly in the long run. Students may not be looking decades down the road, but the compounding factor of losing out on one or two years of employment have a lot of implications.”

German Soto, like most of the Student Voice respondents, would choose graduating as more of a success indicator than graduating on time. While she does feel pressure to graduate with her Posse cohort at Union, her overall goal is still just graduating, even if it takes longer.

The way Griffin sees it, “there is all this pressure to ‘finish in four,’ but students know that it often takes longer than a four-year period. It’s almost as if they are anticipating challenges and want to build in time for that.”

Orphan at the University of Denver recognizes a related policy issue. “As we continue to push on-time completion, how does that work against goals that students have for themselves?”

On the student loan front, she points to the stark difference between her own first-generation experience—where a Pell Grant combined with a state opportunity grant covered her full tuition—and today’s first-generation students. They are loan-averse but must still take out student loans because the country’s commitment to truly helping first-generation students with college aspirations “has eroded. It’s unfair they have to think so much about student loan debt.”

Establishing mentor relationships is another success factor few survey respondents recognize (although Livingston believes it may have emerged as more important had it been described as “someone to watch out for you and seek advice from”).

“We’ve been doing this thing alone all our lives, so asking for help, we don’t know how to,” says German Soto. “Sometimes it’s viewed as weak.” Yet, research shows that students, particularly first-gen students, benefit from close relationships with faculty members, Orphan notes.

First-gen students may view mentorship as daunting, says Whitley. They think, “What is a mentor? Why do I need one? Are they a counselor? Are they trying to *fix* me?”

The misperceptions may well extend to all students. In a September 2021 Student Voice survey of 2,003 undergrads (first- and continuing-generation), fewer than one-quarter of the 44 percent who had not had a mentor said they would really want one.

Connection Actions and Reactions

Do students in the current Student Voice survey reveal first-generation identities to professors and classmates? Respondents are most likely to do so “only in relevant discussions/situations.” One-quarter never share.

German Soto says she will always “do my best to tell people. I view it as an accomplishment.” She’ll also, however, notice assumptions from some faculty and students that first-gen students are all poor and minorities, and that “we all have a relative that has died. It’s completely insane the amount of stereotypes they’ve given us.”

When Orphan was an undergraduate about 20 years ago, “it felt like something you tried to hide and maybe didn’t even have the language for.” It wasn’t until her third year, when she transferred to a regional public university and began hearing professors identify themselves as first generation, that she began identifying herself.

One-quarter of Student Voice respondents say they’ve had one professor who shared a first-generation identity, with an additional 17 percent saying more

than one professor has done so. Did it matter? Two-thirds of students say the reveal had a positive impact.

Whitley's takeaway: "It's worth the effort to get faculty to acknowledge their identity, or allyship, and to have resources on the syllabus." As for those who didn't seem to care, maybe they have already connected with others on campus and don't feel a need to feel closer to professors.

Some institutions provide office door identifiers (e.g., Centre's "We Are First" postcards) or create posters (used around the Wichita State campus and in student newsletters, for example) for these professors. Such efforts normalize the idea of successful academics coming from families without college experience. Plus, Gandu explains, students are more likely to reach out when faculty and staff are outspoken about their status. "It shows they've walked that journey before and could be a resource."

Carleton maintains a detailed first-gen faculty directory online, including basic info and words of wisdom. "We wanted students to know who the faculty and staff were, but also wanted faculty and staff to know each other," Livingston says. While introducing themselves at orientation sessions to students and parents, she, the provost and the dean have begun highlighting that they were first generation in college.

LeMura, who says that identity of hers comes up in conversation often, sees it as a lost opportunity when such experiences aren't shared. "This is the stuff of life, the great inspiration that comes from those who by their actions or outcomes show that good things are possible."

As noted, about eight in 10 current Student Voice survey respondents feel as if they belong, at least in certain spaces, on campus. But the 753 first-generation students responding to a January 2022 Student Voice survey were more likely to struggle with fitting in, with about half saying that it wasn't an issue at all or much. Continuing-generation students in that survey (n=1,249) were about 10 percentage points *more* likely to say it wasn't really an issue.

While participating in campus activities is a natural way to fit in, in the current survey only half of respondents are involved in extracurriculars. Work and family commitments may account for that, but Whitley has heard from many colleges this year that they're "really struggling with student involvement in general." "The pizza and free stuff doesn't work anymore. Students aren't joining organizations as much."

"The pandemic has rewritten student life and involvement," says Gandu. His department, usually a popular spot for student helpers, has struggled to fill paid tour guide positions and volunteer roles. Suddenly students are asking, "What's in this for me?" So his department has touted the development of public speaking and other soft skills, that they can provide employee references, and how admissions ambassadors tend to be leaders elsewhere on campus, so it can be a great way to connect with other student leaders.

German Soto—whose activities include being an orientation leader, a tour guide and president of the Black Student Union—says the large number of students who aren't involved surprises her. "I'm grateful for the fact that I'm involved in so much. It was a big thing for me to get involved, because I knew it was going to be hard for me on campus. It was my first time being away from home that long." Initially, her commitments presented a time management issue, but "I did get better at it."

At Monmouth, Taylor's department has committed to building first-generation student leadership opportunities. "We're nudging them off the sidelines," he says. One example is an advisory council launching this fall. "First-generation students can have conversations with and make recommendations to me and others working with our initiative about what they need, what they see, what's meaningful." His hope is that they'll take on leadership roles in other campus organizations, too.

Off-campus employment tends to be less flexible for students interested in campus involvement, yet those jobs might pay more. Carleton caps the number of on-campus work hours by year in college, creating issues in certain cases. Some students, particularly first-gen students, will note how they juggled high school with jobs requiring many more hours a week, or will

explain that they have a responsibility to send some money earned during college home (even $40 of an $80 paycheck), Livingston says.

A good number of Colgate's first-gen students get involved on campus plus work, many of them multiple jobs, says Spencer. She recently advised a few students struggling to keep up on course assignment deadlines to cut back on work hours—and helped them figure out what financial needs could be fixed to make that happen. "Find two to three things you're passionate about," she will tell students. "You don't want to just be a member—you want to contribute." A good mix of activities includes something related to one's major or aspirations plus "something where you can have fun and relax."

Persistence Assistance

Students facing academic, time management, financial or other struggles are at risk for leaving their institutions—and half of the Student Voice survey respondents have at least considered transferring or dropping out.

This past year, one Bentley student on academic probation was not improving her grades. "She was very close to being suspended for a year," says Griffin. "My fear was that she was never going to come back. Come to find out, she was working 30 hours a week off campus to support her family." Bentley staff are helping her find on-campus employment, which would eliminate her commute and allow her job to better accommodate her commitments as a student.

German Soto's supports have included Andrew Alvez, the assistant director of intercultural affairs who has mentored her through Union's Bridges Program for first-gen students, and her Posse cohort. But during her first term, she found herself thinking about transferring or leaving college altogether. "I had Dru in my ear, saying I was going to make it, that he was going to be there for me every step of the way."

And her Posse group has committed to being there for each other if any one of them falters. “They’d be the first people to tell me not to go. They’d throw my car keys away,” she says.

Some colleges get creative about supporting students who must pause their studies. The PATH (Possibilities at the Heights) program established in 2021 at Le Moyne, for example, is for certain students needing a leave of absence to work or care for a family member. During the leave, they can maintain ties to the college by taking up to four credits of online courses for free.

In reality, some students will leave and no amount of effort will bring them back. But colleges could “facilitate ongoing communication, so that if they’re ready they can go back,” says Orphan, adding that nonprofit colleges might look to the for-profit sector for ideas.

While reasons for not continuing with college are individualized, Taylor from Monmouth says financing remains the biggest obstacle for most first-generation students—so college affordability is rightly at the center of most first-generation initiatives. In both the national conversation and at institutions, he hopes higher ed leaders keep up the momentum on supporting this population and commit to being change agents with reflection on this question: “How are we affecting change, real structural change, systemic change?”

Next week at the Student Voice news hub: more results from the first-generation students’ survey, with a focus on how they feel about the supports their institutions have to help ensure success in academics and in navigating student life.

About 40% of UC-Santa Barbara students represent the first generation in their family to attend college—something my university is proud of. Often, first-generation students come from low-income backgrounds, but are they really all that different from other students who grew up in poverty but are not the first in their families to attend college? At the national level, how do first-gen students fare in college, and how are they supported?

In this post, I first provide some basic, data-based facts about these students. Unless otherwise mentioned, all our data comes from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics. This survey has been conducted every eight years since 1990, and it collects information from beginning college students at the end of their first year, and then three and six years after starting college. For this post, I look only at students enrolled in four-year schools, and "first-gen" means neither parent has a four-year degree. I conclude with some discussion of evidence and reminders that "first-gen" and "low-income" are not synonymous labels for college students.

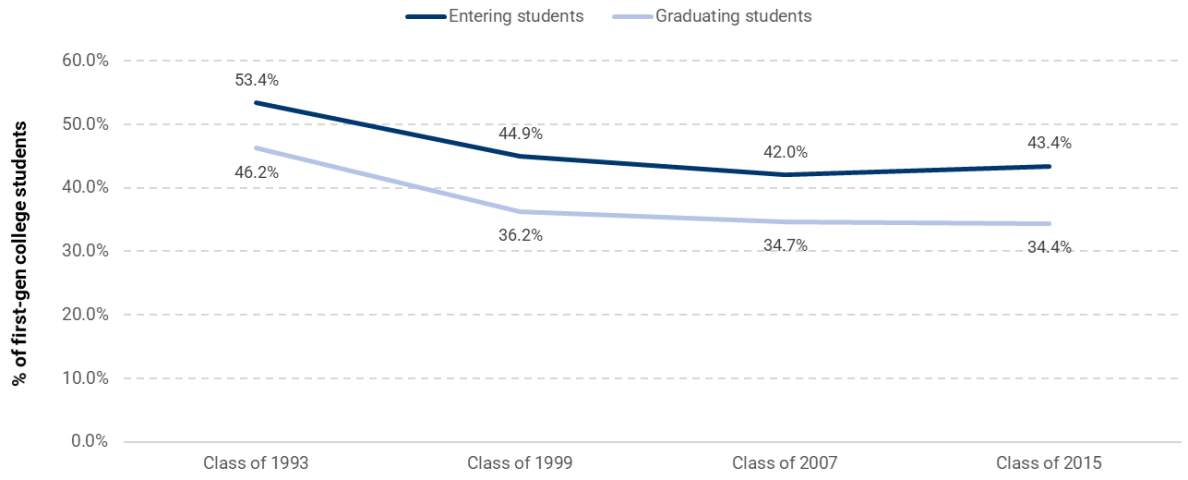
Fact 1: First-gen students are now a sizable, stable population among college enrollment.

The first fact is that neither college-entering rates nor college-graduating rates for first-gen students have changed much in recent years (see Figure 1

below). But note that they decreased drastically in the ‘90s—partially due to the increased bachelor’s attainment rate in the U.S. in the ‘60s and ‘70s—leading to more college-goers having at least one college-educated parent. Today, over 40% of entering students are first-gen, as are about one-third of graduating students. (In Figure 1, the label “Class of 2015” means students who would have graduated in 2015 if they spent four years earning their bachelor’s. As is standard, the calculation of graduation rates allows up to six years for graduation.)

Figure 1

Proportion of college students that is first-generation



Source: *Author's calculations using the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics.*

Fact 2: First-gen students disproportionately enroll in less-selective colleges.

There is a very striking pattern when one looks at first-gen enrollment across college selectivity levels.

In open-admission schools, two-thirds of students are first-gen. Contrast this with “very selective” schools, where less than one-third of students are first-gen. (As an aside, the high proportion of first-gen students at my large, R1 university appears to be something of an anomaly.) The fact that very selective schools have lower fractions of first-gen students is likely not surprising as these schools are (a) more expensive and (b) require more savvy and resources on how to get admitted (i.e., guidance from parents). Unfortunately, as you will see next, outcomes for first-gen students are better precisely at those very selective schools where they are least likely to attend.

Fact 3: First-gen students complete college at lower rates than their peers.

Most first-gen students who attend a very or moderately selective school graduate, while the large majority of first-gen students who attend an open-admissions school do not. Of course, the more selective schools cherry-pick students likely to graduate, where open admission schools take all comers who meet basic qualifications. However, the same cherry-picking-or-not distinction is true for non-first-gen students. At very selective schools, family educational background is associated with a modest

difference in graduation rates (10 percentage points). In contrast, the graduation rate for first-gen students at open-admission schools is below half the rate for non-first-gen by a gap of 23 percentage points.

First-gen students are different from low-income students

I dug a little deeper into graduation rates by running regressions predicting whether a student graduated on the basis of both first-gen status and parents' income. First-gen students tend to come from lower-income families (average family income of $58,000 by my calculations) than do non-first-gen students (average family income of $120,000). Perhaps the differences in graduation rates are explained by these large differences in family income?

The first lesson from the analysis is that, while income matters, first-gen status matters even when controlling for income. Holding all else equal, I find that first-gen students are 16% less likely overall to graduate than are non-first-gen students with equal parental income. So being a first-gen student really does mean something more than just coming from a low-income family. This finding resonates with other studies that have looked at the experiences of first-gen students. (For further reading, see Terenzini et al., Engle, and Engle and Tinto.)

The second lesson from the regressions is that the apparently varying first-gen/non-first-gen gaps in graduation rate by college selectivity—the ones shown in Figure 3 above—are mostly about the same size after controlling for family income. With these models, I find that first-gen students are about 16 percentage points less likely to graduate than other students at institutions of varying levels of selectivity. The exception is very selective institutions, where the first-gen difference is only about 7 percentage points.

First-gen students warrant more support than they get

I also examined financial aid. Interestingly, public universities give more financial aid to first-gen students while private universities give more to non-first-gen students. (Data for this question comes from the 2016 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, which is a little more current than the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Survey.) The survey data shows first-gen students in public universities get about $5,100 in need-based aid and $10,100 total in their senior year, while non-first-gen students get about $3,200 in need-based aid and $8,700 overall. In private universities, first-gen students get about $8,900 in need-based aid and $19,400 overall, while non-first-gen students get about $8,800 in need-based aid and $22,000 overall.

In other words, public universities give first-gen students more need-based aid than non-first-gen students receive, presumably reflecting income differences. Merit-based aid is about equal. In contrast, at private universities, non-first-gen students get about $2,600 more financial aid than do first-gen students. What's happening at private universities, presumably, is that non-first-gen students are competed for with considerably more "merit-based' aid.

Prior research suggests that increased financial aid is particularly important in helping first-gen students succeed, though other academic supports could help as well. Angrist, Autor, and Pallais conducted a field experiment that randomly assigned aid to Nebraska high school graduates to study the effect of merit aids on college degree completion. They found that the estimated effect for first-gen students is twice as large as the estimates for students from more-educated families. Further, Angrist, Lang and, Oreopoulos found that a combination of financial aid for higher grades (with enhanced academic support services) was especially effective for first-gen students, but only for women as it had little apparent effect for men.

In summary, first-gen students do well at selective institutions, but the less selective institutions that most attend haven't found a way to get graduation rates up compared to rates for non-first-gen students. Part of the difference in outcomes is due to first-gen students coming from lower-income families. Income differences don't explain everything though. The disadvantages of coming from a family where you are a pioneer in higher education are real.

Being the first in your family to attend higher education can be a rewarding and exciting experience.

But research shows that first-generation college students also face challenges, often related to economic and social factors, at phases of the higher education process from application to graduation. Veronica Hauad, the deputy dean of admissions and deputy director for access, affordability and inclusion at the University of Chicago in Illinois, says that these students commonly lack what experts call "social-cultural capital."

"If you're first gen, your parents haven't gone to college, maybe other people in your family haven't gone to college - you haven't navigated this space yet. So you don't know the new space's rules and how to navigate that new space," says Hauad, who was a first-generation college student.

Who Is Considered a First-Generation Student?

The definition of first generation, used to determine eligibility for the federal TRIO programs and Pell Grant, is a higher education student whose parent or parents did not earn a bachelor's degree, according to an amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1965.

Some schools, like the University of Pennsylvania, extend the definition to those whose parents received degrees from non-U.S. institutions, among other exceptions.

Given that the definition often varies by institution, students can miss out on resources and opportunities. Evelyn Elliott, a first-generation senior and president of First Gen United at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., says she came to campus unfamiliar with the term.

"I didn't even know what first-generation students were until I got an email from my college about it, inviting me to join the first-gen community. It's an identity that I didn't even realize that I could access and tap into," Elliott says.

Applicants should verify what definition an institution uses, or ask an admissions officer if it is not clearly stated to see if they qualify for its first-generation student opportunities.

Finding the Right Institution

Students from a first-generation or low-income background tend toward community colleges, trade schools and other vocational routes. But Matt Rubinoff, creator of the national I'm First campaign to help first-generation students succeed in higher education, encourages applicants to take a thoughtfully optimistic approach to the college search and to look at four-year degrees and more selective institutions, even if they feel out of reach.

Rubinoff, who is chief strategy officer at UStrive, an online mentoring organization for high school and college students, says it's important for first-gen students to consider financial and other constraints but not to limit their options.

"One thing we are trying to tackle head on is this misperception of what college opportunities exist for first-gen students," he says, "especially low-income first-gen students who, because they don't have a parent who went through the process, tend to take more of a 'glass half-empty' approach."

Like their peers, first-gen students should take into account a college's size, selectivity, location, extracurriculars, academics and cost. But that's "really just the tip of the iceberg," Rubinoff says.

READ: How to Choose Between Urban, Suburban and Rural Colleges.

First-generation students also need to consider additional aid and on-campus opportunities offered specifically for first-generation students. These include summer bridge programs, first-generation cohorts and faculty mentorship programs.

Rubinoff says to think "ahead of the first time you show up, 'Is this a school that is going to be able to support and nurture me both in and out of the classroom? Not just academically, but socially and financially as well?'"

Talking directly to an institution's admissions officer or current student can be a great way to fill in informational gaps and learn more about what programs and services that institution offers.

Financing Your Higher Education

Navigating the financial aid process is complicated for everyone, but it can be especially confusing for first-generation applicants. A study from the Pew Research Center reports that first-generation students are more likely to incur college debt, and more of it.

Applicants should fill out the FAFSA, typically due at the end of June for each academic year, which is responsible for a large portion of many applicants' financial aid package.

Some universities also allow students to submit financial aid appeals. If students feel they did not receive enough in scholarships, grants or loans in a university's offer, they may be able to appeal to increase their aid package. Hauad stresses the importance of asking questions throughout the entire process.

"You need things and you should ask for them, even if the outcome is not what you want, you should ask," Hauad says. "That's a big piece in any part of the process. You need to be proactive."

READ: 7 Strategies for Appealing a College Financial Aid Package.

First-generation students can also look for scholarships and aid that cover living expenses in addition to tuition and fees, as well as scholarships offered exclusively to first-gen students. Information on such scholarships can be found online through resources like UStrive and First Generation Scholars.

Elliott advises students to budget based on the financial breakdown given to them by their college, and then seek out and account for any hidden costs and fees.

"This can be asking your academic adviser if there are certain courses that have course fees. Those are often huge surprises that come up and can be $300 to $400, depending on what your major is," she says.

Alongside academic advisers, current students of the same intended major can be a good resource for uncovering potentially hidden costs.

Elliott also recommends looking for on-campus resources such as food pantries, textbook banks and school-sponsored transportation, which can help bring down the cost of living.

Summer Bridge Programs and Other On-Campus Resources

Summer bridge programs, typically two to four weeks during the summer months, can help ease the transition to freshman year for first-gen students and families. These programs may invite

students to an in-depth orientation, communicate with family members, provide academic advising and offer noncredit summer courses.

"The two colleges I've worked for have had those programs – you can go to Kenyon and do KEEP or STEM, you can go to UChicago and do CAAP. These are programs that are for students who historically are underrepresented at the college. You get to spend some time at that college in the summer before orientation, before move-in, and you get to learn the landscape of the school," says Hauad.

Once on campus, opportunities to connect and aid first-generation students are available at many institutions. Mentorship programs often pair first-generation students with faculty or upperclassmen that have similar backgrounds. Student-run organizations, like First Gen United at GWU, help connect new students to a larger cohort of first-generation students across their college or campus, and host social and academic events.

“I would definitely recommend reaching out and attending events that are specifically targeted for first-gen students, if they are available,” Elliott says. “If they’re not, that’s kind of where it can become really difficult. Especially if you go to a university or college that is traditionally high income – it can be isolating, it can be difficult.”

If programs for first-generation students are not offered at an institution, Rubinoff recommends finding other affinity groups such as student organizations and clubs, and connecting with faculty members.

Related: 8 Ways to Build Positive Rapport With Professors
Experts say it's common for first-generation students to feel out of place in higher education.

“It’s not that you’re the impostor. It’s that you didn’t have information that others did, sometimes very intentionally, systematically, and you haven’t gotten that information,” says Hauad. “And that’s where the comfort with asking questions will come in, making sure that you ask things of people – that you’re proactive.”

But for many first-gen students, especially those from lower-income backgrounds or who are geographically far from family, that feeling might also be reinforced from back home.

"Oftentimes, it's the parents who kind of are pressuring students to commute or come back home, drop out of school, get a job and support the family," Rubinoff says. "It's a difficult situation, but the investment in your education and the value of a college degree and being able to have that to show for your effort beyond long term pays for itself and more."

First-generation students who feel out of place on campus should remember that many other students are feeling the same way when they enter college, Hauad says.

“College is new to everyone. Everyone is learning something – you’re a first-gen, you’re international coming from another country, your parents went to a different college at a different time, you’re learning to navigate. You’re not the only one even if it feels that way.”

Current School
Who are you as a person?
Talents, skills
Passions

If they've ever experienced anxiety in college, what part of college caused it

Name: Jordan Williams
Current School: McEachern High School

Jordan is a highly motivated and empathetic individual who thrives on connecting with others and making a difference in their community. They are a natural leader, often taking charge of group projects and extracurricular activities. Jordan is also deeply committed to social justice issues, frequently volunteering at local organizations and participating in community service projects.

Talents and Skills:

Public Speaking: Jordan has honed their public speaking skills through participation in debate club and model United Nations, where they have won several awards.
Writing: With a talent for expressing ideas clearly and persuasively, Jordan excels in writing, particularly in essays and articles for the school newspaper.
Leadership: Jordan has demonstrated exceptional leadership abilities as the president of the student government association, successfully leading initiatives to improve school policies and student life.
Passions:

Social Justice: Jordan is passionate about advocating for equal rights and opportunities for all, with a focus on issues like racial equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and economic justice.
Education Reform: Believing strongly in the power of education to transform lives, Jordan is committed to working towards reforming the educational system to make it more equitable and accessible.
Experiences with Anxiety in High School:
Jordan has experienced anxiety during their high school years, primarily due to the pressure to maintain a high GPA and excel in extracurricular activities in preparation for college applications. The competitive environment, along with the stress of standardized tests and the uncertainty of college admissions, has occasionally overwhelmed them. Additionally, balancing their commitment to social causes, schoolwork, and personal life has been challenging, leading to periods of anxiety. However, Jordan has learned to manage this anxiety through mindfulness techniques, time management strategies, and seeking support from friends, family, and school counselors.

Jordan views their acceptance to Howard University as a significant achievement and an opportunity to further their education and advocacy in an environment that values diversity, social justice, and academic excellence. They are excited to join Howard's community, contribute to meaningful discussions, and continue their journey toward making a positive impact in the world.

Name: Trey Johnson
Current School: Howard University

Who Trey is as a person: Trey is an ambitious and resilient individual, always striving to overcome the obstacles that come with being the first in their family to attend college. They possess a strong work ethic, developed from balancing school with part-time jobs to support their family back home. Trey is insightful, often bringing unique perspectives to discussions, especially those related to socioeconomic disparities.

Talents and skills:

Analytical Thinking: Trey has a natural aptitude for numbers and analysis, which serves them well in their finance studies and in deciphering complex financial markets.
Problem-Solving: They excel at identifying problems and devising effective solutions, a skill that is invaluable in group projects and internships.
Adaptability: Navigating the challenges of being a first-generation college student has made Alex exceptionally adaptable, and able to adjust to new situations and expectations quickly.
Passions:

Financial Literacy: Trey is passionate about increasing financial literacy among underrepresented communities. They volunteer to conduct workshops for high school students, teaching basic financial skills and the importance of financial planning.
Economic Equality: Motivated by their personal experiences, Trey is deeply committed to addressing economic inequality and aspires to use their finance degree to help create more equitable financial systems and opportunities.
Experiences with Anxiety in College:
Trey's journey as a first-generation college student has been both rewarding and challenging, often marked by feelings of anxiety and imposter syndrome. The pressure to succeed academically and financially support their family, combined with navigating the complex college environment without a family precedent, has been overwhelming at times. Furthermore, balancing academic responsibilities with part-time jobs to afford tuition and living expenses has added to their stress. To manage this anxiety, Trey has sought support from mentors and advisors at Howard, participated in first-generation student groups where they find solidarity and understanding, and utilized campus mental health resources.

Trey sees their time at Howard University as a transformative experience, not only advancing their career aspirations in finance but also allowing them to contribute to a broader mission of economic empowerment and equality. They are determined to pave the way for future generations in their family and community, demonstrating that with resilience and support, barriers can be overcome.