

Mirror, Flashlight, and Roadmap: How Institutions of Higher Education Use Data to Advance Student Outcomes

And Why We Need Your Help

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About Me

-  **Interim Chief Data Officer, University of Colorado Boulder**
-  **20 years experience in higher education**
-  **15 years on campus (Kansas, Vanderbilt, Minnesota, Colorado)**
-  **5 years in Ed-Tech/Consultancy**
-  **13 years Higher Ed Analytics/Data Science**

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A photograph of a grand, classical-style university building made of light-colored stone. The building features a central entrance with a triangular pediment, flanked by two wings with arched windows. A prominent clock tower rises from the center. In the foreground, a paved walkway leads towards the building, lined with green lawns and small, rounded green shrubs.

What Does a Research University Do?

- ✓ Create new knowledge in the form of academic research, scholarly output, and creative works
- ✓ Teach undergraduate and graduate students so they can be engaged members of society and informed, participatory citizens in a democracy
- ✓ Generate credentials to signal to society and the labor market that graduates have achieved certain skills
- ✓ Engage with the public in order to be broadly useful to society and so we may create economic and social value

✓ Play football

- ✓ Preserve knowledge through libraries, archives, curation, and art
- ✓ Heal patients and create life-improving treatments
- ✓ Act as an economic engine for local and global businesses
- ✓ Other stuff that we haven't even listed here

A close-up, over-the-shoulder photograph of a person wearing a dark blue graduation cap (mortarboard) with a purple tassel and a purple academic gown. The person has long, straight, reddish-brown hair. In the background, other graduates in similar attire are visible, though slightly blurred, suggesting a large outdoor ceremony.

Who Does a University Serve?

 **Students**

 **Faculty**

 **Staff**

 **The Public**

 **Alumni, Friends, Fans, and Donors**

 **The Economy**

 **Its Local Community**

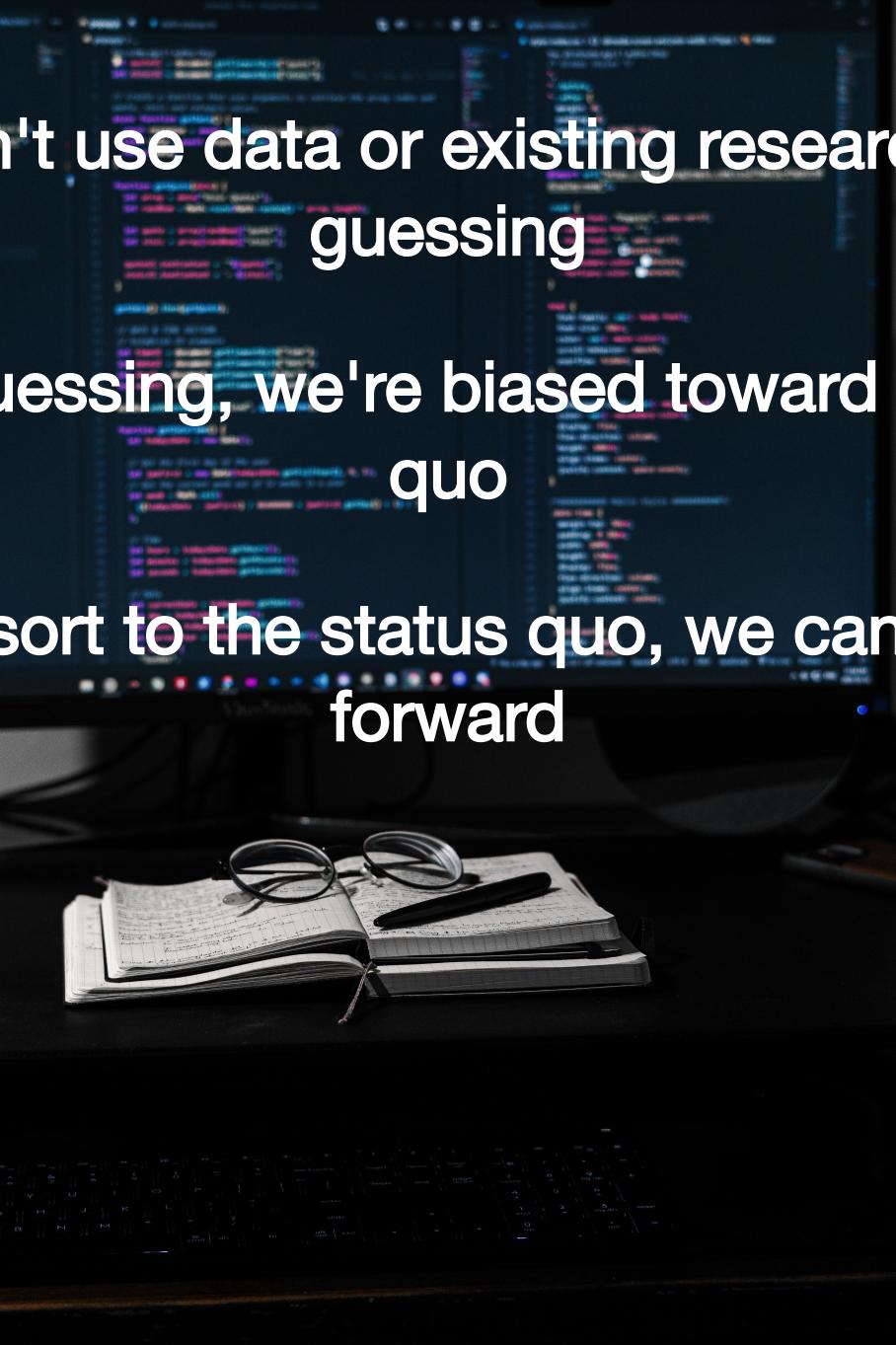
A wide-angle photograph of a green soccer field. In the upper left foreground, a white soccer goal is positioned on the grass. A player in a blue shirt and black shorts is seen from behind, kicking a black soccer ball towards the goal. The field has white boundary lines and a small number '12' is visible near the top left corner of the goal area. The background shows a blurred stadium seating area.

Universities have diffuse and sometimes competing goals

Universities have myriad stakeholders

Universities have to demonstrate our value to taxpayers and to society

Universities are resource constrained



If we don't use data or existing research, we're guessing

If we're guessing, we're biased toward the status quo

If we resort to the status quo, we can't move forward

Universities use data as a "mirror" to see how we're doing



Universities use data as a "flashlight" to find areas for improvement



Descriptive Statistics and Reporting



University
of Colorado
Boulder

Reset
Filters



CU Boulder Retention & Graduation Rates

First-time, full-time undergraduate students entering in the summer/fall

School/College: All Major: All

Entry Year
2010 to 2021

Entry College
All

Entry Major
All

Gender
All

Race/Ethnicity
All

Residency
All

First Generation Status
All

Financial Aid Status

Disability Status
All

RAP Participant
All

ACO Status
All

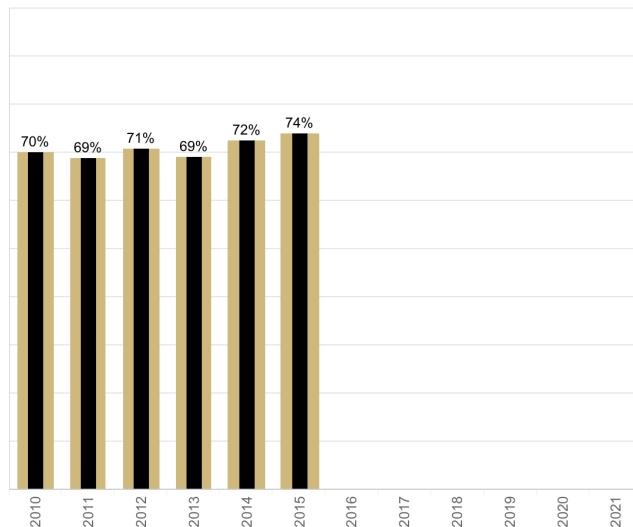
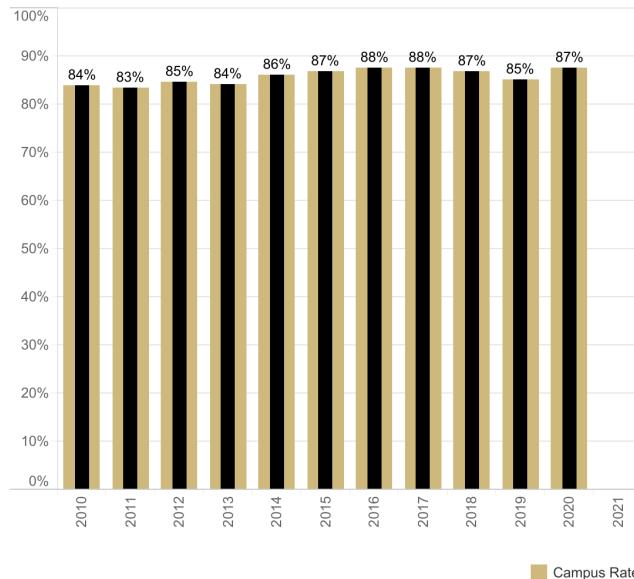
Greek Status
All

Select Retention Rate
Enrolled 2nd fall, any college

Select Graduation Rate
Graduated by 6th summer, any college

Retention Rate: Enrolled 2nd fall, any college

Graduation Rate: Graduated by 6th summer, any college



These are historical retention and graduation rates for CU Boulder for first-time, full-time undergraduates



Reset
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First Gen

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All

Disability Status
All

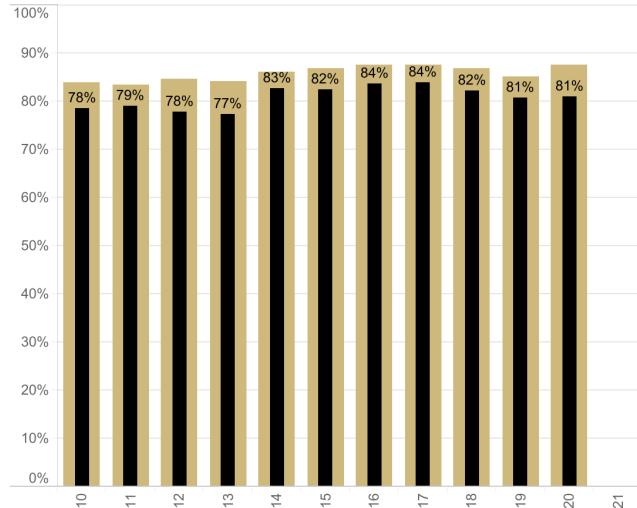
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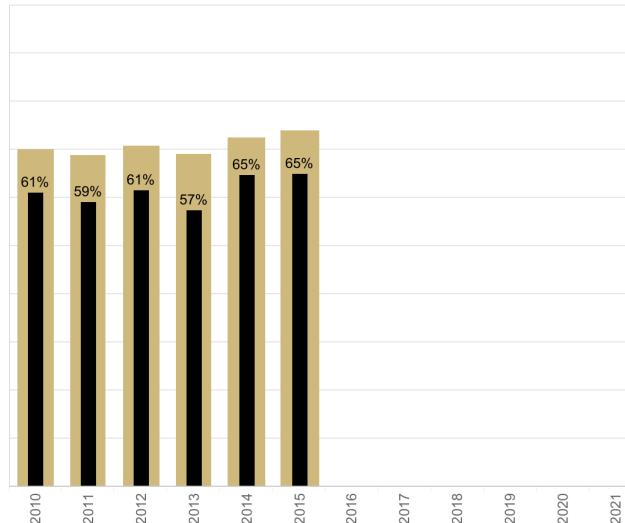
Select Retention Rate
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Retention Rate: Enrolled 2nd fall, any college



Select Graduation Rate
Graduated by 6th summer, any college

Graduation Rate: Graduated by 6th summer, any college



These are historical retention and graduation rates for CU Boulder for first-time, full-time undergraduates who are ALSO first-generational

It appears as though, on average, first-generational students are retained and graduate at a lower rate than peers whose parents attended college.

A silhouette of a person standing in a dark landscape, holding a flashlight that beams a bright light into the night sky filled with stars.

Data Science and Predictive Analytics



Research Question: Can we hypothesize why first-generational students graduate at lower rates?

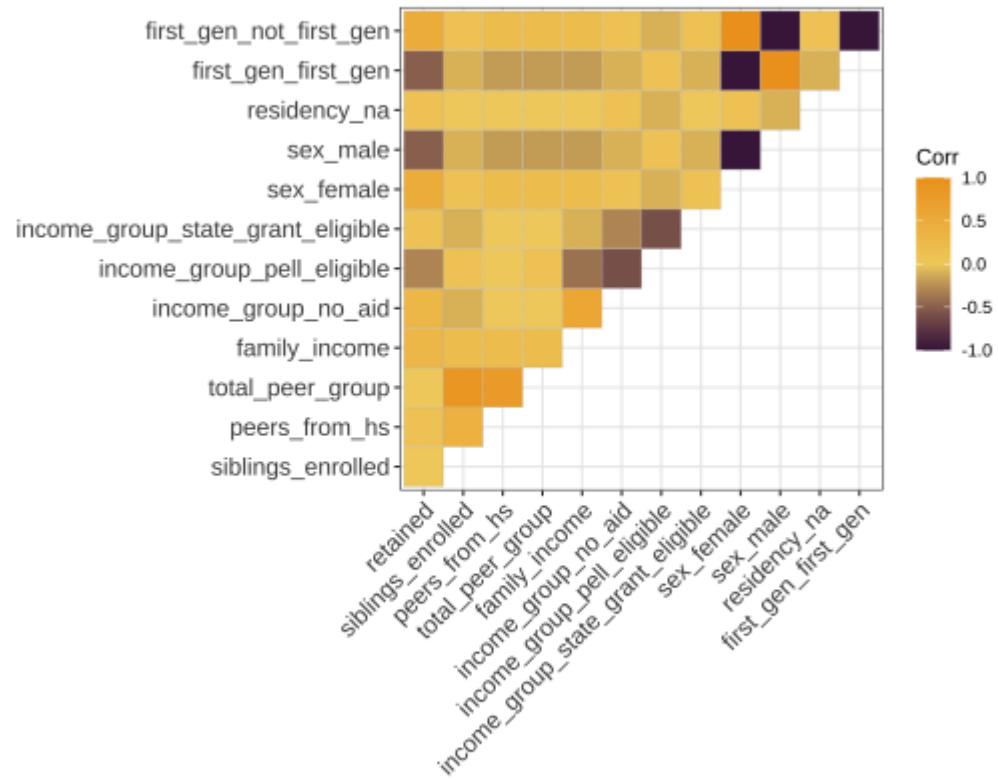
Compile the Raw Data (Not Real Data)

student_id	1	2	3	4	5	6
retained	0	1	1	1	0	0
income_group	Pell Eligible	No Aid	Pell Eligible	No Aid	Pell Eligible	Pell Eligible
sex	male	female	female	female	male	male
age	22	38	26	35	35	NA
siblings_enrolled	1	1	0	1	0	0
peers_from_hs	0	0	0	0	0	0
residency	Resident	Non-Resident	Resident	Resident	Resident	International
total_peer_group	1	1	0	1	0	0
first_gen	first_gen	not_first_gen	not_first_gen	not_first_gen	first_gen	first_gen
family_income	283	2783	309	2073	314	330

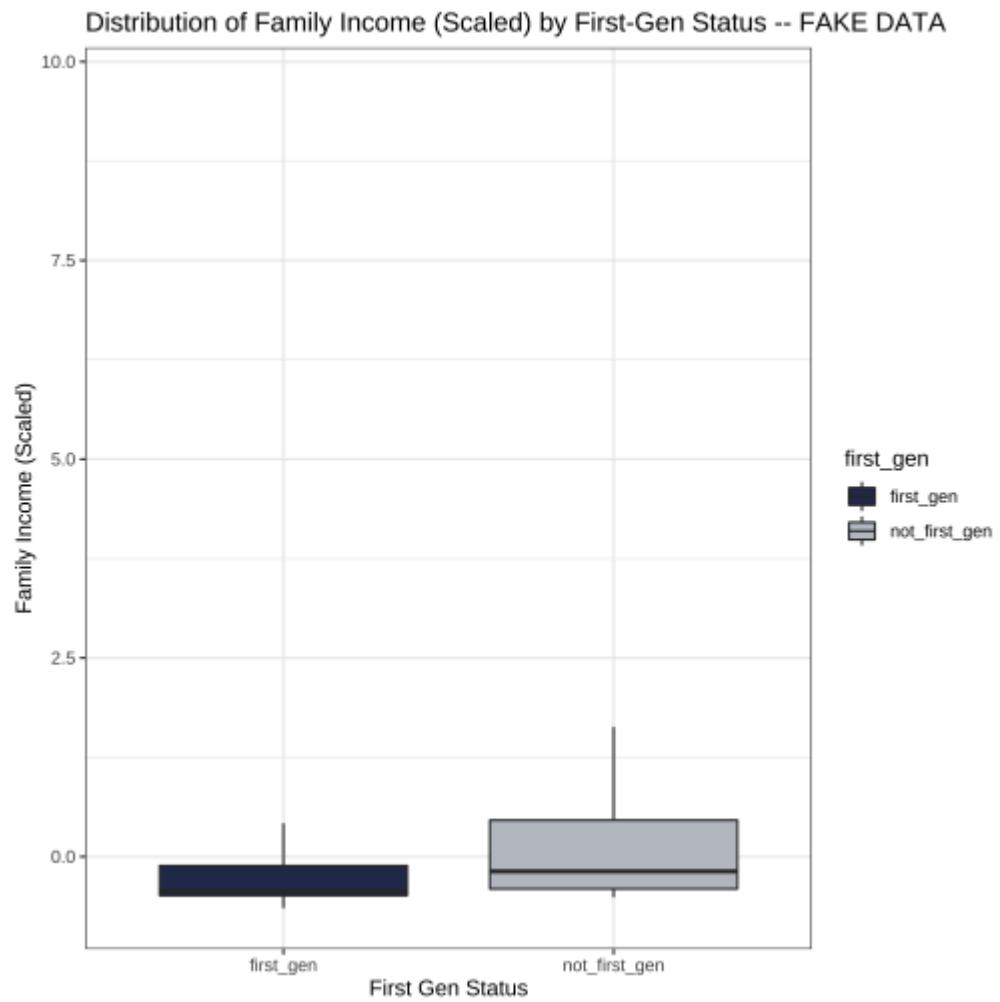
Pre-Process the Data (Again Not Real Data)

student_id	1	2	3	4	5	6
retained	0	1	1	1	0	0
income_group	Pell Eligible	No Aid	Pell Eligible	No Aid	Pell Eligible	Pell Eligible
sex	male	female	female	female	male	male
age	-0.5300051	0.5714304	-0.2546462	0.3649113	0.3649113	NA
siblings_enrolled	0.4325504	0.4325504	-0.4742788	0.4325504	-0.4742788	-0.4742788
peers_from_hs	-0.4734077	-0.4734077	-0.4734077	-0.4734077	-0.4734077	-0.4734077
residency	Resident	Non-Resident	Resident	Resident	Resident	International
total_peer_group	1	1	0	1	0	0
first_gen	first_gen	not_first_gen	not_first_gen	not_first_gen	first_gen	first_gen
family_income	-0.5021568	0.7865640	-0.4887541	0.4205673	-0.4861766	-0.4779288
income_group_no_aid	0	1	0	1	0	0
income_group_pell_eligible	1	0	1	0	1	1
income_group_state_grant_eligible	0	0	0	0	0	0
sex_female	0	1	1	1	0	0
sex_male	1	0	0	0	1	1
residency_international	0	0	0	0	0	1
residency_non_resident	0	1	0	0	0	0
residency_resident	1	0	1	1	1	0

Explore the Data (Again Not Real Data)



Explore the Data (Again Not Real Data)



Model the Outcome: Split Into Test and Training Sets

retn_train\$retained	n	percent
0	412	0.6158445
1	257	0.3841555

retn_test\$retained	n	percent
0	137	0.6171171
1	85	0.3828829

Model the Outcome: Build Basic Regression Model (This is Hacky and Poorly Specified)

```
mod.1 <- glm(retained ~  
              total_peer_group +  
              family_income +  
              first_gen_first_gen,  
              data = retn_train,  
              family = "binomial")
```

Review and Interpret the Results

term	estimate	std.error	statistic	p.value
(Intercept)	4.59998	0.19685	7.75218	0.00000
total_peer_group	0.72952	0.07324	-4.30613	0.00002
family_income	2.11703	0.15248	4.91882	0.00000
first_gen_first_gen	0.06219	0.21840	-12.71770	0.00000

Interpretation (Fake Data)

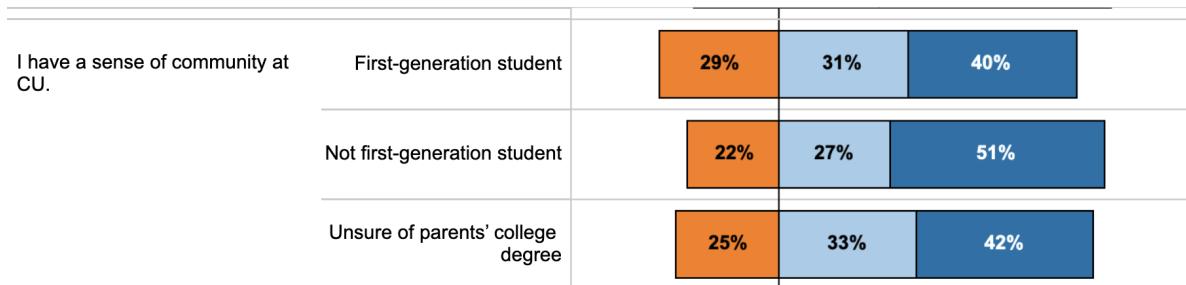
Being classified as first-gen_first_gen is correlated with being 0.06 times less likely to be retained in the second year when controlling for other factors in the model.

For each additional 'unit' of family_income, a student is 2.11 times more likely to be retained in the second year when controlling for other factors in the model.

Surveys and Data Collection

Go Ask Them!

This set of questions addresses your experiences with CU Boulder overall. Indicate how strongly you disagree or agree with each of the following statements:



Agree/ Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Somewhat disagree/ Disagree

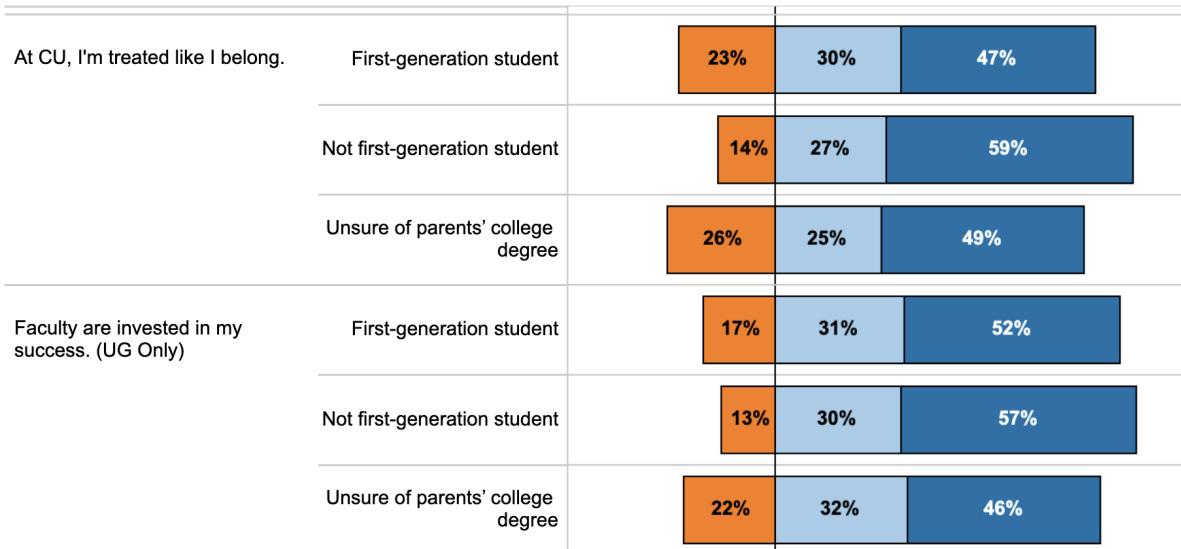
4 Chart Types

Change Chart Type:
 Display Distribution
 Display Averages

First-generational students disagree that they have a sense of community at CU Boulder 7% more than non-first-generational students.

Belonging at CU Boulder

This set of questions addresses your experiences with CU Boulder overall. Indicate how strongly you disagree or agree with each of the following statements:



Legend:

click to highlight on chart

- Agree/ Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree/ Disagree

4 Chart Types

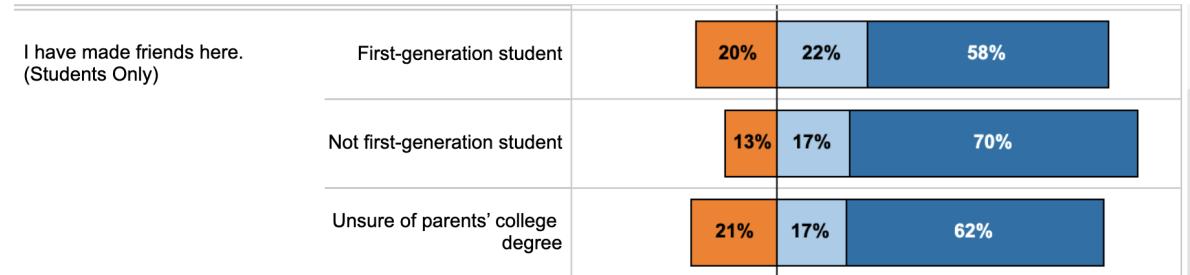
Change Chart Type:

- Display Distribution
- Display Averages

First-generational students disagree that they belong 9% more than non-first-generational students.

Belonging at CU Boulder

This set of questions addresses your experiences with CU Boulder overall. Indicate how strongly you disagree or agree with each of the following statements:



Legend:

click to highlight on chart

 Agree/ Strongly agree

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 Somewhat disagree/ Disagree

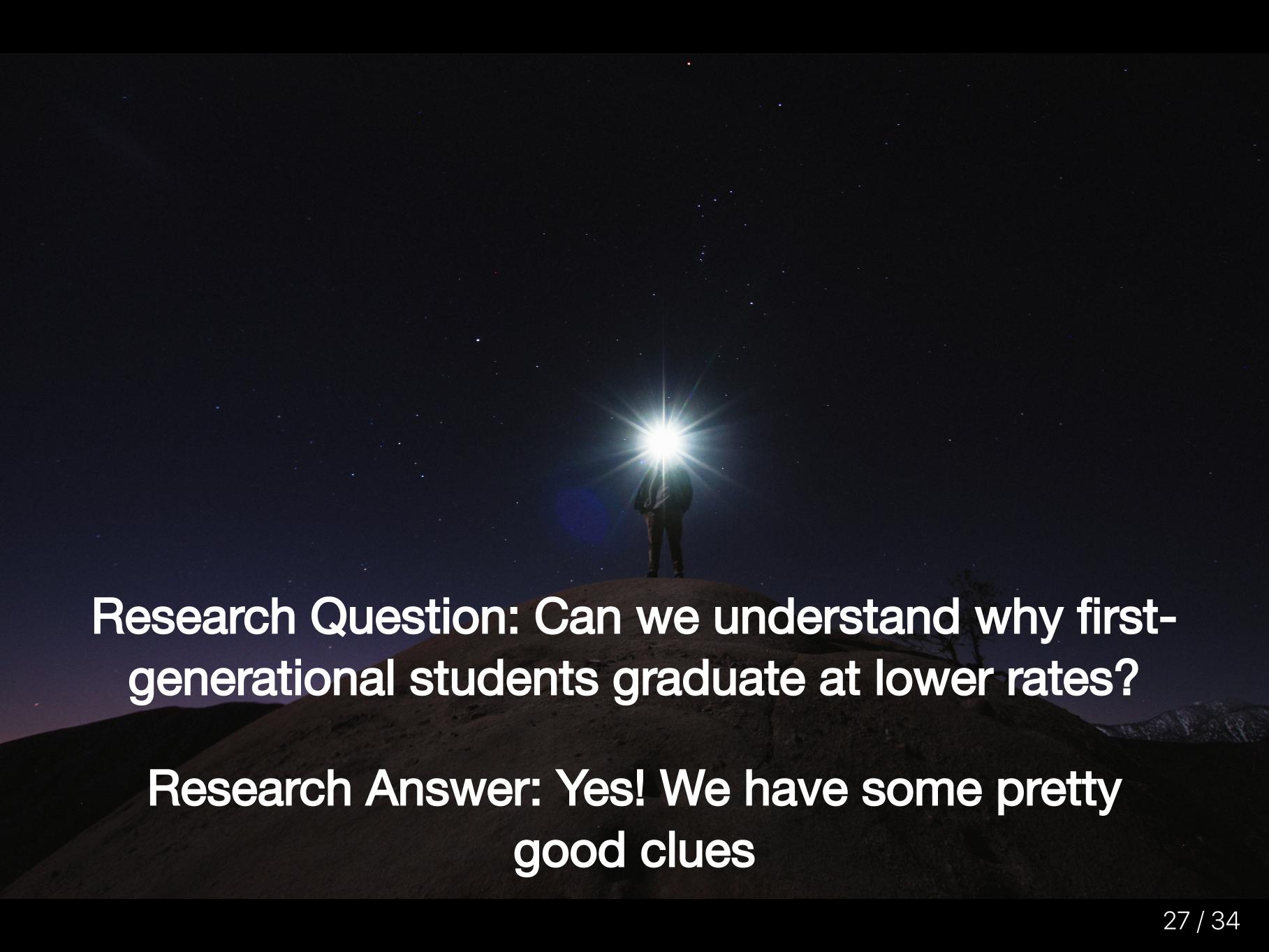
4 Chart Types

Change Chart Type:

Display Distribution

Display Averages

First-generational students disagree that they have made friends here 7% more than non-first-generational students.



Research Question: Can we understand why first-generational students graduate at lower rates?

Research Answer: Yes! We have some pretty good clues

- ✓ Retention and graduation are key indicators of student and institutional success
 - ✓ Differential rates in retention and graduation are inequitable and demand attention
- ✓ Theoretical evidence posits many theories as to why first-generational students are less likely to persist until graduation.
 - ✓ Our fake data and clunky model specification indicated two things:
 - ✓ That family income is also highly correlated and something institutions can impact through financial aid. And...
 - ✓ That students from first-generational backgrounds feel less connected, less engaged and less likely to have friends or support.
 - ✓ So what can we do about it?

A wide-angle photograph of a green soccer field. In the upper left foreground, a white soccer goal is positioned on the grass. A player in a blue shirt and black shorts is seen from behind, kicking a black soccer ball towards the goal. The field has white boundary lines and a small number '12' is visible near the top left corner of the goal area. The background shows a paved path and some blurred trees or buildings.

Universities have diffuse and sometimes competing goals

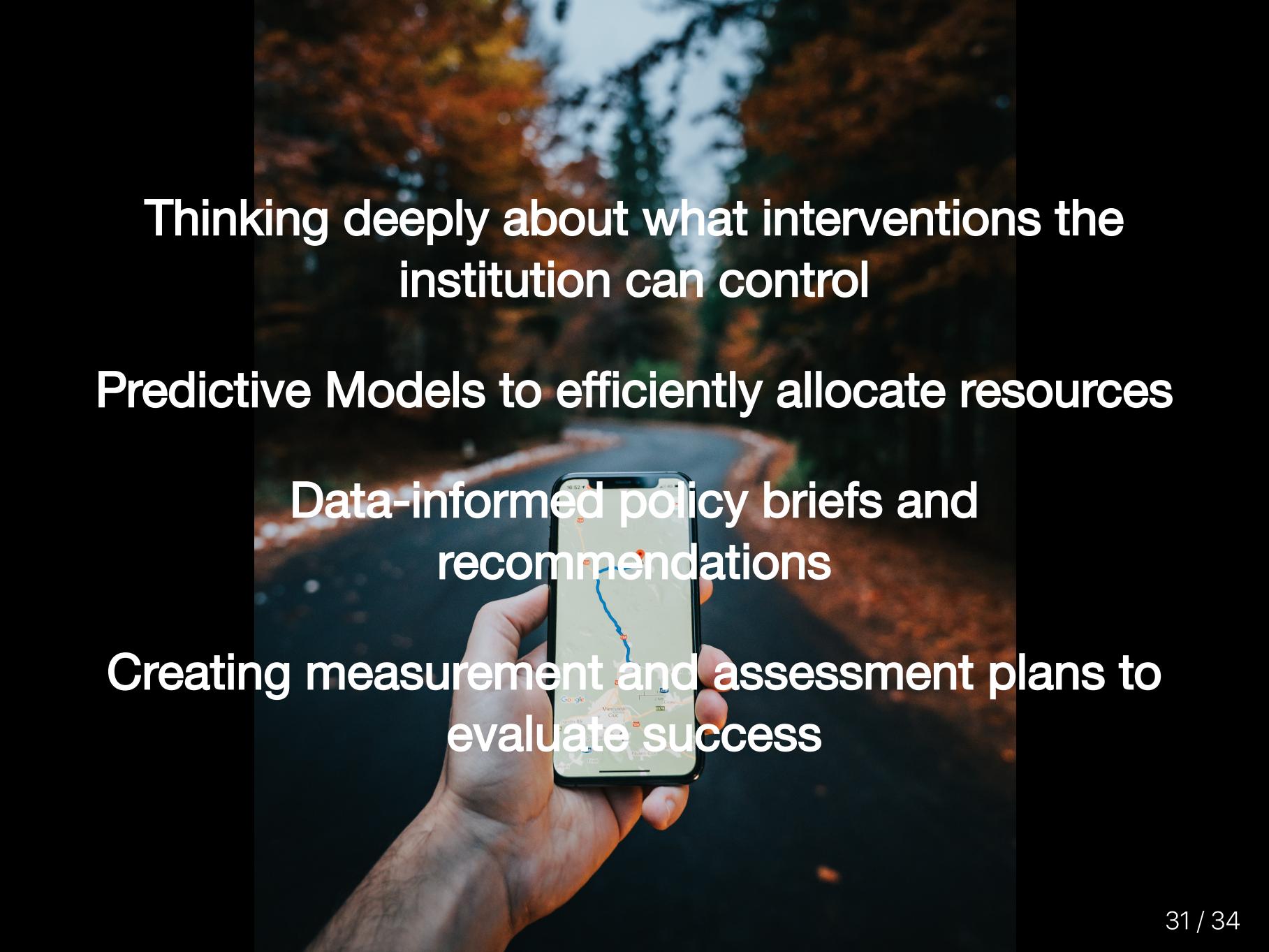
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How Do We Use Data To Improve the University?



Thinking deeply about what interventions the institution can control

Predictive Models to efficiently allocate resources

Data-informed policy briefs and recommendations

Creating measurement and assessment plans to evaluate success

We Need Your Help

The public and non-profit sectors need descriptive, predictive, and prescriptive analytics to advance prosocial outcomes

These sectors aren't as far along as the private sector. This provides lots of room for innovation!

Find a business problem you care about. For me, that's helping colleges and universities, but there are endless ways to make a difference.

Some Blue Sky Projects in ODA and Higher Ed

NLP Model to Detect Incidents of Self-Harm in Survey Responses

IoT Experiment for Rapid, Random Surveys via Smart Phone

Deep Learning exploration of optimal curricular pathways

Recommender Systems for Courses, Instructors, Majors

Prescriptive Models for Guiding "Next Likely Action" for students and advisors

[Your Great Idea Here]

Thank you: Marcos, Marie, Jordyn, Poom, Professor Larsen and the MSBA Team for the Invitation

This slide deck was created using R, Rmarkdown and the Xaringan Package

All photos are freely available from Unsplash.com

Errors, Typos, and Oopsies Are Mine. Please let me know if you see something wacky

Code and Slides available at

bradweiner.info/talk

