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First-Generation College Students: What the Research Says About Retention and Belonging

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Introduction

More than half of U.S. undergraduates—56% in 2015–16—are first-generation college students (FGCS) in the sense that neither parent holds a bachelor's degree, and about one-quarter have parents who never attended college at all (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2022; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2025). Despite their growing numbers and contributions to campus diversity, first-generation students face persistent challenges to persistence and academic success. These students are more likely to leave college before degree completion, report lower sense of belonging, and navigate complex cultural and financial barriers that their continuing-generation peers often do not experience (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Yet research in the past decade has illuminated evidence-based practices that institutions can adopt to improve retention, belonging, and academic outcomes for this population.

This white paper synthesizes the research literature on first-generation student success, focusing on five critical areas: sense of belonging, advising models, family engagement, financial barriers, and identity navigation. The findings highlight practical implications for institutional policy and practice, offering accessible guidance for higher education professionals committed to supporting first-generation student achievement.

Sense of Belonging and Student Persistence

Sense of belonging—the feeling that one is a valued member of the campus community—is one of the strongest predictors of first-generation student retention (Strayhorn, 2019). First-generation students at public research universities report significantly lower sense of belonging and poorer mental health than continuing-generation peers, yet are less likely to use counseling services (Stebleton et al., 2014). This lower sense of belonging stems from multiple sources: limited family knowledge about college norms and expectations, social class anxiety, and perceptions of not fitting in among peers with more privileged backgrounds.

Research by Harackiewicz and colleagues (2014) demonstrates that a brief values-affirmation writing exercise in an introductory biology course narrowed the course-grade gap between first-generation and continuing-generation students by 50% and increased retention in the next course by 20%. Related work shows that a one-hour "difference-education" session, in which senior students describe how their backgrounds shaped their college experience, eliminated the social-class achievement gap in first-year GPA (Stephens et al., 2014), and that brief social-belonging interventions improve academic and health outcomes for marginalized students (Walton & Cohen, 2011). More broadly, culturally engaging campus environments—where students can maintain connections to their home cultures while building campus ties—are associated with stronger belonging for students from minoritized backgrounds (Museus & Maramba, 2011). Interventions are most effective when they speak directly to the specific challenges first-generation students face rather than offering generic engagement programming (Stephens et al., 2014).

Advising and Academic Support Models

Academic advising is a critical leverage point for first-generation student success. Research on mentoring and advising consistently finds that structured, developmental relationships with institutional agents support persistence, particularly for students without family college experience (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). However, many institutions provide insufficient advising resources, and first-generation students—lacking family knowledge about degree requirements and career pathways—often struggle to navigate the academic system independently.

Strengths-based advising models show particular promise for first-generation students. Schreiner and Anderson (2005) describe how a strengths-based approach—identifying student assets and building upon them rather than focusing on deficits—can increase engagement and academic self-efficacy. Mandatory first-year advising, peer advising networks, and online advising tools can extend advising capacity so that first-generation students make informed academic decisions. Institutions employing intrusive advising—in which advisors proactively reach out to at-risk students with academic or personal support—report particularly strong outcomes for first-generation students.

Family Engagement and Communication

First-generation students often rely heavily on family support for motivation and persistence, yet their families may lack knowledge about college systems, expectations, and pathways to success (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Addressing this gap through proactive family engagement is a high-impact practice. Woosley and Shepler (2011) found that first-generation students' early academic and social integration depends on educational commitment, campus environment, and expected involvement—factors that institutions can shape through orientation events for families, transparent communication about academic progress and campus resources, and culturally responsive family involvement initiatives.

Culturally responsive approaches are essential. Many first-generation families may be hesitant to engage with college systems due to previous negative institutional experiences, immigration-related concerns, or language barriers. Institutions that provide translated materials, hold family events in accessible locations and times, invite family input on campus policies, and explicitly value the cultural knowledge families bring validate students and families as capable members of the college community (Rendón, 1994). Such engagement benefits both students and families: first-generation students who maintain strong family connections while building campus-based belonging experience more holistic support for success.

Financial Barriers and Resource Navigation

First-generation students are disproportionately low-income, making financial barriers a primary obstacle to completion. National data show that first-generation students are disproportionately from low-income households and are far less likely to complete a degree: six years after entry, 52% of first-generation students had earned no credential, compared with 30% of continuing-generation students (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2022). Beyond tuition costs, first-generation students face hidden expenses—textbooks, technology, transportation, health insurance—that often are not addressed in financial aid conversations.

Research by Goldrick-Rab and colleagues (2017) with nearly 34,000 community-college students found that two-thirds experienced food insecurity and half experienced housing insecurity, and that failure to secure students' basic needs puts them at risk of dropping out.

Institutions that implement emergency aid funds, provide transparent financial literacy programming, eliminate unnecessary fees, and simplify financial aid processes significantly reduce attainment gaps. Additionally, work-study and on-campus employment opportunities that accommodate student schedules can reduce financial stress while building campus connections. Evidence-based approaches also include targeted grant aid (rather than loans) and year-round financial advising to help first-generation students understand their aid packages and plan for expenses.

Identity Navigation and Sense of Self

First-generation students often navigate complex identity terrain, balancing family expectations and cultural identities with academic ambitions and campus culture. This identity work is heightened for first-generation students of color, who report intersecting pressures of race, social class, and educational status (Stephens et al., 2014). Impostor syndrome—the persistent belief that one does not belong and is not truly capable despite evidence of achievement—is particularly common among first-generation students and is a significant predictor of both mental health challenges and academic disengagement.

Identity-affirming education and support are critical. Cabrera and colleagues (2013) found that a summer bridge program for first-year students improved first-year persistence and performance, illustrating how structured, identity-affirming transition programs can support students who are new to college culture. Cultural mentoring—in which faculty and staff of similar cultural backgrounds provide guidance and role modeling—also shows promise (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Additionally, institutions that foster a growth mindset through classroom messaging and institutional practices help first-generation students reframe academic challenges as opportunities for learning rather than evidence of deficiency. This cognitive shift, combined with culturally sustaining pedagogy, supports both academic success and psychological well-being.

Implications for Institutional Practice

The research presented in this brief points to five concrete steps institutions can take to improve first-generation student success:

Implement belonging interventions in the first year

Values affirmation exercises, identity-affirming peer mentoring programs, and intentional cohort experiences are evidence-based practices that narrow achievement gaps and improve persistence. These interventions are low-cost and high-impact.

Strengthen academic advising with proactive outreach

Allocate resources to reduce advisor-to-student ratios, train advisors in strengths-based and cultural competency practices, and implement intrusive advising models that reach out to at-risk students. Mandatory first-year advising and peer advising networks extend institutional capacity.

Develop culturally responsive family engagement initiatives

Provide translated materials, hold family events at varied times and accessible locations, and create channels for family input on campus policies. Position families as partners rather than obstacles to student development.

Create robust financial support and literacy systems

Establish emergency aid funds, provide year-round financial advising, eliminate unnecessary fees, and prioritize grant aid over loans. Ensure on-campus employment opportunities are abundant and flexible to meet student needs.

Integrate identity-affirming teaching and student support

Incorporate identity development into the curriculum, foster growth mindset through classroom messaging, and hire and empower faculty and staff from underrepresented backgrounds to serve as cultural mentors. Create student organizations and affinity spaces that honor cultural identities.

Conclusion

First-generation college students are a vital part of American higher education and bring diverse strengths and perspectives to our campuses. Yet these students face distinctive barriers that require intentional, evidence-based institutional responses. The research is clear: belonging interventions, proactive advising, family

engagement, financial support, and identity-affirming practices significantly improve first-generation student retention and success. Institutions committed to equity and access must view support for first-generation students not as supplementary programming, but as essential to their core mission of student success.

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