
First-Generation College Students

Congratulations, and welcome to college! Perseverance, resilience, resourcefulness, and hard work have helped you make it this far. As a first-generation college student, this is a particularly important achievement. First-generation university students are those students whose parent(s) have not attained a college degree. These students, who have little or no family collegiate history, may enter a college or university with limited knowledge about the jargon, traditions, and patterns of expected behavior. These factors may prevent first-generation students from fully engaging in a university setting and may contribute to early departure from the university before the completion of a degree. No matter how intelligent and capable, first-generation students may benefit from additional support as they adjust to a new environment. It can be helpful to learn more about what other first-generation students have experienced as well as what can be done to help maximize your performance and experience as you work towards attaining your degree.

How Might My College Experience Be Different?

First-generation students tend to come from working class families from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. First-generation students may start at a community college, attend college part-time, live off-campus or with family or relatives, delay entering college after high-school graduation, or work full-time while they are enrolled. While certainly immersed in an exciting experience, some first-generation college students receive less support from their families while attending college. Their families may not understand the demands of college work. Students may also feel added responsibility from families to be ‘the one who succeeds’ in college. This may increase the pressure the individual already experiences as a new student.

Despite having good academic performance in high school, first-generation students are susceptible to doubts about their academic and motivational abilities, and may believe that they are not college material. Because of these numerous obstacles, and because they may have to manage the demands of family, and different cultures of home and college, first generation students may find it difficult to feel integrated socially and academically. Fortunately, there are things these students can do to gain confidence and feel more comfortable.

Common Feelings

If you are a first-generation college student, you should first know that you are not alone. Many of the feelings you experience are normal and to be expected. First-generation students often experience a range of feelings about being the first in their family to attend and complete college. What are some common feelings?

Excitement and Anxiety – Many students are thrilled but also somewhat frightened about being away from home at college, living on their own, and being the first in the family to attend college. These students may ask themselves, “Am I cut out to be a college student?” despite their stellar academic performance in high school.

Responsibility – Many first-generation students have to help pay for their education, perhaps more so than students of higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition to financial responsibility, these students may be pressured by family and friends to return home often, and may receive mixed messages about their changing identities (e.g., wanting to succeed, but not wanting to be different from the rest of the family or their peers).

Pride – These students often feel an overwhelming sense of pride about being the first in their families to attend and complete college. A college degree can provide many opportunities. This is an important accomplishment!

Guilt – In addition to pride, many first-generation students may feel guilt about having the opportunity to attend college while others in the family did not have that opportunity. These students may wonder if it is fair for them to be at school while their parents struggle financially at home. They may feel the need to go home to support their families. First-generation students may also feel guilty about their academic performance if it is not as good as they or their families would like.

Embarrassment and Shame – These students may feel embarrassment over their socioeconomic status or the level of education in their family. First-generation students may try to act like their family is more highly educated or financially advantaged than they really are. There may be embarrassment around being different from their peers at college, particularly if their peers have a long lineage of family members attending college or if they seem to know the ‘lingo’ when a first-generation student may not.

Confusion - First-generation students may feel ‘out of the loop’ when it comes to college processes and procedures such as application, graduation, job or graduate school searches, etc. They may not be aware of the resources available to them or of options available to them after graduation.

Recommendations for First-Generation College Students

Most students who leave college are likely to do so within the first four semesters. What can you do to ensure that you complete your degree and have a positive college experience?

Get support – First-generation students are more likely to live off-campus, work while taking classes, and be enrolled part-time than their non first-generation counterparts. By becoming involved on campus, you may receive the support you need and begin to feel more integrated with other college students. Join groups, organizations, or support groups that are of interest to you. Also, talk with people you trust, perhaps your families and friends, about what you are experiencing as you adjust to college and a new environment.

Communicate about what you are experiencing – In times of transition, it can be helpful for individuals to communicate what they are experiencing and what they need from one another. As you grow and develop, you may begin to feel different from your family and peers. This is a natural process for all college students, and it can be helpful to share your experiences with each other.

Utilize resources – Take advantage of mentoring programs as well as the variety of offices and programs designed to assist you. Many universities have offices for ethnic minority students, advising programs, tutoring programs, financial aid programs and counseling centers. Their services can help you navigate the college terrain as well as feel understood and connected. You can also benefit from getting to know an upper-level student who can show you the ropes. Finding a first-generation college student who has already been there a few years can be especially helpful as he or she can share tips on how to deal with the first year of college.

Maintain a balance – You do have a lot to juggle! With the demands of academics, work, family, and a social life, it is important that you find a way to balance competing needs. Time management is essential, and having a schedule can help you manage those competing interests and demands. Remember that the perseverance, resilience, resourcefulness, and hard work that helped you get in to college will also help keep you here.

Recommendations for Family Members

Families may feel confused around what their student is doing at college, as it may be a foreign place to them. What can family members do to help insure the success of their student?

Learn about the college process and what to expect – It can be helpful for family members to attend orientations, meet with advisors, and get to know campus resources so they can be more familiar with what their student is experiencing.

Be patient with one another – This is a learning process for everyone involved. Remember, you are going through this for the first time. There is a learning curve, and it is important to be patient with yourselves and each other.

