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FirstGen Forward releases update to seminal national landscape report on first-generation student success in higher education

"Identifying First-generation College Students: Definitions, Data, and Data Use" is the second of six research briefs in the landscape analyses series

WASHINGTON, DC (July 22, 2025) - [FirstGen Forward](#), formerly the Center for First-generation Student Success, today announced the release of "[Identifying First-generation College Students: Definitions, Data, and Data Use](#)," the second installment in its new national landscape analyses series, [First-generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs, Services, and Perspectives in Higher Education](#).

Produced in partnership with [Phase Two Advisory](#), this new research brief builds on FirstGen Forward's foundational landscape analyses from 2018 (four-year institutions) and 2020 (two-year institutions), offering fresh insight into how U.S. colleges and universities define, identify, and use data on first-generation students today. The findings are based on a national survey of 571 practitioners from 411 institutions and focus groups with 73 stakeholders from 65 institutions across 47 states and Washington, D.C.

"How institutions define and track first-generation students has profound implications for their ability to equitably support this growing group of college students," said Dr. Melinda Mechur Karp, founder and principal of Phase Two Advisory. "While more campuses today are working with a formal definition and collecting data, significant gaps remain in the consistent use and accessibility of that data to inform meaningful action."

Key findings from the report include:

- More institutions have adopted formal definitions of "first-generation," with nearly three-quarters of surveyed campuses now doing so—up from just over half in previous analyses.

- Most definitions align closely with the federal TRIO definition, though still remain inconsistent, especially across two-year institutions. One notable change is the increased use of a definition acknowledging parental degree completion “from an institution in the United States,” signaling greater awareness around the unique nature of navigating the American higher education system.
- Identification most often occurs at entry, such as during admissions or FAFSA completion.
- Student information systems (SIS) usage has improved, yet only about half of campuses report capturing first-generation status in their SIS—and even fewer make these data easily accessible to staff.
- Data use lags behind data collection. While many institutions gather disaggregated data, fewer use them to guide institutional strategy, planning, or resource allocation.

“First-generation students now represent more than half of all undergraduates nationwide,” said Kevin Kruger, interim president and CEO of FirstGen Forward and president emeritus of NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. “That scale demands not just recognition but responsive infrastructure—clear definitions, better data, and intentional use of that data to drive support for first-generation students.”

The updated series reflects an evolving higher education landscape shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, economic shifts, and political pressures. It seeks to provide a current, data-informed foundation for institutions striving to support first-generation students.

“Our original landscape reports served as a blueprint for institutional efforts to serve first-generation students,” said Deana Waintraub Stafford, vice president of Field Development and Engagement at FirstGen Forward. “But the field has changed. This new series captures where we are now—and where we need to go next.”

Additional briefs will continue to be added through Spring 2026. To read the briefs or other publications, or to learn more about FirstGen Forward, visit firstgenforward.org.

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ABOUT FIRSTGEN FORWARD

FirstGen Forward, formerly the Center for First-generation Student Success, accelerates success for first-generation students in education, career, and life through collaborations with higher education, philanthropy, business, government, and individuals to eliminate the completion gap and broaden post-college opportunities. Our vision is a future in which first-generation students obtain postsecondary credentials; access opportunities commensurate with their skills, education, and training; and maximize their service to people and communities throughout the world.

ABOUT PHASE TWO ADVISORY

Phase Two Advisory works with colleges, foundations, and improvement networks to translate research evidence into equity-forward reform strategies. We provide 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.