

RESEARCH BRIEF

First-generation Student Success:

A Landscape Analysis of Programs, Services, and Perspectives in Higher Education





About FirstGen Forward

FirstGenForward.org

FirstGen Forward (FGF) is transforming higher education to drive first-generation student success effectively and equitably across education, career, and life. We provide data, training, and expertise for a growing network of colleges and universities around the country to scale and sustain the important work of serving first-generation students. FirstGen Forward aims to acknowledge the intersectional experiences of first-generation college students. It offers an outlet for sharing cutting-edge research and current media conversations, opportunities for engagement through online learning, conferences, and events, and access to a bevy of programs and services.

About Phase Two Advisory

phasetwoadvisory.com

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.

About the Authors



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Melinda is a nationally recognized expert on improving students' transitions to college and supporting them once there. She founded Phase Two Advisory after nearly twenty years conducting research and working with colleges on education reform as the Assistant Director at the Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. Melinda holds a B.S. in Human Development and Family Studies from Cornell University and both an M.A. and a Ph.D. in Sociology and Education from Columbia University.



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As a first-generation, low-income college graduate, Suzanne has dedicated her career to focusing on policies, programs, and multi-sector partnerships across the K-20 pipeline that support college access and success. She has over 15 years of experience as a practitioner in K-12, public & private colleges, & national non-profits, including work with The Posse Foundation, TRIO, and Promise programs. She holds her Bachelor's in Psychology & Spanish from the University of Notre Dame, her Master's in Social Work from the University of Pennsylvania, and her Ph.D. in Higher & Postsecondary Education from New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.



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Nancy has more than a decade of experience as a practitioner in higher education and leadership development, primarily working with underrepresented students including first-generation, minority, and DACA students. Nancy received her Ed.D. in higher education administration at The George Washington University. She also received an M.A. in history and B.A. in government and politics from the University of Maryland.



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Mary serves as the assistant vice president of data analytics with FirstGen Forward. Mary joined FirstGen Forward in 2020 from NASPA Advisory Services where she served as assistant director. Prior to joining NASPA, Mary served as the assistant director of Institutional Research at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. A data and research enthusiast, Mary is passionate about empowering others to proficiently interpret and utilize data and research for continuous improvement and promotion of student success, and contributing to the field through research. Mary earned a B.A. in sociology from Hofstra University, an M.S. in sociology from Utah State University, and a Ph.D. in higher education from the University of Toledo.

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CONTEXT

Upon its founding in 2017, FirstGen Forward (then, the Center for First-generation Student Success) set out to explore and understand the national landscape of first-generation support, services, and perceptions at colleges and universities across the United States. Two landscape studies were released: [Landscape Analysis of Programs and Services at Four-year Institutions \(2018\)](#) and [First-generation Students in Community and Technical Colleges \(2020\)](#).

AT THE TIME, THESE STUDIES FOUND THAT:

- 1 Identifying first-generation students is challenging for most colleges and universities, given varying definitions and data constraints. Moreover, information on first-generation students is inconsistently shared and not always used to track outcomes for these students.
- 2 Colleges and universities provide a range of supports for first-generation students, but these supports vary widely in focus, scale, and intensity. Cohort-based supports are most common, but are limited in their reach.
- 3 First-generation students bring substantial strengths to the college experience, and leveraging these strengths within programming is a best practice that should be scaled. At the same time, the college environment is not created with these students in mind, and so colleges and universities should be intentional in building more supportive campuses to ensure first-generation student success.
- 4 Supports for first-generation students are often limited by resource constraints or lack of engagement from campus stakeholders. Building networked supports or targeted universal design efforts centering first-generation students may improve offerings without requiring additional financial investment.

The landscape has shifted substantially since the initial landscape scans: the COVID-19 pandemic elevated and exacerbated existing inequities in the U.S. higher education system; colleges and universities saw an influx of pandemic recovery dollars but now face economic challenges as those funds end and the “demographic cliff” shrinks enrollments; and affirmative action has been struck down by the Supreme Court and skepticism of diversity and equity has shifted institutional programming. As such, it is important to revisit the earlier landscape scans to understand what services institutions currently provide to first-generation students and what gaps in services might now exist.

To address these topics and to examine a longitudinal comparison of salient findings found in the former reports, FirstGen Forward again used a mixed-methods approach including a national survey and focus groups that dive deeper into critical topics and emerging themes. Rather than a singular report, we will release a series of Research Briefs exploring the most salient findings. This document provides an overview and methodological summary for the entire series.

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH BRIEF SERIES

First-generation college students currently comprise 54% of the total undergraduate student population in the United States,¹ which is an increase from the one-third estimated population at the time of the previous landscape studies.^{2,3} Though the various ways in which first-generation students are defined shifts between states, systems, and institution type and subsequently impacts our understanding of the first-generation student population, student survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) paint the picture of who these students are and their potential outcomes and workforce trajectories. Six years after starting college, just 24% of first-generation students earned a bachelor's degree compared to 59% of continuing-generation students; a 35% difference in degree completion rates.⁴ For first-generation students to thrive in their postsecondary education and beyond, colleges and universities must improve their ability to recruit and retain these students to degree or certificate completion.

This is especially true in the context of career and workforce development trends. By 2031, 72% of jobs will require postsecondary education, an increase from 66% of jobs in 2021.⁵ Moreover, the largest growth in jobs with living wages will be in careers that are focused on the bachelor's or graduate degree pathways.⁵ It is essential that

first-generation college students have appropriate access to postsecondary education—and that colleges and universities are prepared to support them through to degree or certificate completion—to ensure their ability to compete for these jobs and succeed in the 21st century workforce.

The visibility of the first-generation student identity has been on the rise in recent years, resulting in additional research on this population. [An Annotated Bibliography on First-generation College Students: Research from 2008-2019](#) summarizes hundreds of articles published on the experiences and outcomes of first-generation students and graduates. Since 2021, the [Journal of First-generation Student Success](#) has also been a premier source of knowledge about first-generation student success. Despite increases in the availability of research on first-generation student success, gaps remain about the national landscape of first-generation student success, including ways in which colleges and universities are enacting institution-wide strategies, policies, and practices to support these students.

This landscape study, released as a series of research briefs, aims to fill gaps in knowledge and practice.

Focus areas were determined through data analysis and engagement with the broader field in order to explore topics of most relevance to practitioners and policymakers.

¹ RTI International. (2023). *First-generation College Students in 2020: Demographic Characteristics and Postsecondary Enrollment*. Washington, DC: FirstGen Forward.

² Cataldi, E.F., Bennett, C.T., & Chen, X. (2018). First-generation students: College access, persistence, & post-bachelor's outcomes. (NCES 2018-421). US Department of Education: Institute of Education Sciences.

³ Skomsvold, P. (2015). *Web Tables—Profile of Undergraduate Students: 2011–12* (NCES 2015-167). U.S. Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics.

⁴ RTI International. (2024). *First-generation College Students' Achievement and Federal Student Loan Repayment*. Washington, DC: FirstGen Forward.

⁵ Strohl, J., Gulish, A., and Morris, C. (2024). *The Future of Good Jobs: Projections through 2031*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.



METHODOLOGY

The first phase of this landscape analysis consisted of a national survey conducted through Qualtrics. The survey questions were adapted from the previous studies, *Landscape Analysis of Programs and Services at Four-year Institutions (2018)*⁶ and *First-generation Students in Community and Technical Colleges (2020)*,⁷ with revisions for clarity and present-day context to enable longitudinal comparison. While the previous studies were divided into two surveys for 2- and 4-year institutions, this study relied on a single survey with branching pathways depending on the sector of the respondent's institution. Using Qualtrics survey logic, two main pathways were built to complete the survey: one for those who work directly with first-generation initiatives and a shorter set of questions for those who do not.

The initial launch of the survey included emails to approximately 1,700 practitioners from within the FirstGen Forward Network and approximately 5,400 individuals who were identified through a NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) database using search criteria that included the functional area of first-generation

student services, job title keywords (e.g., first-generation, first-gen), or were consumers of the *Journal of First-generation Student Success*. In addition to these emails, the survey was more broadly distributed through the FirstGen Forward newsletter, Phase Two Advisory listserves, and social media for both organizations. Those invited by email were also encouraged to share the survey link with colleagues involved in first-generation student success initiatives. After the initial launch, more targeted emails were sent to individuals in the original email pool who worked at minority-serving institutions (MSIs), with specific outreach to those at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions (AANAPISIs). The survey opened on October 15, 2024 and closed on December 2, 2024.⁸

There were 571 responses representing 411 different higher education institutions. Eighty-nine percent (88.8%) of the respondents indicated they worked directly with first-generation initiatives at their institution. Respondents were more likely to be new to their specific position or role,

⁶ Whitley, S.E., Benson, G., & Wesaw, A. (2018). *First-generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs and Services at Four-year Institutions*. Washington, DC: Center for First-generation Student Success, NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and Entangled Solutions.

⁷ Karp, M. M., Cormier, M., Whitley, S. E., Umbarger-Wells, S. M., & Wesaw, A. (2020). *First-generation students in community and technical colleges: A national exploration of institutional support practices*. FirstGen Forward; NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education

⁸ The survey was fielded amidst a rapidly changing sociopolitical context spanning the weeks pre- and post-presidential election. As such, responses about campus structures and resources, in particular, may look different than would a current survey of the field or future focus group data.

with 38.0% with less than two years in their current position and 34.3% with three to five years in their current position. However, their total time at their institution was more evenly distributed with 18.2% with less than two years at their current institution, 24.7% with three to five years, 21.4% with six to ten years, 20.0% with eleven to twenty years, and 12.8% with more than twenty years at their current institution. The respondents were most likely to work in student affairs (40.8%) and have either a master's degree (56.9%) or a doctoral degree (35.2%). In addition, 71.8% of

the respondents identified as first-generation college graduates.

The 411 institutions included in the sample, represented 47 states and the District of Columbia. The sample was geographically representative with a similar distribution by region to all higher education institutions.⁹ However, the sample is not nationally representative. The sample skewed towards public, 4-year institutions (51.8%) and FirstGen Forward Network institutions (60.8%). Private, not-for-profit, 4-year institutions comprised 30.7% of the sample, and public, 2-year institutions comprised 17.0% of the sample. No private, for-profit institutions (2-year or 4-year) or private, not-for-profit, 2-year institutions were included in the sample. Twenty-six percent (25.5%) of institutions were designated MSI institutions, with the most representation from HSIs (16.1%). Seventy-three percent (73.5%) of institutions had one respondent, while the remaining had multiple.

Because of the survey design, which branched questions based on respondent answers, the sample size varies for each question. For consistency, we report the percentage of respondents across questions. All quantitative sample sizes are over 300, except the two-year sample size, which is over 50 when broken out by institutional sector.

The second phase of the study included qualitative interviews and focus groups. Survey respondents were offered the opportunity to participate in follow up focus groups. We recruited additional participants were recruited through the researchers' professional networks.

SAMPLE AT A GLANCE

571 RESPONSES

89% work directly with first-gen student initiatives *(in any capacity)*

72% Identify as first-gen themselves

65% Work in student affairs or student success

33% Have worked at their institution for over 10 years

411 INSTITUTIONS

47 States + the District of Columbia

61% FirstGen Forward Network Institutions

69% • 52% public, 4-year *(compared to 19% nationally)*
• 17% public, 2-year *(compared to 21% nationally)*

26% Minority Serving Institutions

27% Institutions with multiple respondents

⁹ NCES. Table 1. Number and percentage distribution of Title IV institutions, by control of institution, level of institution, and region: United States and other U.S. jurisdictions, academic year 2023–24. Retrieved on March, 4, 2025 from <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/search/viewtable?tableid=36304>

The first set of focus groups focused on career readiness and transitions into the workforce. Eighteen participants were interviewed between December 2024 and January 2025 for 75-minute virtual focus groups. These focus groups were segmented by organizational type: community college, broad-access 4-year college or university, and selective 4-year college or university.¹⁰

A second set of focus groups was conducted in April 2025, with a broader focus on first-generation student support. Similar to the first set of focus groups, survey respondents were offered the opportunity to participate in follow up focus groups and were recruited through the researchers' professional networks. Fourteen virtual focus groups were conducted, segmented by participant type: Seven focus groups for college and university personnel who work with first-generation college students and/or targeted programming for those students, and seven focus groups for first-generation college students enrolled in community, broad-access, and selective

colleges and universities. In addition, the researchers will be conducting a focus group with employers in Fall 2025 to gather their feedback on first-generation career readiness and transitions into the workforce.

Four sets of interview protocols were used:

- 1 For college personnel from the first set of focus groups, focused on career readiness and transition support for first-generation students;
- 2 For college personnel from the second set of focus groups, focused on the strengths first-generation students bring to postsecondary education and the challenges they encounter while there; the types of services and supports provided to first-generation college students; and the broader context within which these services are provided;
- 3 For students from the second set of focus groups, focused on their experiences as first-generation students, their use of programming and services, and suggestions for improving those services; and
- 4 For employers, focused on career readiness and transition support for first-generation students.

The interview data was analyzed thematically, then the survey and interview data was synthesized into a single set of findings and analyses.

¹⁰ For four-year institutions, selectivity levels were determined using College's Board's acceptance rate and selectivity benchmarks to create two categories: selective (50% or lower acceptance rate), and broad-access (51% or higher acceptance rate) <https://counselors.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/pptbigfuturebuildbuildalist.pdf>



CONCLUSION

As institutions of higher education strive to equitably serve a growing and increasingly visible population of first-generation college students, the findings of this updated landscape analysis underscore both progress and persistent challenges. Through comprehensive data collection and stakeholder engagement, this series of research briefs provides a critical, nuanced view of the current state of first-generation student support. It is clear that while there is no singular approach to success, intentional, data-informed, and equity-driven strategies are essential. By uplifting the voices of practitioners and students alike, this work offers a roadmap for institutions committed to not only understanding but also transforming the postsecondary experience for first-generation students—ensuring they have the support needed to thrive in college, career, and life.

RESEARCH BRIEFS

1 First-generation College Students' Career Entry: College Perspectives

This brief explores the unique nature of first-generation college students' career development, how higher education institutions approach this topic, and areas to deepen and expand support to meet the needs of this population.

