FirstGen FORWARD

PHASE TWO ADVISORY™

RESEARCH BRIEF

First-generation College Students' Career Entry: College Perspectives

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About FirstGen Forward

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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

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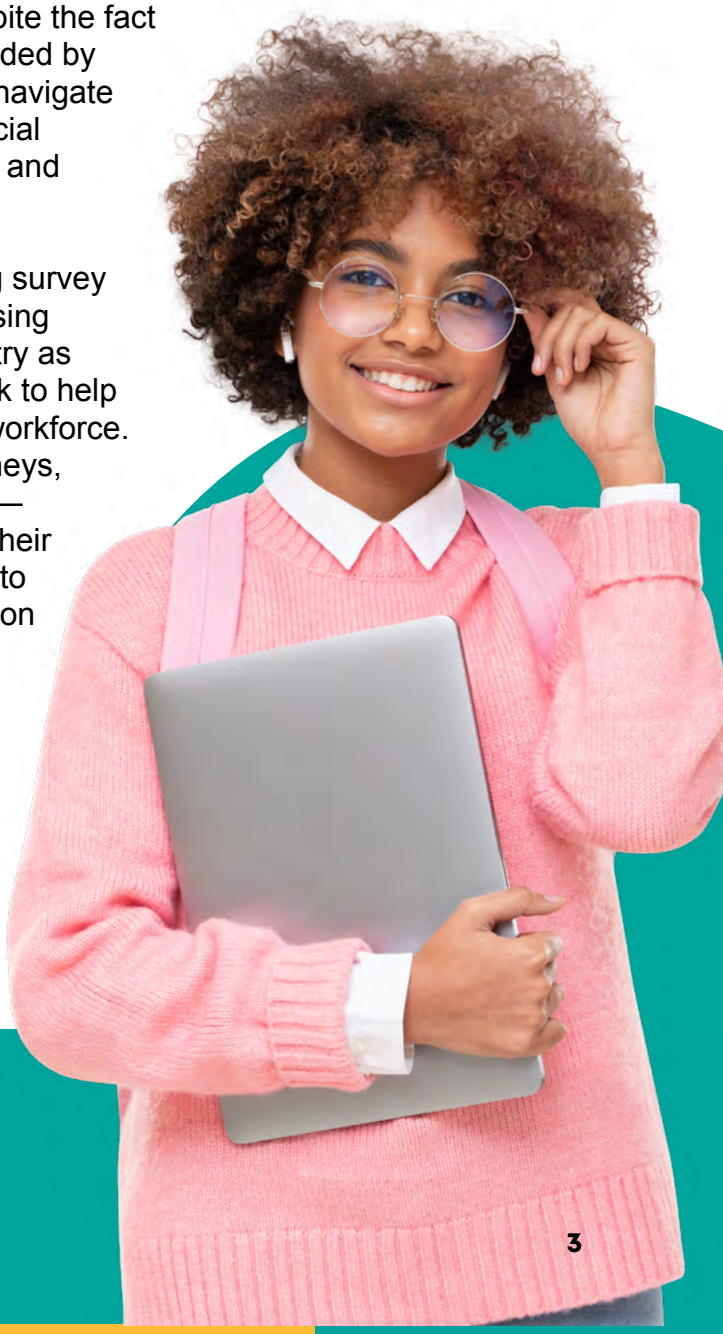
Phase Two Advisory works with colleges, foundations, and improvement networks to translate research evidence into equity-forward reform strategies. We provide strategic planning and implementation support, just-in-time research, and professional learning opportunities to leaders and practitioners throughout the higher education sector as they shepherd transformative change.

INTRODUCTION

Students go to college for many reasons—key among them to prepare for careers that will provide them with long-term economic stability. College is also an opportunity for social mobility, offering graduates access to new types of careers and career trajectories. In many ways, college provides first-generation (first-gen) students with the opportunity to become boundary crossers.[1] They move from one group of people, settings, and experiences into another.

Boundaries shape how we engage with the world, what information we value and have access to, how we view others and ourselves, and how we identify who we are similar to and where we belong. Much has been written about first-gen students' boundary-crossing experiences as they enter and proceed through higher education itself.[2] Yet, the literature is nearly silent on first-gen students' experiences specific to career development and potential for boundary crossing as they transition into their careers. This despite the fact that taking advantage of the career opportunities provided by higher education requires first-generation students to navigate environments with which their parents and existing social networks are unfamiliar—to cross occupational, class, and economic boundaries.

This brief begins to remedy this knowledge gap. Using survey and focus group data, we describe the boundary-crossing nature of first-gen students' career exploration and entry as well as the ways that higher education institutions seek to help students successfully navigate the transition into the workforce. Our research affirms that, much like their college journeys, first-generation students have unique career journeys—encompassing both assets and constraints that color their trajectories. While colleges use a variety of structures to provide first-gen students with career-related information and access to networking opportunities, they pay less attention to the socioemotional and cultural aspects inherent to boundary-crossing.



[1] "Boundary crossing" comes from a rich analytical tradition exploring the many ways that humans create groupings that help them make sense of the world while also establishing identifiable differences among those in different groups. See, for example, Ackerman, S. F., & Bakker, A. (2011). Boundary crossing and boundary objects. *Review of Educational Research,* 81.; Lamont, M., & Molnar, V. (2002). The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology,* 28.

[2] See, for example, Crucet, J. C. (2019). *My Time Among the Whites: Notes from an Unfinished Education*. Picador; Jack, A. A. (2019). *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges are Failing Disadvantaged Students.* Harvard University Press; Morton, J. M. (2019). *Moving Up without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility.* Princeton University Press. O'Shea, S. (2020). Crossing boundaries: Rethinking the ways that first-in-family students navigate 'barriers' to higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41.

We acknowledge that "first-generation college student" is defined in many ways, and often multiple definitions are in play even within the same institution. For this study, we let participants define "first-generation" in ways that were most meaningful to them and their context. For more information on first-generation definitions, see FirstGen Forward's reports on this topic.

METHODOLOGY

This brief draws from a national survey and focus groups with higher education practitioners. The survey was fielded between October 15 and December 2, 2024, and included 411 institutions across 47 states and the District of Columbia.[3] Public two-year, public four-year, and private, not-for-profit, four-year institutions are all represented in the survey respondents. Eighty-nine percent of respondents work directly with first-gen student initiatives and 72% identify as first-gen college grads themselves.

Six virtual focus groups were conducted with higher education practitioners who work directly with first-gen college students and are familiar with career development guidance and supports provided to first-generation college students. Eighteen individuals representing public two- and four-year and private, not-for-profit, four-year institutions from 13 states participated in 75-minute, semi-structured group discussions in December 2024 and January 2025. These individuals generally worked in college/university career centers or ran first-generation programs with a career development component.

Given our sampling methods, it is important to note that our findings reflect what practitioners at higher education institutions believe and with which they are familiar, not what students themselves say or what employers believe about first-generation college students' career readiness and success.

Quantitative survey answers were analyzed in Qualtrics. Focus group and write-in survey answers were coded and analyzed using Dedoose. In addition, given the structure of the survey, the number of responses varied by question. In this brief, when we share survey responses, we are reporting the percentage of respondents for each question (omitting non-responses). A full description of our sample and methodology can be found can be found in the Introduction.

[3] Note that while our sample is national, it is not nationally-representative due to oversampling of certain institution types.

THE UNIQUE NATURE OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT CAREER DEVELOPMENT

In different ways, the survey and focus group questionnaires asked higher education professionals about the strengths first-gen students bring to the career development process, the challenges they face, and the things they need for successful career entry. The data underscore that, for first-generation students, career entry is a boundary-crossing process.

First-gen students must rely heavily on college resources and mentors to help them navigate the unfamiliar spaces they encounter. As such, their journeys are different from those of continuing-generation students.

We have already noted that first-gen students cross boundaries when they enter higher education. In doing so, first-generation college students become skilled at entering, assessing, and learning to succeed in unfamiliar contexts. They become skilled code-switchers,[4] given that they already straddle college and home cultures.

These experiences help first-generation college students as they enter the workforce, given that navigating the world of work as a young professional is also a moment when individuals must learn about and straddle new cultures (that is, the culture of college versus the culture of work and distinct professions). A focus group participant explained,

> *"[They didn't] always have the social or cultural capital that the institution was looking for... And yet they have had resiliency and they have hustled in order to navigate this space. And I think that benefits students a lot as they're leaving the institution, and they're entering the work world in a more full-time capacity, that they have that experience of trying to navigate things that they're not familiar with or spaces that weren't necessarily created for them."*

Participants noted however, that first-gen students often need support seeing these previous experiences as career assets and require coaching to learn how to reframe them as such.

In addition, study participants indicated that first-generation college students are often particularly motivated by the promise of positive career outcomes—they intuitively understand the power a college degree confers in the labor market and are committed to leveraging that power. Often, they and/or their families have sacrificed for their college education, and they are acutely aware that they need to make good on those sacrifices.

This drive particularly works to the advantage of first-generation students once they enter the labor market. They know how to take initiative and are accustomed to taking risks, and their motivation makes them especially eager young professionals. Explained one focus group participant,

[4] "Code-switching" is when individuals shift between the language, behavior, and/or habits of different cultures as they move across different contexts.

"The ones who get to the end and then actually wind up in gainful employment, I think they continue to put themselves out there in a way that definitely bolsters their success. And then just kind of along with that is their willingness to be uncomfortable, because they were very uncomfortable when they started and they were able to be in that discomfort. But, nonetheless, they persisted."

Boundary crossing brings assets but also can bring challenges. Like most of us, first-gen students draw their understanding of "career" from what they see around them, notably the jobs and careers held by family members—which differ from the career options available to those holding college degrees. Thus, first-generation college students often need longer, more structured, and more intentional career exploration opportunities to help them understand the full range of options available to them within a given occupational sector. One focus group participant, who was himself a first-generation college student, explained the process of reenvisioning what careers look like by saying,

"I had a very linear idea, and so did my parents, about what careers were. You could be a teacher, you could be a nurse, you could go into business, you could be a police officer... I think that what I see also is that challenge of finding new careers ... Because you don't have other people that have told you about these different styles and types of careers that are available."

In short, first-generation college students need support exploring a wide range of "possible selves" in order to identify the range of career options that might fit their interests and skills. Moreover, they need opportunities to integrate those possible selves into their identities—to realize that newly-encountered careers are ones that people like them can enter and in which they can succeed. They need exposure to individuals who share their first-gen or other identities to make these possible selves seem like realistic options. One focus group participant eloquently summed up this challenge by saying,

"It's hard to imagine yourself somewhere that you've never been and that people you know have never been."

More practically, the boundary-crossing nature of first-generation college students' career journeys means that while they have robust social networks, those networks are typically situated outside of the career fields they seek to enter. Thus, they need additional support building social networks and gaining access to the types of jobs to which they aspire. In other words, whereas continuing-generation students may know individuals in career fields like biotechnology or arts administration, first-generation students often do not have access to such social networks. When asked "what first-generation college students need for career support," twenty percent of respondents who wrote in survey answers explicitly called for efforts to build social capital, including networking, mentoring, and internship opportunities. Focus group data are similar, but participants also noted that

students need both access to networks and skill-building around how to create, maintain, and leverage those networks.

Respondents also shared how boundary crossing brings myriad emotions and relational shifts. Our data indicate that, for many first-generation students, college is a family affair—students bring the expectations, hopes, and visions for the future of their parents, siblings, and extended family to college with them. One focus group participant stated,

> *"Their trajectory is going to maybe change the direction of their family trajectory."*

Often, those expectations mean that students limit their career exploration in order to enter well-known jobs quickly or struggle with sharing and explaining their new career aspirations to those they love. Said another participant,

> *"People are like, 'Okay, you're going to go to college and you're going to be successful because you're, you, know, the first one in our family. Therefore, I need you to do X career.' I've actually had students tell me, 'I'm doing this because I have to because I have to help pay my younger sibling's tuition' or 'I need to help my parents pay their mortgage.'"*

Navigating the tug of conflicting expectations is challenging in its own right; our data indicate that it brings a secondary challenge—the potential for loss, sadness, and stress, as new career opportunities, while exciting, can also mean leaving something behind. This mirrors other literature on first-generation college students, which emphasizes the cultural conflict felt by many students as they move through higher education.[5]

[5] Morton, J. M. (2019). *Moving up without losing your way: The ethical costs of upward mobility*. Princeton University Press.

CROSS-SECTOR DIFFERENCES

Most of our findings hold across sectors, with two- and four-year institutions raising similar considerations. Two exceptions stand out: Respondents from four-year institutions raised the possibility of feelings of loss and the need for asset-based framing much more often than their counterparts at public two-year institutions. Our data did not speak directly to why this is the case, but one possibility is that first-generation two-year college students, while socially and economically mobile, are likely to enter career trajectories closer in class location to their families of origin than are students in four-year institutions. As such, the leap from family status to college graduate career status may not be as wide—and thus may not be as fraught or as difficult to reframe. Obviously, this difference needs to be explored further, but it is reasonable to speculate that there is more potential for class dislocation when moving into the common career trajectories to which four-year institutions connect students.

COLLEGE APPROACHES TO SUPPORTING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS' CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Given the unique nature of first-generation college students' career development, it is important to understand how colleges support them. Our national sample provides insight into both the structure and content of career-related support. Importantly, findings are similar across the survey and focus groups, indicating that our data are a reliable representation of what practitioners know regarding their institution's career support offerings for first-generation college students.

It should be noted that, often, what is known varies across individuals within the same institution. That is to say, when we look at institutions with multiple survey respondents, we see that 71% had mixed answers. This indicates that there are pockets of knowledge on campuses—and while our survey likely captures the full range of offerings across institutions given the breadth of respondents, any one individual may not have a complete picture of their institution's offerings.

Colleges structure career-related support in a variety of ways. Across both survey and focus group datasets, our samples were evenly split between colleges that provide first-generation-specific career support and those that rely on general career services. Thirty-six percent of survey respondents indicated that their institution offers career programming specifically tailored for first-generation students; 43% indicate that they do not, with the rest being unsure. Two-year colleges offered tailored support at a much lower rate (25%) than the sample as a whole.

One-time workshops are the most commonly reported type of career support offered, with 52% of survey respondents indicating that their college offers them. Forty-three percent of respondents' institutions offer slightly longer-term support in the form of career workshop series, but only 33% of respondents indicated that their colleges offer sustained long-term career programming. This aligns with focus group respondents, who also indicated that for most first-generation college students, career-related supports are one-off activities.

With regard to the content of support provided, tailored support tends to focus on critical pieces of career-search-related information.[6] The most common content area was resume review (82%). General career readiness and internship workshops hovered around 70%. Sixty-eight percent of respondents offer financial literacy workshops, and 66% of respondents indicated that their colleges offer interview preparation.

[6] The survey only asked about tailored support, so we do not have information about the content of college-wide career services.

INTERNSHIPS

Many open-ended survey responses and focus group comments indicated that students need to practice career readiness, not just learn about it. They emphasize that workshops are useful, but what matters more are longer-term opportunities to explore and experience the workplace. To that end, internships came up regularly in both the open-ended responses to the survey question "What do students need?" as well as the focus groups. Responses were evenly distributed across sectors, indicating their importance to all types of first-generation college students.

Study participants indicated that internships help students explore career options, learn workplace norms, and build the social networks critical for strong career trajectories. They also were clear that internships, as currently structured, are often inaccessible for first-generation college students. Students need paid internships as well as financial support for clothing, headshots for LinkedIn profiles, housing, and transportation. Nearly half of the responses across datasets referring to internships also mentioned the need for financial support, as in this survey response: "I think funding is difficult and can prohibit some first-gens from taking advantage of unpaid internships. Paid internships are so few and far between."

DEEPENING CAREER SUPPORT FOR FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Although our data illustrate many ways that colleges provide career-related support to their students, they also highlight that there is more work to be done to reflect and meet the unique career development needs and boundary-crossing experiences of this population.

First, our qualitative data shine a bright light on a critical disconnect between what practitioners believe students need and the content they actually provide. Of the 201 write-in responses answering about specific skills or knowledge needed by first-gen students, the most common skill mentioned was interview preparation. Yet, the survey indicates that this is one of the less-commonly offered content areas (66%).

Moreover, qualitative data indicate that first-generation college students need help learning how to navigate the "hidden curriculum" of the job market. By this, respondents mean that first-generation students need to understand the unspoken rules of their potential careers, from expected dress codes to professional language to culturally-specific ways of asking for help and communicating with recruiters and supervisors. One focus group participant defined this knowledge as

> *...nuances to how one describes or writes about or speaks about oneself in social professional contexts and how to create and build a network. I believe those are learnable, teachable skills, but they are things that sometimes I've seen this population stumble with a little bit.*

Over one-third of focus group excerpts coded as "information and skills" were related to teaching the hidden curriculum, as were approximately 25% of interview open responses. Notably, open-ended survey responses doubled down on the importance of a very particular type of unspoken workplace rule—salary and benefits negotiation. These responses underscored the boundary-crossing nature of first-gen students' career trajectories by emphasizing that many first-generation college students often do not realize that offer letters and salaries can lead to conversations or even how to interpret the full package of benefits included in a job offer. They note that career support should help students learn this "insider" knowledge so that first-generation college students are not disadvantaged economically at the start of their career journeys.

Finally, our qualitative data sources call attention to the need to provide students with more than information—they need socioemotional support and the opportunity to build trusting relationships that can support them as they navigate difficult situations and the sometimes-fraught process of crossing boundaries. Though not the most prominent part of our data, the presence of these insights highlighted the commonness of

imposter syndrome,[7] loss, and cultural conflict among first-generation college students as they prepare to enter the workforce. Survey responses referred to the need for "emotional support in planning post-bac[calaureate] life," "opportunities to explore the hidden costs of career readiness and preparation," "how to handle imposter syndrome," and "breaking down internal messages around money and education, and potential changing dynamics with family and friends." Focus group participants noted that students who do not feel they belong are less likely to ask for help or advocate for themselves, thereby inhibiting their access to and transition into a wide range of job opportunities.

In short, the content of career support often does not reflect the unique and boundary-crossing nature of first-gen students' career journeys, as identified earlier in this brief. The content relies heavily on "traditional" job search needs without attending to the many ways that the boundary crossing needs to be supported and nurtured through teaching new forms of social and cultural capital and attention to feelings of dislocation and loss.

These findings also call into question the predominant structure of existing support, notably the heavy use of workshops and general programming uncovered in the survey. Helping students learn to navigate cultural disconnect, process feelings of discomfort or loss, and build a sense of belonging all take time. Long-term programmatic approaches, such as cohort programming and efforts to assign students individual career advisors early in their collegiate journeys, enable more in-depth socioemotional support. However, our survey data indicate long-term support structures are less common.

Shifting towards longer-term and more nuanced support can be resource-intensive. However, our dataset indicates that alumni are an under-utilized resource and could be leveraged to extend and deepen career support—while potentially building students' sense of belonging, expanding their possible selves, and providing additional socioemotional support. Approximately one-quarter of survey respondents indicated that they use first-generation college student alumni as mentors for current students, and a similar number use first-generation alumni to help identify internships and jobs.

Moreover, while alumni are perceived as effective mentors and entrees into networking, they are most commonly used as panel participants or as part of practice interview sessions. This is despite focus group participants' noting that creating job shadowing and mentoring opportunities that honor students' identities is a critical strategy. One participant explained that,

> ***"this approach matters because it builds networks, but also with intention on what that career is going to look like for someone who holds identities like yours. Because I think that does make a big difference."***

[7] "Imposter syndrome" refers to instances where individuals doubt that their accomplishments or sense of belonging despite evidence that they have and can be successful.

CONCLUSION

This brief highlights the boundary-crossing nature of career exploration and entry for first-generation college students. It also illustrates how colleges currently support these students' career journeys—primarily via workshops and job search-related support. We find that these supports could be enhanced and deepened by embedding more financial support, especially for internships, and focusing on helping students navigate the emotional and relational challenges of crossing class boundaries that often come as part of the first-generation college student career journey.

As such, we find that colleges seeking to enhance their career support for first-generation college students should build longer-term and more relational approaches. Doing so would enable them to provide necessary content while scaffolding students' career exploration in ways that help them navigate challenges as they arise while also building trust, a sense of belonging, and new "possible selves." Colleges would also be wise to lean on their first-generation alumni to help them engage in such approaches, given that alumni are currently under-utilized but particularly effective mentors and cultural navigators.

Finally, it is important to note that our data rely on the perceptions of those who work within higher education institutions. While these personnel often regularly meet with employers, we do not have the perspectives of the employers and students themselves. Understanding these perspectives, and particularly the alignment between college offerings and employer needs, is a critical next step in deepening and enhancing the career-related support offered to first-generation college students.

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