CENTER FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT SUCCESS

AN INITIATIVE OF NASPA AND THE SUDER FOUNDATION

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGES:

A NATIONAL EXPLORATION OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT PRACTICES

November 2020

Melinda Mechur Karp, PhD
Maria Cormier, PhD
Phase Two Advisory

Sarah E. Whitley, PhD
Sarah M. Umbarger-Wells
Center for First-generation Student Success, NASPA

Alexis Wesaw
NASPA

NASPA
Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education

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The Center for First-generation Student Success, an initiative of NASPA and The Suder Foundation, is the premier source of evidence-based practices, professional development, and knowledge creation for the higher education community to advance the success of first-generation students. Based in Washington, D.C., the Center 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 intended to improve first-generation initiatives across higher education.

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In preparation for this study, we sought the advice and support of our colleagues from Achieving the Dream and the American Association of Community Colleges as experts on this sector of higher education. We are sincerely grateful to Dr. Karen A. Stout, president and CEO, Achieving the Dream; Dr. Walter Bumphus, president and CEO, American Association of Community Colleges; and the talented staff at each organization for their contributions.

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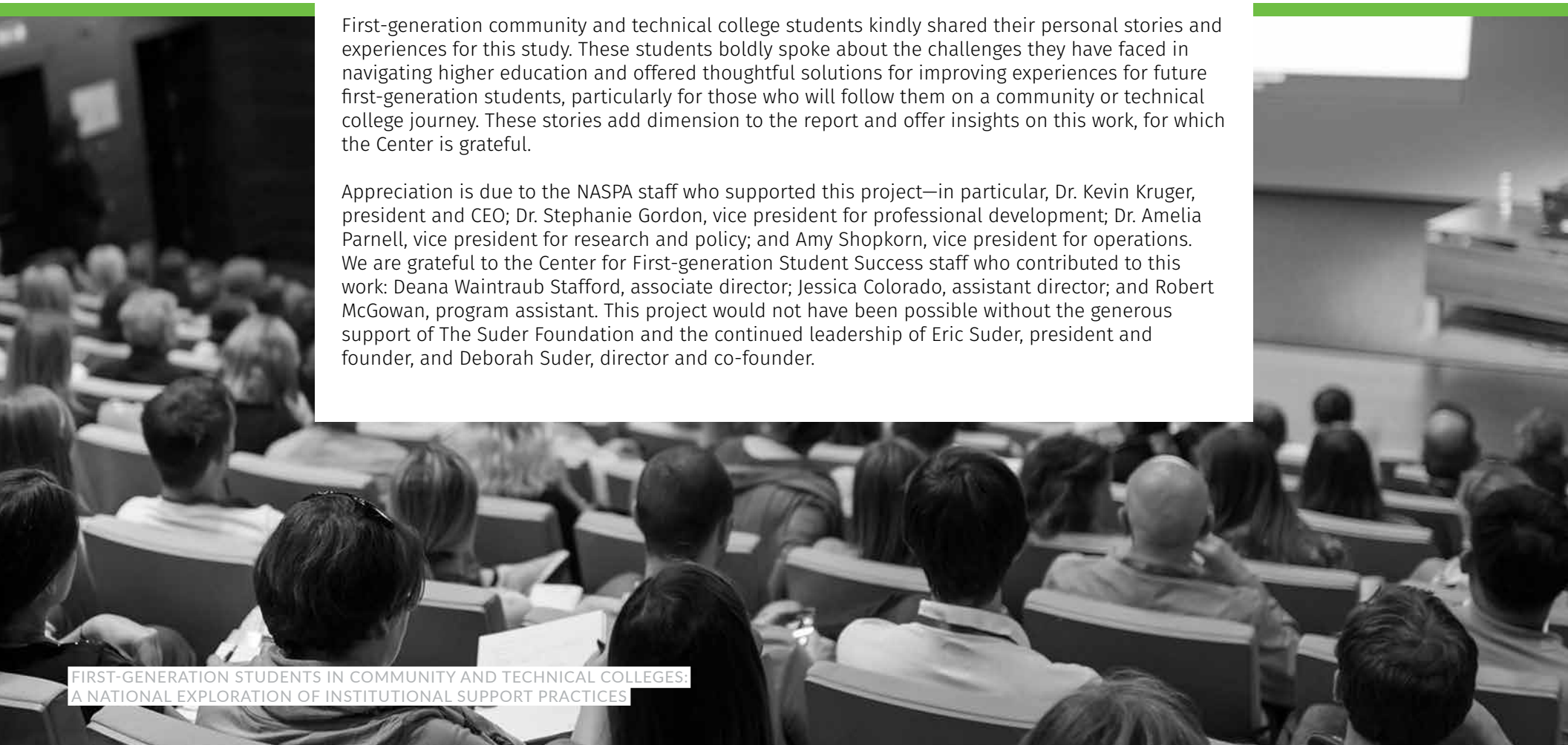
First-generation community and technical college students kindly shared their personal stories and experiences for this study. These students boldly spoke about the challenges they have faced in navigating higher education and offered thoughtful solutions for improving experiences for future first-generation students, particularly for those who will follow them on a community or technical college journey. These stories add dimension to the report and offer insights on this work, for which the Center is grateful.

Appreciation is due to the NASPA staff who supported this project—in particular, Dr. Kevin Kruger, president and CEO; Dr. Stephanie Gordon, vice president for professional development; Dr. Amelia Parnell, vice president for research and policy; and Amy Shopkorn, vice president for operations. We are grateful to the Center for First-generation Student Success staff who contributed to this work: Deana Waintraub Stafford, associate director; Jessica Colorado, assistant director; and Robert McGowan, program assistant. This project would not have been possible without the generous support of The Suder Foundation and the continued leadership of Eric Suder, president and founder, and Deborah Suder, director and co-founder.



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INTRODUCTION

The Center for First-generation Student Success, an initiative of NASPA and The Suder Foundation, was established in 2017 to serve as the premier source of evidence-based practices, professional development, and knowledge creation for the higher education community and to drive innovation and advocacy for the success of first-generation students. In late 2017, Center staff launched a national landscape analysis of first-generation college students attending institutions across higher education sectors. Through early data collection, the research team quickly realized that serving first-generation students at community and technical colleges differs dramatically from doing so at 4-year or baccalaureate institutions and that this nuance deserved intentional focus. Moreover, a scan of the data collected at the time showed that nearly all submissions reflected the experiences of 4-year institutions. Through consultation with Center staff and key stakeholders, the research team decided to move forward with a study specific to 4-year institutions, with a commitment to producing a study on community and technical colleges soon after.

To understand the current state of first-generation student support programs and services at community and technical colleges across the United States, in 2019 the Center partnered with Phase Two Advisory to interview institution leaders, administrators, student services staff, and first-generation students and collect data from a national survey.[1] We share the findings in this report. We identify three interrelated trends in how community and technical colleges identify and support first-generation students: Identifying first-generation students is complicated; first-generation students bring substantial strengths to their community and technical colleges; and 2-year colleges support first-generation students in multiple ways.

From the outset, the intention of this exploration of first-generation students in community and technical colleges has been to help you understand how stakeholders work to meet the needs of first-generation students, and how first-generation students themselves experience and appraise those efforts. To help you and the broader community of practitioners, educators, and advocates who focus on first-generation students daily and with great passion, we provide concrete recommendations at the end of each section. Together, the insights and lessons presented in this report can help institutions refine their support practices or provide actionable ideas to elevate first-generation initiatives in environments where all students benefit.

[1] The full methodology for this study is provided in the appendix of this report.

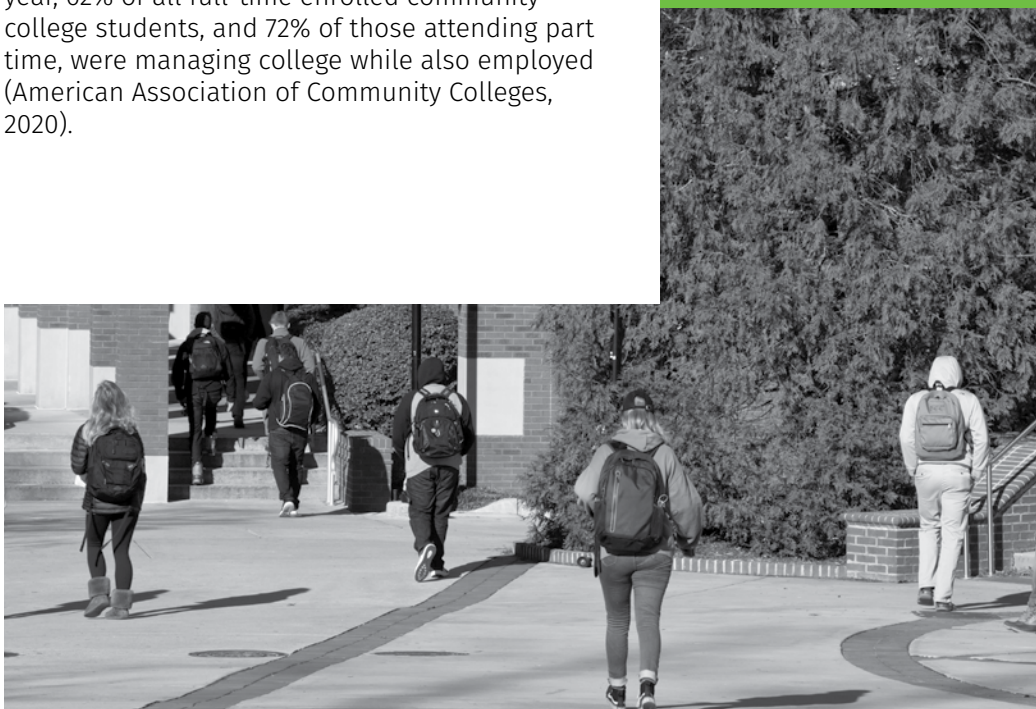
COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGES

Community and technical colleges are critically important in American society and are central to the mission of higher education, as well as the United States' ambitious college completion goals. These 1,000-plus institutions—located in nearly every community in the United States—are publicly funded, offer associate degrees and certificates,[2] and help students connect to both technical and liberal arts or transfer-focused programs of study.

Through open admissions policies, comparatively lower tuition, geographic proximity to home communities, and flexible opportunities for those with employment or family commitments, community and technical colleges offer an invaluable pathway to postsecondary education, often for students otherwise unlikely to enroll in higher education. In fall 2018, community college students represented 41% of all enrolled undergraduates in the United States with more than 6 million credit-seeking and over 5 million non-credit-seeking students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). During the same academic year, the more than 1,100 community and technical colleges located across the United States awarded over 852,000 associate degrees and over 579,000 certificates (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), thus significantly contributing to growing an educated U.S. workforce.

Given their access mission, community colleges typically enroll large numbers of low-income, older, parenting, and working students (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). In 2017, 44% of all enrolled Hispanic students and 35% of all enrolled Black students were attending community and technical colleges (Shapiro et al., 2017). Approximately half of dependent students with annual family incomes below $30,000 started at community colleges during the 2011–2012 academic year (Skomsvold, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). During the 2015–2016 academic year, 62% of all full-time enrolled community college students, and 72% of those attending part time, were managing college while also employed (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020).

[2] Some community colleges also offer bachelor's degrees, usually in a small number of technical or economically relevant programs.



STUDENT VOICES

My mom got a GED and now my brother wants a GED. I was paying bills at 16 and now I'm here [in community college]. It's no shame, but it's a cycle that has to be broken, and that's why I'm here. *(North Carolina)*[3]

The access to higher education provided by community colleges is critical at the individual and the societal level. Community college graduates who earn an associate degree make, on average, $10,000 more per year than those with only a high school diploma and nearly $20,000 more than those who stop out prior to high school graduation. Higher education also correlates with better health, greater civic participation, and more tax dollars (Baum et al., 2013). Federal and state education attainment goals (e.g., the Lumina Foundation's Goal 2025 and Tennessee's Drive to 55) rely on the expanded access to postsecondary education provided by community colleges.

Despite their benefits, historically, completion rates within the public 2-year sector have been low. Of students who entered a public 2-year college in 2013, 41% had earned a credential 6 years later, compared with 67% of those who entered a public 4-year institution (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). To address this completion challenge, the community and technical college sector has been engaged in comprehensive redesign over the past 15 years.

Informed by research and insights from successful programs supporting first-generation, minoritized, and low-income students; behavioral economics; and the psychology of learning, the community college sector has begun to engage in comprehensive redesign in order to improve student outcomes (see, e.g., Bailey et al., 2015). For example, because research suggests that intentional practices such as proactive academic advising; special cohort programs that remove barriers and create community; coaching; and mentoring can improve success for first-generation students (Bettinger & Baker, 2011; Engle & Tinto, 2008), community colleges have sought to expand these approaches. Importantly, they are seeking to move beyond small, boutique programs to a more comprehensive and institutional approach that touches all aspects of the student experience—from admissions to the classroom, and from advising to workforce preparation.

[3] Throughout, we indicate the state where student participants were enrolled in community or technical college at the time of data collection. This is intended to preserve confidentiality while providing the reader with contextual information.

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES

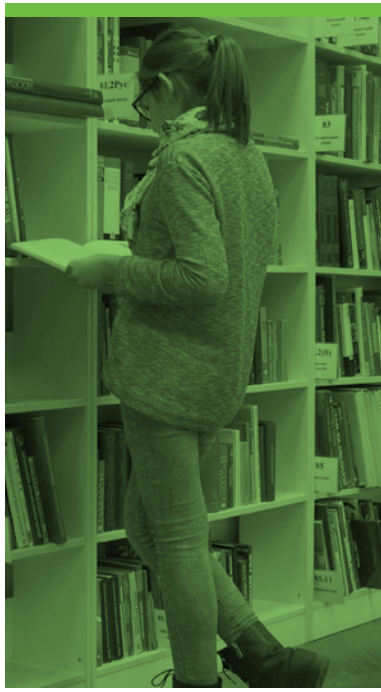
First-generation students are an integral part of the fabric of community colleges.[4] Nearly three quarters of new associate degree seekers in 2011–2012 were first-generation students, meaning they came from families in which the highest educational level of their parents was lower than a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). In fact, among students who first enrolled in college during the 2011–2012 school year, 38% of enrollees in public 2-year institutions had parents for whom a high school diploma was their highest degree earned. Among public 4-year enrollees, 22% had parents with a high school diploma or less (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

First-generation students are less likely than non-first generation students to enroll in higher education, across all sectors (Cataldi et al., 2018). Those who do enroll are less likely than other populations to complete a credential, a trend seen in community and technical colleges. Among students who entered public 2-year institutions in 2003, 49% of first-generation students had earned a degree or were still enrolled after 6 years, compared with more than 57% of students whose parents had at least some college (Cataldi et al., 2018).

Challenges to completion start early for first-generation students: 10% of certificate seekers and 13% of associate degree seekers who entered college in 2003–2004 departed community college without a credential after the first year and did not enroll again (RTI International, 2019). Research tells us that first-generation status creates unique challenges in part because parental education is often correlated with degree attainment. After controlling for factors such as family income and academic preparation, parental education remains a significant factor in first-generation student persistence and degree completion across all institutional types (Choy, 2001). Many first-generation students face significant hurdles to accessing, financing, and completing higher education (Stephens et al., 2012; Woosley & Shepler, 2011) due to not possessing the cultural capital of their parents' college-going experience as a resource (Atherton, 2014; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

When we launched this study in summer 2019, we felt urgency to elevate the experiences of first-generation students within the community college sector. Their overrepresentation in the sector means that if higher education is going to support first-generation student success, it needs to do so in public 2-year institutions. The corollary is also true: First-generation students' success will increase the overall success of community colleges.

We also recognized that community colleges continually face a tension between high-touch, high-intensity programming and a near-constant state of budget constraint. Many effective approaches are expensive, but community colleges typically receive less state funding per equivalent student than do their counterparts (The Institute for College Access & Success, 2019; Kahlenberg et al., 2018). States have



[4] As discussed in the findings section of this report, defining *first-generation student* is not a straightforward task. In this section, we use the definition used by the author of the reports we are citing. Wherever possible, we clarify those authors' definitions and criteria for first-generation student status.

also divested more rapidly from community colleges than from their 4-year counterparts. According to The Century Foundation, per-student spending on public 4-year institutions increased 16% between 2003–04 and 2013–14 but only 4% within the public 2-year sector (Kahlenberg et al., 2018). Thus, community colleges must find ways to support students with a high level of need, including first-generation students, while paying attention to efficiencies and working within budgetary constraints.

There is also emerging evidence that common community college reforms, although effectively increasing overall success, are not closing key equity gaps (Jenkins, Brown, et al., 2018; National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). Many of these reforms do not explicitly call out the needs of student subpopulations, even as they draw from research on programs that support those students elsewhere. It is therefore important for stakeholders to understand how community and technical colleges are serving populations like first-generation students within their current reform context. This study is a step toward doing so.

As we were completing this report, the COVID-19 pandemic upended the world, including higher education. To combat the spread of the virus, in spring 2020 most community colleges closed their doors and moved instruction and services online. In so doing, the challenges faced by first-generation community college students, as well as the programs that and practitioners who support them, were thrown in stark relief and laid bare.

Numerous surveys indicate that students, particularly those from low-income, parenting, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), and/or first-generation families, have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic (Blankstein et al., 2020; Osborne, 2020; Student Senate for California Community Colleges, 2020). First-generation students with an intersectional low-income identity often face transportation issues or food insecurity, and may lack access to reliable internet access and the necessary technology for online instruction (Center for First-generation Student Success, 2020). Online learning also presents challenges for first-generation students returning to home environments unfamiliar with the behaviors and habits required to complete college academics. These challenges are compounded by the family and work financial obligations that many first-generation students face.

At the institutional level, the pandemic has exacerbated colleges' existing financial shortfalls and created much economic uncertainty going forward. Community colleges have invested substantial resources into supporting their students, from purchasing additional laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots to expanding professional development for virtual learning. Federal investment has not kept pace. The CARES Act reimbursed colleges by full-time equivalency rather than headcount, leaving community colleges and their part-time students disproportionately underfunded (Miller, 2020). Given widespread fears over state budget shortfalls, future funding for community colleges and their students is also at risk.

The pandemic's financial fallout makes it all the more imperative for colleges to think strategically about how to support first-generation students. As this report details, effectively serving first-generation students often requires resource-intensive programs and supports. Many colleges already struggle to find funds and staff to support the full range of first-generation students on campus. Our findings provide provocative insight into the tension between targeted supports and scaled (often less expensive) ones. Balancing budgets and student needs will become more critical as colleges face a looming economic recession.

The remainder of this report situates the first-generation student experience in a community and technical college context followed by the findings.

FINDING 1: IDENTIFYING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IS COMPLICATED

Prior research reveals wide variation in how colleges define *first-generation students* (Toutkoushian et al., 2018; Whitley et al., 2018). The definition a college applies to this population influences both student access to services and assessments of first-generation student outcomes (Toutkoushian et al., 2019), so it is important to understand the full range of definitions and mechanisms institutions use.

To support first-generation students, institutions must know who those students are, which ideally involves a two-fold process. First, campuses must determine which type of student "qualifies" as first-generation by defining this population and developing criteria for inclusion. Second, campuses must develop mechanisms for identifying students who meet the established *first-generation* definition. Thus, our institutional survey and interview protocols explored how community colleges define *first-generation student* and the mechanisms they have in place for identifying this population on their campuses.

IDENTIFYING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

1 *Define the population.* By what criteria are first-generation students defined? How will these criteria be applied?

2 *Develop identification mechanisms.* At what point will students be identified? Through what data sources? How will those data be used and shared?

DEFINING *FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS*

Over half of surveyed colleges (58%) reported having a formal definition for *first-generation students*. Twenty-nine percent reported having no definition, and 13% were unsure if an institutional definition exists, as shown in Table 1.

T01 | Percentage of Institutions with a Formal Definition of *First-generation Student*

Response	Community colleges (*N* = 144)	4-year institutions (*N* = 273)
No	29%	15%
Yes	58%	73%
Don't know	13%	12%

Among community colleges that reported having a formal definition, 35% define *first-generation college students* as those for whom neither parent earned a 4-year college degree, which is the default definition used by federal programs (Higher Education Act of 1965, 1998). Another 38% define these students as those for whom neither parent nor guardian has earned a 4-year college degree. Thus, in total, 73% of responding community colleges consider students whose parents or guardians did not earn a 4-year degree to be first-generation, a higher percentage than for 4-year institutions that adhere to these two formal definitions (68%).

The two common definitions do not consider earning an associate's degree as having earned a college degree. Consequently, students with parents who earned an associate as their highest degree are considered first-generation college students. The two common definitions are also more expansive than the one used by 15% of community colleges, which requires neither parent to have entered higher education for a student to be considered first-generation. In addition, although less prevalent compared with other definitions, some community colleges also consider whether students' parents and guardians attended college in the United States. In doing so, colleges acknowledge that some students' parents and guardians may have attended college outside of the country, an issue 4-year institutions are also grappling with.

T02 | Institutional definition of *First-generation Student* (*N* = 74)

Definition	Percentage
Neither parent or guardian earned a 4-year college degree	38%
Neither parent earned a 4-year college degree	35%
Neither parent entered any form of higher education	15%
Other	5%
Neither parent earned a 4-year college degree from an institution in the United States	3%
Neither parent completed education beyond the associate/2-year degree	3%
Neither parent or guardian with primary influence on a student at age 16 earned 4-year degree	1%

Table 2 illustrates the varying formal definitions used by community and technical colleges that report having a formal definition in the survey. Most interviewee respondents shared that their campus has a formal definition of *first-generation college student*. However, further discussion within the interviews highlighted the degree of nuance hidden by these definitions. Despite working with 2-year college students, most respondents indicated that the 4-year degree criteria stipulated in the federal definition should be applied to students attending 2-year colleges. When asked why they believed the 4-year criteria should be applied to 2-year students, respondents explained that using a 4-year degree benchmark makes sense given that the majority of community college students intend to transfer to a 4-year institution and the likelihood that a bachelor's degree would break the first-generation college student cycle.

COE, TRIO, AND THE FEDERAL DEFINITION OF *FIRST-GENERATION*

The term *first-generation* entered the legislative lexicon as part of H.R. 5192: Education Amendments of 1980 after being coined by the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE), a Washington, D.C.–based association that champions federal TRIO and educational opportunity programs. The term was intended to identify underserved students, like those from low-income, racial minority, or rural backgrounds, who did not have the benefits of navigational capital and college-going knowledge because their parents did not complete a 4-year college degree.

Since 1980, the definition of *first-generation* has evolved as higher education has expanded and enrollment diversified. Although many institutions rely on the federal or legislative definition affiliated with the 1980 amendments and TRIO programs, variations have emerged for specific programs and research, and to meet the population's specific needs. The U.S. Department of Education offers three definitions: the aforementioned legislative definition and two that are specific to research. The primary research definition captures a narrower set of students—only those whose parents have no postsecondary experience whatsoever. This definition excludes students whose parents began college but did not obtain degrees, or those who obtained associate degrees. The Department of Education's third definition goes even further, delineating between students whose parents obtained high school diplomas and those who stopped out before high school graduation. Still, other definitions are often used. University of Georgia education professor Robert K. Toutkoushian, using data from a longitudinal study begun in 2002, analyzed eight different definitions of the term. Within a sample of 7,300 students, those who could be called first-generation ranged from 22% to 77% (Toutkoushian et al., 2018).

Interviewees indicated that family experience in the 2-year sector may be insufficient in helping students achieve their 4-year degree goals. Even if family experience supports success in attaining an associate degree, transfer students may be disadvantaged down the line, once they enter a 4-year institution. According to a student services staff member at a technical college,

> I think the other piece is [there is] such a difference between the associate degree and the bachelor's degree. . . . That experience is totally different for students. And while a parent may have some kind of technical or associate degree, the differences they experienced from being on the 2-year or a 4-year campus is so large and that learning gap is so large. I look at that as a student is still first-gen because that parent or that guardian hasn't had that 4-year experience. *(Ohio)*[5]

Variation in family structure was an additional concern among interviewees. Like many students who attend 4-year institutions, not all community college students have both of their parents or guardians in their lives. As an interviewee pointed out, "If only one of your parents went to college, with family structures being what they are these days—you may need to report a parent for FAFSA[6], but that's not the person who supports you day to day" (Colorado). Moreover, given some families' inability to pass down social and cultural capital, interviewees pointed out that some students with college-educated parents are functionally first-generation in terms of their knowledge and navigational support. In other words, students may not "officially" be first-generation, but they may still lack access to the navigational and cultural supports provided by a parent with college-going experience.

The complexity of first-generation status is even starker among immigrant families. Although some parents or guardians meet the traditional *first-generation* definition, others come to the United States with college experience outside of this country. In these instances, interviewees noted that immigrant college-educated parents often are unable to help their children navigate the complexities of the American higher education system. An interviewee explained,

> We serve a lot of immigrant families. And someone could have been an engineer in a different country but start over here and be a janitor. It's similar to students being first-gen, in that the parents may not know the frameworks in the U.S. or have the time to have the conversations with their kids because of job demands. *(Utah)*

Despite these nuances, nearly three quarters of community colleges reported using a consistent formal definition of *first-generation students* across programs and services. Of respondents, 13% reported their institution has multiple definitions and another 13% were unsure. However, interviewees implied that, in practice, multiple definitions are actually used more commonly than survey responses indicate.

[5] Throughout, we indicate participants' state of employment to preserve confidentiality while providing the reader with contextual information.

[6] Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which is the form used to apply for financial aid

Seventeen of 33 interviewees indicated that an alternative, often informal, definition is used on campus at least some of the time, usually for programs not funded by federal dollars.[7] This gives colleges leeway to serve as many students as possible, without running afoul of funding mandates. An interviewee from Colorado explained that her college follows the federal guidelines for defining *first-generation students*, but in the areas it has control over (such as grant-funded initiatives), it prefers to use broader definitions in order to help as many students as possible.

Many interviewees pointed out that a single definition of *first-generation* may not reflect today's community college student, emphasizing that first-generation students are not a monolithic group. Although they may disproportionately come from minoritized backgrounds, not all of them do so; similarly, though many have financial struggles, not all of them are financially disadvantaged. Using broader definitions where possible, therefore, allows community colleges to address students' multiple identities. For instance, stakeholders indicated that a broader definition allows them to focus on the underlying needs of first-generation students, rather than on specific family structures:

> We may have an official definition. But in our program informally, we're really talking about students who don't have an asset at home of experience from a parent or guardian to help them navigate the system. They are traversing that on their own, with the assistance of high school and us but not parents, guardians, or someone at home who has gone through the experience. *(California)*

Using multiple definitions in this way means that students are also able to choose which supports meet their needs, based on the identity most salient to them. Because first-generation students are also often students of color, veterans, returning adult learners, or myriad other identities, this approach allows them to find programming that works for their circumstances. A stakeholder in Arizona explained that students at his institution "opt into" first-generation supports, allowing them to identify in ways and with programs that feel comfortable to them. He said, "If they identify that way, then that works for us." According to the stakeholder, this approach minimizes bureaucratic processes that may prevent students from receiving services.

[7] As discussed later in this report, community colleges support first-generation students through multiple program structures; some have more stringent funding and definitional requirements than do others.

IDENTIFYING FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Once colleges define who will be included in their population of first-generation students, they must determine how they will find out which students meet the criteria. To do this, they must engage in an array of decisions about when students will report their family background, through what mechanisms, and how the data will be used. Nearly all community colleges surveyed attempt to collect data on first-generation status in some way; only 16% of responding colleges indicated that they do not ask for this information.

Surveyed colleges reported a range of opportunities for students to self-identify as a first-generation college student, usually during the matriculation process. Of surveyed colleges, 58% ask students on the admissions application, 17% on a student questionnaire during the enrollment process, and 43% when completing the FAFSA. In addition, 36% of colleges reported asking students to self-identify on applications for special programs or support services (see Table 3). These methods are not mutually exclusive; most colleges appear to ask students in more than one way or at more than one time.

T03 | Opportunities for Students to Self-Identify as First-Generation

Opportunity	Percentage	Total
On the application for admission or The Common Application	58%	121
When completing the FAFSA	43%	121
On an application for a program or support service	36%	121
On a student questionnaire during the enrollment process	17%	121
We do not ask students to identify as first-generation	16%	121
On a student questionnaire once a student has arrived on campus	8%	121
Other	8%	121

Note. Percentages total more than 100%, as respondents were allowed to "select all that apply."

As with defining *first-generation students*, interviews revealed more nuance around how institutions collect data on and identify first-generation students. Across responses, it is clear that community colleges struggle to collect accurate data on first-generation students, despite the myriad approaches in use. Few interviewees felt confident in their college's ability to accurately identify and count first-generation students. In particular, the definitional complexity described above exacerbates data collection challenges. Interviewees indicated that formal definitions are often confusing to students. For example, interviewees who reported that their college uses the formal FAFSA definition noted that students sometimes misinterpret or conflate the differences between having both parents and/or guardians attend, as opposed to graduate from, college.

Staff also find the definitions confusing. For example, when asked to describe how her institution identifies first-generation college students, a respondent in New Jersey whose campus relies on self-reported FAFSA data stated, "If you are the first in your family to go to college, you'd be identified." The reality, however, is that "first in the family to go" would exclude students whose parents attended but did not graduate, even though those students are still considered first-generation under the federal definition. Furthermore, a common concern with the use of "first in the family" is that students frequently do not self-report as first-generation if older siblings or relatives attended college, because they believe they are no longer eligible for this status. An Ohio-based student services staff member realized her own first-generation identity during an interview and shared that she never completely understood the definition used by the college but, in talking about it, came to realize she is likely first-generation just like her students.

Interviewees indicated that reliance on self-reported data, particularly from the FAFSA, leads to inaccurate counts. For instance, many students do not complete the FAFSA, making it an incomplete measure of first-generation student enrollment on a campus. Moreover, first-generation students may not self-identify if they do not understand the definition. As such, applicants to special programs may be a self-selected group because only those who realize they are eligible apply. Their data cannot be generalizable to the campus population at large as a result.

Finally, even when data are collected, they are not universally shared or used across the institution, according to survey results. For example, 53% of survey respondents indicated that data regarding first-generation students are not easy to access. Interviewees reported that not all colleges permit FAFSA data to be shared with offices outside of financial aid, limiting data access for student services staff. They also reported that questions regarding first-generation status asked across data collection sources are not always connected to one another or even reported in the student information system, further limiting access to practitioners.

STUDENT VOICES

I didn't even know I was first-generation until, like, last semester because my parents never actually told me they didn't go to college. Everyone in my family just always told me to go to college, so I guess I just didn't really realize it or know it was a thing that mattered. *(Florida)*

For example, one interviewee noted that their college asks about first-generation status on its application, but that students might not understand what the question means. Thus, the college asks the question again as part of its TRIO application, where it can clarify the definition. However, this means that only students who are applying to TRIO are accurately categorized as first-generation, not students on campus as a whole.

As a result of these data collection challenges, many interviewees indicated that they do not always feel confident in the reported number of first-generation students, or in their ability to strategically reach out to all of these students. One respondent, from California, said it would be helpful to have consistent data: "It needs to [be part of] the admissions application so we are all on the same page. We don't have a specific [way] to track data for first-generation students." Many respondents suggested a need for more consistent information collection and access.

Overall, survey and interview data indicate that most colleges have a formal definition of *first-generation students*, but that definition does not always reflect the complicated reality of the community college student population. Moreover, definitional confusion and lack of consistent data sources may lead campuses to undercount first-generation student enrollment and hamper outreach to all students for whom targeted supports may be appropriate. To ensure that all students who need support receive it, expansive ways of defining this population must be considered. Students who self-identify as a first-generation college student may not fit the federal or institutional definition, but they are often traversing the college experience without parental or guardian college experience to help them navigate. This has implications for how the college can best serve students and provide tailored supports.

LESSONS LEARNED

- ***Establish a clear* first-generation *definition and use it consistently.*** Varying definitions of *first-generation status* make it difficult for institutions to benchmark data against other institutions or even compare notes among stakeholders on the same campus. Consider the specific characteristics of your institution's first-generation students when formalizing a definition and then set systems in place for the formal definition to be used consistently across programs and services. This definition should be clear and concise to encourage self-reporting. To facilitate this process, colleges should consider establishing a first-generation task force or steering committee responsible for establishing a common definition that accounts for student demographics, how information is collected, and how it is disseminated. These committees should include first-generation students in addition to student services staff, faculty, and administrators.

- ***Although federally recognized and theoretically universal, the FAFSA may not be the best tool for collecting data on first-generation students.*** The FAFSA definition of *first-generation* is narrow and hard to interpret. Moreover, the FAFSA is not universally completed. Thus, many first-generation students are not captured by FAFSA data. Moreover, FAFSA information is often some of the most protected at an institution, which makes data sharing and use more challenging. Colleges should take into account the potential limitations of using this data source and consider how to bridge knowledge gaps by partnering FAFSA data with other sources, such as admissions data and intake surveys. Colleges may also want to expand their definition and use the narrower FAFSA definition for federally funded programs only.

- ***Students often find the language used in admissions applications and other data collection sources confusing.*** Examining the questions asked and language used on recruitment and data collection documents, as well as providing training for front-line staff on definitions, could help students self-identify more effectively. Clearly explaining the definition of *first-generation* directly on the admissions application is key. Care should be taken to make sure questions align with the actual definition chosen and the definition is used consistently across the institution. Much of the work required to define and message the definition to students needs to happen in the recruitment and precollege phases, to build students' sense of comfort and understanding with the identity and to boost self-reporting. For some students, answering a question about their family may be uncomfortable, and the extra effort to clarify the question(s) may be critical to completion.

LESSONS LEARNED

***Students do not always see themselves in the term* first-generation.** Finding alternate ways to explain to students what it means to be first-generation can help them self-identify more effectively. For example, awareness campaigns and campuswide celebration days can support efforts to clarify definitional language and encourage targeted students to see themselves in the term. Creating comprehensive institutional webpages for both students and their families can be critical resources in the admission and matriculation processes. Take care to use asset-based language that frames the first-generation identity as one of pride rather than hardship. For community and technical colleges, create partnerships with local high schools to grow understanding of the first-generation identity prior to enrollment and make clear how first-generation students can succeed at your institution. A simple, yet highly effective, step is encouraging faculty, staff, and students to self-identify as first-generation if that identity applies to them. For those still grappling with their identity, seeing other first-generation community members offers an important point of connection and symbol of belonging and success.

Make data collection a priority. Interviewees were clear that not having accurate data hampers their efforts to support first-generation students. Without a clear sense of who qualifies for programs and services, they worry they are missing those who could benefit. They are also stymied in working across campus departments if data are not shared. Moreover, without accurate data, it is harder to make the case that first-generation students are a population worth explicitly investing in. Even for campuses that seek to serve all students through their support offerings, having a clear determination of who is first-generation and by what definition offers an opportunity to target marketing and gain a greater understanding of student needs. Making clear decisions on how data gets stored in the admissions processes and ultimately translated to student information systems will improve student support.

FINDING 2: FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS BRING SUBSTANTIAL STRENGTHS TO THEIR COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGES

Higher education literature often highlights the struggles first-generation students face in the college-going process, including inability to afford attendance, tendencies to stop out, and potential lack of academic preparation for university-level studies upon arrival. As a result, first-generation student experiences are too often perceived as shortcomings or detriments by institutional leaders who have perpetuated negative connotations and provided only reactive or limited support. However, findings from our study suggest those perceptions are changing.

Resilience, ambition, a track record of beating the odds, and fresh viewpoints that enhance the broader academic community are all qualities that community college educators emphasized when talking about first-generation students. This perspective echoes findings from the Center's landscape report on 4-year institutions. Moreover, community college educators recognize the positive intergenerational impact of attending college and the ability of a college degree to improve students' economic circumstances.

In working with first-generation students, student services personnel indicate that it is critical to acknowledge and build on the strengths these students bring to institutions and their learning. These strengths can be leveraged to help propel first-generation students to academic success. A number of such strengths emerged through interviews with college administrators and student services staff.[8] Most notably, respondents described how first-generation students are resilient and persistent, having had to navigate multiple barriers and structures just to enroll in and attend college. As one respondent stated, "There is a level of persistence from them [first-generation students] that allows them to step into the unknown and make something of it and be successful" (Florida). Related to this tenacity is their self-sufficiency; first-generation students often have had to figure out how to become successful students on their own, and bring that resourcefulness to campus. These characteristics are assets when navigating higher education and engaging in the pursuit of a college education.

An implicit theme in many interviews was the bravery of first-generation students. First-generation college students are doing something no one else in their family has done, and this involves a certain level of courage not always seen in other students. One interviewee (Colorado) said, "I see them as warriors. . . . [They] are breaking the chain for a better life." Another interviewee (California) emphasized the risk taking first-generation students embark on as they navigate college.

STUDENT VOICES

I have a son that's my oldest. He chose to not go to college because he didn't want to have to do all the English and math classes. But, once I got into [community college], I'm like, you can get a technical certificate without having to do all that. So, it's given him some new thoughts on going back and getting further in his education. *(Indiana)*

I recently became part of SGA [the Student Government Association] . . . and student government offers a lot of benefits and skills that I am learning. Being part of [SGA] helps me learn how to help other students and to be involved. It's a very good, very beneficial club. . . . I just wish I had known about it sooner. *(Indiana)*

[8] The survey focused on institutional structures, so we do not have data on student strengths from the larger survey sample.

Interviewees also indicated that first-generation students have a strong clarity of purpose, in part because they recognize the significance of being part of the first generation in their family to attend college. They are motivated to complete college, understand why they are pursuing higher education, and seek to maximize their time and experiences. They have, in the words of one respondent from Illinois, "a guiding light" propelling them forward, knowing that their success can change the trajectory of their and their family's lives. A student services director at a technical college in Indiana noted that first-generation college students tend to be outcome-focused in order to create a path to economic security and stability.

These characteristics are personal strengths that first-generation students can draw on. But interviewees were clear that colleges benefit from first-generation students, too, and that their presence enhances campus life. First, their motivation contributes to a positive campus culture that encourages learning.

Second, first-generation students are eager to build community on campus. As one interviewee pointed out, "There's a real sense of community with the first-gen population. They want to get to know the student affairs professionals and faculty. . . . Most students don't want hybrid, they want in person and to get to know classmates" (California). As a result, first-generation students tend to take advantage of opportunities to support their learning and be involved with activities and organizations on campus. Many interviewees described how first-generation students seek out relationships with faculty, professional staff, and fellow classmates.

Campuses can leverage this characteristic and help first-generation students create connections among themselves and with their peers. According to a student services staff member at a one California community college,

> When students are cognizant that they are first-generation, they recognize that they are not alone. . . . I think it's important that we call it, name it, promote it so students know that 'I am first-gen' and everyone who has this button or T-shirt is as well.

Multiple interviewees noted that student leaders are often first-generation, indicating their desire and capability to give back to campus.

Our interviews focused on the strengths and assets held by first-generation community college students, but interviewees also emphasized that the structure of the community college inhibits students' ability to leverage these strengths. Interviewees noted the many ways that colleges themselves are not "student-ready," and therefore first-generation students are often disadvantaged by the structures they encounter in higher education. Some of these barriers particularly impact community college students—particularly the need for academic and nonacademic support—given that they balance work, school, and family and may have previously encountered suboptimal K-12 school experiences.

BECOMING STUDENT-READY

The term *student-ready* was highlighted in *Becoming a Student-Ready College: A New Culture of Leadership for Student Success*, in which the authors encourage a shift from focusing on how prepared a student may be for college to the approaches colleges and universities are using to prepare and build successful environments for entering students (McNair et al., 2016). This approach challenges colleges to shift their narrative so that they are responsible for creating environments and supports that enable all students to be successful. To do this, the authors, as well as many institution-based practitioners, argue for examining policies, processes, and practices to understand precisely how students are being served and their strengths utilized in order to reduce barriers to student success. Moreover, practitioners recommend examining the first-generation student experience specific to campus needs, and involving students in this process, to fully understand where improvements could be made.

Interview data revealed specific challenges faced by first-generation community college students. It is important to keep in mind that these challenges are not inherent to the students themselves. Rather, they stem from college structures that require students to possess information and navigational skills to which first-generation students often lack access. Without intergenerational knowledge of how to navigate confusing systems and structures, first-generation students must figure out those systems on their own.

Examples of such systemic institutional barriers include nebulous or complicated bureaucratic processes, tacit understandings surrounding college services and resources, and a host of jargon and terminology. One respondent explained that students sometimes are unfamiliar with the names of college offices, such as the registrar or bursar, and if they do not know the definition of those offices then they are unlikely to use the services or comply with requirements that they do so.

An interview participant noted that colleges assume students possess institutional knowledge, but first-generation students "don't know what they don't know" (Colorado). Moreover, literature indicates first-generation students are less likely to seek help and resources on campus, particularly when they have not established a sense of belonging, exacerbating the challenges of acclimating to the institution.

In the survey, 71% of respondents indicated "navigating campus resources" as a priority for serving first-generation students. This is evidence that faculty and staff see this as an important need in addition to academic success and advising. However, survey data also indicate that only 17% of respondents' institutions have gathered faculty for professional development on teaching and serving first-generation students.

STUDENT VOICES

All semester, I had been going to the writing center for help. When I went before my exams, they wouldn't see me and said I needed an appointment. I never needed one before but they changed how they were doing things. So, I couldn't get help on my paper and I turned it in late and got points taken off. How was I supposed to know? *(Arizona)*

So much more is needed about financial aid. So many people really need it and it's so confusing. It's already hard because I travel back and forth to school and then there is all this finance stuff that is so hard to understand. *(New York)*

There are just so many decisions to make. It would be helpful to have more people to just sit down with and figure out our future. There's a million programs and I don't know which one I am supposed to do. Having a person I can talk to—like, more than a one-time, one-hour kind of talk—would be so good. *(Florida)*

LESSONS LEARNED

- ***Establish mechanisms for identifying and highlighting the strengths of first-generation students and integrate them into college practices and structures.*** To foster an asset-based campus culture for first-generation students, institutions should create formal and informal opportunities to acknowledge and recognize the strengths of first-generation students. For example, colleges can host celebrations for first-generation student successes. At the administrative level, college leaders can include the strengths and assets of first-generation students in speeches or statements in a way that makes this population feel welcome and safe. Creating public spaces, both at the college and on webpages, to highlight accomplishments and contributions is a step toward creating a greater sense of inclusion. Colleges should also offer faculty and staff professional development opportunities that highlight first-generation students' strengths and methods for using asset-based approaches in classrooms, advising appointments, and program offerings.

- ***Conduct jargon, policy, and procedural audits.*** Because colleges are highly bureaucratic and often steeped in tradition, daily operations can become systemic barriers to first-generation student success. Complicated language, confusing policies, and inefficient and challenging procedures can be particularly burdensome for students who commute, work, and have family obligations. Such unnecessary complications have negative implications for student persistence should a small misstep or missed deadline occur. By simply considering changes in language and approaches from within, institutions can shift to an asset-based environment that can create opportunities to celebrate the strengths-based successes of their students. Colleges should review policies and procedures, and clarify jargon used in student-facing communications and definitions so that they are accessible, clarify expectations and processes, convey a sense of belonging and welcome to first-generation student, and emphasize these students' strengths. Make sure policies and procedures are available on websites, in multiple languages, so they can be easily updated and accessed by students at any time.

FINDING 3: COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGES SUPPORT FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IN MANY WAYS

Even though first-generation students bring strengths and talents to campus, they still have specific needs; interviewees indicated that campus structures make it particularly difficult for first-generation students to progress toward a college degree. Being unfamiliar with college terminology and processes not only inhibits first-generation students' access to services but also creates a sense of dislocation and lack of belonging. Opaque processes can be and feel exclusionary to first-generation students, leading them to doubt whether they should even be in college. These institutional barriers must be addressed in order to let first-generation students' strengths shine. As community colleges increasingly shift toward being student-ready, they must scrutinize how their structures and practices can elevate the strengths of first-generation students and rethink how they do business in order to take an asset-based approach.

Regardless of how their institution defines and identifies *first-generation students*, virtually all participants in this analysis saw value in supporting this population and creating structures that enable these students' assets to come to the forefront. For instance, 81% of survey respondents indicated senior administrators at their college care about first-generation students, 71% indicated that faculty care, and 63% indicated an overall awareness and recognition of the first-generation population at their college.

HOW DO COMMUNITY COLLEGES STRUCTURE GENERAL CAMPUS SUPPORTS FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS?

Cohort-based programs: Programs that provide intensive, wrap-around services for a relatively small number of students. Participants form a discrete group (a cohort) and are supported by designated program staff. Examples include TRIO and Future Connect.

Affinity programming: Programs that support specific student populations that often intersect with first-generation students. These programs are similar to cohort programs but often emphasize ethnic or racial identity. Many first-generation students participate in these programs in lieu of or in addition to cohort-based programming. Examples include Ujoma and Puente.

Non-cohort-based, targeted supports: Programs and activities open to all first-generation students on a campus. These activities often focus on building awareness and creating community. Examples include First-Generation College Celebration events, graduation stoles, and first-generation student clubs.

General campus supports: Programs and activities that serve all students on a campus but meet the needs of first-generation students as well. These supports are not first-generation-specific, but they contribute to first-generation student success. Examples include advising, tutoring, and dual enrollment.

Intentional universal design: General support services that are open to all students on campus but are designed such that the needs of first-generation students are explicitly addressed. These supports are first-generation-targeted, even if they are not limited to first-generation student participants. Examples include first-year experience courses that embed first-generation student perspectives into the curriculum.

Such emphasis on shifting structures to support first-generation students is not surprising given the community college sector's mission, which is to ensure that all students, regardless of background or barrier, have access to and the ability to complete a postsecondary credential. Moreover, because community colleges have historically enrolled a large proportion of first-generation students, they are inherently aware of the presence of these students on their campuses and the fact that first-generation students often have different needs and strengths than those of other student groups. However, respondents indicated room for improvement in service provision: 77% of respondents indicated their college should make significant improvements in how first-generation students are supported and only 33% agreed that their institution has provided sufficient human and financial resources to serve this population.

Interview and survey data illustrate two different types of concerns community colleges consider when supporting first-generation students: the content of the supports and services, and how and to whom these supports and services are delivered. Data suggest that the content is generally uniform across community colleges, addressing common challenges faced by first-generation students and seeking to create student-ready environments that build on this population's assets in order to promote student success. How support is structured is more complicated; our data indicate that structural approaches within community colleges are evolving, aligned with other reforms in the community college sector. In the next section, we expand on this complexity and its implications for how community colleges serve and support first-generation students.

THE STRUCTURE OF FIRST-GENERATION SUPPORT

All but three community colleges that responded to the survey indicated that they provide supports for first-generation students. The majority do so through general services (62%) and 23% provide specific or targeted supports; most also combine structures, as illustrated in Table 4.[9]

Interview data confirm that most colleges employ multiple approaches, with nearly two thirds of respondents sharing that they offer more than one type of first-generation support structure. In exploring the interview data, we found four common types of support structures in use within the community college sector: cohort-based programs (including, but not limited to, TRIO); targeted, non-cohort-based programming; general supports; and intentional universal design.[10] Some colleges also rely on affinity programs for student populations that intersect with first-generation status to further expand supports for first-generation students.

[9] Respondents could select more than one answer and the total adds to more than 100%.

[10] Because these categories emerged from interview data analysis, they differ slightly from the survey questions listed in Table 4.

COHORT-BASED PROGRAMMING

Historically, first-generation students have been supported via discrete programs and targeted services. Typically, these programs bring in a group, or cohort, of students and provide them with intensive and holistic support. In the 4-year landscape analysis, the Center found that two thirds of surveyed institutions had a cohort-based program for first-generation students (Whitley et al., 2018). Community colleges that responded to the survey for this report similarly indicated high availability of cohort-based programming. Of community college survey respondents, 69% indicated that they offer TRIO, and 21% offer another cohort-based program either in lieu of or in addition to TRIO. Supporting the survey findings, two thirds of interview respondents indicated that their campus offers a cohort-based program that includes services for first-generation students.

These **cohort-based programs** include federal TRIO programs as well as first-generation Promise (free community college) programs and cohort-based wrap-around support programs funded through other sources. For example, at Portland Community College, the Future Connect program supports between 350 and 400 first-generation students each year. Program participants receive coaching prior to and during matriculation. They attend a targeted college survival class in the fall and subsequent career and leadership courses, taught by their coach, during their first year of enrollment. Participants also receive supplemental financial support, mandatory advising, and access to peer mentoring. As a result of this intensive support, program participants are a "tight-knit group" and have substantially more positive outcomes compared with similar students who do not participate in the program (Hodara et al., 2017).

STUDENT VOICES

[The Honors Program] is really great for first-gen students. The faculty help you and support you. *(Florida)*

The first-generation scholarship has been so helpful. I'm really glad my advisor told me about it because I wouldn't have known. It's helped me a lot. *(Florida)*

T04 | Structure of Service Provision at Survey Institutions

Approach Used to Provide Supports and Services to First-generation Students	Percentage
We offer TRIO/Educational Opportunity Programs.	69%
First-generation students utilize general college services, but no specific programs/services are designed.	62%
We offer broad programs designed specifically to serve first-generation students.	28%
We offer cohort-based programs that specifically serve first-generation students.	21%

Note. Percentages total more than 100%, as respondents were allowed to "select all that apply."

The intersection between first-generation college status and race, class, and/or family structure prompts many colleges to serve students through identity-based **affinity programs** and scholarship-based cohort programming. Interview respondents indicated that many first-generation students on their campuses are supported through cohort programs targeting additional student demographic characteristics, such as race or foster youth. For instance, programs like Umoja and Puente, which enroll Black and Latinx/a/o students, respectively, and provide culturally responsive pedagogy and community building in addition to academic and nonacademic support, often enroll high proportions of first-generation students.

Often, first-generation students are served by both affinity and first-generation-specific cohort programs: Among survey respondents, 89% indicated that students at their college can participate in multiple cohort-based programs. Many interviewees indicated that such overlap can benefit students by addressing different aspects of their identities. One interviewee in California, for example, said, "Even within Umoja and Puente, there's a cultural component that they [first-generation students] don't receive from a [first-generation program] which is important to our students." Another in Utah explained the ways that different minoritized and disadvantaged statuses need to be addressed through targeted programming, saying that colleges need to give students an option to function in both minoritized and majoritized spaces in order to elevate their cultural strengths. In doing so, colleges can emphasize both social mobility and social acceptance.

On the other hand, in resource-constrained environments like community colleges, duplication of services for students in multiple programs may lead to scarcity. Many interviewees indicated that their institution or program has more eligible students than they can serve, and so they try to ensure that first-generation students are in at least one program and avoid duplicating services. One program director in Oregon explained that they ask students to select a single cohort program even if they are eligible for multiple cohorts:

> We do this because we want as many students as possible to have access to the programs. And we want to acknowledge that students may want the cultural focus of [migrant programming] or men of color. We ask students to choose because their first-gen identity may not be most salient.

This example highlights the importance of identifying and tracking students and understanding the intersectional identities through data. In doing so, colleges can better target engagement and support first-generation student needs.

In fact, resource scarcity was a critical issue noted by interview respondents for all types of cohort programs, and this scarcity substantially limits program scalability. The resource-intensive nature of cohort programs makes it challenging to find funds and staff to support more than a relatively small number of students in each program, despite the demonstrated impact. As an interviewee from California explained, these programs are "absolutely important. . . . The challenge is the scalability. It's really difficult to scale those types of programs because they are small. I can never have mentors for 2,000 students!" Although evidence from other student success efforts suggests that cohorts are highly effective and provide students with the high touch they need to be successful (see, e.g., Scrivener et al., 2015), they should be used in conjunction with other support efforts.

Moreover, most externally funded cohort programs are limited in the types of students they are permitted to serve. Students who are not legal residents of the United States, not enrolled full time, or are studying internationally are typically ineligible even if they are first-generation college-goers and in need of additional support. As one interviewee from Utah stated,

> Part of our discussion is not all students are eligible for TRIO, so we are working to support ineligible students. There are students who need our services and we can't serve them, and that's hard because we want to serve all.

This limitation is particularly problematic at community colleges that have multiple definitions of *first-generation*. Interviewees indicated that they seek ways to serve all different types of first-generation students, but they are limited by both the federal definition and student misunderstandings. Explained an interviewee from Pennsylvania,

> When you are with a traditional-definition first-generation student, how much does that really apply to the type of student we experience today given other variables? We encounter students who are not necessarily first-gen, but that doesn't mean they come from a supportive college environment or experience.

To these stakeholders, the narrow definition and inclusion criteria required by cohort programming feels restrictive.

Moreover, cohort-based opportunities may not be evenly distributed among community college students. Although technically open to all eligible students, not all such students may actually know about or understand how to access these opportunities. Of the 24 campuses that responded to the survey question, most indicated that they use electronic communication and/or self-selection to recruit participants, rather than targeted recruitment using institutional data or requiring an application at admission (see Table 5). Previous research (see, e.g., Karp et al., 2008) indicates that such informal recruitment methods may inadvertently exclude students with the least social capital, weakest social networks, or most discomfort asking for help—precisely the types of students best suited to benefit from cohort programming. In other words, given their small sizes, recruitment methods, and eligibility requirements, these important programs may not be supporting the majority of first-generation community college students who could benefit from them.

T05 | Recruitment of Students for Cohort-Based Opportunities Among Survey Institutions

Recruitment Method	Percentage
Email, website, or electronic communication	83%
Student self-selects/submits application	67%
Recruited by faculty/staff during orientation process	46%
Recruited by faculty/staff during admissions process	42%
Partnership with secondary school or local program	38%
Interest meetings	33%
Targeted selection using institutional data	33%
Requirement of admission/matriculation	8%
Other	8%

Note. Percentages total more than 100%, as respondents were allowed to "select all that apply."

NON-COHORT-BASED, TARGETED SUPPORTS

In response to the limitations of cohort-based programming, some community colleges engage in non-cohort-based programming for first-generation college students. In this approach, community colleges provide services targeted toward all first-generation students rather than a subset—for example, by holding workshops open to any self-identified first-generation student rather than just those in a formal cohort. Survey data indicate that approximately a third of responding institutions take this approach.

Examples of non-cohort-based programming abounded in our interview data. Interviewees explained that non-cohort-based programming enables them to expand their reach, both through efficiencies (reaching more students, albeit less intensively) and by including first-generation students not eligible for cohort programs. As discussed earlier, many campuses use the federal definition of *first-generation* for purposes of grant funding and financial aid, but they cast a wider net for broader programming, such as first-generation celebrations or faculty mentoring. The president of a community college in Colorado explained,

> To me, if someone identifies as first-gen, what they are telling me is that they have anxiety about coming to college. They don't have someone they can talk to about it. Maybe they did have a parent who attended, but maybe there is a strained relationship or the parent is deceased. When they identify as first-gen, I take that to mean that they are experiencing the kinds of anxiety, nervousness, and curiosity that I might have gone through when I started college [as a first-generation student].

Thus, through non-cohort-based supports and services, this college serves a broader group of students through the programming it controls. The college hosts luncheons for first-generation students. It also targets financial aid and advising outreach, using messages that resonate with first-generation students to draw them into those services. It also makes sure that first-generation students are made aware of the bureaucratic consequences of actions such as dropping a class.

FIRST-GENERATION CELEBRATIONS

In 2017, the Center for First-generation Student Success joined COE to host the National First-Generation College Celebration on November 8, the anniversary of the signing of the Higher Education Act of 1965. This event was a call to action for colleges and universities across the United States to recognize the first-generation faculty, staff, and students in their communities and to celebrate the strengths and accomplishments each have found in pursuing higher education. Now an annual event, National First-Generation College Celebration Day is observed at hundreds of institutions and is spreading to the K–12 education sector and private industry. Celebration events range from distribution of first-generation pride materials and campus awareness campaigns to keynote speakers and capital campaigns. Some institutions use this day to launch new initiatives or strategic plans intended to improve and scale support for first-generation students. What began as a 1-day event at many colleges has grown to weeklong and monthlong celebrations of first-generation students. To date, the Center's website hosts over 250 profiles of institutional celebrations. Moreover, given the popularity of National First-Generation College Celebration Day, the Center, COE, and The Suder Foundation awarded grants to 24 institutions in 2019 and 31 in 2020 to financially support the growth of celebration efforts.

A range of colleges across the country report hosting first-generation-focused convenings and student clubs. A college in California hosts a First Gen Institute, which informs faculty about literature and research on first-generation students, conducts outreach, and provides first-generation-specific programming. The school also holds a first-generation parent orientation each August, as well as networking workshops for students. Another college, in New York, runs an I am First-Gen campaign, through which faculty who are first-generation college graduates themselves share their status and bios. Staff and current students also write "first-gen monologues" about their experiences as first-generation students. A college in Wisconsin hosts a "first-gen club" to provide peer support and leadership opportunities.

In addition, a number of campuses host First-Generation Celebration events to ensure that first-generation students feel welcome, to make sure they understand how their strengths can be celebrated in their new community, and to encourage important dialogue about the first-generation identity and institutional experiences. For some, the notion of celebrating the identity of first-generation students may appear simply as a social occasion. Yet, taking the opportunity to raise awareness about not only the presence of first-generation students but the vast contributions they make within the campus community can be the first step in significantly improving the experiences and outcomes of these students. For first-generation students, seeing themselves reflected in the community is a reinforcement of their belonging and a signal of their ability to succeed. For faculty, leadership, and staff, it is a reminder of who is sitting in their classrooms and visiting their offices, and why it is important to think critically about how these students are being instructed and engaged.

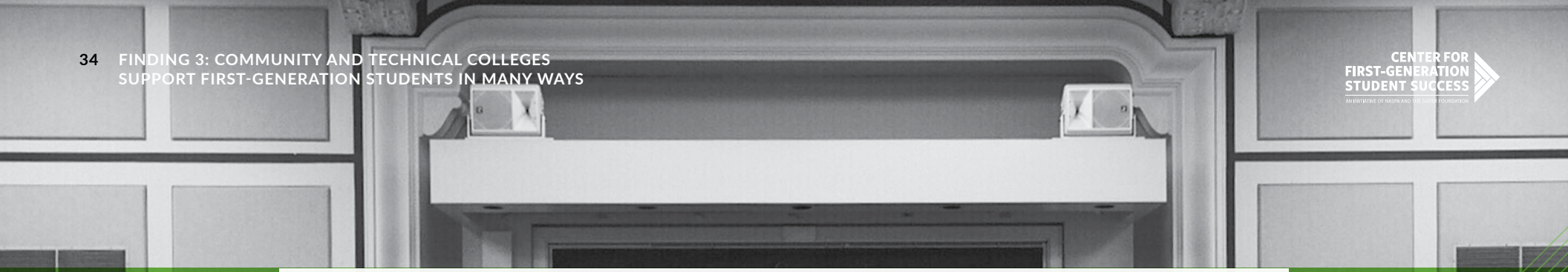
First-generation celebrations take many forms. For example, some colleges distribute "I am first-gen" T-shirts to faculty and staff, and graduation stoles to graduating first-generation students. One interviewee in New Jersey shared,

> That sends a real message to the community we are serving. . . . November 8 is First-gen Day. . . . We will draw attention to and celebrate first-gen students, so they know when they look left and right, there's a good chance that someone else is first-gen, too.

Other colleges distribute buttons and T-shirts to first-generation members of the college community, including faculty and staff.

STUDENT VOICES

My professors are supportive, but I have to prioritize. I work. I'm a mom. I have to take care of the house, home, and homework. I'm not that person to go to my professor like, this is my life, I need you to understand that I'm driving an hour, had 3 hours of sleep. I don't want to be the girl in class that you notice because of that. I'm trying so hard. *(North Carolina)*



Because first-generation students often come to campus unaware of the different types of supports and services available and whether they are eligible, community colleges often extend their non-cohort-based programming to middle and high school students. One respondent in Connecticut explained that oftentimes secondary students who are first-generation benefit from resources that tell them how to apply for college, what classes to take, and how the transfer process works. To help facilitate sharing this information, the respondent's college invites seventh- through ninth-grade students to campus to learn about the processes and what to expect. Some colleges also work to engage families more systematically in the application and onboarding process.

In addition to serving larger numbers of students than through a cohort-based approach, non-cohort-based approaches can also support a campuswide cultural shift toward first-generation support. Interviewees indicated that providing non-cohort-based programming that includes all first-generation students on campus is particularly important for helping create a welcoming culture and foster campuswide connections among first-generation students. It also creates an environment where first-generation students feel greater comfort in seeking resources and asking for assistance. By embedding first-generation programming into other activities, such as graduation or orientation, campuses are able to send a message to all stakeholders—students, staff, and faculty—that supporting this population is important and should become part of a campus's "how we do things." This norm in turn encourages first-generation student success to become part of the institutional fabric through prioritization in college mission statements, strategic plans, and decision making.

However, survey data indicate that community colleges' capacity to offer robust, non-cohort services may be limited. Most community colleges do not have a designated first-generation program, webpage, or student organization. For example, only 29% of survey respondents indicated that their campus has a particular office designated as the primary support for first-generation college students, only 13% have web content targeted toward this population, and only 9% have an established first-generation student organization. Thus, campuswide efforts are not always conducted in systemic or sustainable ways and remain significant areas of improvement for colleges across the country.

UNIVERSAL SUPPORT

Community colleges often provide first-generation student support via the same collegewide support services available to all students on campus. In general, community colleges provide a wide array of supports for all students, from tutoring to advising to career guidance. These services are available to first-generation students, and community colleges rely on them to support this population. Among survey respondents, 62% indicated that first-generation students on their campuses use general college services in lieu of targeted programming. Nearly 75% of interviewees indicated that first-generation students on their campuses are supported via regular college services.

Leveraging existing services appears to be unique to the community college sector; the 4-year landscape scan did not find widespread adoption of this approach. Community colleges' use of universal services to support first-generation students is driven by a few factors, including the large number of first-generation students enrolled in the 2-year sector and insufficient funding to serve all first-generation students through cohort programming. In particular, targeting services toward first-generation students feels redundant on many campuses. According to one student services staff member, "60% of our students identify as first-generation, or have similar challenges; we therefore have fewer things identified as first-generation student supports because almost all students identify in this way" (New York). According to some colleges, labeling supports as first-generation-only feels exclusionary on campuses where large numbers of students have some sort of academic or nonacademic support need, as explained by a respondent in Pennsylvania: "We landed on being inclusive rather than exclusive with services and supports; by labeling it as a first-generation service, we risk leaving out single mothers or veterans." Interviewees also indicate that there is a high degree of intersectional need among community college students, such that general services can support multiple populations at once.

In closely examining the data, however, we identified two different approaches to using general campus services to support first-generation students. The first is a more traditional approach, in which **general campus supports** are available to first-generation students and are assumed to meet their needs. On these campuses, stakeholders assume that the typical community college support ecosystem—with its robust array of services, offices, and support options—meets the needs of all students on campus, including first-generation students. Eighteen interview respondents indicated that their campus takes this approach.

Interviewees explained this approach by emphasizing that, because so many of their students are first-generation or have similar needs, support services inherently are accessible and useful to them. At a college in Texas, for example, a seminar required for all first-time-in-college students provides information that is important for first-generation success. Specifically, the seminar is led by an academic advisor and closely connects the curriculum to college resources, which is the type of support often touted as important to first-generation students.

Other colleges take a similar point of view and design the entirety of their student support offerings with the assumption that all students need intensive support, regardless of first-generation or other subpopulation status. One respondent in Ohio explained that her college's philosophy starts from the lens that

> Our students don't have the background and networks to navigate the college experience. So, [we] provide lots of support along the way, everything from the admissions process to support filling out FAFSA to program sessions where they can get FAFSA help because they may not have help at home or in their schools.

A college in Connecticut takes a similar approach because the demographics of its community correlate with first-generation status. As such, the school does not have targeted programs specific to this student population.

However, our data also reveal that some colleges take the opposite approach. Instead of assuming existing services universally serve everyone, including first-generation students, they design or redesign services with the specific needs of first-generation students in mind—and then offer those services to the broader campus. This approach reflects **intentional universal design**. Data indicate that 16 campuses in the interview sample engage in this strategy for at least some services. An interviewee from Texas explained this strategy:

> We intend to offer the most benefits to all students. First-gen need x [and] y, and FTIC [first-time in college] needs x. We just scale it up. We scaled up what first-gen needs to all FTIC. So yes, they need different things, but we designed the college to take care of the student who needs the most resources. If they don't need it, they can discard it. But the students who need all of it get all of it.

Campuses that engage in this approach indicate that it is a way to overcome resource and eligibility constraints of cohort-based programs while still being intentional about the needs of first-generation students. By putting first-generation needs at the center of their work, campus personnel ensure these students get the support they deserve, honor these students' strengths, and expand the reach of this population. Moreover, this approach addresses questions of intersectionality by ensuring that students with different identities access the types of support they need, and by ensuring that students who are first-generation but have a different primary identity are still able receive first-generation-specific supports. An interviewee in Colorado explained this philosophy:

> New students at community colleges identify in multiple ways. First-gen and veteran. First-gen and single parent. First-gen and working. First-gen and ESL [English as a second language]. So what we try to do is not be so broad that we can't help anybody. . . . [W]e had to look at, what is the largest group we could impact based on what their needs are? Usually that's first-gen.

STUDENT VOICES

We have so much in one place. Scholarship info. Different health services. Counselors. Meal tickets. Bus passes. It's like the Walmart of resources. *(New York)*

You can use a computer, get off-campus resources, get brochures. Go to the learning center. It's great. *(New York)*

The president of a college in Arizona described the approach this way:

> What we . . . have is an understanding that two thirds [of our students] are first- gen and the one third that aren't are likely to be profoundly impacted by poverty, etc. So we are looking to set up a holistic support system. . . . I would be hard pressed to say, "Here's what we do for first-gen students and only first-gen students and the one third that aren't first-gen have to go elsewhere." It's just an approach that says, "[F]illing out a FAFSA is a daunting task for all of us! Even those of us with education, who have children, so what's it like for a first-gen family? What's it like for the 55% of students whose native language isn't English?" As opposed to singling out first-gen students.

Intentional universal design seems to be employed most regularly within first-year experience/student success courses. Among community colleges interviewed, some were in the process of redesigning those courses as part of broader sectorwide efforts to scale effective practices. First-year experience courses are a natural fit for meeting first-generation student needs, as they typically emphasize information provision, campus navigation, and relationship building. Campuses that take an intentional universal design approach design their first-year experience courses with first-generation students in mind, crafting curricula and pedagogies that meet first-generation needs, and using those needs as the basis for the course writ large. They then open the course to all students, enabling scale while still serving first-generation students in an intentional manner.

The first-year experience course at a college in Colorado exemplifies this approach. The school designed its program to expose students to information necessary for being successful in college, build a campus network, and hone skills for resiliency and tenacity. The course builds on research showing that students need to practice accessing support skills and networks, and therefore schools need to provide them the opportunity to "build a blueprint for success" through the development of an academic and problem-solving plan. The college's pedagogical philosophy for the course was described as starting "with the course as first-gen students being the least common denominator. If you build it for first-gen, everyone will benefit."

Another example of universal design is to develop campuswide orientation programs that specifically address first-generation student needs. In Pennsylvania, a college designed an open-house night to help students become familiar with supports on campus. It was developed for first-generation students, under the assumption that this population and their families need additional exposure to campus services. However, the college soon realized that the content of the evening could be helpful to a broader swath of students, so the program was labeled as a general open-house night—thereby extending its reach while keeping the needs of first-generation students at the center.

The intentional universal design approach appears to be both new and unique to the community college sector. This may be due in part to the large percentage of first-generation students enrolled in these institutions and the need to provide support at scale. However, it also aligns with other innovations in the sector, which emphasize the need for scale rather than programmatic support. Research in community colleges consistently finds that smaller programs, although effective for individual enrollees, do not improve overall completion rates (Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2018; Rutschow et al., 2011). Moreover, this research finds that a programmatic approach introduces unnecessary complexity and can exclude many students who could benefit from support services.

Given the research, community colleges around the country are thinking about how to better integrate into their business-as-usual practices the kinds of supports traditionally offered in cohort programs. Community colleges are engaged in comprehensive redesigns of advising and student services, curricular pathways, developmental education, and Guided Pathways[11]. All of this work takes as its staring point the need to redesign the entire institution, rather than launch discrete programs that touch a relatively small subset of students.

Intentional universal design for first-generation students is aligned with this approach in its attempt to create new institutional structures and processes that reach everyone, even as the approach starts with the needs of a specific subpopulation. Many of the 16 interviewees whose colleges take an intentional universal design approach explicitly connected it to broader campus efforts at institutional transformation:

> We are moving away from boutique programs to serve the masses. I always think as an administrator, if I know what works, I want to reach as many people as possible. I want to replicate things like TRIO and mentoring. When we look at student demographics, so many are first-gen, underrepresented. Services are what we do. It's not a smaller group of the overall population, so it's not treated as boutique. It's our entire population. *(Texas)*

> Through Guided Pathways, all . . . support services fall under same dean and that helps with collaboration. It allows for intersections among student identities, low-income, students of color, and first-generation, ESL, athletes. *(New York)*

> The campus is trying to create TRIO for all, trying to implement these [personalized support] services whether you are TRIO or not. Seminars for everyone. Peer mentors for everybody. Trying to create a tutoring lab. *(Colorado)*

[11] Guided Pathways is a movement that seeks to streamline a student's journey through college by providing structured choice, revamped support, and clear learning outcomes—ultimately helping more students achieve their college completion goals. The reform recognizes that the current self-service model of community colleges leads many students to unintended dead ends or unforeseen detours in the form of excess or out-of-sequence credit.

Based on these findings, it appears that intentional universal design is an evolution in the provision of services for first-generation students. Though new and not yet widespread, the approach holds promise for meeting multiple goals within the resource-constrained community college context: Intentional universal design addresses research on the need for transformation, it allows for scale, and it addresses the unique needs of first-generation students while acknowledging intersectionality of identities and needs across the community college student population. Moreover, this approach is a way for colleges to become more student-ready. At its core, intentional universal design thinks about what students need in order to be successful, and it re-creates institutional structures to meet those needs and encourage student strengths and learning to flourish.

THE CONTENT OF SUPPORT PROVIDED BY COMMUNITY COLLEGES TO FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Regardless of how they structure it, community colleges provide support along an array of dimensions. As shown in Table 6, most institutional survey respondents prioritize academic support, advising, campus navigation, time management/study skills, and financial aid (e.g., FAFSA information).

These supports are most common across the various support structures previously described. However, by design and probably because they have much smaller staff-to-student ratios than broad-based programming, cohort programs typically go beyond academic and financial aid support to provide robust offerings such as first-year seminars, mentoring, and social events. Table 7 provides details on the types of support provided via cohort programming at the 21 survey institutions that responded to this question.

T06 | Priority Content Areas Among Supports for First-generation Students at Survey Institutions (*N* = 92)

Support Content Area	Percentage
Academic success/study skills	88%
Advising/major selection/degree planning	80%
Navigating campus resources	71%
Time management	70%
Understanding financial aid	63%
Financial literacy	58%
Building community/support	50%
Career/postgraduation preparation	50%
Building faculty relationships	49%
Résumé preparation/interviewing	47%
Mental and physical health	41%
Self-advocacy	41%
Utilizing strengths as a first-generation student	33%
Study abroad	12%
Other	11%
Don't know	7%

Note. Percentages total more than 100%, as respondents were allowed to "select all that apply."

T07 | Services Provided via Cohort Programs for First-generation Students at Survey Institutions (*N* = 21)

Service	Percentage
Academic advising	95%
Academic support	95%
Academic workshops	86%
Social events	76%
Career guidance/mentoring	67%
First-year seminar/interest group	62%
Need-based financial aid	62%
Transition-based workshops	62%
Peer mentoring	57%
Topic-based workshops	57%
Graduation/celebratory events	57%
Special orientation programming	57%
Faculty/staff mentoring	52%
TRIO /Educational Opportunity Programs	52%
Summer bridge program	43%
Transfer to 4-year institution supports/resources/preparation	43%
Emergency aid	38%
First-generation alumni engagement	29%
Transition to workforce supports/resources/preparation	29%
Family programming	24%
Honors or high academic achievement programs	19%
Merit-based financial aid	19%
Other	10%
Living-learning communities	5%
Study abroad	5%
Don't know	0%

Note. Percentages total more than 100%, as respondents were allowed to "select all that apply."

Although the survey responses indicate that community colleges tend to focus on first-generation students' academic and financial needs, interviewees described how first-generation students are most successful when they are provided with information as well as relationships, connection, and a sense of belonging. Particularly within cohort programs, the structure and academic content of service offerings (e.g., academic advising) provide a mechanism for program personnel to build such relationships, develop community, and cultivate more personalized interactions with first-generation students. For example, at one Colorado college, TRIO advisors sit with new students and "get to know them, and then do a lot of self-assessments to determine their needs, then decide what they need."

A similar one-on-one orientation is held for TRIO students at a college in North Carolina. Although this session provides the students with important information, it also enables personalized connections to campus and individuals at the college. According to the program director,

> [O]ne way that we are able to immediately get our students who are first-gen connected with the campus is by holding that one-on-one individual first-gen orientation and then helping them navigate, not necessarily holding their hand, but helping them navigate.

Moreover, by co-locating TRIO with other support services, TRIO counselors personally connect students to those other supports in real time, as the need arises, and in a personalized way. The director described the location as "the hub for student supports" and further explained,

> Then if you need that counseling teacher right there, then if you need an academic support plan or disability services, I can connect you to the person right down the hall from me. . . . So we strategically made sure that we were housed in this area with them so that our students won't have to keep going back and forth all around campus.

Within our interview sample, we found that such deep engagement is most prominent among cohort-based programs because their smaller ratios, clear structures and requirements, and contained nature enable more sustained and individualized engagement. However, relationships are built outside of TRIO programs as well, often through the use of first-year seminars and social activities. At a college in Florida, where a dedicated office and staff specific for first-generation efforts has been developed, all first-generation students receive an assigned advisor and access to a one-stop office for enrollment and financial aid support. The one-stop center also offers workshops and events that the staff use to connect students to one another in order to build a sense of community and belonging. The Future Connect program at Portland Community College, described earlier, takes a similar approach, using coaching, student success courses, and regular text messages to build relationships and a sense of belonging among participants.

STUDENT VOICES

Having access to all these resources, like the writing center when you have trouble with an essay, made me feel really comfortable here. It was like the staff here wanted me to be successful. *(Arizona)*

Because of TRIO, there hasn't been a problem that I haven't been able to solve since I got to college. I always have someone to ask. *(Arizona)*

LESSONS LEARNED

- ***Each structural approach has different pros and cons.*** Cohort programs appear to be the most intensive (and are the most studied), but they are limited in their reach. More expansive programs may have difficulty creating deep relationships between students and staff. Because community college students often are lost in a maze of offices, information sources, and programs (Bailey et al., 2015), it is worth considering the extent to which the lack of clear structures inhibits the reach of broad-based first-generation student programming. It is also worth exploring whether programs that are intended to have broad reach may actually be occurring in pockets or reaching only a small number of students given the lack of coordinated and intentional outreach on most community college campuses.

- ***Be intentional in recruitment efforts.*** For both cohort and broader programs, it appears that first-generation students are passively made aware of opportunities. Because research shows that the most tenuously connected students are often missed by passive recruitment approaches, campuses should think about how to ensure all students who identify as first-generation or are eligible for programs are invited into them. Creating obvious offices and resource locations may be a first step toward more intentional engagement with the first-generation community on campus. This is also where a clear definition of *first-generation* as well as solidified processes for collecting, storing, and sharing data are imperative so that intentional outreach and recruitment is possible.

- ***There are different ways to implement "first-generation support for all."*** A surprising finding was that campuses take different tactics in scaling support for first-generation students. Although some campuses assume that existing supports meet first-generation student needs by default, others take an intentional universal design approach, developing campuswide supports with first-generation students in mind. This latter approach appears to be a new development and so is worthy of further exploration and experimentation.

- ***Intentional universal design has strong potential.*** Because intentional universal design is grounded in research and attempts to bring to larger numbers of first-generation students those strategies used widely and successfully by cohort programs, the approach appears to have the potential to thread the needle between scale and impact. However, it is an emergent strategy and therefore is in need of assessment. In fact, examining the relative impact, cost, and return on investment of the various structures identified in this report is an important next step in determining the most officious way to serve the large numbers of first-generation students enrolled in community colleges.

- ***Formal services are a gateway to the types of support first-generation students need most.*** Although the formal content of supports is important, it is also critical that support structures are used to encourage relationship building and a sense of belonging among first-generation college students. Interviewees were clear that it is this sense of belonging that is most critical to students' success, and using formal supports to encourage first-generation students to engage more deeply with others on campus, discover that they belong in college, and develop networks of supports is as important as the information or financial support formally provided.

CONCLUSION

This report has explored how community and technical colleges support first-generation students. A companion piece to the Center's earlier report on practices in 4-year institutions, this report has used survey, interview, and focus group data to understand the strengths first-generation community college students bring to campus, the challenges they face, and the structures and services colleges use to help them complete their degrees. The report also explored the ways that community and technical colleges define and collect data on first-generation students who attend their institutions. Given community and technical colleges' critical access role, the overrepresentation of first-generation students among these institutions, and the disproportionate impact the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic crisis has had on community colleges and their students, understanding how community colleges can support first-generation students effectively and efficiently is critical.

Participating institutions made clear that community college approaches to identifying first-generation college students, coupled with collecting, disseminating, and using data, can be improved. Although most institutions reported using the federally recognized definition of *first-generation*, some colleges grapple with whether this definition best applies to their students, how to formalize data collection using this framework, and how to create a climate more conducive to student self-reporting. Given inconsistencies in definitions, questions, and student willingness to self-disclose, many first-generation students and their needs may not be captured by current data collection methods.

Our data indicate that community and technical college leadership and staff are aware of and committed to supporting first-generation students within their communities and acknowledge a need for intentional service provision for this population. They support first-generation students despite resource constraints that limit staffing and funding for demonstratively effective cohort programming and intensive support. We found that most colleges in our samples provide first-generation-specific cohort programming like TRIO, but they are limited in how many students they can serve via these mechanisms. Thus, many community and technical colleges also offer a variety of services for all students, with the intent that they serve first-generation student needs as well.

In fact, the most provocative finding of this study is our identification of the evolution of how community and technical colleges are structuring first-generation student supports. In line with other reforms in the sector, which emphasize comprehensive and at-scale redesign, community and technical colleges are increasingly restructuring first-generation supports as intentional supports for all students. This intentional universal design provides institutions with the opportunity to put first-generation student needs at the center of their work, such as when they design a required first-year seminar with the first-generation student population as the driving force. Such intentionality allows institutions to address both scale and comprehensiveness. As this type of structure is relatively new, its efficacy remains to be seen.

Respondents explained that a motivating factor for redesigning institutional structures with first-generation students in mind was their keen belief that first-generation students bring important strengths and assets to campus, and their desire to make sure that campus cultures and structures allow those assets to shine. Respondents lauded first-generation students for their resilience, dedication, focus, and ability to overcome many personal challenges, as well as the systemic barriers of higher education, in order to succeed. The moral responsibility to their families and the potential for intergenerational change remained a constant theme for why first-generation students need every opportunity to persist toward degree completion. Although administrators and student services staff acknowledged the many structural challenges within the complexities of the community college environment, they fundamentally believe that first-generation students are capable and talented, and should be seen through an asset-based lens as strong contributors in and out of the classroom. Practitioners described first-generation students as desiring to build community and be actively engaged in cocurricular offerings, but acknowledged that, for most students in this population, commuting, employment, and family obligations make engaging in campus activities, and seeking academic support, challenging.

The findings from this study indicate that, despite community and technical colleges' long histories of serving first-generation students, additional consideration of this student population is warranted. In particular, further clarity of definitions, more intentional data collection, and a stronger emphasis on using data to inform programming will strengthen existing first-generation student supports. Moreover, such data collection can help inform efforts to become more student-ready, support professional development efforts, and support continued scaling of effective programming and structural changes. These efforts are all the more important as the country, and higher education in particular, reckons with the economic and social implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As university leaders, practitioners, scholars, and first-generation students and families continue the tireless work of advancing first-generation student outcomes, the Center for First-generation Student Success aims to be a partner and resource in every endeavor. The Center's website offers open access to scholarly literature and current media, professional development events and trainings, national data fact sheets, and connections to a growing number of programs and resources. The Center's research provides evidence that building a community of practitioners across institutions can help develop ideas, solve problems, and network successful programmatic functions that could be customized to an individual campus environment and serve students at scale.

To support institutional efforts, the Center offers First-gen Forward, a national recognition and professional development program for institutions with a dedicated commitment to first-generation student success. To date, 155 institutions of higher education have received the designation; 20 of those have been elevated to Advisory leadership status. Additionally, the Center has launched First Scholars, a national scaling model and ecosystem of processes, tools, and expert guidance designed to work with your institution's specific environment with a common goal of improving first-generation outcomes. Annually, the Center hosts the First-generation Student Success Conference, a component of the NASPA Conferences on Student Success in Higher Education, which convenes over 1,500 leaders, practitioners, and scholars to actively consider approaches for improving experiences and outcomes for first-generation students. In 2021, the Center will launch the *Journal of First-generation Student Success*, the first academic, peer-reviewed publication dedicated to this topic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In considering the findings of this research on community and technical colleges, the prior scholarship on 4-year institutions, and the ongoing work with the Center, the following recommendations are offered for those interested in beginning, advancing, and scaling first-generation student success efforts in the 2-year sector:

- Establish a clear definition of *first-generation college student*, use it consistently, and pair its use with robust collection, dissemination, and application methods. Identify a partner in your institutional research office to support these efforts.
- Although federally recognized and theoretically universal, the FAFSA should not be the only tool for collecting data on first-generation students.
- Build a campus culture where the first-generation identity can be understood and celebrated. Identify first-generation administrators, faculty, and staff to build an inclusive community.
- Conduct departmental, divisional, and institutional audits of strategic plans, policies, procedures, and commonly used jargon to dismantle the hidden curriculum and strengthen equitable access. Engage first-generation students in this process.
- Consider the multifaceted intersectionality of the first-generation identity, and strive to build programs and services that reflect your community and student needs.
- The entire community is responsible for the success of first-generation students. Build cross-divisional, collaborative teams to identify student needs and develop appropriate solutions for a networked, resource-shared approach. Reinforce the need for senior leadership emphasis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish mechanisms for identifying and incorporating the strengths of first-generation students into college practices and structures. Work to eliminate deficit-based approaches.
- Consider how first-generation students can be a target population for intentional universal design reform. Formal services provided to all students at an institution can be tailored to specific first-generation needs and are a gateway to deeper engagement.
- Consider opportunities for engaging with peer and aspirational institutions to expand networks and resource sharing specific to first-generation efforts.
- Remember that efforts for first-generation students benefit many members of the institutional community. Considering first-generation needs in decision making often brings little risk and great reward.

To learn more about strategies for implementing these recommendations or to engage in programs and services designed to advance your first-generation efforts, visit https://firstgen.naspa.org.

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METHODOLOGY

This report presents findings from a national exploration conducted by the Center for First-generation Student Success, an initiative of NASPA and The Suder Foundation, in partnership with Phase Two Advisory. The purpose of the study was to understand the current state of programs and services that are offered to first-generation college students at community and technical colleges across the United States. This includes positioning of programs within the institution, human and financial resources, program content and delivery methods, communication strategies, data use strategies, and institutional successes and challenges. Because first-generation student success programs take on a variety of characteristics and often engage in varying areas of the institutional community, a mixed-methods approach provided a depth and breadth of quantitative and qualitative insights. A complete list of participating institutions is included at the end of this methods section. Complete data collection instruments are available from the Center upon request.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

The Center partnered with Phase Two Advisory to develop interview protocol, purposefully identify institutions that have a variety of characteristics within their first-generation student success offerings, and select key staff members who could speak to these programmatic efforts. The Center also partnered with Achieving the Dream (AtD) and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) to identify institutions engaging in first-generation efforts and appropriate staff to contact for interviews and information sharing. We intentionally identified institutions from varied geographic locations across the United States and with a breadth of enrollment sizes and types of students served.

We recruited participants through multiple approaches. A short electronic form inviting participation was created and disseminated across multiple platforms to administrators, faculty, and staff at community and technical colleges. We sent the form to individuals identified as engaged in student support or first-generation support keyword searches in the NASPA member database, recipients of the NASPA and Center newsletters, the NASPA Community Colleges Division listserv, and member communications released by AtD and AACC. Staff from institutions involved in the Center's First-gen Forward program also received the form. Every person who completed the form and indicated interest in participating in an interview was offered an opportunity. In total, higher education administrators and student services staff representing 38 community and technical colleges across 22 states completed interviews between June and December 2019.

Semistructured interviews focused on each participant's background and role, how their institution defines *first-generation college student*, approaches for tracking and measuring success, intentional supports for this population, other relevant programs or success efforts, technology and resources, and challenges and opportunities for growth. All interviews were conducted using video- or audio-conferencing software, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were recorded with the participant's permission. We took verbatim notes during the interview or, where that was not possible, the interview was transcribed. We uploaded notes and transcripts into Dedoose qualitative analysis software. We coded the data to identify emergent themes, using big-bucket and finer-grained codes. We conducted iterative reviews, member checking, and team coding meetings to generate consensus and come to conclusions.

STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

Imperative to this study are the experiences and insights of currently enrolled first-generation students at community and technical colleges. The form distributed for qualitative interviews included an option to host a virtual focus group for students at the respondent's college. Every person who completed the form and indicated willingness to convene a focus group was contacted. Upon confirming ability to host a virtual focus group, the participant shared a list of student names and email addresses to a Center staff member, who in turn shared a videoconference invitation with the selected students. The invitation included context regarding the Center for First-generation Student Success, the current study, compensation, and instructions for accessing the meeting.

Focus groups, each lasting approximately 60 minutes, were held via videoconference and recorded with the participants' permission. A semistructured interview protocol focused on students' background, college-going decision making, first-generation identity, classroom and student services experiences, support systems, access to resources, and reflections on their current experiences and future planning. In total, 23 students of varying ages, backgrounds, and academic progress, representing eight community and technical colleges, participated in virtual focus groups during the fall 2019 academic semester. Students each received a $20 Amazon gift card as compensation for their time.

Focus group recordings were transcribed; notes and transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose qualitative analysis software. The collaborative Center and Phase Two Advisory research team reviewed the data for emerging themes. These themes were used to bucket-code data and bucket-codes were reviewed and subcoded in alignment with emerging findings. The team then summarized interview findings, identified exemplary data and quotes, held team discussion and member checking, and analyzed data to finalize findings and recommendations.

SURVEY

Themes identified in the interviews and focus groups, as well as in interview protocols and a survey instrument developed for the previous report on 4-year institutions, informed the development of a survey instrument that covered multiple dimensions of first-generation programming and services at community and technical colleges. Because faculty and practitioners responsible for first-generation efforts are often housed in areas across the college and may have job titles that do not reflect their first-generation advocacy, identifying a sample was challenging. The previous study on 4-year institutions faced a similar sampling challenge, so the same approach was adopted for this study.

We identified approximately 1,500 individuals through a NASPA database, using search criteria that included job title keywords (e.g., first-generation, student success, access, inclusion), a demonstrated history of interest in first-generation professional development through participation in relevant conferences or online events, or involvement in the NASPA Community College Division, or through submission of a general interest survey posted on the Center's website and shared via social media channels and the Center's bi-weekly newsletter. We sent these individuals a link to the survey via email; we also shared the link through NASPA and Center mailings, the AtD network newsletter, and the AACC member newsletter. We invited these individuals to share the survey link with colleagues they deemed a better fit to complete the questions or represent other first-generation student success programs. To generate greater interest and response, we kept the survey open from August 2019 until mid-November 2019.

We extracted individual-level results from completed and partially completed surveys from Qualtrics in mid-November 2019. We imported the file into STATA for data cleaning and analysis. If respondents did not answer the first two survey questions, we removed them from the data set. We merged IPEDS Institutional Characteristics survey data into the data set.

In total, the survey yielded responses from 197 institutional practitioners representing 156 two-year institutions of higher education. Unless specifically noted that responses are from individuals, institutions are represented only once in the data. A detailed overview of data analysis by question is available upon request. Appendix Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the institutional characteristics of the survey sample.

App T01 | Institutional Size and Enrollment

Enrollment	Full time		Part time	
	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency
Less than 3,500	64%	95	43%	64
5,000–7,999	14%	21	20%	29
3,500–4,999	11%	17	15%	22
8,000–10,999	6%	9	7%	11
11,000–14,999	2%	3	6%	9
15,000–19,999	1%	2	5%	8
20,000–29,999	1%	1	1%	2
30,000–39,999	0%	0	1%	2
40,000–49,999	0%	0	0%	0
50,000 and over	0%	0	1%	1
Total	100%	148	100%	148

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App T02 | Special Designations Among Participating Survey Institutions

Institutional Designation	Percentage	Frequency	Total
None of the above	39%	57	147
Hispanic-serving institution	33%	49	147
Rural-serving institutions	31%	45	147
Urban-serving institutions	14%	21	147
Other	8%	12	147
Asian American and Pacific Islander–serving institutions	5%	8	147
Historically Black Colleges and Universities	1%	2	147
Tribal colleges and universities	1%	2	147

Survey respondents were asked to give their best estimate of first-generation enrollment at their colleges. Appendix Tables 3–5 provide their answers, and indicate that over half of the students at the community and technical colleges participating in this study were first-generation.

App T03 | Percentage of Current Enrollment Meeting *First-generation Student* Definition

Student Type	Mean
Full-time students	57.25%
Part-time students	54.16%
Less than part-time students	50.64%

App T04 | Percentage of Current First-generation Students Enrolled in Survey Institutions, by Enrollment Status

Full-time first-generation students	
Enrollment Status	**Mean**
Degree-seeking	62.44%
Certificate-seeking	21.92%
Non-degree-seeking	20.75%
Vocational/technical education	20.38%
Part-time first-generation students	
Enrollment Status	**Mean**
Degree-seeking	61.75%
Non-degree-seeking	28.57%
Vocational/technical education	26.57%
Certificate-seeking	25.70%
Less than part-time first-generation students	
Enrollment Status	**Mean**
Vocational/technical education	63.33%
Non-degree-seeking	46.00%
Certificate-seeking	45.00%
Degree-seeking	36.29%

App T05 | Institutions Participating in Stakeholder Interviews, by State

Arizona
Arizona Western College

California
College of the Sequoias
El Camino College

Colorado
Arapahoe Community College
Colorado Mountain College Rifle

Connecticut
Housatonic Community College

Florida
Seminole State College of Florida

Illinois
College of DuPage
Joliet Junior College
Kishwaukee Community College
Spoon River College

Indiana
Ivy Tech Community College

Iowa
Hawkeye College

Maryland
Harford College

Massachusetts
Bunker Hill Community College

Minnesota
Normandale Community College

Nebraska
Metropolitan Community College

New Jersey
Brookdale Community College
Union County College, Elizabeth Campus

New York
Fulton-Montgomery Community College
Mohawk Valley Community College

North Carolina
Davidson County Community College
Pitt Community College

Ohio
Columbus State Community College
Cuyahoga Community College
Marion Technical College
Owens Community College

Oregon
Portland Community College

Pennsylvania
HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College
Montgomery County Community College

South Carolina
Piedmont Technical College

Texas
Houston Community College
Lone Star College–University Park
Lone Star College System
North Central Texas Community College

Utah
Salt Lake Community College

Wisconsin
Madison Area Technical College
UW Whitewater at Rock County

App T06 | Institutions Whose Students Participated in Focus Groups *(8 institutions, 23 students)*

Institution
Arizona Western College
Columbus State Community College
El Paso Community College
Ivy Tech Community College
Onondaga Community College
Pitt Community College
Seminole State College of Florida
SUNY Broome

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