

Teaching First-Generation College Students

by Ben Galina



What does it mean to be first?

“Even when presenting academic credentials and a level of academic motivation equal to that of their peers whose parents graduated from college, first-generation students are at a somewhat greater risk of being academically, socially, and economically left behind.”
Pascarella, et al., 2004: 276.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latino and third ever woman to hold that position, graduated first in her class at Cardinal Spellman High School in the Northeast Bronx. Her path to class valedictorian was hardly a certain one. A child of Puerto Rican immigrants, Justice Sotomayor grew up in the New York City projects known as the Bronxdale Houses. She was diagnosed with Type I diabetes as a young girl. Having overcome all of these odds to beat out her peers for the number one spot at “a school for high achievers,” why was she warned that she’d need to bolster herself to make it through college (Stolberg, 2009: A1)? Yet, this is precisely what happened to Justice Sotomayor. A neighborhood friend who had gone to Princeton one year ahead of the young judge, Kenneth K. Moy, remembers telling her, “I don’t want you to come here with any illusions. Social isolation is going to be a part of your experience, and you have to have the strength of character to get through it intact” (qtd. in Stolberg, 2009: A1). While Sotomayor did make it through intact, Mr. Moy was right to warn his friend. Not only did this young woman from The Bronx face racial and sexual barriers to access at Princeton—when she entered in the fall of 1972, Latinos on campus numbered in the double digits and the school’s first female students had entered only three years earlier, in 1969—she also had to confront barriers because she was the first in her family to attend college (Stolberg, 2009: A1).

Justice Sotomayor is a **first-generation college student**, a group that includes such famous figures as Senator Elizabeth Warren, First Lady Michelle Obama, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, and Ruth Simmons, 18th president of Brown University. Estimates suggest that first-generation students comprise between 15% and 40% of all college students in the United States (Davis, 2010; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).



What exactly defines the term “first-generation student” varies somewhat. The definition used most frequently—and that of this guide—defines students as “first-generation” when neither parent has completed a four-year college degree (Davis, 2010). These students, research shows, struggle to succeed in college when compared to students whose parents attended college, so-called “continuing-generation students.” Sticking points include longer time to degree completion (Chen & Carroll, 2005), lower family incomes (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005), and higher dropout rates among first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Of course, many first-generation students, like Justice Sotomayor, *will* succeed at college.

Even matriculating to a four-year institution as a first-generation student is no easy feat in light of the **many financial, emotional, and academic obstacles set against them**. In other words, the first-generation students we encounter in our classrooms have already overcome great barriers, and **they deserve respect for their tenacity and**

perseverance. Despite these positive characteristics, discrepancies persist in the academic achievement and overall college experience of first-generation students as compared to continuing-generation students. Unfortunately for the college educator, many of the obstacles faced by first-generation students have already been established *before* they ever set foot on campus. Factors such as income, pre-college educational resources, and guidance in the college selection process cannot be altered through our teaching. This is not to say, however, that there are no ways we can facilitate the successes of first-generation students on campus. Many of the necessary interventions will be undertaken at the institutional and administrative levels.

Are you an administrator or institutional officer? You can play a big role in the success of first-generation students on your campus. Davis (2010) offers a slew of strategies that can be implemented on a campus-wide basis for helping first-generation students succeed in his book *The First-Generation Student Experience* (2010).

What can we do in our teaching to support institutional efforts? This guide answers this question by offering evidenced-based high-impact teaching practices. Best of all, the majority of these high-impact practices will benefit all students in your classroom. It turns out that this is a case where a rising tide *can* indeed lift all boats.

This guide is organized according to the trajectory of a first-generation student through process of college. Following this introduction, we offer data on first-generation students before they enter college, followed by a section about the college experience for first-generation students. From there, we describe a number of high-impact teaching and learning strategies that can be employed to facilitate the success of first-generation students in the classroom. Lastly, we provide a conclusion with a number of resources for educators, administrators, and first-generation students themselves. Each section has its own purpose in the context of this teaching guide, but they can, nevertheless, be read out of order.

Before College: Aspiration and achievement deficits

As we have already pointed out, many of the obstacles that first-generation students face have been set in place long before the first day of classes. Indeed, college attendance itself represents a significant milestone for first-generation students. According to the data 2012 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, the proportion of Americans with a college degree—around 40%—hovers just slightly higher than the proportion of the current college population that is first-generation—roughly 32% (Georgetown University Center on Education, 2012). That’s a lot of first-generation college students!

STUDENTS WHO ARE FIRST IN THEIR FAMILIES

So what about those students whose parents *did not* attend college?

first gen•er•a•tion *adj.* | ˈfɜrst jə-nə-ˈrā-shən |

1: describes a student from a family in which neither parent attended college

2: 1 out of 6 college students in the United States



Note: Data from the Higher Education Research Institute's (HERI) Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) from 2005; these CIRP surveys of freshmen at four-year institutions have been conducted annually since 1966
Source: John Pryor et al. "The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2005" (2005)

FIRST GRADUATE

Data from a comprehensive survey by researchers at the UCLA Higher Education Research Institution (HERI) show college attendance and degree attainment are highly correlated with parental education (Saenz et al., 2007: 8). Students whose parents have not completed more than a high school education are much less likely to attend or graduate college than their peers with college-educated parents (Pascarella et al., 2004; Astin & Oseguera, 2005). The difficulty to be the first person in your family to earn a college degree represents a solidification of the current social system. First-generation students are disproportionately likely to be low-income, female, Hispanic, and African-American (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Many are the challenges faced by first-generation students. First and foremost, first-generation lack the critical cultural capital that their continuing-generation peers have been soaking up their entire lives (Davis, 2010). The “culture of college,” to borrow Davis’ turn of phrase, comprises “the insider knowledge, the special language, and the subtle verbal and nonverbal signs that, after one has mastered them, make one a member of any in-group, community, or subculture” (Davis, 2010: 29). Or, in the words of journalist Laura Pappano, “the bright children of janitors and nail salon workers, bus drivers and fast-food cooks may not have grown up with the edifying vacations, museum excursions, daily doses of NPR and prep schools that groom Ivy applicants” (Pappano, 2015). Making the transition to college—always a fraught experience—is a particular difficult process of first-generation students. Other significant characteristics of first-generation students include:

Financial concerns: Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) point out that first-generation students are disproportionately low-income (418). Lack of access to financial capital and lack of information about financial aid negatively affect students’ college persistence rates and overall college experiences. Indeed, researchers observe that first-generation students with “higher incomes were significantly more likely to persist than those with lower incomes” (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005: 418). In one study, researchers showed that first-generation students who are also low-income dropped out of college at a rate four times their non-low-income, non-first-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). What is more, first-generation students more regularly assume financial responsibility for their education (Aspelmeier, 2012: 774).

Motivations for attending college: First-generation students often attend and persist in college for different reasons than their continuing-generation peers (Saenz et al., 2007). These students are more likely to attend college in order to help their parents, bring honor to their family, and gain personal respect (Bui, 2002). Moreover, first-generation students more commonly internalize their educational attainment (Aspelmeier, 2012). This internalization places students at increased risk for experiencing “stereotype threat” (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and “impostor syndrome” (Claude & Imes, 1978; Ewing et al., 1996).

Stereotype Threat: Negative stereotypes about socially marginalized groups hold that any lack of socioeconomic success may be attributed to internal deficits rather than social, historical, or situational injustice. A student who identifies as a member of one of these groups may feel anxious about confirming such negative stereotypes through her individual achievement. Insidiously, this experience commonly leads to academic underachievement through an unconscious self-handicapping (Steele & Aronson, 1995). For more on stereotype threat, see ReducingStereotypeThreat.org.

Impostor Syndrome: High-achieving people may feel that their success has nothing to do with their individual efforts or talents. Instead, they attribute their success to external factors such as luck, coincidence, or the ease of an endeavor. These feelings of “phoniness” negatively affect academic performance, social integration, and emotional health (Claude & Imes, 1978; Ewing et al., 1996). For more on impostor syndrome, see [this article from the Caltech Counseling Center](#).

Levels of Parental Engagement: Upon making the decision to attend college, first-generation students may feel disconnected or misunderstood by their families and communities (Davis, 2010: 192). These students commonly report feeling they are being disloyal to their parents and peers (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Differences between the goals and life paths of parents and first-generation students is “likely to cause dissonance,” according to Somers et al. (2004: 429). This dissonance has been termed called, alternatively, “survivor guilt” (Somers et al., 2004: 431) and “breakaway guilt” (London, 1989: 153) by researchers. Regardless of the term used, feeling unsupported has consequences on the educational attainment of first-generation students. Parental involvement in education has been shown to improve students’ educational aspirations and reduce the shock of transitioning to college (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

Sources of knowledge about college: The transition to college may be especially difficult for first-generation students because of the foreignness of the experience among their social networks. Davis (2010) reports that first-generation students are likely to limit themselves to “one or two sources of information” about college culture (30). As a result, integrating into this new culture is a much more fraught experience. First-generation students must learn not only the content of their classes but the social rules and roles of academia. Even the vocabulary of college—words like “registrar,” “bursar,” and “GPA”—may be completely unfamiliar to these students.

Educational differences: First-generation students are more likely than their continuing-education peers to attend lower performing schools and take less challenging courses while in high school (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Martinez, et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004). Taking less rigorous courses in high school may be at least partially to explain for first-generation students’ weaker cognitive skills in reading comprehension, math, and critical thinking (Terenzini et al., 1996). K-12 educational experiences have a large effect on college academic performance and psychological health (Tinto, 1993). During the first year of college, first-generation students report markedly lower GPAs than continuing-generation students (Warburton et al., 2001: 38).

The characteristics of first-generation students, of course, do not exist in a social vacuum. The first-generation label exists in conjunction with other social differences—race, ethnicity, religion, dis/ability, nationality, citizenship, gender, and sexual orientation, for example—and these differences must also be considered along with students’ first-generation label. An **intersectional** lens can help educators account for the unstable, combinatory nature of difference.

“**Intersectionality**” refers to the overlapping nature of social differences in the creation of unique social identities (Crenshaw, 1989). In its simplest form, it is the understanding that race, class, gender, and sexuality always exist in relation to one another. To be a black woman, then, is not the same as being black, or as being a woman, but rather it is a specific embodiment. This term, popular in the social sciences and humanities, is a valuable analytic to understand student experience. For more information on intersectionality in teaching and learning, see the [Vanderbilt Guide to Feminist Pedagogy](#). To read Crenshaw’s original paper outlining intersectionality, click [here](#). For more on teaching and difference, see the following guides from the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching: [Disability](#), [Stress](#), and [Feminist Pedagogy](#).

This is all to say that, the following picture of first-generation students is extrapolated from existing data, but, significantly, it does not apply to every situation or student. Differences that make students unique must be accounted for.

In demographic terms, though, there are useful data for us to consider on race, class, and gender. While the portion of first-generation students, relative to all students, has diminished since 1971—a fact attributable, in part, to greater educational attainment in the United States overall—the demographic composition of this group has also shifted (Saenz et al., 2007). Since 1971, the first-generation student population has skewed increasingly toward women and Hispanic. This shift should give us pause because it represents decreasing access to higher education among certain populations. The decline in black first-generation students, for instance, “is faster than the relative proportion of African American adults without a college education” (Saenz et al., 2007: 13). This discrepancy should motivate us, as educators, to comprehend the pervasive social consequences of college attainment and universalize the experience for all who seek it.

At College: Struggles with isolation and invisibility

Academically, first-generation students perform poorly compared to their continuing-generation peers. Not only do first-generation students have lower overall college attainment rates (Billson & Terry, 1982), but those who do complete their undergraduate degrees take significantly longer than non-first-generation students (Terenzini et al., 1996). While in college, first-generation students report lower GPAs than continuing-generation students (Warburton et al., 2001).

In a 1995 study, average freshman GPA was 2.7 for all students but only 2.4 for first-generation students (Warburton et al., 2001).

They are both more likely to be enrolled in remedial classes (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Horn & Bobbitt, 2000) and less likely to be enrolled in college honors programs (Pascarella et al., 2004: 251). Unfortunately, a need for remediation is significantly linked to dropping out of college (Pulley, 2008).

A deficit of rigorous high school coursework often leaves first-generation students unprepared for the learning practices that facilitate success at college, such as effective studying, peer collaboration, and efficient note taking. When combined with the general invisibility of study skills in college classrooms (Wingate, 2006), the newfound rigor of college coursework places first-generation students at a disadvantage compared to other students. Research shows that first-generation students study fewer hours than other students (Terenzini et al., 1996: 10). What is more, this studying is often less effective because first-generation students “need to be introduced directly to the methods and procedures of efficient study” (Davis, 2010: 41). For example, Treisman (1992) found that **almost 90% of first-generation students studied only by themselves** for a college calculus, a sharp contrast from other students, who were much more likely to combine studying alone with studying in peer groups.

The distinct academic lives of first-generation and continuing-generation students is partially attributable to the different courses and majors first-generation students are likely to choose. Perhaps because, as we have seen, first-generation students are more likely to attend college to get ahead financially and help their families, they are more likely to choose vocational or vocationally-oriented programs. For instance, first-generation students are more likely to major in business or a technical field than other students. Conversely, they are less likely to choose a major in the humanities, fine arts, and sciences (Terenzini et al., 1996; Chen & Carroll, 2005). Without the informed advice of parents or other college-educated adults, first-generation students often struggle to choose courses that are appropriate for their academic level and correspond to their motivations for pursuing a college degree. These students may not find the advising they need on campus, either. Academic advisors are not always trained on the differences between first-generation and continuing-generation students and thus often fail to meet the needs of the former (Kocel, 2008; Payne, 2007). That first-generation students take significantly longer to choose a major—an early indicator of college attrition—is evidence of their poorly met advising needs.

In the classroom, first-generation students demonstrate several notable characteristics that may alter their experience in the classroom and negatively impact overall learning. First-generation students often hold back in classroom discussions, unsure of the rules of the classroom space or unfamiliar with the practice of academic discussion (Rendón, 1995). When it comes to academic aspirations and achievement generally, first-generation students report anxiety more frequently and more acutely than other students (Martinez et al., 2009; Terenzini et al., 1996). Researchers, including Davis (2010) and Peet, Montgomery, and Weekes (2015), attribute this anxiety to the imposter syndrome and the stereotype threat phenomenon. **Feelings of anxiety intensify the isolation of first-generation students in the classroom.** Not only are they less likely to speak out in class than other students, but first-generation students are also much less likely to report positive interactions with faculty. Indeed, first-generation students have fewer interactions with faculty either in or outside of class when compared to continuing-generation students, even when controlling for other social factors like race and gender (Kim & Sax, 2009). Regardless of parental educational attainment, “positive and close interactions between undergraduates and their professors” positively affects student GPA, as well as personal growth and enjoyment of learning (Kim & Sax, 2009: 437). Thus, the distress and isolation of first-generation students further hampers a successful college experience.

Unfortunately, impostor syndrome and stereotype threat hinder first-generation students beyond the classroom, as well. As Mr. Moy told Justice Sotomayor before she entered Princeton, “social isolation is going to be part of your experience” as a first-generation student. The data support Mr. Moy on this point. When asked to reflect on their college experience, first-generation students report feeling less confident and isolated at higher rates than continuing-generation students (Davis, 2010). Indeed, first-generation students are more likely to “suffer from depression and other emotional problems” (Davis, 2010: 199). Compared to the average student, first-generation students participate in fewer extracurricular activities, credit-bearing or unpaid internships, and networking opportunities (Glenn, 2004; Moschetti & Hudley, 2008). Several groups of researchers have pointed out how common it is for **first-generation students to feel socially and emotionally marginalized** (Francis & Miller, 2008; Bui, 2002; Lundberg, et al., 2007). Considering that these students are also more likely to live off campus (Davis, 2010: 193), work more hours in a job outside of school (Saenz et al., 2007), and have dependent children (Terenzini et al., 1996), college can be a very lonely moment in the lives of first-generation students.

In the Classroom: Make expectations visible and respect difference

How does all of this research about first-generation students translate into classroom principles and practices? Unfortunately, little research exists about the most effective strategies for enhancing the learning outcomes of first-generation students. At least partially, this dearth in the research literature should be understood as an effect of the complexities of collecting reliable data from the patchwork quilt of classrooms that make up higher education. Differences between institutions (4-year vs. 2-year; public vs. private; large vs. small) and disciplines, along with demographic variation at the campus and classroom levels, make it difficult to issue generalized recommendations on how to improve academic achievement and increase learning among first-generation students. Lastly, as mentioned in the introduction to this guide, interventions for first-generation students at the institutional level may yield the most significant positive results, given that students will take many courses from many different instructors during their path to an undergraduate degree.

This is not to say, however, that classroom instructors are powerless in the effort to help first-generation students be successful. The following list comprises the most impactful recommendations for teaching first-generation college students.

Transparency: Although it may come with great individual freedom, college also comes with a number of unwritten rules, both cultural and academic. These rules may seem, after years in the academy or growing up in a family of college-educated people, completely commonsense. Yet, to first-generation students, they are anything but. To help students familiarize themselves with both the cultural and academic rules of college, instructors should be as transparent as possible about their expectations in every activity and assignment. In a pilot study of 1180 students, McNair, Finley, Winkelmes and colleagues (2016) found that greater instructor transparency increased students' academic confidence, sense of belonging, and mastery of the skills that employers value in new employees. Gains were seen in all students as a result of increased transparency. The effect, however, was much more significant for first-generation and low-income students. To make assignments more transparent, instructors should ask themselves and then report to students their answers to the following three questions:

- **Task:** *What do I want students to do?*
- **Purpose:** *Why am I asking students to do this?*
- **Criteria:** *How will I evaluate their work?*

Ultimately, this transparency promotes equity in the classroom by allowing all students in on what Winkelmes calls the “secret, unwritten rules of college”(Berrett, 2015).

Teach study skills: The rigor of most college coursework requires the development of effective study skills. Instructors should not assume, especially in lower-level courses, that all students have the necessary study skills to succeed. Instead, instructors should be explicit in the classroom about how to best study for particular assignments and types of content (Hodges & White, 2001).

Organize study groups: Because first-generation students are more likely to isolate themselves academically and socially, they often miss out on the benefits of group study. To prevent this, instructors should organize formal study groups that incorporate all students. The level of supervision given to these groups may range. Instructors may choose to have a student who successfully passed the class previously or a graduate student participate in student study groups to provide information or record attendance. It may be suitable to include study group attendance and participation as part of a course participation grade. Particularly positive results have been observed when faculty show an active interest in such groups.

Use rubrics: Grading [rubrics](#) make explicit the criteria by which complex assignments are evaluated. Using rubrics to assess student performance [promotes equity in grading](#), expedites necessary communication with support services, and helps students pinpoint learning deficiencies to allow for more targeted improvement efforts (Stevens & Levi, 2005). Rubrics can also serve as [formative assessments](#), which allow instructors track student progress and adapt learning activities to meet students' content or skill deficits. Lastly, when given in advance of an assignment,

rubrics assist students in focusing their efforts for an assignment (Stevens & Levi, 2005). This makes rubrics particularly useful for first-generation students.

Model discussion: First-generation students may not be familiar with the procedures of discussion in academia. Instructors should take opportunities throughout the semester to model an ideal discussion. Indeed, because discussion may vary across disciplines making your expectations about in-class discussion transparent will be beneficial to all students. Along with modeling, instructors may take the opportunity to have a “meta-discussion” with students where, all together, students analyze a recent in-class discussion in order to reflect on speaking time, turn-taking, and evolving perspectives. For more on leading productive classroom discussions, see the following [guide to discussions](#) from the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching.

Incorporate first-generation experiences: Given the “invisibility” of first-generation status, these students often lack role models. Instructors must incorporate first-generation experiences into the curriculum in the same way that we attend to other forms of diversity. In disciplines where reading and discussion take up most of class time, texts by first-generation authors should be assigned, and discussions should, where possible, center the experiences of first-generation students. In all disciplines, instructors should be explicit about available accommodations or support services available to first-generation students.

The problem of educational retention and attrition among first-generation students persists even after these students receive their undergraduate degrees, which explains why first-generation students are less likely to enter doctoral programs than their peers (Choy, 2001; Hoffer et al., 2003). This, in turn, creates a pipeline issue for first-generation college faculty, given that terminal degrees are a pre-requisite for most faculty positions. In other words, first-generation college students have difficulty locating a first-generation role model on the faculty, which in turn makes it harder to recruit and train first-generation faculty. Whenever possible, then, professors who identify as first-generation students should make their first-generation status explicit.

Develop personal relationships: While beneficial to all students’ academic achievement and degree attainment, first-generation students in particular benefit from close interactions with faculty, both in- and outside of class (Filkins & Doyle, 2002; Smart & Umbach, 2007). Kim and Sax (2009) show that greater frequency of positive interaction between first-generation students and instructors translates into greater academic, social, and emotional gains. To achieve this, instructors might schedule one-on-one conferences with students, make office hours mandatory a certain number of times in a semester, or invite students to come early to class or stay behind to talk. If a class is too large to support these types of individualized interventions, an instructor may nonetheless promote closer relationships with students through personal surveys handed out to all students at the beginning of the semester or by sharing appropriate personal information about herself.

Interaction with faculty in a research context shows a particularly significant positive effect on college GPAs and degree aspiration for all groups (Kim & Sax, 2009). Therefore, faculty members should consider what opportunities may exist for collaborative research with undergraduates and which students take advantage of such opportunities. As Davis (2010) states, the “symbolic impact of being able to say, ‘I know Professor Smith,’ cannot be underestimated (197). Students will feel more integrated into campus life and more supported overall.

Promote grit, lessen the stereotype threat and the imposter syndrome: Angela Duckworth, a psychologist and educational researcher, finds that one of the most consistent predictors of individual success in education is the quality of perseverance, which she calls “grit” (Duckworth et al., 2007)

Watch Duckworth’s TED Talk here:

https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_grit_the_power_of_passion_and_perseverance

First-generation students may already be especially resilient compared to their peers (Rodríguez, 1983; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993). As we have seen, however, they frequently internalize their educational achievement, relying heavily on a personal locus of control and self-motivation. These factors contribute to first-generation students’ high rates of anxiety and the frequent experience of the imposter syndrome and the stereotype threat phenomenon. To lessen the intensity and impact of these feelings, instructors should consciously train students to be “grittier.” One way to train this skill is by promoting intellectual curiosity in the face of failure. In research projects, students should be encouraged to think about the process of research as much as the product. Ask students to turn in multiple drafts of their research findings. Another way to train for grit is to assign challenging material—a complex novel or an

innovative research article—and spend time with students picking it apart. Assign the same text twice if students struggle. In this way, we teach students that failure is a normal part of academia and of life.

Build cultural capital: When Pappano writes that first-generation students “may not have grown up with the edifying vacations, museum excursions, daily doses of NPR and prep schools that groom Ivy applicants,” she is essentially referencing the amassed cultural capital of students from families with college-educated parents. Indeed, much of what is commonly considered to be hallmark of an educated person is instead the cultural capital accrued from being a member of a privileged class, race, gender, etc. (Gardner & Holley, 2011). For Doug Lederman (2013), it is this difference in cultural capital that divides first- and continuing-generation students. In their book *Rethinking College Student Persistence* (2013) Braxton and colleagues show that greater levels of cultural capital translates into greater engagement and social integration. In the classroom, then, instructors should avoid assuming that students will know certain culturally-specific information, such as the albums of *The Beatles*, or that they will have had culturally-specific experiences, such as travel abroad, because these represent a particular social (class, race, gender, etc.) position. Rather, instructors should look to include privileged cultural elements from a variety of communities and cultures. This disrupts the sheen of universality that accompanies elite Western culture. At the same time, instructors can help students gain cultural capital that will serve them in other classes and later in life. Lederman, for instance, cites a Wofford College program, [Novel Experience](#), that pays for students, in small groups, to eat dinner at a fancy restaurant. Joined by a professor, the students discuss a previously assigned novel while getting to know the professor, their classmates, and the ins and outs of fine dining.

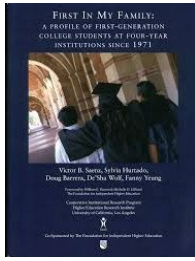
Engage parents: Instructors should seek to mitigate first-generation students’ unwanted feelings of disconnection from family and childhood peers. Constructive parental engagement in college education boosts students’ educational aspirations and eases the cultural transition to college (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Although somewhat limited in their ability to reach out to parents, instructors may want to assign that re-connect students with their families and home communities, such as ethnographic or (auto-)biographical work. For faculty who work in an advisory capacity in addition to teaching, explicit discussion of a students’ relationship with his home can improve the quality and personalization of advising, as well as lessen feelings of “dissonance” (Somers et al., 2004: 429).

[The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#), also known as the Buckley Amendment, protects the privacy of student records and prohibits sharing information about students, even to their parents, without express consent.

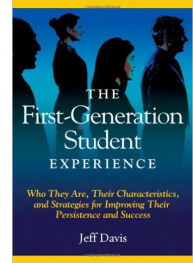
Conclusions

In *Investment in Learning* (1977), former president of Grinnell College and the University of Iowa Howard Bowen argues that society must vigorously support higher education. A college degree is an investment whose benefits exceed the individual degree holder to disperse throughout society. This simple idea—college completion benefits the individual and the community—is central to the missions of many institutions of higher education. It should give us pause, then, that first-generation students attain college degrees at lower rates and with more difficulties than continuing-generation students. Although our nation has more college students than ever, the majority of these college degrees go to students from higher income brackets. Between 1970 and 2013, the percentage of students earning a degree from the top quarter of household income increased from 40 to 77%; among the lowest quarter of household income that same rate rose from 6% to 9% (Pell Institute, 2015). What happened to the social mission of higher education?

The findings of this teaching guide can be summarized as follows. First-generation students learn differently from other students. Before college starts, they are likely to have missed out on many opportunities that facilitate attainment of a college degree, including completion of rigorous coursework, development of study skills, and accumulating cultural capital. Once at college, first-generation students are likely to experience isolation from their peers and faculty. Classroom instructors can foster first-generation student success by addressing the unique obstacles facing first-generation students.



The composition of this guide relied heavily upon the report of UCLA Higher Education Research Institute *First In My Family: A Profile of First-Generation College Students at Four-Year Institutions Since 1971* (Saenz et al., 2007) and Jeff Davis' *The First-Generation Student Experience: Implications for Campus Practice, and Strategies for Improving Persistence and Success* (2010). These texts are invaluable resources for educators and administrators seeking to learn more about first-generation students, along with any of the texts cited in the references section of this guide.



Several advocacy and research organizations exist for first-generation students. [FirstGenerationCollegeBound](#) and [I'mFirst!](#) both offer plentiful resources for first-generation students, and their parents and advisers.



This guide focuses on teaching first-generation undergraduate students. For information on first-generation graduate students, the InsideHigherEd articles [“Graduate Study for First-Generation Students,”](#) by Jess Waggoner (2013) and [“From First-Gen College Student to First-Gen Grad Student,”](#) by Alicia Peaker and Katie Shives (2013) serve as useful departure points.

Lastly, in following the recommendations offered here within, the author of this guide, Ben Galina, would like to come out as a first-generation student.

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