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

“Supporting First-generation College Students in 2025: A National Perspective” is the third of five research briefs in the landscape analyses series

WASHINGTON, DC (September 24, 2025) - [FirstGen Forward](#), formerly the Center for First-generation Student Success, today announced the release of “[Supporting First-generation College Students in 2025: A National Perspective](#),” the third installment in its new national landscape analyses series, [First-generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs, Services, and Perspectives in Higher Education](#).

Produced in partnership with [Phase Two Advisory](#), this new research brief builds on FirstGen Forward’s foundational landscape analyses from 2018 (four-year institutions) and 2020 (two-year institutions), sharing the challenges faced by first-generation college students and the programs supporting them due to the rapidly changing sociopolitical landscape in the U.S. during the first half of 2025. The data used for this brief comes from a national survey of college practitioners exploring how their institutions support first-generation college students. Conducted between October and December of 2024, the survey data and focus groups captured the perspectives of 571 practitioners at 411 institutions across 47 states and the District of Columbia.

“Colleges and universities are navigating incredibly difficult times, and, as social scientists, we believe we have a responsibility to report what we see in the data, making visible the challenges first-generation students and practitioners are facing,” said Dr. Melinda Mechur Karp, founder and principal of Phase Two Advisory. “We hope the strategies included in the brief help to mitigate harm to first-generation programming and the students themselves.”

Key findings from the report include:

- First-generation support efforts are not usually housed with DEI-related programs: among survey respondents, over 70% from four-year institutions and over 85% at

two-year institutions report that first-generation initiatives are housed outside of DEI-related offices.

- Survey data indicate that 57% of institutions rely on federal funds for specific programming (e.g., TRIO, Title III) to support first-generation programming; this percentage increases to 75% among community colleges and 71% among public colleges overall.
- The survey data indicate that, as with other forms of federal funding, the impact of TRIO's loss would be felt most acutely by institutions with the broadest access missions.
- Practitioners are experiencing high levels of stress, job insecurity, and uncertainty. They are under increased scrutiny regarding their work.
- In addition to navigating trying times, first-generation students articulated increased financial pressure and deep concern for the anticipated risks to their financial aid and scholarships.

"First-generation students represent 54% of all college students. To not serve this crucial student population may have widespread implications beyond higher education – economic implications," said Dr. Kevin Kruger, interim president and CEO of FirstGen Forward and president emeritus of NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. "Still, there is hope and strength in solidarity; this brief is an important resource and beacon. "

"To fulfill the promise of higher education, we must work to ensure that critical supports remain in place, that institutions are equipped to serve them, and that policies and funding that reflect these values are visible and unharmed," said Dr. Stephanie J. Bannister, vice president of the FirstGen Forward Network at FirstGen Forward. "We must protect TRIO, we must save Pell, and we must continue to serve first-generation students the way they deserve to be supported."

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

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

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ABOUT FIRSTGEN FORWARD

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

ABOUT PHASE TWO ADVISORY

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