



FirstGen Forward

IMPACT REPORT



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LOOKING FORWARD

Nine years ago, I had the privilege of sitting at the table during some of the earliest conversations about founding the Center for First-generation Student Success. At the time, I was in the room to share a practitioner's perspective on a bold idea that was just beginning to take shape. My work then focused on strengthening the support structures students rely on throughout their college experience and preparing them for the world beyond it.

My lens has broadened since then, but all these years later—now as president of FirstGen Forward—that focus remains the same.

I will never forget those early conversations about the Center. There was hope and energy around a shared mission and purpose. We were inspired by the visionary commitment of The Suder Foundation, the leadership and partnership of NASPA, and the inspirational thought leadership of Dr. Sarah E. Whitley, founding senior director and current principal at Sova Solutions.

Looking back over the past eight years, that promise has become reality. Today, our Network includes more than 470 colleges and universities—an interconnected community sharing knowledge, strategies, and ideas to strengthen support for first-generation students.

As we grow the Network, invest in research, and advocate for change, we remain grounded in the same sense of purpose that fueled those first conversations nearly a decade ago. Our mission—to be the premier source for student success through a first-generation lens—has never been more important.

Letter from the President

Dr. Stephanie J. Bannister

In my travels across the country, I have spoken with practitioners, scholars, and postsecondary ecosystem partners who demonstrate extraordinary resilience and determination to ensure first-generation students succeed, even as higher education navigates an increasingly complex environment. Advancing equity, strengthening institutional support, and elevating the first-generation student experience remain essential to the future of higher education.

This Impact Report highlights the people and partnerships that make this work possible—our staff and board, our institutional partners, and the strategic priorities that guide our mission and vision. My hope is that as you read it, you feel both a sense of connection and a renewed purpose in supporting first-generation students.

This mission is only possible because of the scholars and practitioners working every day on their campuses, the foundations and corporate partners investing in this movement, and the dedicated staff and board members who bring our vision to life.

On behalf of FirstGen Forward, thank you for your commitment to advancing the success of first-generation students.

With gratitude,



Stephanie J. Bannister, Ph.D.
President, FirstGen Forward



Organizational History

2017

- June 14, 2017, NASPA and The Suder Foundation announce the **Center for First-generation Student Success**.
- The **Inaugural First-Generation College Celebration** is observed on November 8, in honor of the signing of the Higher Education Act of 1965.

With a deep belief in the talent and potential of first-generation students, we founded The Suder Foundation and First Scholars. Through this work, we witnessed firsthand the power of a cohort-based model in advancing first-generation student success and began asking how that impact could reach more institutions. We helped bring that vision to life through FirstGen Forward. We remain deeply engaged in this work and grateful for the community of partners advancing success for generations to come.

— Eric Suder & Deborah Suder



2018

- The Center **launches firstgen.naspa.org**, the first-of-its-kind resource dedicated to first-generation student success and a repository of first-gen scholarship, news, and media.
- **First-generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs and Services at Four-year Institutions** is published, reviewing first-gen efforts at four-year institutions.

2019

- The Center **launches a national network of 90 colleges and universities** committed to advancing success for first-generation students.
- The Center releases its first **[national data fact sheets](#)** highlighting trends and insights on first-generation student experiences.
- The **inaugural NASPA First-generation Student Success Conferences** debut, joining the NASPA Conferences on Student Success in Higher Education and establishing a dedicated professional development track for first-generation student success.
- The Center and the Council for Opportunity in Education **introduce the First-Generation College Celebration Grant Program**, providing institutions with unrestricted funds to support #CelebrateFirstGen activities.

2021

- The Journal of First-generation Student Success publishes its first volume and issue.
- A new series of **[national data fact sheets](#)** is published, focusing on first-generation graduates and transitions to graduate school and employment.
- **[An Annotated Bibliography on First-generation College Students: Research from 2008-2019](#)** is published.
- The Center joins Today's Student Coalition, a national network advancing opportunities for today's learners.
- The Network grows to **196 institutions (including 10 Network Leader Cohort Three institutions)**

2020

- **[First-generation Students in Community and Technical Colleges: A National Exploration of Institutional Support Practices](#)** is published, offering a review of first-gen efforts at community and technical colleges.
- The Network grows to **142 institutions (including 17 Network Leader Cohort One/Two institutions)**.

2022

- The First-generation Student Success Conference is held in person again after two years of being virtual, with nearly 1,000 registrants.
- The Network adopts a new model designed to engage and empower institutions to learn, plan, and achieve transformation of the first-generation student experience.
- The Center launches a new publication series—[Resource Guides](#)—which combines literature and actionable strategies.
- The Network grows to **250 institutions (no new Network Leader cohort this year)**.

2024

- Another series of [national data fact sheets](#) is published, comparing findings from the 2019 and 2021 fact sheets.
- [Decoding the Academy: A Roadmap for First-generation College Students Through Graduate Education](#) is published, creating necessary visibility around the first-generation graduate student identity, experience, and recommendations for transformative change.
- The Center rebrands as FirstGen Forward and files to become an independent non-profit organization.
- The Colorado Department of Higher Education announces the [First-Generation-Serving Institution Designation](#) and name engagement in the FirstGen Forward Network as an eligibility requirement.
- The Network grows to **409 institutions (including 13 Network Leader Cohort Five institutions)**.

2023

- Increased the FGCC Grant Opportunity to \$1000, awarding over \$50,000 in grant monies.
- The Network grows to **329 institutions (including 16 Network Leader Cohort Four institutions)**.

2025

- After the rebrand, FirstGen Forward launches a new website: firstgenforward.org
- The Journal of First-generation Student Success publishes its fifth volume and marks the anniversary by being indexed in SCOPUS.
- FirstGen Forward receives the determination letter, establishing the organization as an independent non-profit.
- The Network grows to **470 (including 18 Network Leader Cohort Six institutions)**.



About FirstGen Forward:

FirstGen Forward is the center for first-generation student success—your premier source for evidence-based approaches, data-informed strategies, professional development, and research. Together, we are building community and belonging through the FirstGen Forward Network, knowledge creation and evidence-based practices, and thought leadership and advocacy, transforming higher education and the student success landscape guided by a first-gen lens.

Mission

FirstGen Forward is the premier source for student success through a first-generation lens, equipping the higher education community with evidence-based approaches, data-informed strategies, professional development, and research.



Vision

A future where higher education embraces a student-ready approach—grounded in continuous improvement—effectively serving first-generation students, to ensure their success in college, career, and life.

Board of Directors

Message from the Board



Kevin Kruger, Ph.D.

Board Chair & President Emeritus
NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education



Danita M. Brown Young, Ph.D.

Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign



Eric Suder

President and Founder
The Suder Foundation



Deborah Suder

Director and Co-Founder
The Suder Foundation



Jeanine Ward-Roof, Ph.D.

Vice President for Student Affairs
Ferris State University

FirstGen Forward is the only organization across higher education focusing on addressing gaps in equity and access for first-generation college students. Through their transformation lens, institutions are experiencing structural, attitudinal, and policy changes that not only benefit first-generation students, they also benefit the entire institution.

As a first-generation college graduate, I relate to today's first-generation students and am encouraged by institutions engaging in the Network and committing to the promise of higher education. The future is first-gen, and FirstGen Forward is the center for first-generation student success.

Let's keep moving first-gen forward!

Kevin Kruger

Message from the FirstGen Forward Board Chair,
Dr. Kevin Kruger, President Emeritus, NASPA



President

Stephanie J. Bannister, Ph.D.



Assistant Vice President

Wendy Beesley, M.P.A.
Network Strategies



Director

Zachery Holder, M.S.
Talent & Creative Strategy



Associate Director

Catherine Johnson, M.Ed.
Data Expert Guidance & Analytics



Vice President

Martina A. Martin, Ed.D.
Network Strategies



Staff Accountant

Danielle Munro



Senior Director

Garrett Nagaishi, M.A.
Organizational Operations



Assistant Director

Blake Nantz
Data Analytics & Learning



Director

Rosemary Sandoval
Organizational Effectiveness & Executive
Assistant to the President



Assistant Director

Jennifer Luken Sutton, Ph.D.
Expert Guidance and Recruitment
Strategies



Executive Vice President

**Deana Waintraub
Stafford, M.Ed.**
Innovation & Effectiveness



Associate Vice President

Qua'Aisa Williams, Ph.D.
Learning & Impact

Staff

Nearly three-quarters of FGF staff identify as first-gen.
They are staunch advocates for first-generation student success.

WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR THE FORWARD THINKERS' THOUGHT PARTNERSHIP, ADVOCACY, AND INSIGHTS.

THANK YOU,
FORWARD THINKERS



Amy Baldwin, Ed.D.
Former Director and Senior Lecturer of Writing, Literacy, and Academic Success in Student Transitions University of Central Arkansas



Claude Taylor, M.A.
Title V Project Director Middlesex College



Daphne L. Rankin, Ph.D.
Retired Associate Vice Provost for Strategic Enrollment Management Virginia Commonwealth University



Jacki Rodriguez, M.A.
Director, Office of First Gen Student Success University of Memphis



James K. Winfield, Ed.D.
Associate Dean for FYE, General Education and Retention Strategies Southern New Hampshire University



Jennifer Schoen, M.Ed.
Director, Opportunity Scholarships and Outreach Programs Northeastern University



Julie Carballo, M.Ed.
Assistant Dean for First-generation, Transfer and Veteran Initiatives North Central College



Kelley O'Neal, M.Ed.
Executive Director, Byrne Student Success Center Texas A&M University



Maria Dykema Erb, M.Ed.
Inaugural Executive Director Boston University



Mary Wallace, Ph.D.
Assistant Vice President of Student Experience University of Alabama at Birmingham



Oscar Miranda Tapia, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate North Carolina State University



Rashné Jehangir, Ph.D.
Professor of Higher Education and Assistant Dean of Education Opportunity Program; Robert H. Beck Chair of Ideas University of Minnesota-Twin Cities



Ryan Barone, Ph.D.
Assistant Vice President for Student Success Colorado State University



Sonja Ardoin, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs Clemson University

THANK YOU

Strategic Priorities and Outcomes

National Reach & Institutional Transformation:

Scale holistic first-generation student success by empowering institutions and leaders across higher education.

Knowledge Creation, Research & Community Building:

Serve as the central hub for evidence-based practices, scholarly research, and community engagement to advance first-gen student success.

Thought Leadership & Advocacy:

Influence national conversations and drive systemic change through thought leadership and cross-sector advocacy.



National Reach & Institutional Transformation:

Scale holistic first-generation student success by empowering institutions and leaders across higher education

FirstGen Forward Network

FirstGen
FORWARD
Network Member



FirstGen
FORWARD
Network Leader



The FirstGen Forward Network is a national scaling model that guides institutions of higher education through a shared journey to strengthen first-generation student support. The Network brings together leaders from across the country to exchange data, model innovative practices, and expand evidence-based solutions that improve first-generation student success. With this collaborative approach, FirstGen Forward equips institutions with the tools and strategies to improve first-generation completion rates at scale.

As of December 2025, the Network includes **472 colleges and universities across 47 states**—including **243 Minority-Serving Institutions, 8 Historically Black Colleges and Universities, 2 Predominantly Black Institutions, and 124 Rural-Serving Institutions**—serving **5.2 million students, 2 million of whom are first-generation.**



Network Progress and Early Impact

Network Member institutions are building strong foundations to transform their campuses through a first-generation lens. From the 2025 Annual Report (281 institutions reporting):

- **94.6%** established an institution-wide definition of “first-generation.”
- **75.4%** created or are developing a first-generation steering committee.
- **80.3%** designated a point person for first-generation initiatives.
- **89.5%** made progress toward their primary first-generation goal.

Emerging Student Success Trends

In 2025, FirstGen Forward analyzed key metrics from the Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP) for institutions that advanced to Network Leader or Network Champion and submitted accurate data. Several promising patterns emerged:

First- to second-year retention:

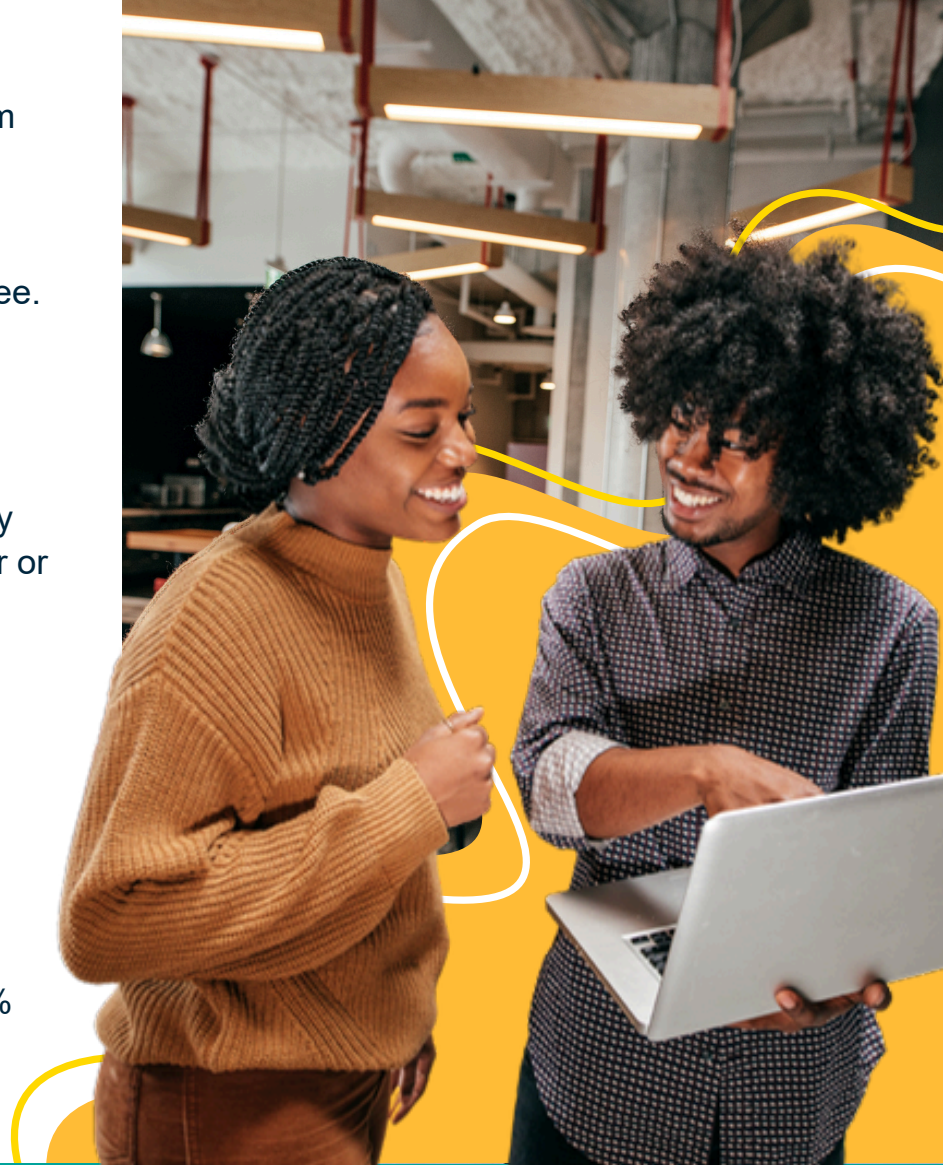
- First-gen students averaged 76.4%, compared to 81.5% for continuing-generation students (a 5.1-point gap).

First-year credit completion:

- First-gen students averaged 84.3%, compared to 86.9% for continuing-generation peers (a 2.6-point gap).

Four-year graduation rate:

- The inaugural Network Leader cohort (2021–2022) reported a 58.4% four-year graduation rate—34.4 points above the national average.



Summary of Network Impact

Together, these findings show a strong and consistent pattern of progress across the FirstGen Forward Network. Institutions are making **measurable gains in enrollment, retention, and academic momentum for first-generation students**, demonstrating a shared commitment to improving outcomes and narrowing equity gaps. While the scale of improvement varies, the overall trajectory is positive and accelerating. As the Network expands and strengthens its data practices, these trends provide a solid foundation for continued progress, deeper collaboration, and ongoing innovation in first-generation student support.



EARLY NETWORK LEADER COHORTS DELIVER BREAKTHROUGH FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION GAINS

These institutions showed meaningful gains after their first full year in the Network Leader phase, signaling strong momentum in first-generation student success. As the Network matures, future analyses will incorporate additional years of graduation-rate data, enabling more robust trend reporting and the inclusion of six-year completion outcomes.

The inaugural Network Leader cohort achieved a

58.4%

four-year graduation rate for first-generation students with the 2021–22 student cohort

representing the strongest outcome for first-generation cohorts in the past five years and surpassing the graduation rates of students who first enrolled before the pandemic.

FirstGen FORWARD

Network Member

NETWORK MEMBER PHASE: BUILDING THE FOUNDATION

Institutions focus on establishing core elements of first-generation student success:

- Define a shared institutional definition of “first-generation.”
- Review student-level data to understand first-gen needs
- Form a steering committee to guide strategy
- Designate a point person to lead first-gen initiatives
- Community & Learning

Network Members actively participate in:

- Monthly workshops
- Professional development opportunities
- Peer networking and resource sharing

Continuing institutions deepen their practice through:

- Regional community meetings
- Expanded professional learning
- Leadership in sharing effective strategies with peers
- Pathway to Advancement

Institutions in good standing may progress to Phase Two: Network Leader, signaling readiness for broader institutional transformation.



FirstGen FORWARD

Network Leader

Network Leader Phase: Custom Approach to Institutional Transformation


Network Leader is the second phase of the FirstGen Forward Network and is our customized approach to intentional institutional transformation to advance student outcomes. Our work creates an environment where direct student support can be established, scaled, and sustained.

Benefits of participation in the Network Leader phase include:

- an evidence-based and research-supported framework of actionable priorities supported through intentional and relevant monthly workshops;
- access to the Leader Academy: an intensive onboarding workshop and community-building experience;
- diagnostic tools providing critical institutional insight;
- robust data-sharing as part of the national Postsecondary Data Partnership;
- guidance of expert coaches along each step of the experience; and
- customized solutions and continuous improvement plans personalized to allow each institution to meet its first-generation student success goals.

When a first-generation student attends an institution that is developed with them in mind and has appropriate support and resources, student success outcomes improve.

Once selected for the **Network Leader** Phase, an institution commits to a multi-year experience that requires presidential and financial support to build a leadership team focused on improving institutional cultures and systems at scale.



Network Leader institutions implement the following best practices throughout the 28-month engagement in partnership with the support of their FirstGen Forward Expert Guide:

- **Establish a cohesive leadership team** that includes the vice president of academic or student affairs, the institutional research (IR) lead, and the first-generation or student success director, with formal approval from the president or chancellor.
- Conduct a **comprehensive institutional mapping and program audit** to identify redundancies, streamline first-generation initiatives, and improve operational efficiency.
- Administer a faculty and staff survey to assess institutional strengths, identify areas for improvement, and uncover opportunities to enhance support for first-generation students.
- Apply **continuous improvement methodologies**, including the development of SMART goals and detailed 30-, 60-, and 90-day action cycles to drive meaningful and measurable progress.
- Adopt and implement the **Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP)** to access aggregate dashboards and secure analysis-ready student-level data.
- Set **targeted quantitative student success goals**—such as first-generation first- to second-year retention, first-year credit completion ratio, and overall completion—and regularly track progress using PDP data.

Upon meeting milestones in the **Network Leader** phase, institutions may be recommended for advancement to the **Network Champion** phase.



Network Champion Phase: Sustaining Leadership

A Network Champion is a national thought-leader in advancing first-generation efforts and contributes to an important knowledge base on evidence-based practices, leadership engagement, and scaling support.

Network Champion institutions receive support and benefits that include:

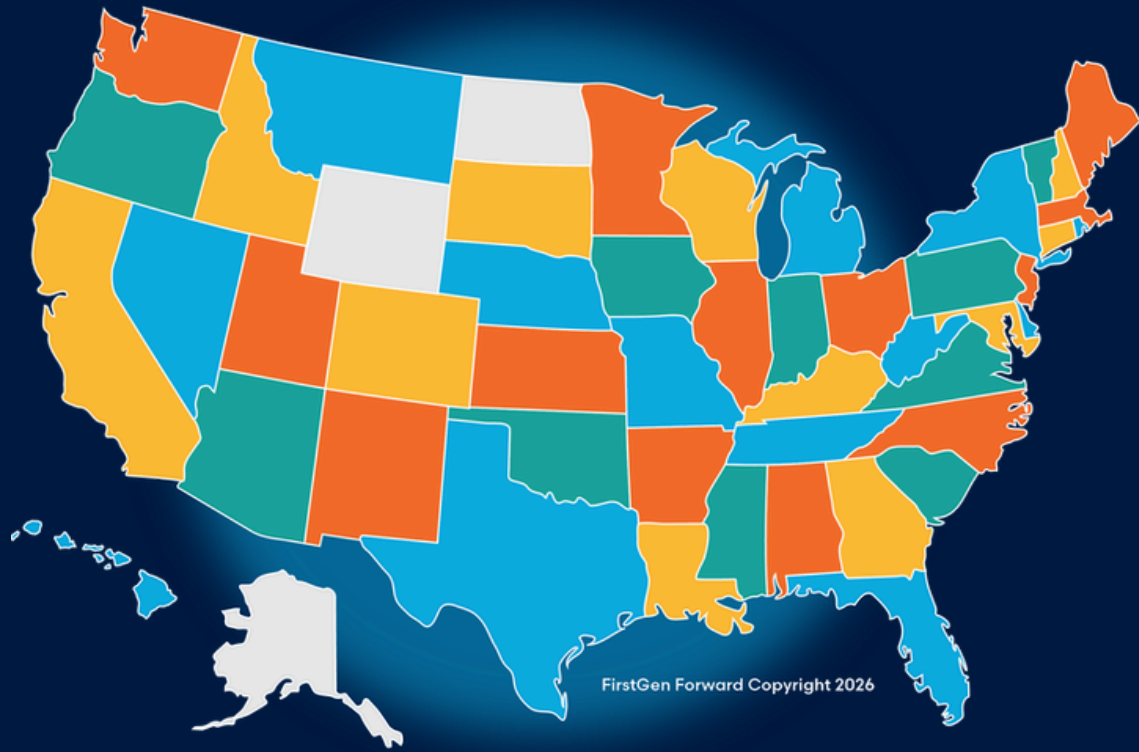
- Ongoing **professional development**
- Access to **specialized resources**
- **Engagement with Expert Guides**
- Additional benefits include:
 - Innovation **grant opportunities**
 - **Discounted conference attendance**

To remain a Network Champion, institutions must:

- Meet annual **participation and reporting requirements**
- **Serve as mentors** to other Network institutions
- Stay **active in the Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP)**

Network Champion is the final phase of the Network Journey. Network Champions emerge as exemplars in advancing first-generation student success.





FIRSTGEN FORWARD NETWORK

472
INSTITUTIONS

47+
THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

5.2 MILLION = **2 MILLION**
STUDENTS NATIONWIDE FIRST-GEN

2026 NETWORK RECRUITMENT TARGETS

+50

FirstGen
FORWARD
Network Member

50

FirstGen
FORWARD
Network Leader

8

FirstGen
FORWARD
NETWORK CHAMPION

WHAT HAVE EXPERT GUIDES LEARNED ALONGSIDE INSTITUTIONS?



Across recent cohorts, institutions consistently demonstrated strong equity-centered intent; however, cohort engagement data indicate that impact is most strongly associated with intentional alignment among leadership, organizational structures, and daily practice.

Persistent Implementation Barriers

- Leadership turnover, organizational restructuring, and limited staff capacity consistently hinder efforts to embed first-generation student success metrics into strategic plans.

Power of Cross-Level Leadership Teams

- Institutions with integrated teams—pairing senior leaders with frontline program staff—were better able to access data, translate insights into action, and maintain momentum.

Faculty Engagement as a Critical Lever

- Across all cohorts, institutions identified faculty training and involvement as essential for scaling and sustaining first-generation student success efforts.

Altogether, these findings underscore that measurable progress depends not only on strategic priorities but on aligned leadership, data-enabled teams, and faculty integration.



EXPERT GUIDES

Catherine Johnson

Wendy Beesley

Martina A. Martin

Jennifer Luken Sutton



CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN ACTION

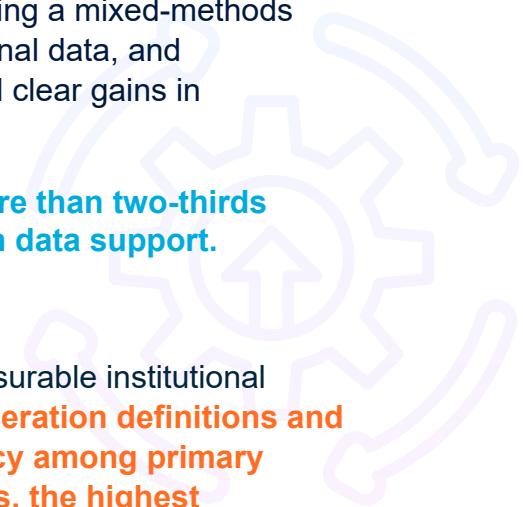
In 2023, Sova Solutions conducted a formative evaluation examining the implementation of the FirstGen Forward Network model from approximately the first quarter of 2023 through the first quarter of 2025. Using a mixed-methods approach that included focus groups, interviews with institutional leaders and partners, institutional data, and pre- and post-surveys, the evaluation found strong satisfaction with the Network experience and clear gains in institutional knowledge, confidence, and capacity.

All survey respondents indicated that the Network met or exceeded their expectations, **with more than two-thirds reporting being extremely satisfied, particularly with expert guidance and first-generation data support.**

Institutions reported improvements in:

- data use for continuous improvement;
- stronger alignment between leadership and institutional strategy;
- increased campus-wide coordination; and
- at several institutions, record-high first-generation retention outcomes.

The evaluation also documented measurable institutional progress, such as **improved first-generation definitions and data systems, increased data literacy among primary contacts, and, at several institutions, the highest first-generation retention rates in five years.** Findings were used to inform targeted refinements to the Network model, strengthening its effectiveness and responsiveness to institutional needs.



COFFEE CHATS

Purpose and Format

Each 60-minute session brought together small groups of institutional leaders for a relaxed discussion. These sessions created a space for leaders to speak candidly about their experiences and engage directly with the Network's data and support structures.

What Participants Reflected On

Across institutions, leaders offered insights on:

- Their FirstGen Forward journey, from early milestones to day-to-day implementation realities
- Use and impact of Network supports, including tools, expert guidance, monthly workshops, and peer connections
- Successes and persistent challenges, particularly related to time, staffing, and resource constraints
- How Network participation shaped their first-generation student success efforts, including shifts in strategy, capacity, and institutional alignment



KEY TAKEAWAY

FirstGen Forward is successfully supporting institutions in systematizing and scaling their first-gen student success efforts. While institutions universally value expert guidance, peer connections, and data access, there are clear opportunities to improve communication clarity, tool flexibility, and meeting efficiency. The Network is driving real institutional change, from strategic planning integration to cross-campus collaboration, but continued refinement of delivery methods will enhance impact and sustainability.

WHAT NETWORK INSTITUTIONS ARE SAYING

Expert Guidance Impact

"[Our expert guide has] been above and beyond amazing. She's always very resourceful, and she creates a safe space for us to share challenges that we're having, and also like challenges, like political ones too... She brings a lot of perspective and insights and resources, and she's always when we have questions, and I asked her about something, she will always say, 'Oh, well, I'm working with this other institution who has done this great work. So let me send you some of the resources that they've done.'"

— Public 4-Year University

The Value of a Systematic Approach

"The 90-day continuous improvement cycle has made advancing first-gen work doable... Allows taking big picture idea and make it manageable... Key tool for small staff capacity doing comprehensive work."

— Public 4-Year University

National Framework Support

"I credit FirstGen Forward for giving us a national lens and support that made my job easier when it was time to defend why we wanted a full time position."

— Public 4-Year University

The success of the May 2025 Coffee Chats established a trusted model for feedback and engagement. The approach has since been adapted for community college and HBCU partners, demonstrating its value as a scalable, relationship-centered method for gathering insights, strengthening partnerships, and guiding continuous improvement across diverse institutions.

National Reach through Virtual and In-person Gatherings

In 2025, FirstGen Forward advanced its role as a national leader in first-generation student success by delivering a robust mix of virtual and in-person gatherings that broadened engagement and amplified impact. New initiatives—such as Community Conversations, the Network Leader Academy, and the Champion Convening—provided high-value learning experiences that connected and equipped stakeholders across higher education. Our national conference presence, targeted support for first-generation graduate students, and the inaugural Funder Gathering further solidified FGF as a trusted connector and catalyst, ensuring institutions and partners have the insights and support needed to advance equitable outcomes for first-generation students.

1,110+
participants across three high-impact community conversation sessions

300+
institution leaders engaged since 2023 in our Leader Academies & Champion Convenings



COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Launched in February 2025, Community Conversations bring together the full FirstGen Forward Network to explore timely topics in first-generation student success in a virtual series.

The series creates space for institutions across roles and types to engage with shared challenges and access resources responsive to the evolving higher education landscape. Highlighted Community Conversations included:

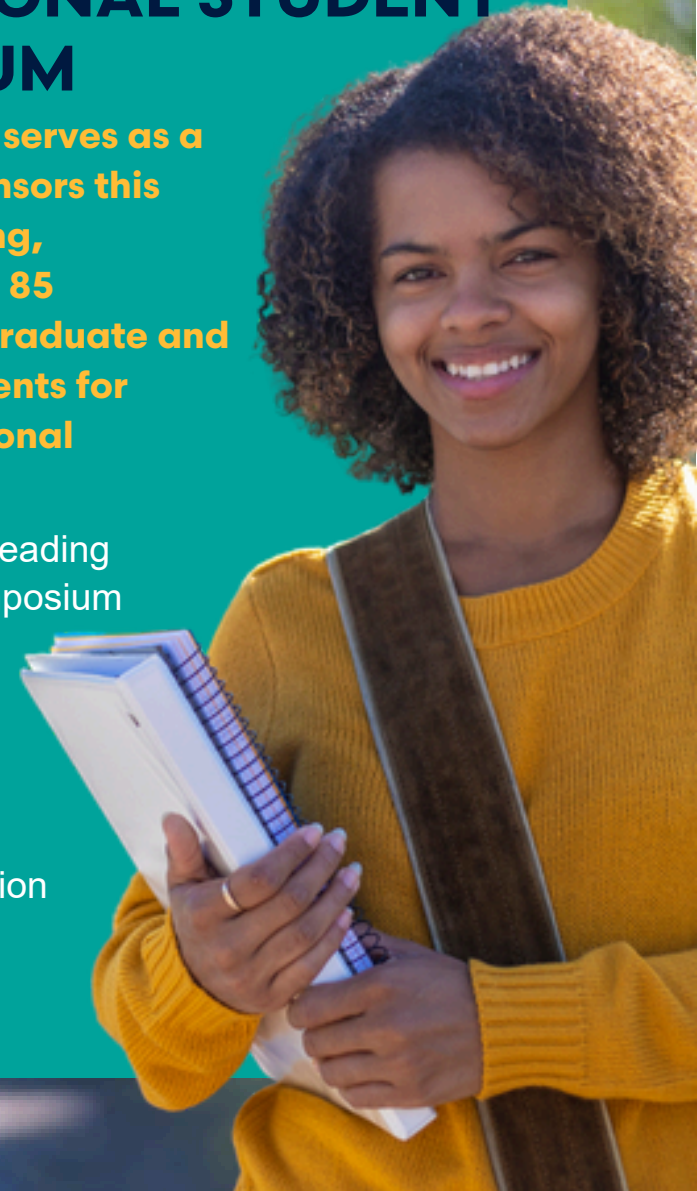
- *Well-Being: A Candid Conversation on Mental Health and Self-Care for First-Generation Professionals in Higher Education*
- *First-gen Capital: Leveraging Lived Experience for Success*
- *2025 Landscape of Higher Education*

More than **1,100** participants engaged in these sessions, reinforcing their value as a trusted, scalable platform for Network-wide learning and connection.

FIRST-GENERATION GRADUATE & PROFESSIONAL STUDENT SYMPOSIUM

FirstGen Forward serves as a coordinating sponsor for this national convening, bringing together 85 first-generation graduate and professional students for targeted professional development.

In partnership with leading institutions, the symposium elevates visibility, builds community, and supports persistence and career-readiness among first-generation scholars.



CONFERENCE WORKSHOPS & FIELD ENGAGEMENT

NASPA ANNUAL CONFERENCE & FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT SUCCESS CONFERENCE

FirstGen Forward delivers high-impact workshops and sessions reaching more than 125 participants in 2025, alongside broader conference audiences. These engagements translate Network insights into practice, equipping institutions—both within and beyond the Network—with actionable strategies to strengthen first-generation student success.

NETWORK LEADER ACADEMY

A cornerstone leadership experience, the Academy has engaged over 300 institutional leaders since 2023. It accelerates institutional progress by aligning leadership teams, strengthening data use, and advancing continuous improvement strategies. Participants report clearer priorities, stronger collaboration, and increased confidence in driving measurable outcomes.

NETWORK CHAMPION CONVENING

This convening brings together top-performing institutions to deepen impact and scale effective practices. With participation from nearly all Network Champion institutions, the experience strengthens capacity in data use, policy alignment, workforce strategy, and long-term sustainability—advancing field leadership and innovation.

FUNDER GATHERING

Launched in 2025, the Funder Gathering convenes philanthropic partners and institutional leaders to align investment with practice. With 15 participating funders, the event strengthens partnerships, enhances shared understanding of impact, and supports more first-generation students.

The background features a photograph of students in a classroom, overlaid with a large, white, stylized graphic element that resembles a thick, rounded 'L' shape or a bracket. The text is positioned within the white space of this graphic.

Knowledge Creation, Research & Community Building:

Serve as the central hub for evidence-based practices, scholarly research, and community engagement to advance first-gen student success.

RESOURCE GUIDES

FirstGen Forward curates Resource Guides in collaboration with field experts to support practitioners, leaders, and institutions in advancing first-generation student success.

- [Prioritizing First-generation Students in Online Education](#)
- [Scholarly Writing Insights: A Guide for First-gen and Emerging Scholars, Faculty, Editorial Boards, and Publishers](#)
- [Engaging with Statewide Advocacy for First-generation College Students](#)
- [Serving Undergraduate First-generation Latinx/a/o Communities in Higher Education](#)
- [Engaging Support for Black First-generation Students](#)
- [Financial Aid and Financial Literacy for First-generation Students](#)
- [Supporting First-gen Graduate, Professional, or Doctoral Students](#)
- [Creating an Inclusive Experience for Rural First-gen Students](#)

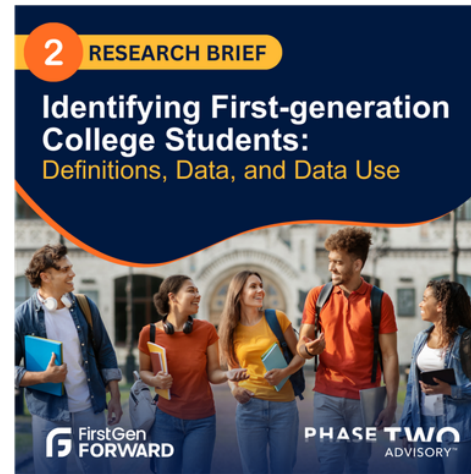


Together, these resources extend FirstGen Forward's impact by equipping institutions with targeted tools and insights to advance equitable outcomes for first-generation students.



Landscape Research Briefs

Research Briefs deliver timely insights on first-generation student success by combining rigorous data analysis with practitioner and student perspectives. Produced with Phase Two Advisory, the series explores key topics such as first-generation data use, campus support patterns, identity and belonging, and workforce preparation. Together, these briefs extend FGF's impact by offering evidence-based, actionable insights that help institutions understand current needs, identify gaps in practice, and strengthen programs and policies that advance first-generation student success nationwide.



 [Download the National Landscape Briefs](#)



NASHYA POOLE
GRADUATE ASSISTANT
KENT STATE UNIVERSITY

"It's important to recognize our hardships and celebrate the accomplishments that brought us here."

NATIONAL FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE CELEBRATION

First-Generation College Celebration (FGCC) is a national initiative observed annually on November 8 to raise awareness of the first-generation college student identity by advancing an asset-based, national narrative of these students' experiences and outcomes.

- Reached a broad national audience with **over 2 million impressions**
- Engaged **1.4+ million individuals** across social media platforms
- Drove **30,000 website users** and nearly **20,000 visits** to the FGCC page
- Generated more than **1 million social engagements**, demonstrating strong resonance with students, educators, institutions, and community members
- Leveraged coordinated storytelling, bilingual messaging, and widespread institutional participation
- Significantly **amplified national visibility, engagement, and conversation** around first-generation student success through FGCC 2025

NATIONAL FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE CELEBRATION

7

STATE PROCLAMATIONS

Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Washington, and South Carolina

26

GRANT OPPORTUNITY

These grants supported **151,628 first-generation students**

2

MILLION SOCIAL IMPRESSIONS

Strong reach and positive sentiment highlight the pride fueling #CelebrateFirstGen.

Grant Opportunity

The First-Generation College Celebration (FGCC) Grant Opportunity—supported by TIAA and the Council for Opportunity in Education—helps institutions build meaningful, sustainable initiatives that elevate first-generation students and strengthen campus-wide commitment to their success. In 2025, 26 institutions received grants totaling \$5,000, \$2,500, or \$1,000, supporting 151,628 first-generation students and advancing asset-based approaches to first-generation celebration and success.

STATE PROCLAMATIONS

Proclamations formally recognizing First-Generation College Celebration Day. These proclamations elevated November 8 as a date of honor for first-generation students and reinforced the importance of asset-based recognition at the state level. Statewide recognition further strengthens national awareness of the First-Generation College Celebration, which underscores the growing commitment among policymakers and education leaders to advancing first-generation student success.

SOCIAL MEDIA REACH AND CAMPAIGNS

The campaign aimed to build awareness and engagement for First-Generation College Celebration Day across Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok. Creative assets included new and existing video content, static images featuring first-generation students and professionals, ambassador-style testimonials, and bilingual (English/Spanish) messaging. The strong excitement and pride surrounding #CelebrateFirstGen were reflected in the campaign's overall performance and positive sentiment.

The Journal of First-generation Student Success

ISSN 2690-6015

The Journal of First-generation Student Success (JFGSS) is the first academic peer-reviewed publication dedicated exclusively to advancing research and practice that centers on the success of first-generation students.

Purpose and Focus

Publishes research and practice-focused articles that directly support implementation. Prioritizes innovative solutions and asset-based narratives that move beyond deficit framing.

Quality and Recognition

- Invited to apply for the 2026 Scopus indexing.
- Also invited to apply to the Web of Science, with plans to pursue after Scopus completion.

Content and Contributions

Features high-quality scholarship and “notes from the field” on topics such as:

- Institutional supports
 - Student wellness
 - Collaborative summer bridge models
- Provides a unique venue for cross-disciplinary collaboration and rigorous inquiry.
- Impact
 - Strengthens the national knowledge base on first-generation student success.
 - Helps shape data-informed, equitable approaches to serving first-generation students across higher education.



REACH AND READERSHIP

Broad national and international audience
2,837 institutional subscribers
15,560 article downloads in 2024

Network Workshops, e-Learning Modules, Webinars

FirstGen Forward supports continuous learning and institutional progress through a combination of cohort-based Network Workshops, e-Learning Modules, and webinars designed to advance first-generation student success across the Network. Together, these learning opportunities create structured, responsive spaces for institutions to build knowledge, share practice, and apply insights aligned to their stage in the FirstGen Forward journey.

1,268
Participants

Network Member institutions participate in cohort-based class meetings designed to provide a strong foundation for each incoming class. Meeting topics are curated based on institutional feedback to ensure relevance and impact. Class meetings are held every other month, with participants encouraged to attend at least four of the five sessions offered each year.

1,352
Participants

Regional Community Meetings bring together all Network institutions within geographic regions to engage in discussion on timely, relevant topics. These meetings foster peer connection, shared learning, and collaboration across institutions navigating similar regional contexts.

510
Participants

For Network Leader institutions, monthly workshops combine expert-led content with peer learning and networking to promote active learning and collaboration. These workshops are intentionally designed to advance knowledge and progress on actionable priorities while fostering a responsive partnership with Expert Guides to address each institution's unique areas of focus.

15
Modules

Alongside live sessions, e-Learning Modules offer short, multimedia-rich courses that strengthen Network engagement by addressing key knowledge gaps and showcasing real institutional examples. Webinars expand access to timely research, practical tools, and expert insights, connecting institutions with strategies they can apply across a wide range of campus contexts.

EXPANDING DATA USE AND UNDERSTANDING

Data Summits

In 2025, FirstGen Forward hosted two revitalized Data Summits—one for Network Leaders and Champions, and another tailored for Network Members. These redesigned **convenings delivered practical tools, shared learning, and a scalable model** that will shape our 2026 Summits and beyond.

PDP Commons

Over the past year, we launched the PDP Commons, **a centralized digital hub for institutions participating in the Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP)**. The Commons provides a single, accessible space where leaders, data professionals, and practitioners can find tools, training, and guidance to strengthen their use of PDP data.

The result is a curated collection of resources designed to help institutions understand, interpret, and apply PDP data in service of equity and student success. These resources include:

- Workshop materials and slide decks that institutions can use for internal professional development and cross-campus learning
- Downloadable reports and reference documents developed through our FirstGen Forward data initiatives
- Templates and tools to support benchmarking, goal-setting, and equity-minded data conversations
- Upcoming data events hosted by FirstGen Forward

With the PDP Commons, institutions now have a powerful, evolving hub that transforms PDP data into actionable insights—strengthening decision-making and advancing equity for first-generation students.

NETWORK LEADER AND CHAMPION DATA SUMMIT

The 2025 FirstGen Forward Data Summit convened 126 attendees from 60 Network institutions for a full day of collaborative learning designed to strengthen data literacy, advance equitable student success practices, and deepen the effective use of Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP) data. The event brought together institutions at varying stages of data maturity, providing structured opportunities to reflect, learn, and strategize collectively.

NETWORK MEMBER DATA SUMMIT

The Network Member Data Summit offered a **90-minute learning experience** designed to strengthen institutions' capacity to collect, interpret, and apply first-generation student data.

The summit brought together **340 participants from 198 institutions**, representing a wide range of institutional contexts and levels of data readiness. This diversity created a collaborative environment where participants reflected on current practices, shared common challenges, and explored strategies to improve data quality and accessibility.

The session emphasized **core principles for defining, collecting, and managing first-generation student data**, helping institutions better understand how their data systems, definitions, and processes influence the accuracy and usefulness of the insights they rely on to support students.

POSTSECONDARY DATA PARTNERSHIP PANEL



This panel featured leaders from Florida International University (FIU), the National Student Clearinghouse/Postsecondary Data Partnership, and FirstGen Forward to discuss how institutions can build strong data cultures and leverage analytics to drive equitable outcomes.

Panelists emphasized that transforming campus culture requires intentional leadership, broad access to data, shared definitions, and faculty engagement strategies that position data as a tool for empowerment—not compliance.

- Florida International University illustrated this impact firsthand, sharing how sustained focus on performance-based metrics helped the institution dramatically reduce outcome gaps between first-generation and continuing-generation students over 13 years.
- Speakers highlighted the power of metrics such as gateway **course completion, stop-out patterns, and DFW rates to guide effective interventions**—including a course redesign that cut accounting drop/fail rates from 40% to 20%.
- They also underscored the importance of **regular leadership convenings, clear governance structures, and cross-department collaboration to sustain momentum** and drive institutional alignment.
- For resource-constrained campuses, panelists encouraged starting small: **focus on a concise set of metrics, accept imperfect data, refine research questions over time**, and celebrate early wins to build buy-in.

Collectively, the discussion demonstrated a clear message: **data-informed practice is essential to advancing first-generation student success**—and meaningful progress is achievable when institutions align priorities, use shared definitions, and collaborate intentionally.



Thought Leadership & Advocacy:

Influence national conversations and drive systemic change through thought leadership and cross-sector advocacy.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP & ADVOCACY

2025 INFLUENCE AT A GLANCE



A SNAPSHOT OF HOW FIRSTGEN FORWARD HAS INFLUENCED NATIONAL CONVERSATIONS AND DRIVEN SYSTEMIC CHANGE FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT SUCCESS.



Who We Reached:

Institutional Leaders

Presidents, provosts, VPSAs, deans, directors

Higher Ed Practitioners

Advisors, program staff, student success teams, Military-Connected Support Staff

HBCU & MSI Leaders

Administrators and faculty from minority-serving institutions

Workforce Partners

Employers, career development leaders, NACE stakeholders



VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENTS

NASPA Virtual Conference
Inside Higher Ed Webinar



PODCAST

FirstGenFM episode
Student Affairs NOW



CONFERENCES

NASPA Annual Conference*
Student Success in Higher Education Conference
UNCF Unite Conference



EVENTS

NASPA Symposium on Military-Connected Students
National Association for Colleges and Employers

***Spotlight:** Turning Investment into Impact The University of Louisville demonstrated how targeted investments strengthened retention and completion outcomes for first-generation students—with clear ROI storytelling to sustain momentum.

FIRSTGEN FORWARD PARTNERSHIPS

We are proud to continue and maintain intentional partnerships and memberships with the following organizations:



American Council on Education®



NACADA
THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING

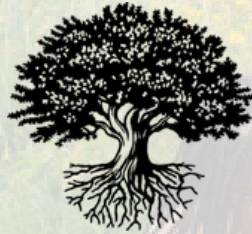


Postsecondary Data Partnership

PDP Data Collective Advisory Committee



COUNCIL *for* OPPORTUNITY *in* EDUCATION



National Student Clearinghouse™
Research Center™



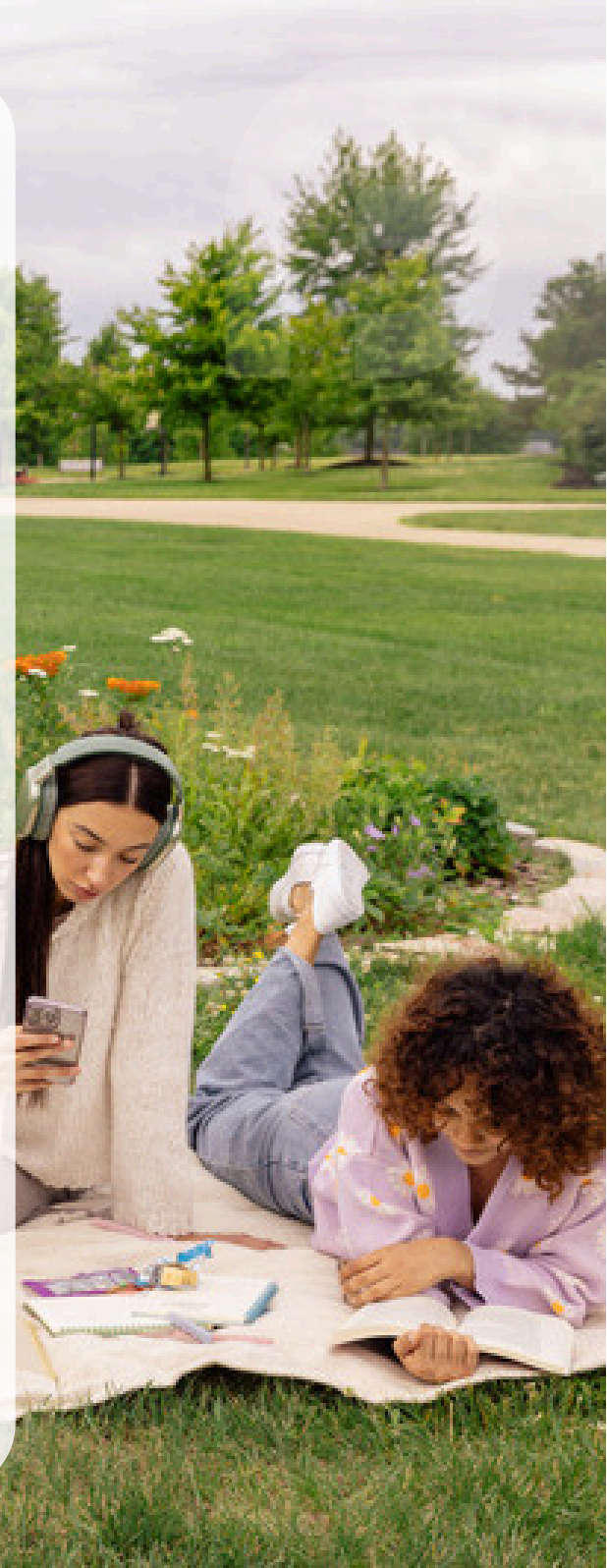
NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER

FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE® AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA



TSC

TODAY'S STUDENTS COALITION



FUNDING PARTNER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



Looking ahead, the mission of FirstGen Forward will only grow in importance. By 2031, it is estimated that more than 72 percent of jobs in the United States will require some form of postsecondary education or training. In a rapidly changing economy, access to and completion of higher education will increasingly determine whether individuals and families can achieve financial stability and long-term economic mobility.

Philanthropic and corporate partners recognize this moment and the opportunity it presents. Their investments in FirstGen Forward fuel the research that advances evidence-based solutions, the data that helps institutions identify and support first-generation students, and the Network that ensures promising practices are shared and scaled across higher education.

Because of this support, we have been able to expand a national Network of institutions committed to first-generation student success, deepen our research on the first-generation experience, and work alongside colleges, universities, and communities to transform how students are supported from enrollment through graduation.

This work exists because partners believe in the talent and potential of first-generation students—and in the power of higher education to transform lives across generations. Their investments are not only supporting students today; they are strengthening the future of our workforce, our communities, and our nation. We are deeply grateful to our foundation and corporate partners for advancing the first-generation movement and for helping make this work possible. workforce impact, and generational transformation.

CHARGE FOR THE YEARS AHEAD

At FirstGen Forward, our work is evolving. We have been focused on understanding the first-generation experience and on helping institutions assess and strengthen internal structures. These will always be part of our organization's mission, but we are now expanding our focus and partnering with institutions, state systems, foundations, and workforce-aligned organizations.

We know that when first-generation students receive the support they need, the benefits extend far beyond individual campuses. Today, 54 percent of incoming undergraduate students identify as first-generation, meaning their success strengthens not only institutions but the entire economy. That success also creates a ripple effect across generations, as graduates share their knowledge, opportunities, and experiences with their families and communities.

Since our founding in 2017, we have partnered with hundreds of institutions and thousands of practitioners. Together, we recognize the opportunity not only to support students as they navigate existing systems, but also to reimagine how higher education connects learning to opportunity—ensuring that degrees, majors, certificates, and credentials are clearly linked to economic mobility and meaningful postsecondary outcomes.

Looking ahead to 2030, we are setting bold goals that will extend the reach and impact of the first-generation movement nationwide. We will intentionally and thoughtfully **grow the national FirstGen Forward Network to advance 100 institutions into and through the Network journey** supporting their progress toward leadership and champion status. As part of this growth, we will strengthen data capacity and shared tools, so institutions can better identify, track, and improve outcomes for first-generation students.

We will also **expand the national body of scholarship by producing 20 new research publications and evidence-based resources** that advance the field and elevate promising practices. At the same time, we will **catalyze 36 unique innovations, supporting institutions both within and beyond the Network** as they develop new models, interventions, and partnerships that accelerate first-generation student success.

To sustain and scale this work, we will **add 12 new strategic partners across philanthropy, higher education, and employer networks**—aligning mission-driven organizations around a shared national vision for first-generation success.

Finally, we will continue to strengthen the national community of practice, expanding opportunities for institutions to learn from one another through convenings, publications, peer networks, and shared resources. And we will maintain our leadership role in shaping the future of higher education, connecting first-generation success to workforce opportunity and long-term economic mobility.

I am confident we will meet—and exceed—these goals because of the strength of this organization and the power of the first-generation movement. Thank you for being part of it.



Stephanie J. Bannister, Ph.D.
President, FirstGen Forward

The image features a group of diverse individuals in a library or study environment. A large, white, stylized graphic element, resembling a thick, rounded 'L' shape, is positioned on the left side of the page. The background is a warm orange color, and the word 'Appendix' is written in a large, white, sans-serif font across the center. The overall design is modern and professional.

Appendix



ABOUT THE FIRSTGEN FORWARD NETWORK

The FirstGen Forward Network is a journey for institutions of higher education, a national scaling model that brings together higher education leaders from around the country to share data, model innovation, and scale impact to first-gen student support.

NETWORK MEMBER

During the first year of active engagement in the FirstGen Forward Network, Network Member institutions commit to building a foundational understanding of first-generation student success through participating in monthly workshops, networking, and professional development opportunities, sharing knowledge and resources, and contributing to a peer community. Upon completion of year one, an institution will be recognized as a continuing Network Member institution. Building upon the first Network Member year, continuing institutions engage in regionally-based community meetings, networking and professional development, and share knowledge as leaders in this important work. Through active engagement and meeting annual requirements, Network Member institutions maintain status within this phase of the Network. Institutions in good standing are also eligible to advance to phase two: FirstGen Forward Network Leader as a sign of preparedness for institutional transformation.

NETWORK LEADER

Network Leader is the second phase of the FirstGen Forward Network and serves as our customized approach to intentional institutional transformation to advance student outcomes. Our work establishes an environment where direct student support can be established, scaled, and sustained. When a first-generation student attends an institution that is developed with them in mind and has appropriate support and resources, outcomes will improve.

Benefits of participation in the Network Leader phase include an evidence-based and research-supported framework of actionable priorities supported through intentional and relevant monthly workshops; access to the Leader Academy; diagnostic tools providing critical institutional insight; robust data sharing as part of the national Postsecondary Data Partnership; guidance of expert coaches along each step of the experience; and customized solutions and continuous improvement plans personalized to allow each institution to meet its first-generation student success goals. Once selected for the Network Leader Phase, an institution commits to a multi-year experience that requires presidential and financial support for a leadership team to focus on improving institutional cultures and systems at scale.

Network Leader institutions implement the following best practices throughout the 28-month engagement in partnership with the support of their FGF Expert Guide:

- **Establish a cohesive leadership team** that includes the vice president of academic or student affairs, the institutional research (IR) lead, and the first-generation or student success director, with formal approval from the president or chancellor.
- **Conduct a comprehensive institutional mapping and program audit** to identify redundancies, streamline first-generation initiatives, and improve operational efficiency.
- **Administer a faculty and staff survey** to assess institutional strengths, identify areas for improvement, and uncover opportunities to enhance support for first-generation students.
- **Apply continuous improvement methodologies**, including the development of SMART goals and detailed 30-, 60-, and 90-day action cycles to drive meaningful and measurable progress.
- **Adopt and implement the Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP)** to access aggregate dashboards and secure analysis-ready student-level data.
- **Set targeted quantitative student success goals**—such as first-generation first- to second-year retention, first-year credit completion ratio, and overall completion—and regularly track progress using PDP data.

Upon meeting milestones in the Network Leader phase, institutions may be recommended for advancement to the Network Champion phase.

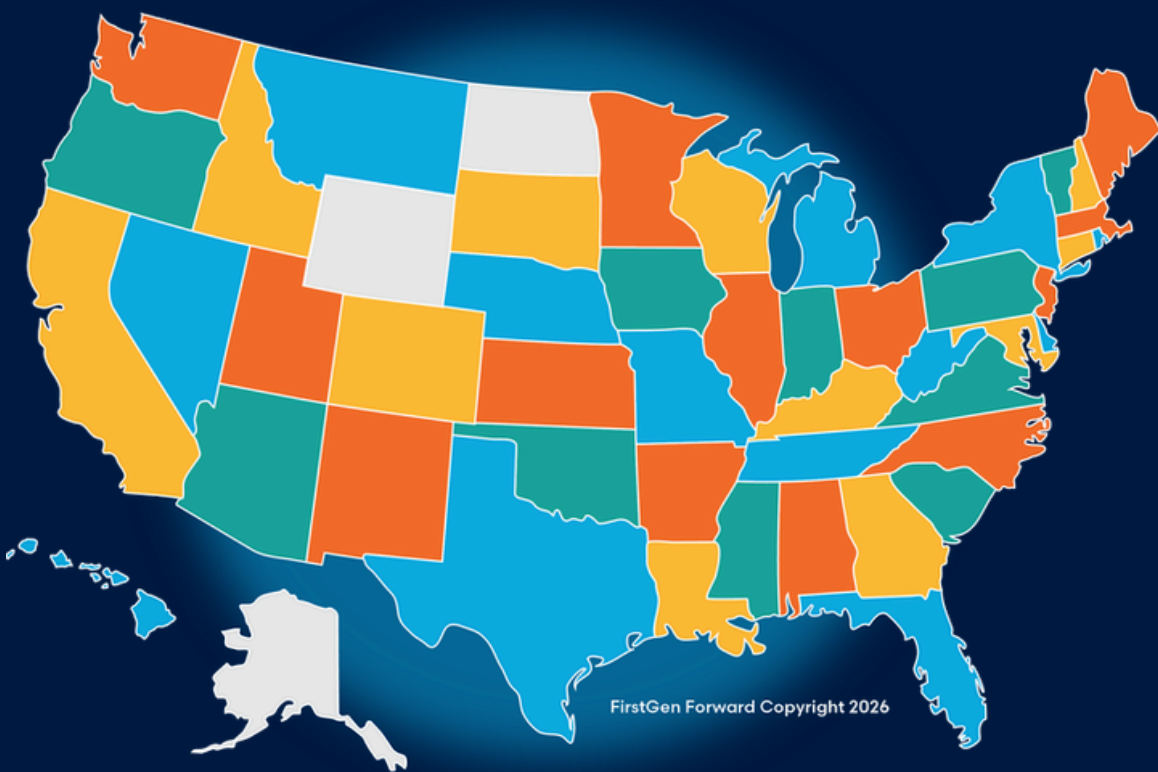
NETWORK CHAMPION

A Network Champion is a national thought-leader in advancing first-generation efforts and contributes to an important knowledge base on evidence-based practices, leadership engagement, and scaling support.

To maintain membership in the Network Champion phase, institutions must meet annual requirements, serve as Network mentors, and remain active in the Postsecondary Data Partnership. Each Network Champion institution receives regular professional development, access to resources, and engagement with Expert Guides. As a benefit, those in the Network Champion phase have access to innovation grants, discounted conference attendance, and more.

As of December 2025, we partner with 472 colleges and universities across 47 states, including 243 Minority-Serving Institutions, 8 HBCUs, 2 Predominantly Black Institutions, and 124 rural-serving institutions—collectively serving more than 5.2 million students, 2 million of whom are first-generation.

As of February 1, 2026, 401 institutions are at the Member stage, 40 at the Leader stage, and 31 at the Champion stage.



FIRSTGEN FORWARD NETWORK

472
INSTITUTIONS

47+
THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

5.2 MILLION = **2 MILLION**
STUDENTS NATIONWIDE FIRST-GEN

401 FirstGen FORWARD Network Member

40 FirstGen FORWARD Network Leader

31 FirstGen FORWARD NETWORK CHAMPION

NETWORK

BY THE NUMBERS



PUBLIC/PRIVATE

PUBLIC 4-YEAR: 237

PUBLIC 4-YEAR, PRIMARILY ASSOCIATES: 3

PUBLIC 2-YEAR: 41

PRIVATE 4-YEAR: 128

OTHER: 2

SUBMITTING INSTITUTION DETAILS: 61

RACE AND ETHNICITY COMPOSITION (INSTITUTION-SERVING LEVEL)

- HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY: 8
- HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTION: 68
- EMERGING MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTION: 77
- PREDOMINANTLY BLACK INSTITUTION: 2
- ASIAN AMERICAN AND NATIVE AMERICAN PACIFIC ISLANDER SERVING INSTITUTION: 94
- ALASKA NATIVE SERVING OR NATIVE HAWAIIAN SERVING INSTITUTION: 1
- NATIVE AMERICAN SERVING NON-TRIBAL INSTITUTION: 2

AS OF FEB 1, 2025

NETWORK

BY THE NUMBERS



ESTIMATED UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT ENROLLMENT

- 0-4,999: 124
- 5,000-9,999: 98
- 10,000-14,999: 41
- 15,000-19,999: 34
- 20,000+: 111
- UNKNOWN: 63

ADDITIONAL INSTITUTION TYPES

- RURAL SERVING: 124
- COMMUNITY OR TECHNICAL COLLEGES: 43
- LAND GRANT: 51

FIRST-GEN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT PERCENTAGE

NOTE: THIS INFORMATION IS PROVIDED BY THE INSIGHTS AND IMPACT TEAM AND WAS PULLED FROM THE READINESS AND PROGRESS AUDIT.

- 0- 10%: 15
- BETWEEN 11% AND 25%: 143
- BETWEEN 26% AND 50%: 145
- GREATER THAN 50%: 32
- NOT REPORTED: 132

AS OF FEB 1, 2025

COFFEE CHATS PARTICIPATION OVERVIEW

- **Scope:** 12 institutions across 12.5 hours of interviews
- **Timeframe:** May 19-27, 2025
- **Format:** Individual "Coffee Chat" conversations with institutional teams
- **Institution Types:**
 - Public 4-year: 7 institutions (58%)
 - Private 4-year: 3 institutions (25%)
 - Community College: 2 institutions (16%)

Geographic Distribution: Nationwide representation, including Texas, South Carolina, Vermont, Maryland, Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Massachusetts, Virginia, and Ohio





The
Future is
FirstGen

 FirstGen
FORWARD