



IMPACT REPORT **Executive Summary**

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More than 54% of all undergraduate students identify as first-generation. This Impact Report will cite this number often because it underscores the enormous depth and breadth of FirstGen Forward's impact. We use data, advocacy, research, and community to benefit not only first-generation students but also the entire student population and the country.

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.

Our Approach

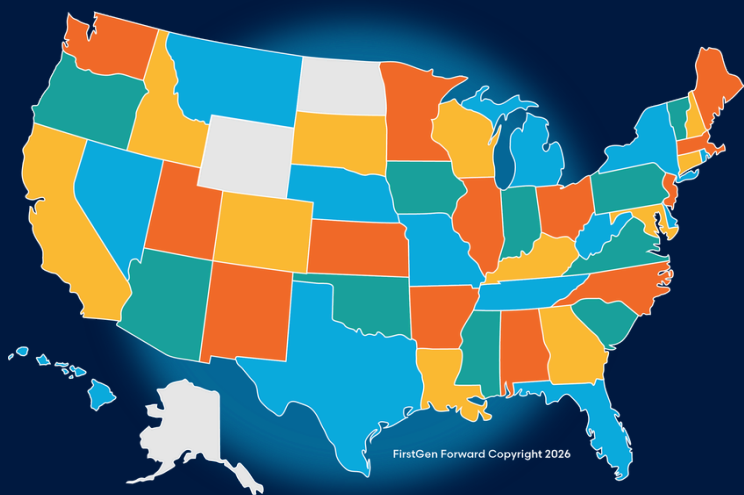
NATIONAL REACH & INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Before the founding of FirstGen Forward, support for first-gen students at universities and colleges was inconsistent. Some institutions placed a great deal of emphasis on supporting first-gen students, while others barely scratched the surface. Many believed that if they simply focused on supporting all students, first-generation students would also benefit.

We're proud to say that the work we have done over the past eight years has had a profound impact on the landscape of first-generation student support.

Our approach has been to connect institutions so they can share ideas and data, benefit from the latest research, and travel a well-worn path towards evidence-based, systemic solutions. A big part of that work has been our Network, which institutions join with a commitment to substantially increasing their support for first-generation students. The Network journey has three phases: Network Member, Network Leader, and Network Champion.

Each builds on the previous phase, enhancing leadership alignment, data maturity, systems integration, and measurable outcomes.



FIRSTGEN FORWARD NETWORK

As of December 2025, the Network includes:

472
INSTITUTIONS

47+
THE DISTRICT
OF COLUMBIA

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

243

MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

INCLUDING

8

HBCUs

2

PBIs

124

Rural-serving Institutions

This means that nearly 500 universities and colleges are deeply committed to supporting first-generation students. Nearly 500 universities and colleges are working toward implementing evidence-based solutions that work. Nearly 500 universities and colleges are approaching first-generation student support through a strengths-based lens.

When colleges and universities invest in supporting first-generation students, they see real results. Among our Network Leader institutions, data show that more than **58 percent of first-generation students are graduating in four years**, compared to less than 30 percent of students at the national level.

The Network model is a scalable approach to institutional change. The journey from Network Member to Network Leader to Network Champion drives substantive change, and we are committed to expanding our Network this year.

KNOWLEDGE CREATION, RESEARCH & COMMUNITY BUILDING

We are committed to building knowledge that our community and the Network can use to drive change. Programs and systems that truly work across institutions with vastly different circumstances, populations, and histories must be informed by data, and we focused in 2025 on expanding access to the latest data and knowledge. Through our peer-reviewed journal, the Journal of First-generation Student Success, our Post-Secondary Data Partnership Commons, and our Landscape Briefs, we had an enormous impact in 2025.

21,520

article downloads
in 2025



5,000

Landscape Brief
downloads



200

PDP Commons
pageviews



THOUGHT LEADERSHIP & ADVOCACY

One of our organization's core beliefs is that first-generation students are resilient, persistent, determined, and strong. We approach all our work with this in mind, and reject any notion that first-generation students are at a deficit. When it comes to completion rates, retention, and other statistics, there are significant gaps between continuing-generation and first-generation students, but we do not believe this is due to any deficit on the part of first-generation students. We believe the way to close these gaps is to be intentional in implementing systemic, evidence-based solutions, such as those shared by our Network institutions.

One way we are having an impact on the national conversation about first-generation students is to focus on and celebrate the strengths and achievements of first-generation students.



First-Generation College Celebration Day in November was our most visible campaign of 2025. This event continues to build and expand across the country. In 2025, First-Generation College Celebration saw:

- **2M+** impressions
- **1.4M+** individuals reached
- **1M+** engagements

Another way we are joining the conversation is by advocating for the continuation and expansion of federal programs, like TRIO, that support first-generation students and those from low-income households. Working in alliance with Today's Student Coalition, we've joined hundreds of organizations by signing on to letters, amplifying key efforts to address access, financial, and structural barriers to student success.

Looking Ahead

This year, we have some big goals for growth. This Impact Report provides more detail, but by 2030, we are committed to growing the FirstGen Forward Network to 50 institutions, reaching 3.1 million first-generation students. We will publish 20 new research and evidence-based resources and continue to lead the national conversation on the best ways to support first-generation students using a strengths-based approach.

We will continue our focus on data, as we believe the cornerstone of any institutional commitment to first-generation students must include a robust plan for accessing and managing data.

We will also 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.

2025 was a year of transition, strategy, and refocusing on our core mission. This year, 2026, will be one of growth, impact, and innovation. Our vision is “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.” We're excited to make significant progress on that this year.