

**CENTER FOR  
FIRST-GENERATION  
STUDENT SUCCESS**

AN INITIATIVE OF NASPA AND THE SUDER FOUNDATION



**FIRST-GENERATION  
STUDENT SUCCESS:**  
A LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS OF  
PROGRAMS AND SERVICES  
AT FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS  
**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across higher education, engaged communities of university leaders, practitioners, scholars and students are working tirelessly to craft approaches that unlock the vast potential of first-generation students. First-generation students make up a third of all college students, but only 27 percent will attain their degrees within four years—markedly lagging behind their continuing generation peers. While research suggests that certain intentional practices can improve first-generation college success, there is a need for *greater clarity around existing approaches and impediments if institutions are to scale effective, data-informed solutions*. The report, *First-generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs and Services at Four-year Institutions*, lead by the Center for First-generation Student Success, an initiative of NASPA and The Suder Foundation, in partnership with Entangled Solutions, details how institutions are serving first-generation students, the challenges institutions encounter in providing support, and how first-generation students perceive their institutional experience.

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### A Phased Research Approach

The Center initiated a two-phase, mixed-method, research strategy to illuminate how institutions are serving first-generation students and the factors and constraints shaping their decision-making and experiences. Phase 1, the qualitative component, comprised interviews with 78 faculty, administrators, and leaders representing 45 four-year institutions, 15 thought leaders at 12 student success nonprofits; and 40 first-generation students through focus groups at eight institutions. Phase 2, the quantitative component, involved a nationwide survey of 371 faculty, administrators, and thought leaders across 273 four-year institutions. Findings and recommendations are outlined in brief below and set out in detail in the report, which features first-generation student reflections, practitioner perspectives, institutional highlights, and profiles of thoughtful, working approaches.

## Findings: The Uniquely Complex First-generation Identity

The report parses the complex nature of the first-generation identity and examines the necessary, yet challenging task that institutions face in arriving at an appropriate definition for the term “first-generation.” Several key themes emerged.



**Define to align, design, measure, and serve** – How institutions define first-generation guides student eligibility for services, drives decision-making, and shapes programs and services. By aligning definitions across programs and services, institutions can improve the data they collect and, in turn, more closely track student needs and assess service efficacy.

- ▶ **Seventy-three percent of institutions surveyed employ a formal definition of first-generation. Of these, 56 percent define first-generation as, “Neither parent or guardian have a four-year college degree.”**



**Consider intersectionality** – First-generation students can be first-gen plus minority, first-gen plus LGBTQIA, first-gen plus low-income, and more. While this “First-gen Plus” identity can increase campus-wide engagement, it can also unintentionally lead to misconceptions and gaps in use of services. Intersectional identity often drives where first-generation support programs are located on a campus, and given the diverse nature of the first-generation community, it can be important to consider whether those resources are appropriately placed. For instance, aligning programs with the financial aid office might perpetuate the perception that first-generation equates with low income.

- ▶ **Seventy-five percent of surveyed first-generation programs are housed in Student Affairs, 48 percent in Academic Affairs, and 43 percent in Student Success.**



**Shift to an asset-based lens** – The challenges that first-generation students face are too often erroneously perceived as character flaws or inherent shortcomings. Institutions are uniquely placed to shift this negative narrative to an asset-based lens that celebrates the unique strengths of these students and encourages them to use their talents to enhance the college experience. Such a cultural shift benefits not only first-generation students, but also their campuses and the wider communities in which they put their degrees to work.

- ▶ **Among institutions that report offering first-generation programming, 54 percent of cohort-based programs and 33 percent of non-cohort-based programs host celebratory or graduation events for students to mark significant milestones.**

## Findings: The Institutional Mindset and Approach

Institutional support for first-generation students is in a state of flux, but a picture of the prevailing mindset and shifts in approaches emerged throughout the study.



**Shift from college ready to student ready** – Rather than focusing primarily on whether students are college-ready, institutions are becoming student-ready by changing policies, processes, and practices to improve services and reduce barriers to success. Seventy-eight percent of survey participants believe senior administrators at their institution care about first-generation students. However, 72 percent of these respondents indicate that their institutions should make significant improvements to how they support first-generation students on campus.



**Cohort and networked service approaches** – Cohort-based programs offer effective, high-touch support for a subset of first-generation students but are resource-intensive. An emerging networked approach, which enhances activities such as resource and data sharing, joint programming, and partnered recruitment, allows institutions to expand the reach and scale of their high-touch support despite resource constraints. Cohort and networked programs are not mutually exclusive; many institutions actively use both models. Of surveyed institutions offering first-generation student success programs, 73 percent indicated having at least one cohort-based program.



**Intentional alignment with high-impact educational practices** – Practitioners frequently use high-impact educational practices (HIPs) to inform their first-generation offerings because of their widespread use across higher education and the shortage of practice-oriented research centering specifically on first-generation support. While HIPs have been successfully used with first-generation students, practitioners do report that the need for haste in implementing new programs and uncertainty regarding alternative approaches inform their choices. They recommend assessing which are best suited to first-generation students and evaluating their success over time.



**Proactive vs. reactive support** – By identifying first-generation students earlier, improving information sharing, and strengthening data collection, institutions are expanding programs to support students throughout the postsecondary experience and beyond rather than focusing on the transition from high school to college.

## Findings: Practical Insights for Advancing Change

Across the postsecondary landscape, institutions face common challenges as they craft student-ready, proactive, networked support for first-generation students. They struggle with a lack of alignment on program goals; inconsistent, disjointed, and reactive support approaches; a paucity of consistent student data and insights; and constraints on resources. However, the analysis identified creative approaches that have demonstrated success in addressing these issues.



**Appoint primary advocates with visibility and influence** – First-generation students report that feeling connected to a specific mentor, faculty member, or advisor is critical to their success. Identifying key campus players with sufficient influence to convene appropriate stakeholders and advance concerns to leadership is a key early step in a networked approach.

- ▶ Across surveyed institutions, 50 percent report identifying a “point person” to coordinate first-generation efforts, and 48 percent have designated a particular office on campus as the primary support for first-generation students.



**Build and sustain an engaged community** – An engaged community is the foundation of successful first-generation work. Bringing together faculty, staff, students, university leaders, families, first-generation alumni, community members, and stakeholders creates a community that can be leveraged to advocate for first-generation students and connect them to resources. Practitioners and students alike particularly value the mentorship opportunities that a broad first-generation community affords.

- ▶ Students participating in focus groups identified mentorship as the top desire for their college experience.

Within this campus community, **Faculty Partners** have multiple roles to play. First-generation programming consistently provides opportunities for students to connect with faculty, and even one-time interactions can have a positive impact. Faculty’s role as advisors can be elevated and they can share personal experiences as first-generation learners. Sixty-three percent of institutions reported feeling faculty on their campus care about first-generation college students.

**First-generation Students** can be engaged as advocates themselves, planning and executing programs, mentoring peers, and acting as campus ambassadors. This engagement was also found to translate to greater involvement from these students as alumnae. Seventy-four percent of cohort-based programs offer a peer mentoring component.



### Proactively set institution and program vision and objectives –

Institutions reported feeling rushed to implement first-generation services, pressed for resources, and regarded assessment as a distant rather than immediate goal. Over time, this can lead to misalignment with mission and vision, illuminating the need for a more proactive approach to establishing objectives.

- ▶ When asked about the three most important success factors driving institutional offerings for first-generation students, 87 percent of respondents identified retention, 65 percent pinpointed completion/degree attainment, and 60 percent identified academic performance as priorities.



### Track pre-matriculation through post-completion student data –

Many institutions lack consistent processes to collect, access, share, and understand data. This can foster reporting deficits, confound institutional comparisons, and lead to programs and services that lack informed basis. Many institutions report launching first-generation initiatives with little research or the ability to track impact and success.

- ▶ Eighty percent of institutions are identifying first-generation students during matriculation. However, only 41 percent use data to inform institutional offerings for first-generation students, and only 61 percent track data about first-generation student success.



### Understand the reach and gaps of existing resources –

Housing resources and programs geared toward first-generation students within different offices makes them challenging for students to navigate and staff to identify. Surfacing existing resources enables practitioners to glean a better understanding of service gaps, and prioritizing data-tracking enables them to put evidence-based practices to use. Faculty, graduate students, and outside partners can provide research leadership in the absence of in-house support.

- ▶ Only 22 percent of institutions reported using faculty to conduct research on first-generation student experiences.



### Consider funding opportunities and return on investment (ROI) –

Practitioners identify resource constraints, both financial and human, as the top challenge to providing first-generation students with support for the duration of their college experience. Institutional funds are the primary source of financial support for programs, and leadership decision-making is based on ROI. To overcome these constraints, institutions can look for opportunities to reduce the cost of advising through alternative programs like peer and alumni counseling; leverage technology; share costs with campus partners; and source additional funding, for instance, via first-generation donors who are interested in supporting first-generation programs.

- ▶ Sixty-four percent of respondents list institutional funds as a primary source for first-generation programs at their institution. Thirty-nine percent list Federal funds for specific programming (TRIO) as a primary source. Sixty-one percent of institutions that responded to the national survey have engaged first-generation alumni in philanthropic giving.



## Recommendations

Building on the findings, the report offers a comprehensive list of recommendations intended to guide practical strategies and systemic approaches to advancing first-generation student success.

### Highlighted recommendations to colleges and universities include:

- ▶ Establish a common first-generation definition early.
- ▶ Mobilize for institutional change, not just another program.
- ▶ Engage a community of advocates to lead sustained change.
- ▶ Conduct a comprehensive institutional assessment of the first-generation student experience.
- ▶ Dismantle silos for a networked approach.
- ▶ Create systems for actionable data and advancing research.
- ▶ Foster an asset-based campus culture for first-generation students.
- ▶ Weigh the balance between broad reach and meaningful, sustained engagement. Offer appropriate first-generation involvement opportunities with intentionality.
- ▶ Consider post-completion engagement from the time of admission.

### Highlighted recommendations for instigating systemic change in higher education include:

- ▶ Isolate key drivers and intersectionality to advance first-generation research and understanding.
- ▶ Develop standardized metrics to collect and track data on first-generation students.
- ▶ Establish a network of peer institutions that serve first-generation students.
- ▶ Reinforce a data-driven national narrative for first-generation student success.
- ▶ Seek opportunities to promote the first-generation identity prior to matriculation.
- ▶ Recognize and reward institutions that are leaders in the first-generation space.
- ▶ Build a culture that celebrates first-generation student success.
- ▶ Advance opportunities to share research and effective practice across higher education.

## Conclusion

The landscape analysis uncovered a deeply impassioned community of first-generation practitioners and advocates working to drive systemic change that will allow institutions to become more student-centric and data-informed at a critical time. It has never been more important to support students to degree completion. Although hampered by resource constraints, this community is energized and engaged. The landscape analysis provides examples of innovations, data on multiple dimensions of first-generation programs and services, and comprehensive recommendations for improving institutional and programmatic approaches. A more in-depth discussion of the findings and recommendations from this research is available in the report, *First-generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs and Services at Four-year Institutions*.