



**FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS
IN COMMUNITY AND
TECHNICAL COLLEGES:**

A NATIONAL EXPLORATION OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT PRACTICES

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The Center for First-generation Student Success, an initiative of NASPA and The Suder Foundation, is the premier source of evidence-based practices, professional development, and knowledge creation for the higher education community to advance the success of first-generation students. Based in Washington, D.C., the Center aims to acknowledge the intersectional experiences of first-generation college students. It offers an outlet for sharing cutting-edge research and current media conversations; opportunities for engagement through online learning, conferences, and events; and access to a bevy of programs and services intended to improve first-generation initiatives across higher education.



ABOUT PHASE TWO ADVISORY

Phase Two Advisory works with colleges, foundations, and improvement networks to translate research evidence into 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 on their campuses.



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First-generation community and technical college students kindly shared their personal stories and experiences for this study. These students boldly spoke about the challenges they have faced in navigating higher education and offered thoughtful solutions for improving experiences for future first-generation students, particularly for those who will follow them on a community or technical college journey. These stories add dimension to the report and offer insights on this work, for which the Center is grateful.

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INTRODUCTION

Community and technical colleges are critical access points for higher education, particularly for first-generation college students. To understand the current state of first-generation student support programs and services at community and technical colleges across the United States, in 2019 the [Center for First-generation Student Success](#) partnered with Phase Two Advisory to interview institution leaders, administrators, student services staff, and first-generation students and collect data from a national survey. In total, 38 two-year institutions across 22 states, as well as 23 first-generation students through focus groups at eight institutions, are represented in our qualitative data. We also gathered survey responses from 197 faculty, administrators, and thought leaders across 156 two-year institutions.

This report features the perspectives of administrators and student services practitioners who work daily to improve first-generation student outcomes, the voices of first-generation community and technical college students reflecting on their unique experiences, and analyses of the programs and approaches these institutions offer in support of first-generation student success.

Although the data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the urgency to serve first-generation students has only increased since March 2020. This report highlights the ongoing tension between high-touch, high-intensity programming and budgetary constraints, which will only be exacerbated as the pandemic's economic fallout grows. The lessons learned in this report provide insight into how community and technical colleges can continue to support first-generation students even within the current fiscal and health context.



METHODOLOGY

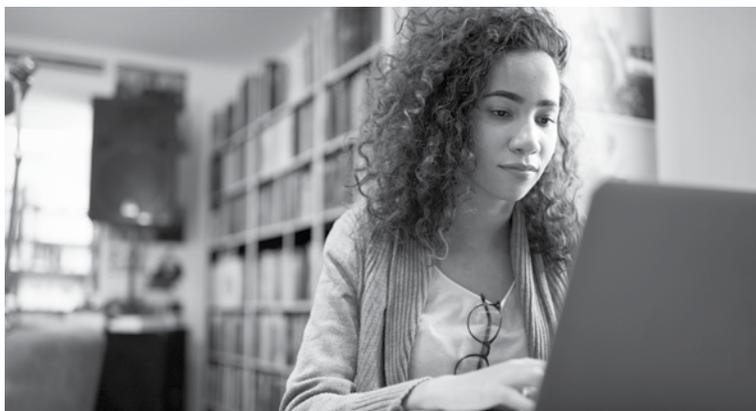
This report presents findings from a national exploration conducted by the Center for First-generation Student Success, an initiative of NASPA and The Suder Foundation, in partnership with Phase Two Advisory. The purpose of the study was to understand the current state of programs and services that are offered to first-generation college students at community and technical colleges across the United States. This includes positioning of programs within the institution, human and financial resources, program content and delivery methods, communication strategies, data use strategies, and institutional successes and challenges. Because first-generation student success programs take on a variety of characteristics and often engage in varying areas of the institutional community, a mixed-methods approach provided a depth and breadth of quantitative and qualitative insights. This approach included stakeholder interviews, student focus groups, and a survey of community and technical colleges staff from across the country. A detailed methodology, data tables, and a complete list of participating institutions are included in the appendix of the full report. Complete data collection instruments are available from the Center upon request.

FINDINGS

IDENTIFYING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IS COMPLICATED

In order to support first-generation students, institutions must know who those students are, which ideally involves a two-fold process. First, campuses must determine which type of student “qualifies” as first-generation by defining their population and developing criteria for inclusion. Second, campuses must develop mechanisms for identifying students who meet the established first-generation definition.

Just over half of community and technical colleges reported having a formal definition of *first-generation students*. Typically, most colleges ask students to self-identify as first-generation in more than one way or at more than one time in the matriculation process. Most students identify on the admissions application or when completing the FAFSA, while others may disclose during applications to special programs or support services. Many colleges report having informal definitions in order to expand support for students not eligible for funded programs. These informal definitions also help campuses reflect the complicated reality of the college student population, for whom *first-generation status* is not cut and dry. Such nuance, combined with incomplete data systems, means that many community colleges report difficulties using data consistently across campus programs.



LESSONS LEARNED



Establish a clear *first-generation* definition and use it consistently. Varying definitions of *first-generation status* make it difficult for institutions to benchmark data against other institutions or even compare notes among stakeholders on the same campus. Consider the specific characteristics of your institution’s first-generation students when formalizing a definition and then set systems in place for the formal definition to be used consistently across programs and services.



Although federally recognized and theoretically universal, the FAFSA may not be the best tool for collecting data on first-generation students. The FAFSA definition of *first-generation* is narrow and hard to interpret and the FAFSA is not universally completed.



Students often find the language used in admissions applications and other data collection sources confusing. Examining the questions asked and language used on recruitment and data collection documents, as well as providing training for front-line staff on definitions, could help students self-identify more effectively.



Students do not always see themselves in the term *first-generation*. Finding alternate ways to explain to students what it means to be first-generation can help them self-identify more effectively.



Make data collection a priority. Without accurate data, it is difficult to make the case that first-generation students are a population worth explicitly investing in.

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS BRING SUBSTANTIAL STRENGTHS TO THEIR COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGES

Resilience, ambition, a track record of beating the odds, and fresh viewpoints that enhance the broader academic community are all qualities that community college educators emphasized when talking about first-generation students. Moreover, community and technical college educators recognize the positive intergenerational impact of attending college and the ability of a college degree to improve students' economic circumstances. In working with first-generation students, colleges must acknowledge and build on the strengths these students bring to institutions and their learning.



LESSONS LEARNED



Establish mechanisms for identifying and highlighting the strengths of first-generation students and integrate them into college practices and structures. To foster an asset-based campus culture for first-generation students, institutions should create formal and informal opportunities to acknowledge and recognize the strengths of first-generation students.



Conduct jargon, policy, and procedural audits. Because colleges are highly bureaucratic and often steeped in tradition, daily operations can become systemic barriers to first-generation student success. Complicated language, confusing policies, and inefficient and challenging procedures can be particularly burdensome for students.

COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGES SUPPORT FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IN MANY WAYS

As community colleges increasingly shift toward being “student-ready,” they must scrutinize how their structures and practices can elevate the strengths and overall success of first-generation students. Moreover, institutions must reconsider how they take an asset-based approach in how they do business. In particular, findings suggest that colleges should consider how and to whom the service is delivered, and the content of the supports and services.

The majority of colleges support first-generation students through a combination of general and specific or targeted supports. These include the following:



- **Cohort-based programs**, which consist of discrete programs for a group of students, are widely provided. Of community college survey respondents, 69% indicated that they offer TRIO and 21% offer another cohort-based program either in lieu of or in addition to TRIO. A common cohort-based approach is the use of identity-based **affinity programs**.
- In response to the limitations of cohort-based programming, some community colleges engage in **non-cohort-based, targeted supports**. In this approach, community colleges provide services targeted toward all first-generation students rather than a subset. Survey data indicate that approximately one third of responding institutions take this approach.
- Community colleges often provide first-generation student support via the same **general campus supports** available to all students on campus. Among survey respondents, 62% indicated that first-generation students use general college services in lieu of targeted programming.
- **Intentional universal design**, in which colleges create or redesign services with the specific needs of first-generation students in mind—and then open them up to the broader campus—is a new and unique approach in the community college sector. Sixteen campuses in the interview sample reported engaging in this strategy for at least some services.

Regardless of how it is structured, community and technical college support for first-generation students encompasses a variety of topics. Most institutions prioritize academic support, advising, campus navigation, time management/study skills, and financial aid (e.g., FAFSA information). Particularly within cohort programs, the structure and academic content of service offerings (e.g., academic advising) provide a mechanism for program personnel to build relationships, develop community, and cultivate a sense of belonging among first-generation students.



LESSONS LEARNED



Each structural approach has different pros and cons.

Because community college students often are lost in a maze of offices, information sources, and programs, it is worth considering the extent to which the lack of clear structures inhibits the reach of broad-based first-generation student programming.



Be intentional in recruitment efforts. Because research shows that the most tenuously connected students are often missed by passive recruitment approaches, campuses should think about how to ensure all students who identify as first-generation or are eligible for programs are invited into them.



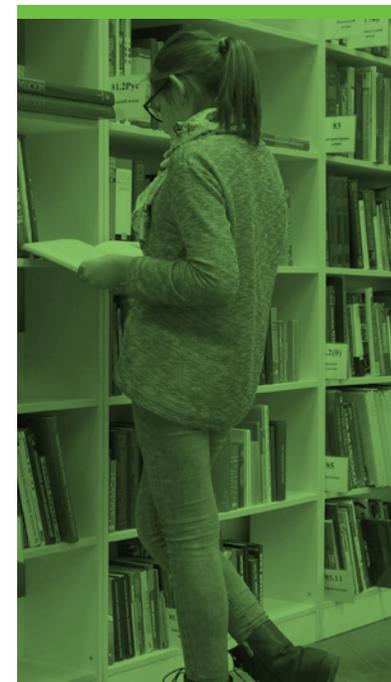
There are different ways to implement “first-generation support for all.” Although some campuses assume that existing supports meet first-generation student needs by default, others take an intentional universal design approach, developing campuswide supports with first-generation students in mind.



Intentional universal design has strong potential to thread the needle between scale and impact.



Formal services are a gateway to the types of support first-generation students need most. Although the formal content of supports is important, it is also critical that support structures are used to encourage relationship building and a sense of belonging among first-generation college students.



RECOMMENDATIONS

In considering the findings of this research on community and technical colleges, the prior scholarship on 4-year institutions, and the ongoing work with the Center, the following recommendations are offered for those interested in beginning, advancing, and scaling first-generation student success efforts in the 2-year sector:

- Establish a clear definition of **first-generation college student**, use it consistently, and pair its use with robust collection, dissemination, and application methods. Identify a partner in your institutional research office to support these efforts.
- Although federally recognized and theoretically universal, the FAFSA should not be the only tool for collecting data on first-generation students.
- Build a campus culture where the first-generation identity can be understood and celebrated. Identify first-generation administrators, faculty, and staff to build an inclusive community.
- Conduct departmental, divisional, and institutional audits of strategic plans, policies, procedures, and commonly used jargon to dismantle the hidden curriculum and strengthen equitable access. Engage first-generation students in this process.
- Consider the multifaceted intersectionality of the first-generation identity, and strive to build programs and services that reflect your community and student needs.
- The entire community is responsible for the success of first-generation students. Build cross-divisional, collaborative teams to identify student needs and develop appropriate solutions for a networked, resource-shared approach. Reinforce the need for senior leadership emphasis.
- Establish mechanisms for identifying and incorporating the strengths of first-generation students into college practices and structures. Work to eliminate deficit-based approaches.
- Consider how first-generation students can be a target population for intentional universal design reform. Formal services provided to all students at an institution can be tailored to specific first-generation needs and are a gateway to deeper engagement.
- Consider opportunities for engaging with peer and aspirational institutions to expand networks and resource sharing specific to first-generation efforts.
- Remember that efforts for first-generation students benefit many members of the institutional community. Considering first-generation needs in decision making often brings little risk and great reward.

To learn more about strategies for implementing these recommendations or to engage in programs and services designed to advance your first-generation efforts, visit <https://firstgen.naspa.org>.

CONCLUSION

This report explores the ways in which community and technical colleges support first-generation students. Given community and technical colleges' critical access role, the overrepresentation of first-generation students among these institutions, and the disproportionate impact the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic crisis has had on community colleges and their students, understanding how institutions can support first-generation students effectively and efficiently is critical. The findings from this study indicate that, despite community and technical colleges' long histories of serving first-generation students, additional consideration of this student population is warranted. In particular, further clarity of definitions, more intentional data collection, and a stronger emphasis on using data to inform programming will strengthen existing first-generation student supports. Moreover, such data collection can help inform efforts to become more student-ready, support professional development efforts, and support continued scaling of effective programming and structural changes.

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