

RESOURCE GUIDE

ENGAGING SUPPORT FOR BLACK FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS



Charmaine Troy, PhD
Associate Director of
First-Generation Student Initiatives
Georgia Tech

**CENTER FOR
FIRST-GENERATION
STUDENT SUCCESS®**

AN INITIATIVE OF NASPA AND THE SUDER FOUNDATION



ABOUT THE CENTER

The Center is transforming higher education to drive first-generation student success effectively and equitably across education, career, and life. We provide data, training, and expertise for a growing network of colleges and universities around the country to scale and sustain the important work of serving first-generation students. 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 RESOURCE GUIDES

In collaboration with experts in the field, the Center for First-generation Student Success has curated resource guides covering a variety of topics specific to first-generation student success. The purpose of the resource guides is to offer supplemental items and create stronger connections to topics covered. Each will include an overview, recommendations, a list of articles and/or examples featuring helpful approaches, and references. To remain current, these resource guides will be updated periodically.

AUTHOR



Charmaine Troy, PhD, serves as the associate director of first-generation student initiatives at Georgia Tech. In this role, she focuses on the access, equity, and success of first-generation students. She leads the university's work in supporting the cocurricular success of first-generation college students and overseeing the planning, development, and implementation of programming for first-generation students. Before joining Georgia Tech, she served as assistant dean for first-generation student success at Virginia Tech.

A founding member of the [Black First-gen Collective](#), Dr. Troy is coeditor of the books *Graduate Education at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): A Student Perspective and Developing and Implementing Promising Practices and Programs for First-Generation Students*. She is coauthor of the book chapter "Mentoring Experiences of Graduate Students in HBCU Professional Programs" in *Professional Education at Historically Black Colleges and Universities*. Dr. Troy holds a BA in journalism and mass communication from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, an MPA from North Carolina Central University, and a PhD in higher education from Morgan State University.

OVERVIEW

First-generation students are often tasked with navigating college admissions, financial aid, and campus life without the same support structures their continuing-generation peers have. During the 2015–16 academic year, 23.9% of the undergraduate population were first-generation (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022). Many of these students feel ill prepared for classes and life on campus because they do not have family members to rely on for advice.

However, Black first-generation students face additional challenges during their college experiences. In Fall 2020, Black students made up 12.5% of all postsecondary enrollment (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022). Among all undergraduate students, 29% of Black students were first-generation compared to 16.7% of white students. The challenges they face include mental health issues (Lowe et al., 2021), disproportionate student debt (Perry et al., 2021), low enrollment and completion rates (Weissman, 2023), educational inequity (Darling-Hammond, 1998), and implicit forms of racial discrimination (Knox, 2023).

Research shows that first-generation students report higher levels of depression (Stebbleton et al., 2014) compared to students who are not first-generation. However, Black first-generation students face additional stressors that lead to mental health issues. Black students face challenges such as racism, insensitive comments, or questions of belonging (McClain et al., 2016). All these challenges contribute to adverse mental health outcomes for Black students (Lowe et al., 2021). In addition, combating racial discrimination by the way of political activism exposes Black first-generation students to more stress and anxiety.

According to a [Brookings Institute report](#), Black students finance their education through debt. Education does not achieve income parity for Black workers. White college graduates have seven times more wealth than Black college graduates. The disproportionate debt that Black students are accumulating to finance their education affects the racial wealth gap (Perry et al., 2021).

Black students have a lower 6-year completion rate for degrees than any other racial ethnic group: 34% of Black students have an associate degree or higher compared to 46% of the general population (Kyaw, 2023). These outcomes are attributed to racial discrimination and the rising cost of higher education. A 2023 study found that Black students are far more likely to experience racial discrimination than their non-Black peers. Those enrolled at less diverse institutions reported experiencing discrimination more often (Knox, 2023).

Undergraduate enrollment among Black students has [declined by 25%](#) since Fall 2010. It continues to decline postpandemic. In addition, the survey found that 35% of Black students have major responsibilities beyond coursework and serve as the primary providers for their families (Kyaw, 2023). Black students also made up 20% of students who worked a full-time job. Despite the data to support the need for focusing on Black first-generation student success and retention, literature about the Black first-generation college student identity and experience is limited.

Faculty and practitioners must prepare to meet the needs of Black first-generation students by creating new models and approaches for faculty-student interaction. The creation of new models and approaches can lead to an increase in Black first-generation student success, retention, and graduation rates. Beneficial approaches include creating outreach programs and safe spaces (Lowe et al., 2021); teaching financial literacy (Black First-gen Collective, 2020) and providing student debt cancellation (Perry et al., 2021); improving college accessibility (Knox, 2023); and increasing antidiscrimination efforts (Knox, 2023).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Prioritize mental health concerns:

- [Studies](#) show that Black students are less likely to ask for help than white students. Furthermore, Black college students disproportionately underuse mental health services, even when they need support and such support services are accessible. [The National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) reports that 36% of students cite stigma as the top barrier to seeking care. In response, institutions should consider establishing support spaces for Black first-generation students that promote [positive mental health](#) instead of focusing on mental illness.

Introduce financial literacy:

- [Findings](#) show that the financial decisions that students make in college have an impact on their financial status after college. Institutions may want to require a personal finance course or financial life skills course as a general requirement for students. A course covering the foundation of financial literacy could help close the wealth gap for Black first-generation students. The course should cover the following basics of financial management:
 - Budgeting: By understanding incomes and expenses, students can increase awareness and avoid overspending.
 - Debt management: Financial literacy can help students manage their debt and learn about different repayment options, interest rates, and the importance of paying their bills on time.
 - Investing: Understanding the basics of investing can help students realize the importance of diversification and long-term financial planning.
 - Building credit: By learning how to use credit responsibly and making debt payments on time, students can learn about the importance of building a strong credit history.
 - Negotiating salaries: Financial literacy can teach students how to negotiate for higher pay and better benefits.

Improve college access

- [Research](#) has shown some factors that consistently influence student achievement. These include smaller class sizes, a challenging curriculum, and having more qualified teachers in the classroom. Black students, especially those from low-income urban and rural areas, are less likely than white students to have access to these resources. Institutions can improve college accessibility for Black first-generation students in these areas by implementing some of the following policies and practices:

- Offer better financial aid packages: One of the main barriers to college access is affordability. To make college more accessible, institutions can audit merit-based and needs-based aid to influence distribution of financial aid and scholarships for students.
- Reduce tuition fees: Reducing the cost of tuition can make college more affordable and accessible for students from low-income families.
- Address systemic barriers: Addressing systemic barriers, such as racism, can help ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed in college.
- Improve outreach and communication: Improving outreach and communication with prospective students can help ensure that students from all backgrounds are aware of the opportunities available to them and how to access them.

Increase antidiscrimination efforts

- Institutions can increase antidiscrimination efforts to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for Black first-generation students by applying the following practices:
 - Implement diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that provide training and resources focused on [cultural competency](#), implicit bias, and intersectionality. This practice can help promote awareness and understanding of diverse cultures, identities, and perspectives.
 - Create safe spaces where students can share their college experiences and find camaraderie among one another. An example of a safe space could be a cultural center or a support group.
 - Offer support and financial resources, such as mentoring programs, scholarships, and affinity groups, to ensure inclusion, access to education, and reduced financial barriers.
 - Ensure equitable access to opportunities on campus, regardless of their identity or background. Examples of opportunities include internships, research opportunities, and leadership positions.
 - Develop inclusive policies and practices that are inclusive and do not discriminate against any underrepresented groups.

RESOURCES

These resources reflect the experiences and needs of Black first-generation college students:

- [Black First-generation College Students Matter: A Call to Action](#)
- [For Colleges and Universities, Reopening Plans Must Meet Students' Mental Health Needs](#)
- [Interactions into Opportunities: Career Management for Low-Income, First-Generation African American College Students](#)
- [Vectors of Identity Development During the First Year: Black First-Generation Students' Reflections](#)

Books:

Cross, W.E. (1991). *Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American identity*. Temple University Press.

Cross, W. E., Jr., Parham, T. A., & Helms, J. E. (1991). The stages of Black identity development: Nigrescence models. In R. L. Jones (Ed.), *Black psychology* (pp. 319–338). Cobb & Henry Publishers.

Smith, W.A., Yosso, T.J., & Solorzano, D.G. (2006). Challenging racial battle fatigue on historically White campuses: A critical race examination of race-related stress. In C. A. Stanley (Ed.), *Faculty of color: Teaching in predominantly White colleges and universities*. Anker Publishing.

Tatum, B. D. (1997). *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race*. Basic Books.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [The Black First-gen Collective](#)
- Twitter handles: [@blackfirstgens](#), [@firstgendocs](#), [@FirstGenCollege](#)
- Instagram: [@firstgenandjuice](#)
- Podcast: [First-Gen Lounge](#)
- [#BlackFirstGen](#), [#BlackFirstGenForward](#)

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