



RESOURCE GUIDE

ENGAGING IN STATEWIDE ADVOCACY FOR FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS



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



AN INITIATIVE OF NASPA AND THE SUDER FOUNDATION

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT SUCCESS

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 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



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OVERVIEW

In the United States, 20% of first-generation college students will graduate within 6 years with a baccalaureate degree, despite making up 54% of college attendees overall (RTI International, 2019, 2023). Reasons for this disparity include the variety of challenges institutions create for first-generation college students, such as higher education's rising cost; increased financial stress; complicated, hidden academy norms; and lower extracurricular-involvement levels (Canning et al., 2020; Laiduc et al., 2021; Means & Pyne, 2017; Pratt et al., 2019; Wilcox et al., 2021). Although institutions create many challenges, first-generation students often have higher levels of resilience and grit—and are therefore better able to handle challenging situations (Bennett et al., 2021; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). Numerous ways exist to dismantle these barriers and become a student-ready institution, thus removing the need for first-generation college students to continue to struggle. One avenue to increase support for first-generation college students is through intentional advocacy efforts.

In 1980, the amended Higher Education Act of 1965 defined first-generation college students as college students “neither of whose parents completed a baccalaureate degree” (p. 135). This act and subsequent amendments would further clarify this definition and provide direct or indirect federal support to first-generation college students. Those supports included the creation of several new TRIO college access and success programs; student assistance programs such as work-study and Pell Grants; and the Strengthening Institutions Program, which increases colleges' capacity to serve low-income students (Fountain, 2023). Despite the current federal programs that directly and indirectly support first-generation college students, further action is critical to ensure that these students persist and succeed. State-level advocacy is another avenue of support for first-generation college students that higher education practitioners can leverage.

Higher education spending is the third-largest category of state spending, though it is only a small fraction of overall spending at the federal level (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2019). At the same time, state contributions to higher education have reached their highest levels since the Great Recession due to increased federal stimulus funding (State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2024). State funding increases create fruitful opportunities for statewide first-generation student advocacy. Additionally, research shows that institutions acting as lobbying groups wield significant power in the appropriations process, particularly when they make a concerted effort (Ferrin, 2005; Tandberg, 2010). Despite historic increases in state higher education funding, more is needed to know about the role of statewide advocacy efforts in first-generation student support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Coordinate Statewide Efforts Across Institutions

With 3,779 degree-granting post-secondary institutions in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022), coordinated efforts for first-generation advocacy can prove useful. In their collective impact model, Kania and Kramer (2011) outline five commonalities that create powerful results when multiple organizations confront societal issues. These five commonalities could be useful for coordinating efforts across several institutions:

- **Common agenda.** Advocates must resolve differences among organizations to have a shared vision for social change.
- **Shared measurement systems.** Organizations must agree on how they will report and measure success.
- **Mutually reinforcing activities.** Recognizing the diversity of institutional types across states, each organization does not need to do the same activities; however, advocates must align activities with the collective vision for change.
- **Continuous communication.** Monthly or biweekly meetings with organizational leadership are important to keep the energy up and momentum moving. Importantly, intentional communication is also necessary to agree on a shared vocabulary, such as how the initiative will define first-generation college students.
- **Backbone supporting organizations.** Kania and Kramer (2011) note that many initiatives fail due to a lack of supporting infrastructure. Minimum staffing recommendations include determining the roles of the project manager, data manager, and facilitator, as well as getting institutional leadership buy-in and support.

Meet With Legislators and Public Officials

Particularly for public institutions, working with state officials is paramount. Legislators may be alumni of colleges and universities in the state and may have a special interest in supporting these institutions. Many institutions have government relations staff or offices that may help facilitate interaction with public officials. Consider the following strategies when planning interaction between state officials and your first-generation advocacy initiatives:

- **Bring the public officials to you.** The [Council for Opportunity in Education](#), a national TRIO program advocacy organization, has developed a robust outreach guide for hosting members of Congress on college campuses. The guide's information is widely applicable to state legislators and includes suggestions for planning the visit and objectives for during and after the visit.
- **Bring your students to the public officials.** State Higher Education Days are events when representatives from post-secondary institutions gather at a state capitol. Use these days to bring first-generation students to the capitol, where they can learn about the legislative process

and talk to legislators about issues important to them.

- **Work with your institutional government relations staff.** Discuss what strategy works best for you and how first-generation student success fits within your college's broader mission and goals for legislative support.

Combine Powerful Statistics With Impactful Stories

Research has shown that statistical information is generally more persuasive; however, narratives may generate more emotional responses (Allen & Preiss, 1997; Zebregs et al., 2015). Knowing your audience is key. Statistical information such as the percentage of first-generation students in a state or at an institution; any gaps in retention, graduation, or career placement rates; and the economic return on education investment may be particularly relevant to a public official. Oftentimes, legislators will want to know how first-generation success impacts their districts, and a student story can help drive that message home. This effort also contributes to workforce development and ensures that more skilled and educated first-generation college students are hired by employers seeking to fill openings and support the local economy, reducing unemployment. Consider the following when approaching your advocacy initiatives:

- **Use data storytelling.** Data storytelling is the presentation of statistical information with accompanying narratives and visuals. Dykes (2020) argues that the combination of the three can explain why a particular data point is important, enlighten the audience to insights they would not have seen without charts or graphs, and further engage the audience through a good story.
- **Leverage first-generation students' voices.** Narratives, testimonies, and anecdotes can be useful for motivating individuals to act (Mosley & Gibson, 2017). Leveraging stories of first-generation student experiences and success may add a personal touch to your advocacy efforts and not only help build support but also create champions for your efforts.

The Kansas Case

One midwestern state may be the blueprint for collective advocacy for first-generation college students: Kansas. Home to more than 60 post-secondary institutions and six state colleges and universities, approximately 37% of college students with Kansas legal residency meet the federal first-generation definition (NCES, 2020, 2022). Within community and technical colleges as well as the Kansas Board of Regents system of state and municipal universities, first-generation students make up approximately 18% of enrollment (Kansas Board of Regents, 2023). Advocates can scale the following exemplar practices beyond the Sunflower State:

Ad Astra First-Generation Student Conference

Each year, a sponsoring Kansas post-secondary institution hosts the Ad Astra First-Generation Student Conference. First-generation students from across the state gather for 1 to 2 days to attend sessions and workshops and listen to empowering speakers. Gathering first-generation college students, staff, and faculty creates an environment for advocacy to start, and these

connections have influenced the ways Kansas galvanizes advocacy efforts year-round. The conference name echoes the state motto (“Ad astra per aspera”). The Latin phrase translates to “To the stars through difficulties” and is representative of the first-generation college student experience.

Kansas First-Generation College Celebration Day Proclamation

In 2021, the Center for First-Generation Student Success and the Council for Opportunity in Education collaborated with the offices of United States Senators Reverend Raphael Warnock (D-GA) and Roger Marshall (R-KS) to propose a First-Generation College Celebration resolution. They led a bipartisan team of senators who helped steer [S. Res. 437](#) to passage under unanimous consent in the 117th Congress—helping to solidify the importance of November 8 as a day to recognize the contributions and accomplishments of first-generation college students. Following this federal approach, students and staff at Washburn University wanted to engage at the state level. Student Government Association President Antonio Martinez proposed a state proclamation and worked with Kansas Governor Laura Kelly’s office to proclaim November 8, 2023, as [First-Generation College Celebration Day](#).

Coordinated Inaugural First-Generation Advocacy Day

A day of advocacy centering on first-generation students evolved from the long-standing Kansas Higher Education Day, on which Kansas regental institution students advocate to the legislature about issues facing their universities. Students from the University of Kansas, Kansas State University, and Washburn University hosted an inaugural State of Kansas First-Generation College Student Advocacy Day on March 20, 2024. Held at the state capitol in Topeka and led by students, the event aimed to advocate for policies supporting the educational journeys of first-generation students.

Kansas State University College Advising Corps

The Kansas College Advising Corps, a constituent program of the National College Advising Corps, plays a critical role in empowering the state’s future college students. Housed at Kansas State University, the corps places recent college graduates as advisors in partner high schools throughout Kansas, where they advocate for a college-going culture, particularly among first-generation, low-income, and other historically excluded students. The corps empowers students through various initiatives, such as career exploration workshops, college campus visits, and completion assistance for Free Application for Federal Student Aid, among others. Institutions interested in partnering with the College Advising Corps should visit the organization’s [website](#).

Kansas TRIO Programs Factbook

Kansas is home to more than 50 federal TRIO programs serving over 14,000 first-generation students, low-income students, students with disabilities, and students underrepresented in higher education (Kansas TRIO, 2023). Each year, representatives from Kansas TRIO programs engage in national-level advocacy at the Council for Opportunity in Education’s Policy

Seminar in Washington, D.C. Advocates primarily use the factbook during the policy seminar's congressional efforts, or, in the case of the University of Kansas, when [U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona visited campus](#) to discuss TRIO programs. The factbook represents statewide coordination to compile funding levels, the number of students served, and impactful stories, and it may have utility with state-specific first-generation initiatives.

RESOURCES

- Review the First-Generation College Celebration [page](#) and connect with colleagues to create an intentional and asset-based celebration on and around November 8. Below is a list of helpful resources:
 - ▶ [Institutional Planning Guide & Template](#)
 - ▶ [Media Kit](#)
 - ▶ [TRIO Resources](#)
- The [Council for Opportunity in Education](#) is an organization that engages in several exemplary advocacy initiatives at the federal and state levels concerning TRIO programs.
- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) [DataLab](#) offers web-based tools to understand and interpret NCES resources. Information contained in various NCES publications can help users understand the current status of their state's first-generation college students.
- [The State Higher Education Executive Officers](#) organization offers on its website several publications for individuals interested in state higher education policy.
- For those individuals interested in federal first-generation student advocacy, the Congressional Research Service publishes [The Higher Education Act \(HEA\): A Primer](#) annually.

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