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**FirstGen Forward releases new national landscape brief exploring
first-generation student identity and belonging**

*“It’s kind of a flex’: Reflections on being a first-generation student” is the
fourth of five research briefs in the landscape analyses series*

WASHINGTON, DC (October 15, 2025) - [FirstGen Forward](#), formerly the Center for First-generation Student Success, today announced the release of [*“It’s kind of a flex’: Reflections on being a first-generation student”*](#), the fourth installment in its national landscape analyses series, [*First-generation Student Success: A Landscape Analysis of Programs, Services, and Perspectives in Higher Education*](#).

Produced in partnership with [Phase Two Advisory](#), this research brief explores how first-generation college students develop their identity, sense of belonging, and community as part of their higher education journey. Drawing on April 2025 focus group data from 45 students at 42 two-and four-year institutions in 19 states, the brief highlights how students move from being labeled as “first-generation” to integrating that status into their sense of self, and the role institutions play in supporting this process.

“This data shows that building a first-generation identity is not automatic but develops over time, strengthened by community and connection,” said Dr. Melinda Mechur Karp, founder and principal of Phase Two Advisory. “When students recognize that they are first-generation and connect with others like them, they not only feel they belong but also begin to see this status as a source of strength.”

Key findings from the report include:

- Many students know their parents did not attend college, but do not initially identify with the “first-generation” label.
- Students often develop their “first-generation” identity in two ways: by recognizing differences from their continuing-generation peers and by building community with other first-generation students.

- Once students connect to the “first-generation” term, they articulate strengths such as resiliency, resourcefulness, adaptability, and leadership, reframing their first-gen identity as an asset.
- Fewer than half of four-year respondents and fewer than one-fifth of two-year institutional respondents report offering opportunities for students to explore what it means to be first-generation.

“These findings make it clear that being first-generation is not just a label but an identity that, once embraced, can be deeply empowering,” said Dr. Stephanie J. Bannister, vice president of the FirstGen Forward Network at FirstGen Forward. “Institutions that recognize and celebrate this identity can help students harness their strengths and persist towards their goals.”

The brief also provides actionable strategies for higher education institutions, including proactively identifying first-generation students, creating opportunities for connections, celebrating first-gen milestones, and designing programming that emphasizes strengths.

The updated series reflects an evolving higher education landscape shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, economic shifts, and political pressures. It aims to provide a current, data-informed foundation for institutions that strive to support first-generation students.

To read the briefs or other publications, or to learn more about FirstGen Forward, visit firstgenforward.org.

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ABOUT FIRSTGEN FORWARD

FirstGen Forward, formerly the Center for First-generation Student Success, accelerates success for first-generation students in education, career, and life through collaborations with higher education, philanthropy, business, government, and individuals to eliminate the completion gap and broaden post-college opportunities. Our vision is a future in which first-generation students obtain postsecondary credentials; access opportunities commensurate with their skills, education, and training; and maximize their service to people and communities throughout the world.

ABOUT PHASE TWO ADVISORY

Phase Two Advisory works with colleges, foundations, and improvement networks to translate research evidence into equity-forward 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.