

Breaking Down Barriers: First- Generation College Student Challenges

bridgeprep



First-generation college students are students whose parents do not have a four-year college degree. First-gen students take pride in being the first in their families to pursue higher education; they look forward to forming life-long memories and friendships, and typically experience exhilaration, anticipation, and thrill upon entering college.

However, students may sometimes start losing sight of their goals once they enter a cycle of stress and uncertainty. Feelings of self-doubt may start to arise, which can then hinder a student's academic performance.

Parents of first-generation college students must realize that it is completely normal for students to experience many up-and-downs during their undergraduate career; after all, it is their utmost perseverance and resiliency that allows them to continue overcoming the challenges that comes their way.

Nationally, of the 7.3 million undergraduates attending four-year public and private colleges and universities, about 20 percent are first-generation students. About 50 percent of all first-generation college students in the U.S. are from low-income families. These students are also more likely to be a member of a racial or ethnic minority group.

One of the favorite checkmarks on college applications for admissions directors to see is "first-generation college student." Much energy and money are spent on outreach to this portion of the applicant pool as schools seek to diversify their student population and give bright students from families with no history of college degrees the chance to aspire to something bigger and better than their parents may have. Along with opportunity, there are challenges for first-generation college students.



1

Family Dynamics

In families, role assignments about work, family, religion, and community are passed down through the generations creating intergenerational continuity. When a family member disrupts this system by choosing to attend college, he or she experiences a shift in identity, leading to a sense of loss. Not prepared for this loss, many first-generation students may come to develop two different identities – one for home and another for college. This dual identity can lead to confusion, stress, and anxiety.



2

Support from Home

Lack of support from family and friends at home, as compared to other students around them, can make first-generation college students feel abandoned and without the encouragement they may need to stay the course. To be fair, those who did not attend college may not understand the pressures and anxieties these students are facing and may not know the right words to say to keep them on track and focused.



3

Social Life

At colleges across the country, tuition, room and board, and books are often covered by scholarships, grants, and other sources for first-generation students. To participate in the campus social life, however, can often cost hundreds or thousands of dollars more. Whether the school has an active Greek community or students spend their weekends and vacations traveling, there are many ways that first-generation, lower-income students are left out of the college experience. The social aspect of college is pivotal to fitting in and creating friendships.

4

Lack of Resources

The lack of knowledge of existing resources may often prevent first-generation college students from fully taking advantage of everything that a higher education can provide. Navigating the financial aid process, understanding class selections, scholarship opportunities, and parent accessing information from their network to help. These resources often hide in plain sight and if you do not know where to look then it will be challenging.

How to Prepare

This is not an exhaustive list of challenges but are the primary challenges that first-generation college will face. The best way to improve the outcomes is to identify the challenges and develop solutions prior to that situation. Family dynamics, support from home, social life, and lack of resources are significant obstacles. Here is a list of strategies that students can employ to increase the chances of success:

- Keep your eye on the prize: begin with the end in mind, from day-to-day the overall goal should be in the forefront of your mind. This will make the daily activities bearable.
- Establish a network: create a network of current students and college graduates. These individuals can be a wealth of knowledge with finding important resources. Your network should include a mentor. Mentors provide the best because they have already been through it, they will provide advice on issues.
- Have an open mindset: Creativity allows you to view and solve problems more openly and with innovation. It broadens your perspectives and may result in unique solutions.

