FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

First-generation undergraduate students who are predominantly non-white and from low-income backgrounds, face myriad of barriers in their pursuit to become the first in their families to graduate college. As the first in their families to navigate college admissions, financial aid, and postsecondary coursework, these barriers manifest both in terms of accessing college and as persist as they attempt to complete college through financial, social, and academics. Research has found significant differences in enrollment, degree attainment and finances between continuing-generation students (whose parents have a bachelor’s degree or higher) and students whose parents have little or no college experience. Among all undergraduate students, the DOE classified 25% of white and Asian-American students as first-generation students. In contrast, 41% of African American and 61% of Latino student belong to this demographic.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 34% of undergraduates were the first in their families to go to college in the 2011-12 academic year. An additional 28% of undergraduates had parents with at least some college experience but not a bachelor’s degree. [1]

Unless noted, this brief uses data from NCES from the 2011-12 academic year.

ENROLLMENT/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- First-generation students were more likely to attend two-year institutions than their peers. 48% of first-generation students enrolled in a two-year institution, compared with 32% of students whose parents had at least a bachelor’s degree.
- Only 25% of first-generation students attended four-year institutions. According to a 2008 Pell Institute study, first-generation students were more than seven times more likely to earn bachelor’s degrees if they started in four-year institutions as opposed to two-year institutions.
- First-generation students are more likely to enroll in for-profit institutions than their peers. 19% of first-generation students enrolled in for-profits, compared with 8% of students whose parents had at least a bachelor’s degree.
- Nearly 50% of all students enrolled in for-profits were first-generation students.
- First-generation students were more likely to attend college part-time than their peers. 48% of first-generation students attended college part-time, compared to 38% of students whose parents had at least a bachelor’s degree.
First-generation students enrolled in distance education at a higher rate than their peers.

- 8% of first-generation students enrolled in distance learning while 5% of their peers whose parents had at least a bachelor’s degree enrolled in distanced learning.

According to a 2011 report from the Higher Education Research Institute, first-generation students were less likely to complete their college degree in six years than their peers whose parents had at least some college experience (50% first-generation versus 64% non-first generation).

Only 11% of low-income, first-generation college students will have a college degree within six years of enrolling in school, compared to about 55% of their more advantaged peers who were not low-income or first-generation students, according to a Pell Institute study of students who first enrolled in fall 2003.

**DEMOGRAPHICS**

First-generation students tended to be older than their peers and were more likely to have dependents.

- The median age for first-generation students was 24, compared to the median age of 21 for students whose parents had at least a bachelor’s degree.
- 34% of first-generation students were over age 30, compared to 17% of students whose parents had at least a bachelor’s degree.

Among students considered independent for financial aid purposes, 60% of first-generation students had dependents compared to 45% of students whose parents had at least a bachelor’s degree.

Minority students were more likely than white students to be first-generation students.

- 42% of black students and 48% of Hispanic students were first-generation students, compared to 28% of white students.

- English is not a first language for nearly 20% of first-generation students.

**CHALLENGES**

First-generation students demonstrated lower rates of college readiness in key academic areas compared to their non-first-generation peers. This put them at a higher risk of failing out of college.

- 36% of first-generation students in their first or second year of undergraduate education reported taking a remedial class after high school, compared to 28% of their peers whose parents had at least a bachelor’s degree.

First-generation students had a lower median household income and more unmet financial need compared to students whose parents attended college.

- The median family income for first-generation freshmen at two- and four-year institutions was $37,565, compared to $99,635 for non-first-generation freshmen.

- According to a 2008 Pell Institute study, the mean amount of unmet financial need for low-income, first-generation students was nearly $6,000 (before loans), which represented half of their median annual income of $12,100. As a result, they worked
and borrowed more than their peers, with negative consequences for college completion.

- 27% of first-generation students come from households making $20,000 or less, compared to 6% of non-first-generation freshmen.
- First-generation students are borrowing from the federal government at increasing rates to pay for their education (from 15% in 1997 to approximately 37% in 2013).
- 46% of first-generation borrowers attended institutions in the bottom quartile in default rate measurements.

SOURCES

"New Supports for First-Gen Students: Helpful or Just a ‘Drop in the Bucket?’" The Hechinger Report, October 2015.
"New Research on First Generation Students" Inside Higher Ed, September 2017
"The Barriers to Success" Forbes, August 2017

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There is some disagreement about how to define the term first-generation. NCES defines first-generation college students as those who are the first in their family to attend college. According to the Pell Institute, a first-generation student is a student whose parent or guardian did not attain a bachelor’s degree.