



Postsecondary National Policy Institute

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

First-generation undergraduates face myriad barriers in their pursuit to become the first in their families to graduate college. Predominantly non-white and from low-income backgrounds, they are often the first in their families to navigate college admissions, financial aid, and postsecondary coursework. 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.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 35% of undergraduates were the first in their families to go to college in the 2015–16 academic year. An additional 26% of these students had parents with at least some college experience but not a bachelor's degree.^[i]

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.
 - 53% of first-generation students enrolled in a two-year institution, compared with 39% of students whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree.
 - Only 39% of first-generation students attended four-year institutions.
- First-generation students were more likely to enroll in for-profit institutions than their peers.
 - 18% of first-generation students enrolled in for-profits, compared with 5% 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 exclusively online programs at a higher rate than their peers.
 - 14% of first-generation students enrolled in exclusively online programs while 10% of their peers whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree enrolled in exclusively online programs.
- According to the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) Center for First-Generation Student Success, 42% of college students who graduated in 2015–2016 with a bachelor's degree were first-generation college students.
- The same study found that first-generation students enroll at higher rates at Minority-Serving Institutions (MSI) in the 2015–2016 school year,
 - 67% of students enrolled at American Indian/Alaska Native-serving Institutions are first-generation students
 - 65% of students enrolled at Hispanic-Serving Institutions are first-generation students
 - 60% of students enrolled at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are first-generation students.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- Among all undergraduate students enrolled in the 2015–2016 academic year, the U.S. Department of Education classified 37% of white, 33% Latino, 19% African-American and 8% of Asian-American undergraduate students as first-generation students. 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 23, 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.
- According to NCES (2017), 78% of first-generation students were native English speakers in 2012.

FAMILY WEALTH, STUDENT DEBT, AND EARNINGS OUTCOMES

- First-generation students had a lower median household income and more unmet financial need than 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 continuing-generation **[ii]** 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.
 - 27% of first-generation students came from households making \$20,000 or less, compared to 6% of continuing-generation freshmen.
- According to The Institute of College Access and Success, 30% of first-generation bachelor's degree recipients have difficulty with student loan repayment (e.g., deferments, forbearances, delinquencies).
- 46% of first-generation borrowers attended institutions in the bottom quartile in default rate measurements.
- According to a 2021 Pew Research Center study, first-generation college graduates incurred more debt paying for their education.
 - 65% of first-generation college graduates owed \$25,000 or more in student loans, compared with 57% of second-generation college graduates.
- First-generation students accumulate less wealth **[iii]** over a lifetime than students with college-educated parents.
 - The median household wealth of first-generation college graduates is \$152,000 compared to second-generation college graduates (\$244,500).

SOURCES

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[i] There is some disagreement about how to define the term first-generation. NCES (2014) defines first-generation college students as those who are the first in their family to attend college. NCES (2018) defines first-generation as students whose parents have not participated in postsecondary education. According to the Pell Institute, a first-generation student is a student whose parent or guardian did not attain a bachelor's degree.

[ii] NCES (2017) defines continuing-generation college students as students who have at least one parent who had some postsecondary education. NCES (2018) defines continuing-generation students as those with at least one parent who earned a bachelor's degree and students with at least one parent who attended college but no parent who had earned a bachelor's degree.

[iii] Pew Research Center (2021) defines wealth as the value of all the assets owned by the household (cars, homes, financial assets, businesses, etc.) minus outstanding debts owed by the household.

