



Postsecondary National Policy Institute

First Generation Students in Higher Education

CENSUS OVERVIEW

Predominantly non-white and from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students are often the first in their families to navigate college admissions, financial aid, and postsecondary coursework. According to the Census' American Community Survey, in 2021, [37%](#) of the population aged 25 and over had never enrolled in college and 56.3% had no college degree. The Census' Current Population Survey shows that, in 2021, [28.3%](#) of children under the age of 18 lived in a household where their parent or guardian had never enrolled in college and 42.3% lived in a household where their parent or guardian did not have a college degree. For this fact sheet, "first-generation" will be used to describe "[students enrolled in postsecondary education whose parents had not attended college.](#)"

ENROLLMENT

Unless otherwise noted, enrollment data in this section come from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (NPSAS), academic year 2015-16.

- [23.9%](#) of undergraduates were first-generation.
 - 17.7% of public 4-year, 17.1% of non-profit 4-year, 29.8% of public 2-year, and 34% of for-profit institutions enrollment were first-generation students.
- First-generation students were [more likely](#) to attend public 2-year institutions or for-profit institutions than the national average.
 - 44.1% attended public 2-year institutions, compared to 35.3% of all students
 - 12.5% attended for-profit institutions, compared to 8.8% of all students
- [30.3%](#) of students enrolled at minority-serving institutions (MSIs) were first-generation, while 19% of students enrolled at non-MSIs were first-generation.
 - [21.6%](#) of students enrolled at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) were first-generation.
 - 31.6% of students enrolled at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) were first-generation.
- [38.5%](#) of Latino, 30.7% of Native American, 29% of Black, 25.6% of Asian, and 16.7% of white students were first-generation.

FINANCIAL AID

- According to the NPSAS, [56.4%](#) of first-generation students received some form of federal Title IV financial aid in the 2015-16 academic year, compared to 53.9% of continuing-generation students.
 - [48.2%](#) of first-generation students received a Pell grant, compared to 36.3% of continuing-generation students.
 - [32.6%](#) of first-generation students received a federal student loan, compared to 37.8% of continuing-generation students.
- Among first-generation students who received federal Title IV aid, the [average amount](#) received was \$7,923, compared to \$8,785 for continuing-generation students.

- The average Pell grant amount for first-generation students was \$3,818, compared to \$3,694 for continuing-generation students.
- The average Federal student loan amount for first-generation students was \$7,610, compared to \$8,543 for continuing-generation students.

COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- According to the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) study, among students who first enrolled in the 2011-12 academic year, [19%](#) of first-generation students had attained a bachelor's degree by 2017, compared to 46.6% of continuing-generation students.
 - 56.2% of first-generation students had attained no degree or certificate, compared to 37% of continuing-generation students
- Among students who had attained a bachelor's degree by 2017, [16.2%](#) were first-generation students.

EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- According to the Baccalaureate & Beyond study, ten years after receiving a bachelor's degree, first-generation graduates who reported having an income averaged a gross income of [\\$68,278](#), compared to the average of \$78,720 for continuing-generation students.
- Wealth accumulation can be [measured](#) differently from income. Ten years after graduating:
 - [66%](#) of first-generation graduates reported owning a home, compared to 62% of continuing-generation graduates
 - [84%](#) of first-generation graduates had some form of a retirement account, compared to 87% of continuing-generation graduates
- According to a [2021 Pew Research Center study](#), first-generation graduates accumulate less wealth over a lifetime than continuing-generation graduates.
 - The median household wealth of first-generation college graduates is \$152,000 compared to \$244,500 for continuing-generation college graduates.

POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- According to [a report](#) by The Institute of College Access and Success, 30% of first-generation bachelor's degree recipients had difficulty with student loan repayment (e.g., deferments, forbearances, delinquencies).
 - 46% of first-generation borrowers attended institutions in the bottom quartile of default rates.
- The 2021 study by Pew found that 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 to 57% of continuing-generation college graduates.

DATA SOURCES

[American Community Survey](#). & [Current Population Survey](#). U.S. Census Bureau, October 2022.

[Baccalaureate & Beyond Survey](#). National Center for Education Statistics, October 2022.

[Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, October 2022.

[Digest of Education Statistics](#). National Center for Education Statistics, October 2022.

[National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey](#). National Center for Education Statistics, October 2022.

[Pew Research Center](#). 2021.

[The Institute of College Access and Success](#). 2020.