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. In 2024, 55.5% of the population aged 25 and over had no college degree, and 36.5% had never enrolled in college.[1] In 2022, 23.1% of children lived in a household where their parent or guardian had never enrolled in college, and 42.5% lived in a household where their parent or guardian did not have a college degree.[4]

ENROLLMENT

- In 2019-20, 25.8% of undergraduates were first-generation.[7]
  - Enrollment at public 4-year institutions was 21.7%, at non-profit 4-year institutions 16.8%, at public 2-year institutions 32.7%, and at for-profit institutions 39.9% among first-generation students.[7]
- First-generation students were more likely to attend public 2-year institutions or for-profit institutions than the national average.[7]
  - 37.1% attended public 2-year institutions, compared to 29.3% of all students.[7]
  - 9.6% attended for-profit institutions, compared to 6.2% of all students.[7]
- 33.3% of students enrolled at minority-serving institutions (MSIs) were first-generation, while 19.7% of students enrolled at non-MSIs were first-generation.[7]
  - 26.1% of students enrolled at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and 34.7% of students enrolled at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) were first-generation.[7]
- 45.8% of Latino, 28.2% of Native American, 32.1% of Black, 27.2% of Asian, and 16.7% of White students were first-generation.[7]

FINANCIAL AID

- In 2019-20, 63.1% of first-generation students received some form of federal Title IV financial aid compared to 52% of continuing-generation students.[7]
  - 55.2% of first-generation students received a Pell Grant, compared to 35% of continuing-generation students.[7]
  - 33.3% of first-generation students received a federal student loan, compared to 35% of continuing-generation students.[7]
- Among first-generation students who received federal Title IV aid, the average amount received was $7,891, compared to $9,070 for continuing-generation students.[7]
  - The average Pell Grant amount for first-generation students was $4,143, compared to $4,107 for continuing-generation students.[7]
  - The average federal student loan amount for first-generation students was $7,582, compared to $8,886 for continuing-generation students.[7]
- First-generation college graduates incurred more debt paying for their education.[5]
  - In 2019, 65% of first-generation college graduates owed $25,000 or more in student loans, compared to 57% of continuing-generation college graduates.[5]

* For this fact sheet, "first-generation" will be used to describe "students enrolled in postsecondary education whose parents had not attended college."[6]

COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- Among students who first enrolled in 2011-12, 19% of first-generation students had attained a bachelor's degree by 2017, compared to 46.6% of continuing-generation students.[3]
    - 56.2% of first-generation students had attained no degree or certificate, compared to 37% of continuing-generation students.[3]
- Among students who had attained a bachelor's degree by 2017, 16.2% were first-generation students.[3]

EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- 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.[2]
- Wealth accumulation can be measured differently from income.[8] Ten years after graduating:
    - 66% of first-generation graduates reported owning a home, compared to 62% of continuing-generation graduates.[2]
    - 84% of first-generation graduates had some form of a retirement account, compared to 87% of continuing-generation graduates.[2]
- First-generation graduates accumulate less wealth over a lifetime than continuing-generation graduates.[5]
    - The median household wealth of first-generation college graduates is $152,000 compared to $244,500 for continuing-generation college graduates.[5]

DATA SOURCES

[1] American Community Survey & Current Population Survey. U.S. Census Bureau, January 2026.
[2] Baccalaureate & Beyond Longitudinal Study. National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.
[3] Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study. National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.
[4] Digest of Education Statistics. National Center for Education Statistics, December 2025.
[5] First-Generation Student Economic Outcomes. Pew Research Center, May 2021.
[6] First-Generation Students: Stats in Brief. National Center for Education Statistics, February 2018.
[7] National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.
[8] Wealth Analysis FAQ. Urban Institute, 2021.