



JOURNAL

THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND EMPLOYERS

www.nacweb.org

NOVEMBER 2016



FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS:

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UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY: Meeting the Career Development Needs of First-Generation College Students

by Heather Maietta

Starting and navigating the career planning process is unfamiliar territory for many students, but it can be undoubtedly overwhelming for first-generation (FG) college students. As career services professionals, creating a launch pad for our students is the foundation of our profession—helping is what we do, and what we want to do well. This helping challenges us to consider impactful ways of serving all students—including FG college students, often referred to as the hidden minority.¹

The two most widely used definitions of FG college students are 1) those students whose parents matriculated, but never graduated with a bachelor's degree and 2) those students whose parents never persisted past a high school diploma. Depending on the definition your

institution recognizes, as many as 50 percent of United States college students are considered first generation. Moreover, for the next 15 years, increases in college enrollments are predicted to consist of mostly FG students.² The challenge with this forecast is that only 27 percent of first-generation students graduate within four years; less than 45 percent graduate in five years; and only 50 percent earn their degree in six years.³ The National Center for Education Statistics data show less than one-quarter of first-generation students overall earn their way to a bachelor's degree, compared to 68 percent of their non-first-generation peers. These statistics are strikingly worse for low income, first-generation students.⁴ Conversely, the share of jobs that require postsecondary education has doubled over the last 40 years, as the job market continues to

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require more advanced skills application and employers continue to favor advanced degrees as a qualifier for employment.⁵

What we do know is the first six months are critical for FG students in terms of orienting them to the college culture and establishing structural support, resources, and opportunities. First-generation college students often do not realize there is support on campus—or that they have access to support, including tutoring, counseling, career services, and other resources. We also know the baccalaureate degree is an avenue of upward social mobility and increased economic advantage.⁶ Students whose parents did not attend college are at a disadvantage when it comes to postsecondary access, let alone meeting the challenges involved in persisting through graduation.

First-generation college students are coined the “hidden minority” for several reasons. Many institutions fail to recognize FG students as an at-risk population or have insufficient knowledge of their unique needs and how to implement effective strategies for support. In some cases, there is an overall campus disinterest in both acknowledging FG students as an at-risk population and in generating the requisite fervor to increase institutional support or necessary services. Often, budget constraints play a role. However, supporting the admissions, retention, and post-graduate success of FG students is propitious to the entire campus, and financially lucrative to the enrollment, alumni, and advancement functions. Focusing on the financial benefits alone, supporting FG students in, during, and out of college is remunerative to the bottom line. Big picture, there is a fundamental correlation between the success of first-generation students and overall graduation rates.⁷ Additionally, there is a correlation between student retention and satisfaction with the career services function.⁸

**FIRST GENERATION
PERSISTENCE BARRIERS**

For many first-generation college students, attending and graduating from college can change the trajectory of their lives, their families lives, and in some cases, the lives of their community. Not every FG student’s college experience is as dramatic, but most are complex enough to warrant focused attention from certain sectors of the university, one being career services. For students who weren’t raised learning the language

associated with college or career, simple terms like “industry” or “field” can be foreign. The idea of participating in an unpaid internship opportunity is impossible to fathom let alone achieve. What’s more, seeking out services to demystify the career development process is an option often not considered by FG students because they do not know what questions to ask or what type of support to seek out, and don’t have parents or family members who can guide them.

**COMMON BARRIERS FIRST-
GENERATION STUDENTS FACE:**

- Among these students, there is an absence of a strong sense of entitlement.
- They have a high desire to connect and engage with faculty.
- They can possess unrealistic career goals, or make career goals without understanding the aspirations associated with their decision.
- They are uncomfortable in a college environment.
- They have trouble navigating campus services.
- They are more likely to work full time.
- They are more likely to commute.
- Their participation in events/extracurricular activities is low.
- They are underprepared academically.
- They face acute financial pressures.
- They are more comfortable with professors and staff than peers, viewing faculty and staff as experts whose acceptance they crave, while being less focused on the social aspects of college.
- They take longer to choose a major.
- They are under the impression they should not ask questions.
- They lack cultural capital—that is, they do not understand the “unspoken rules” and therefore can’t make judgments that reflect those. (For example, a first-generation student may be unfamiliar with the concept of fraternities/sororities and/or unaware of the benefits of taking part.)
- They lack study skills/time management.
- They have low self-efficacy.
- They are more oriented to the present than to the future.
- They experience social/cultural isolation.
- Their professional network is nonexistent.
- They experience feelings of not belonging/impostor syndrome.

Moreover, Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella (2012) found that first-generation college students receive less emotional, informational, and financial support from their parents than continuing-generation or legacy students. Parents often want to be involved, but are not sure what level of involvement is appropriate and what advice to provide. Some of these barriers are consistent with legacy students as well, but these students often have a knowledgeable internal compass and external support system to help them navigate college. A fragile or non-existent support system layers stress and uncertainty to the college trajectory in general, and traverses the career planning process in particular.

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE SENIORS

From 2012 to 2014, a study of career transition issues of first-generation college seniors was conducted at two small, private colleges in the northeast.⁹ This study added to the groundbreaking research of Overton-Healy (2010), who sought to call attention to the unique transitional issues FG students face leaving college and entering the world of work. Overton-Healy's research began to raise awareness of the "retention" of emerging alumni and helped create a sense of urgency for the on-going career and professional development needs of first-generation students *beyond the first year*.

This research supported the findings of Saginak (1998) who identified five discrete areas of significant change and challenge for college seniors: 1) changing roles and identities, 2) managing practicalities such as relocation and finances, 3) dealing with demands on time and attention, 4) establishing an action plan for job hunting, and 5) reflecting on self and assessing personal achievements. Pistilli, Taub and Bennett (2003) also found four areas of concern with which college seniors' grapple: 1) career, 2) change and loss, 3) graduate/professional school, and 4) emotional and financial support.

Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory (1984) was used as the theoretical framework for this study. Key themes from the research highlighted FG students not wanting to "waste" the degree or take a job beneath their credentials; concerns about having to return to their parents' homes; conducting a successful job hunt; and honoring family expectations around their desired career path. FG seniors also reported carrying with



them over the entire college experience feelings of isolation from friends and family; not having a constant professional support system; and missing out on important activities, such as career fairs, because of family or work obligations.

BELOW ARE THE TOPICS THAT EMERGED:

FG students attend college for a career, not for deeper learning or love of topic.

FG students feel a strong sense of gratitude to family, but also a desire to "step up" for the family.

FG students are less likely to embrace campus activities, often because they commute or need to work while attending college.

FG students feel the weight of importance that decisions take on during college.

FG students do not suffer from analysis paralysis; in fact, they tend to make hasty, sometimes unformulated decisions.

FG students realize there is a better life within reach and feel the *only* gateway to this improved life is obtaining the degree.

FG students are hungry for after-college success information targeted to them.

Helpers designed to assist FG students need to be educated on the needs of FG students and equipped to assist.

FG students have a diminutive or non-existent network; furthermore, they have no realization of its importance.



Layering the complexity of the senior year with issues related to first-generation status exacerbates the transitional experience. Actively seeking employment is the single most confusing and terrifying closure experience for FG students. They express a need to act in ways that reinforced their career goals; that is, to find a job, be a self-reliant adult, and live their chosen lives.¹⁰ The senior year—an important and often overlooked transitional year—is the final year for the university to build strong positive affinity with FG students, and the last occasion to help students develop important life success skills. This presents tremendous opportunity for career services to make a meaningful, lasting impact.

HOW CAREER SERVICES CAN SUPPORT CHANGE

The good news for our industry is that every one of these first-generation barriers links directly or indirectly to the career services function, and provides the opportunity to impact growth and post-graduate success of this underrepresented population while at the same time increasing our campus influence as strategic thought leaders and cross-campus collaborators. Positioning ourselves as experts in FG college student best practices, career services can partner with offices across campus to educate and influence change. This section showcases ideas for building out excellent programming already in place across our industry.

Career Services: Career courses designed to meet the needs of first-generation college students will impact all students, not just this

underrepresented population. Activities like mock dinners or on-the-job networking where FG students can be instructed on formal etiquette required for job interviews are excellent ways to introduce them to an environment they were not likely exposed to before. Some offices establish funds to help students pay for incidental expenses such as mileage and parking for interviews, internships abroad, graduate school application fees, and, in some cases, stipends for unpaid internships (Colorado College offers such a program). FG students need and appreciate practical and common-sense workshops on college transition topics.¹¹ Understanding personal budgeting, salary negotiations, fringe benefits, and how to handle debt are areas in which FG students feel the least prepared.

Admissions: Managing transition requires a clear understanding of the type of support needed. From the onset, FG students and their families hunger for clarity on topics such as personal financing for college, academic expectations, and the language of college, to name a few. Career services attached directly to the retention efforts of a holistic admissions process is an excellent strategy to support FG students from day one. Adjustment outreach to parents and families is a strong admissions strategy that fosters a sense of acceptance from the campus community. Schlossberg (1984) emphasized that a comprehensive understanding of what the change is, how it is occurring, and the effect of the change on other aspects of life must be in place before any actions toward resolution or assimilation can be fully implemented. Unmasking individual hidden challenges FG students face early and educating the campus on intervention strategies that work is a service career centers can provide.

Arts and Culture: No longer is it enough for students to just have a bachelor's degree to ensure employment success. Employers are increasingly interested in extracurricular activities and a variety of experiential learning experiences as part of post-graduate professional readiness. Many first-generation students come from isolated or disadvantaged backgrounds with little access or exposure to arts and cultural. Furthermore, the value of these experiences is often lost on FG students and their families. Exposing FG students to a variety of cultural experiences can be a fun and easy way to introduce the idea that the workplace is full of diversity and the ability to work

with diverse populations is a professional asset. Elizabethtown's Momentum Program exposes first-generation college students to arts and culture starting the summer before entering college. A variety of field and road trips are offered to provide students with opportunities to explore the local community and urban centers in the area. On the short list are the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gettysburg, and the Barns Foundation. Students continue to be involved with Momentum throughout their college experience. Engaging students with cultural opportunities on and off campus is a win-win for the entire campus community, including career services.

Advising: In order for college to work for everyone, including students on the margins, advising those who are most vulnerable is essential. This includes career advising. There is no better way to learn about students' needs and build a relationship of support and trust. The landscape of this issue is shifting, albeit slowly, but traditionally, academic advising conversations have little connection to career decision making, career instruction, or labor market research. It would behoove academic services staff, including advisers, to adjust the ways they advise first-generation students, recognizing that these students have difficulty assimilating to campus, and therefore have different advising needs. Northwestern State University's Academic and Career Engagement Center was established to prioritize advising as part of a holistic student experience. Whether advising and career services centers are combined or stand alone, career services can play an instrumental role in partnering with advising staff early and often on major declaration, course choice, and suggested support efforts needed for FG students to compete academically with their legacy peers.

Faculty: The faculty/student relationship is arguably the single most influential component of a FG student's college experience. More than their peers, FG students crave a connection with their faculty, and, if this connection is accomplished, faculty members have the power to transform lives. Faculty would open the communication doors FG students crave simply by recognizing and adjusting pedagogy to accommodate their success. Faculty can increase their knowledge of FG student needs and implement strategies through the advising process, as well as create referral programs enlisting the

expertise of career services as partners in the advising process. If we want FG students to benefit completely from the advising experience, it is important for faculty to know what university resources are available and encourage FG students to use them. Many students don't understand the idea of majors vs. career choices, and instead think and make decisions in purely transactional terms; therefore, career services and faculty can identify ways to package the long-term connection between academic decisions with the world of work. Career services can partner closely with faculty to ensure FG students have equal opportunity to academic awards and prestigious experiential learning opportunities. Career services can also be instrumental in the classroom environment by orchestrating meet-n-greets with faculty and select employers, and coach FG attendees beforehand so they feel less intimidated. These examples are just a few of the many first-generation interventions that can be spearheaded by career services.

International Experiences: Career services can also collaborate with study abroad and international offices across campus in support of FG students. We do this already, of course, but when the emphasis is on building the professional portfolio of FG students, collaborating to increase the interest and awareness of the impact of international experiences to post-graduate success is an intentional act. Peer mentoring between international students and domestic students is another way to raise cultural awareness, something FG students often lack. There are also collaboration

WORKING TOGETHER TO SUPPORT CHANGE

1. CAREER SERVICES
2. ADMISSIONS
3. ARTS & CULTURE
4. ADVISING
5. FACULTY
6. INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES
7. ALUMNI AFFAIRS
8. STUDENT AFFAIRS
9. ADVANCEMENTS





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opportunities around international internship opportunities, particularly financial and assimilation support. Career services can also influence FG students' awareness of the benefits of study abroad opportunities to their post-graduate success—something FG students need educating around. Butler University has a designated scholarship for FG students interested in studying abroad to increase participation of this underrepresented population.

Alumni Affairs: Studies suggest that intervention—even relatively modest intervention—can have a big impact on the post-graduate success of FG students.¹² Mentors provide a stable network of support for students, offering advice and guidance related to campus and resources, career preparation, and professional networking. The University of Chicago's Center for Student Support has accomplished this through a First Generation Alumni Mentor Program. Student and alumni—also first generation—are paired, and mentors provide support based on mentees' individual needs. This partnership accomplishes several things: 1) it allows FG students to form a relationship with a professional who might have had similar college struggles; 2) it naturally increases the FG student's professional network; and 3) it is a high touch effort of getting and keeping alumni engaged with the campus; and 4) connecting them with a professional who was also a FG college student ensures they have an advocate to help them, specifically through the world of work transition that is difficult for many FG students.

Student Affairs: Our industry has a long-standing collaborative relationship with student affairs, discovering never-ending opportunities to partner. The challenge is to find targeted ways of collaboration in direct support of FG college students. For first-generation seniors, coping strategies such as healthy diversions and organizing actions were critically important to their sense of control and ability to avoid prohibitive levels of stress. In collaboration with career services, student affair professionals can develop programming matched directly to the developmental stage of the FG students, rather than based on theme or topic. Programming directed toward increasing the self-efficacy of FG students, opening FG students up to their professional networks, and finding impactful

on- and off-campus programming opportunities to increase FG students' social capital are examples. Stanford and Colby College are illustrations of institutions offering mindful partner programs that support FG students.

Advancement: Professional networking is a skill almost every first-generation college student needs—it is vital to their career success. Legacy students who grow up with professional parents or are exposed to a professional environment before entering college naturally learn standard business networking skills. FG students routinely express a high level of anxiety about how to conduct appropriate small talk, introduce themselves in a business setting, or establish important career-based relationships. Colleges, if for no other reason than financial, should turn attention to developing ways to sustain institutional affinity by supporting FG growth initiatives. There are countless ways career services can partner with the advancement team to help this important population. Meet-n-greet gatherings with trustees and other prominent alumni, especially those who were also first generation; invitations to campus/donor social events; allocating capitol campaign dollars to reflect increased programming and support for FG students; and using professional connections to advance the social capital of high achieving FG students are a few examples.

The benefits of cross-campus collaboration in support of first-generation college students with career services at the helm is an excellent opportunity for colleges to build targeted interventions for first-generation students *throughout the college years and beyond*. It gives career services a unique way to expand beyond career fairs and resume workshops—something we've been working toward (and succeeding at) accomplishing for years. This collaborative model showcases we are recognizing and fostering the well-being of *first-generation alumni* and re-thinking the term "retention."

HOW CHANGE CAN OCCUR

Being first generation impacts every dimension of life as a college student, yet few career services-driven programs or structured support services exist to address the specific needs of this population.

Most programs that *do* exist to support FG students are found at the high school level to get

students to college. Once in college, FG students typically navigate the experience independently. As career services professionals, we have the ability to positively impact the successes of FG students in large increments. Showcasing ourselves as the FG campus experts, and building support around impactful change is an opportunity for career services to collaborate with all areas of campus—admissions, academics, student affairs, advancement, alumni and more—in ways that define us as leaders in the retention and post-graduate success of this critical population.

For change to occur, institutions must 1) recognize that first-generation students are underrepresented and underprepared; 2) have a desire to support; 3) allocate appropriate resources for this support to occur; 4) be

intentional; and 5) continuously improve their strategy for support. Career services can drive this initiative by showcasing the benefits this support can have on FG students' post-graduate success and alumni return.

This article only scratches the surface of FG student research; strategies to help them succeed; and the implications for allowing this hidden minority to continue going unnoticed and unsupported. It highlights a handful of offices where collaboration with career services could occur, but the list of offices and the examples are not exhaustive. In short, it is my hope this article helps raise awareness and motivates our industry to consider this population as one where we can make significant, impactful, immediate, and long-term change. **■**

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1. RECOGNIZE THAT FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS ARE UNDERREPRESENTED AND UNDERPREPARED
2. HAVE A DESIRE TO SUPPORT
3. ALLOCATE APPROPRIATE RESOURCES FOR THIS SUPPORT TO OCCUR
4. BE INTENTIONAL
5. CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE THEIR STRATEGY FOR SUPPORT

END NOTES

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