

3rd Annual Academic Advising Summit
Leading First Generation Students to Success
Presented by
Jerry Wright, LaBrian Carrington, & Ramona Walton of
Student Support Services, Northern Illinois University
HSC Illinois Room
September 22, 2011

First-generation university students are those students whose parent(s) have not attained a college degree. These students, who have little or no family collegiate history, may enter a college or university with limited knowledge about the jargon, traditions, and patterns of expected behavior.

These factors may prevent first-generation students from fully engaging in a university setting and may contribute to early departure from the university before the completion of a degree. No matter how intelligent and capable, first-generation students may benefit from additional support as they adjust to a new environment.

How Might the First-Generation College Student Experience Be Different?

1. First-generation students tend to come from working class families from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
2. First-generation students may start at a community college, attend college part-time, live off-campus or with family or relatives, delay entering college after high-school graduation, or work full-time while they are enrolled.
3. Some first-generation college students receive less support from their families while attending college.
4. First-generation students may have families may not understand the demands of college work.
5. Students may feel added responsibility from families to be 'the one who succeeds' in college, increasing the pressure the individual may experience.
6. First-generation students are susceptible to doubts about their academic abilities and may believe that they are not college material, despite having good academic performance in high school.
7. First generation students may find it difficult to feel integrated socially and academically.

Common Feelings

1. **Excitement and Anxiety** – Many students are thrilled but also somewhat frightened about being away from home at college, living on their own, and being the first in the family to attend college. These students may ask themselves, "Am I cut out to be a college student?" despite their stellar academic performance in high school.
2. **Responsibility** – Many first-generation students have to help pay for their education, perhaps more so than students of higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition to financial responsibility, these students may be pressured by family and friends to return home often, and may receive mixed messages about their changing identities (e.g., wanting to succeed, but not wanting to be different from the rest of the family or their peers).

3. **Pride** – These students often feel an overwhelming sense of pride about being the first in their families to attend and complete college. A college degree can provide many opportunities. This is an important accomplishment!
4. **Guilt** – In addition to pride, many first-generation students may feel guilt about having the opportunity to attend college while others in the family did not have that opportunity. These students may wonder if it is fair for them to be at school while their parents struggle financially at home. They may feel the need to go home to support their families. First-generation students may also feel guilty about their academic performance if it is not as good as they or their families would like.
5. **Embarrassment and Shame** – These students may feel embarrassment over their socioeconomic status or the level of education in their family. First-generation students may try to act like their family is more highly educated or financially advantaged than they really are. There may be embarrassment around being different from their peers at college, particularly if their peers have a long lineage of family members attending college or if they seem to know the 'lingo' when a first-generation student may not.
6. **Confusion** - First-generation students may feel 'out of the loop' when it comes to college processes and procedures such as application, graduation, job or graduate school searches, etc. They may not be aware of the resources available to them or of options available to them after graduation.

Recommendations for First-Generation College Students

Most students who leave college are likely to do so within the first four semesters. What can be done to help with a positive college experience?

Get support – First-generation students are more likely to live off-campus, work while taking classes, and be enrolled part-time than their non first-generation counterparts. By becoming involved on campus, they may receive the support they need and begin to feel more integrated with other college students. Get them to Join groups, organizations, or support groups that are of interest. Also, tell them to talk with people they trust, perhaps family and friends, about what they are experiencing as they adjust to college and a new environment.

Communicate about what you are experiencing – In times of transition, it can be helpful for individuals to communicate what they are experiencing and what they need from one another. As you grow and develop, you may begin to feel different from your family and peers. This is a natural process for all college students, and it can be helpful to share your experiences with each other.

Utilize resources – Get them to take advantage of mentoring programs as well as the variety of offices and programs designed to assist them. Many universities have offices for ethnic minority students, advising programs, tutoring programs, financial aid programs and counseling centers. Their services can help them to navigate the college terrain as well as feel understood and connected. They can also benefit from getting to know an upper-level student who can show them the ropes. Finding a first-generation college student who has already been there a few years can be especially helpful as he or she can share tips on how to deal with the first year of college.

Maintain a balance – There is a lot to juggle! With the demands of academics, work, family, and a social life, it is important that they find a way to balance competing needs. Time management is essential, and having a schedule can help them manage those competing interests and demands. Remember that the perseverance, resilience, resourcefulness, and hard work that helped them get in to college will also help keep you here.

Adapted from <http://www.counselingcenter.illinois.edu>