Helping First-Generation College Students Break Through to Succeed.
AMERICORPS VISTA

Since 1965, over 220,000 VISTA members have served in all 50 states and U.S. Territories. AmeriCorps VISTA members are in tribal, rural, suburban, and urban communities. Poverty can take many forms, which is why VISTA’s model is driven directly by communities in need. The AmeriCorps VISTA mission is to strengthen organizations that alleviate poverty through volunteering and the mobilization of resources.

The program’s nationwide corps of VISTA members serve full-time for a year at nonprofit organizations or local government agencies to build the capacity of these organizations to carry out programs that fight poverty. AmeriCorps VISTA members recruit and manage community volunteers, raise funds, and help manage projects. VISTA members support programs that improve academic performance, expand job opportunities, develop financial assets, reduce homelessness, improve health services, and more.

For more information about AmeriCorps VISTA, go to www.AmeriCorps.gov/VISTA.

MESSAGE FROM NELISHA GRAY, AMERICORPS VISTA

Hello!

I am an AmeriCorps VISTA who has worked in the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning at NIU for the past two years. My VISTA assignment was to work with first-generation college students and Pell grant recipients to assist them with their education and financial goals.

Working with first-generation college students has always been a passion of mine. As a first-generation college graduate, I remember the times of acclimating to a four-year university, financial hurdles, and uncertainty for the future. Because of the mentors I had in my life who inspired me and connected me to resources, they helped me to graduate and be prepared for life after college. When I started my VISTA service at NIU and met other staff who felt the need for a first-generation support group, I was nervous but excited to embark on a significant project.

In the span of three semesters, so much has been accomplished! I’m exceedingly grateful for the staff, faculty, and First-Generation Leaders who have worked hard to make Breaking Barriers a valued and successful support group for first-generation college students. With all that has been accomplished and the students we have helped to make their time at NIU better, I cannot think of a better way to end my two years of service at NIU!

Forever a Huskie,
DESCRIPTION & HISTORY

Counseling & Consultation Services, Military and Post-Traditional Student Services, faculty, and an AmeriCorps VISTA working in the Office of Student Engagement & Experiential Learning have collaborated together to create a support group for first-generation college students. The support group, named Breaking Barriers, was created to be a welcoming and supportive environment for first-generation students to connect with each other while gaining the tools needed for success at NIU.

The first Breaking Barriers meeting, an information session, was in January of the spring 2017 semester. At that time, Breaking Barriers did not have a name or the structure it has now. It was only a general idea of having a support group for first-generation college students. The Breaking Barriers staff wanted students to have a sense of ownership and feel that their concerns and opinions mattered. Thus, the students were tasked to decide on the name and goals these meetings would achieve.

As Breaking Barriers continues to be acknowledged as an integral facet at NIU, Breaking Barrier staff and students work together to expand and strengthen its capacity for supporting first-generation college students. Based on discussions regarding the purpose and sustainability of Breaking Barriers from staff and students, the mission as well as a list of the vision, values, and outcomes have been compiled.

**Mission**
To provide support and resources to first-generation college students in order to have a successful experience at NIU and be prepared for life after college.

**Vision**
- Become and integral and sustainable facet at NIU
- Faculty and staff referring students to Breaking Barriers
- Help participants to graduate on time

**Values**
- Stay away from deficit mindset
- Created by students for students
- Topics based on student requests

**Outcomes**
- Ensure students have a welcoming environment
- Create a support system among students and faculty/staff
- Students receive guidance and resources
STRUCTURE

In the span of three semesters, Breaking Barriers has evolved into an organized structure. We have different levels of faculty, staff, and students who help Breaking Barriers provide the support and resources that first-generation students need.

1. **Staff and Faculty Advisors**: Supervises and ensures sustainability of Breaking Barriers
2. **Graduate Assistants**: Works with First-Generation Leaders to plan and facilitate meetings
3. **First-Generation Leaders**: Ideas for support group development and mentor participants
4. **Participants**: Students who attend Breaking Barrier meetings

First-Generation Leaders

A crucial aspect of Breaking Barriers’ success are the First-Generation leaders: dedicated and passionate students who want to have an influential part in the development and prospective direction of Breaking Barriers. Since Breaking Barriers was to be created by students for students, it required a group of student leaders who will be the voice of Breaking Barrier participants. Thus, it was important for First-Generation Leaders to have as a say in the decisions made for Breaking Barriers. In fact, the first group of First-Generation Leaders were the ones who chose the name for the support group and stressed the importance to incorporate time in the meetings for first-generation college students to connect with another. Thanks to their input, Breaking Barriers has grown to be a great addition at NIU.

Their responsibilities include:
- Assist graduate assistants with planning meeting agenda and activities
- Actively participate in meetings through leading ice-breakers, helping to set-up meetings, etc.
- Assist with marketing
- Be a mentor for first-generation college students
- Provide ideas on ways to improve Breaking Barriers
- Help decide on future direction of Breaking Barriers

First-Generation Leaders have incorporated their skills and ideas towards building this support group from the ground up. They will graduate NIU knowing they made a difference for first-generation college students and leave NIU with a great legacy.

“I am greatly looking forward to the next meeting of first-generation college students. The collaboration between members and open style of discussion allows for a spectacular environment for critical thinking. I feel that these conversations will lead to greater success within my personal student career along with many other future first-generation students. Thanks again for helping to start a support group like this. It bodes well for the future first-generation students that arrive on campus”

– First-Generation Leader, Spring 2017

“I really appreciated the welcoming and supportive environment that the meeting held, and I think it is a great opportunity for first generation college students to not only socialize, but grow together and succeed in their academic career.”

– First-Generation Leader, Spring 2017
First-Generation Leader Spotlight

Johnathan Freeman has been a First-Generation Leader since Breaking Barriers started in the spring 2017 semester. He exemplifies what a First-Generation Leader should be: dedicated to the mission, passionate about first-generation initiatives, and incorporating his talents toward improving Breaking Barriers. Johnathan has been helpful in offering marketing ideas, creating marketing materials, and crafting “topical warm-ups” (ice-breakers related to the meeting’s topic). Breaking Barriers staff are very thankful Johnathan has decided to step up to the enormous task of being a First-Generation Leader. His efforts have helped build Breaking Barriers to be what it is today.

Why did you decide to be a First-Generation Leader?
“At the first Breaking Barriers meeting, before the session even had a name, I was highly motivated to take on responsibilities in the organization. As a student who had no idea what to expect going into college, I was motivated to ask questions and find information that my parents could not provide. Other first-generation students may not be as assertive, causing them to miss out on many amazing opportunities that NIU can provide them. Being a part of this organization was an easy decision for me; I wanted to mentor others in a casual setting. Additionally, the goal of Breaking Barriers to "provide support and guidance to first-generation college students to help you graduate on time" is extremely admirable and can benefit a large portion of NIU’s student body.”

What experiences and opportunities have you enjoyed as a First-Generation Leader?
“The enjoyable experiences and opportunities that I have acquired as a first-generation leader are innumerable. In having this role, I have interacted with tons of highly motivated first-generation students. Their personal stories, struggles, and triumphs constantly motivate me to reach my own goals. Our fantastic guest speakers have proved that success is within reach for those who seek it. The peer to peer connections I have made are invaluable to me; I have many students I can look to for help. I was also able to gain extremely relevant experience in program marketing, along with leadership and public speaking opportunities. Needless to say, I have enjoyed just about every aspect of the role.”

What type of impact would you like to see Breaking Barriers make in the future?
“I would like the mission and goals of Breaking Barriers to be acquired by college campuses across the country. A lofty goal, I know, but the first generation student population is typically underrepresented and in need of information. I never expected to attend a university, and neither did many of them until they were accepted; often times we are left in the dark about many aspects of college life. The benefits of this organization can help people far past NIU’s borders.”
MEETING OUTLINE & TOPICS

Meetings are twice a month for one hour. The meetings start out with an ice-breaker that relates to the meeting’s topic. The remaining time of the meeting is either a guest speaker or activity that will address the meeting’s topic. There is always time allotted during meeting for students to discuss and interact with each other. We have had 20 meetings in three semesters with a variety of meeting topics.

Although there is research available on the typical barriers that first-generation college students have like financial concerns and acclimating to college, it is crucial that the topics are chosen by the students. Two ways this goal has been achieved is during the information session when we gather topic interests and the Breaking Barriers registration. The registration asks for meeting topics they would like to have and what would they like to get out of Breaking Barriers by being a participant.

“My knowledge has expanded A LOT by attending Breaking Barriers. I have gained a better knowledge about the resources available to me and more financial aid opportunities.”
– participant, Fall 2017

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>NIU Attendance</th>
<th>H.S. Attendance</th>
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<td>Wednesday, January 25, 2017</td>
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BY THE NUMBERS

Breaking Barriers staff and First-Generation Leaders are proud of the hard work and dedication that has been put towards making this support group successful. These are some of the most noteworthy achievements that have been accomplished since Breaking Barriers’ beginning.

**164** NIU students attended the meetings

**47** Hours First-Generation Leaders have dedicated to improve Breaking Barriers

**On average, 8 students per meeting**

Top 3 requests NIU students wanted from Breaking Barriers

1. Make friends
2. Preparation for graduate school/ life after college
3. Connect with FG students, faculty, and staff

Highest meeting attendance was **17** NIU students

100% agreed or strongly agreed that their overall experience has been satisfactory

**15** high school students received resources from Breaking Barriers

**20** meetings in 3 semesters
MAKING AN IMPACT

What makes the effort and time put into Breaking Barriers worth it is knowing that the support group has made an impact on the success of first-generation college students at NIU.

Quotes from Active Participants

"Breaking Barriers has given me and other members of NIU the opportunity to come together in shining a light on the importance of what it means to be a first generation. By doing so we are given the guidance, resources, and advice in order to be successful students. As an organization we are proud to be first generation's because it has given us a reason to fight harder for our education."
– Participant, Spring 2018

“As a first-year transfer student at Northern Illinois University joining Breaking Barriers has been a very resourceful program for me. Breaking Barriers has helped me expand my knowledge about what opportunities as a first-generation college student at Northern Illinois University are available for me. I have also enjoyed being able to meet and network with other first-generation college students.”
– Participant, Spring 2018

“Coming into a large university for the first time and not having an idea of what was to come was very frightening. I did not know what to expect and felt behind on everything-from the application process, financial aid, scheduling classes, etc. I received an email regarding Breaking Barriers, and being a first generation student and feeling that way, I decided to attend their meetings. I met great staff, students, and received great information and resources from the group. This group has been extremely beneficial to not only feel more at ease, but in succeeding here at NIU.”
– Participant, Spring 2018
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Breaking Barriers wouldn’t be a successful support group without the magnitude of resources, advice, and support we received from various people and offices/departments on campus.

**Breaking Barriers Staff & Faculty**
- Diane Rodgers, Department of Sociology
- Jeffrey Salmon, Military and Post-Tradition Student Services
- Jennifer Kestner, Counseling and Consultation Services
- Lori Korth (GA), Military and Post-Tradition Student Services

**First-Generation Leaders**
- Johnathan Freeman
- Julisa Alvarado

**Resources, Advice, & Support Provided**
- Illinois Campus Compact, AmeriCorps VISTA
- First- and Second-Year Experience
- Holmes Student Center Bookstore
- McKinley “Deacon” Davis Chance Program
- Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning
- Orientation and Family Connections

**Guest Speakers**
- Alicia Schatteman, Center for Nonprofit and NGO Studies and Dept. of Public Administration
- Betsy Salgado, Former Huskie Service Scholar
- Carrie Kortegast, Department of Counseling, Adult & Higher Education
- Destiny McDonald, Office of Student Engagement & Experiential Learning
- Financial Aid and Scholarship Office
- Gail Jacky, University Writing Center
- Gearld Alford, First-Generation College Graduate
- Kathy Ladell, Founder’s Library
- Lynn Schmitz, ACCESS Tutoring and Support Services
- Laura Vivaldo Cholula, First-Generation College Graduate
- Lucero Martinez, First-Generation College Graduate
- Mentoring Valuable Peers Mentors
- Sandy Lopez, Center for Latino & Latin American Studies

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