

# STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL



## Supporting and Retaining First Generation Students

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**THE ADVISORY BOARD COMPANY  
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

# I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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## Project Challenge:

A member institution approached the Council with the following questions:

- **Definition:** *How do other institutions define first generation students?*
- **Services:** *What services do other institutions provide for first generation students? How do other institutions address the unique needs of first-generation students through specific programming (e.g., advising, financial, orientation)? How are other institutions working with campus student groups to provide support?*
- **Structure:** *What staff resources do other institutions dedicate to serving first generation students? How do other institutions organize office and reporting structures for supporting first generation students? Where do support programs lie in the greater campus structure?*
- **Families:** *How do other institutions reach out to families of first-generation students?*
- **Minimizing Stigma:** *How do other institutions provide services to these students while minimizing the stigma associated with reaching out to these students?*

## Sources:

- National Center for Education Statistics: <http://nces.ed.gov>
- Education Advisory Board library: [www.educationadvisoryboard.com](http://www.educationadvisoryboard.com)
- Pell Institute: [www.pellinstitute.org](http://www.pellinstitute.org)
- *Inside Higher Ed*: [www.insidehighered.edu](http://www.insidehighered.edu)

## Research Parameters:

- The Council approached Deans of Students and directors of multicultural centers, and directors of community service at institutions with programs for first generation students.

## I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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<b>A Guide to the Institutions Profiled in this Brief</b>				
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Geographic Location</b>	<b>Carnegie Classification</b>	<b>Approximate Total Student Enrollment</b>	<b>Type</b>
<b>University A</b>	Southwest	Research Universities (high research activity)	28,300	Public
<b>College B</b>	Northeast	Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)	3,400	Private not-for-profit
<b>University C</b>	Midwest	Research Universities (very high research activity)	27,200	Public
<b>University D</b>	Southeast	Research Universities (very high research activity)	26,900	Public
<b>University E</b>	Southeast	Research Universities (very high research activity)	23,300	Public

## II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Key Observations:

- ❖ **All contact institutions define first generation students as a student, neither of whose parents has a four year degree.** This definition includes students whose parents attended some college but did not graduate. First generation status is self reported on students' initial applications. The admissions office is then responsible for communicating a student's first generation status to student affairs.
- ❖ **Services that institutions provide for first generation students focus on mentorship and teaching students about available academic support services.** All institutions have a mentorship program that matches incoming freshmen with older students who have also gone through the program. In addition, all contacts state that instead of building their own support services geared towards first generation students, they found it to be more efficient to point students towards existing academic support services. For example, first generation students are invited to live in a residence hall together at University C. Though they participate in many exclusive social activities, they are encouraged to seek the same academic support services as other students.
- ❖ **Some first generation student programs include scholarships.** For example, University A offers a \$750 scholarship to each of its participants. Since University C's program is live-in, the institution offers additional financial aid to each of its first generation students. This amount is included in the budget for the program.
- ❖ **Mentorship programs vary in formality across contact institutions.** At University A, the formalized mentor program pays mentors. Mentors are required to spend at least 10 hours a week either meeting with mentees or planning events. At University E and University D, on the other hand, mentorship programs are informal and run by students, and the mentors are not paid.
- ❖ **Most contact institutions devote one full-time staff member to oversee first generation student services.** Typically one person from student affairs oversees the day-to-day operations of a first generation students program. That individual frequently reports to the Dean of Students.
- ❖ **Funding for first generation student programs draws from both the university as well as outside grants.** Both University A and University C include full-time staff in their budget count and receive the entirety of their budgets – \$147,000 and \$325,000 respectively – from the university. Contacts at University D and University E, on the other hand, report nominal budgets of only a few thousand dollars per year which pays for things like food for events. **University D receives its funding through a state grant for first generation students.**
- ❖ **Contact institutions reduce stigma surrounding first generation student programs by encouraging students to feel proud of their status.** At all institutions, first generation students must affirmatively elect to participate in the school's first generation student program. Contacts agree that stigma has not been a problem. Recognition is bestowed in many forms, including a special graduation at University D.

# III. BACKGROUND ON SUPPORTING FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS

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## Barriers to College Success

Research suggests that first generation students face greater barriers to college success than their non-first generation fellow students. In high school, first generation students tend to take lower level math courses.<sup>1</sup> During the college application process, first generation students have less support from their parents. Not only are these families less familiar with the application process, on occasion they also discourage their progeny from attending college at all.<sup>2</sup>

Once in college, first generation students also face challenges to success. They are twice as likely as non-first generation students to drop out before the end of their second year.<sup>3</sup> In addition, they are less likely to live on campus and, therefore, experience greater difficulties integrating with the campus community. Factors that contribute to these challenges include familial obligations and income restrictions. That is, many first generation students must work more and live at home.

## First Generation Student Needs

In recent years, more first generation students have sought higher education opportunities. States such as Texas and Florida have seen especially dramatic increases in first generation students as their immigrant populations have burgeoned. The Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation partnered with the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education to identify specific steps that colleges and universities can take to help retain first generation students.<sup>4</sup> These strategies include:

- **Preparing students academically for college**  
Students need to learn study skills, especially time management skills. In addition, since many students come from financially strapped public schools, they lack foundational knowledge in basic subjects like English and sciences. First generation students need programs that close their knowledge gap to more closely align them with their non-first generation peers.
- **Acclimating students to the college environment**  
First generation students report experiencing greater anxiety during the transition to the college than their non-first generation counterparts. For many, it may be their first time away from home, so they need time to acclimatize to this type of independence. College is also the first time that many first generation students are exposed to people from other backgrounds.
- **Involving parent in the college-going process**  
Families also experience anxiety as their children go to college for the first time. The Pell Institute recommends easing parental anxiety by involving them in their child's college transition.
- **Helping students manage their financial needs**  
Since finances are a major factor in first generation student retention, the Pell Institute notes that institutions should help make college more affordable for first generation students through educational grants. First generation students need to learn about multiple sources of aid. Moreover, because many are risk averse and opt to work, which can detract from their studies, they need to learn about and understand the benefits of educational loans.

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<sup>1</sup> Tym, C. et al (2004). "First Generation College Students: A Literature Review." Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation. Accessed July 13, 2010: [www.tgsllc.org/pdf/first\\_generation.pdf](http://www.tgsllc.org/pdf/first_generation.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Engle, J. et al (2006). "Straight from the Source: What Works for First Generation College Students." Accessed July 13, 2010: [www.pellinstitute.org/files/files-sfts\\_what\\_works.pdf](http://www.pellinstitute.org/files/files-sfts_what_works.pdf)

# III. BACKGROUND ON SUPPORTING FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS

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## First Generation Student Programs

Based on findings from studies of first generation needs, many institutions have adopted programs and services for this student population. Some widely implemented programs are listed below.

- **Scholarship programs**

Many institutions offer scholarships specifically for first generation students. These programs range from financial support for the purchase of textbooks, to grants for room and board, to grants that cover half of all tuition, room, and board. Students participate in an application process that coincides with the college admissions process to enter these programs. Stipulations for scholarship renewal may include maintaining a certain GPA and participation in specific extra-curricular activities such as volunteering.

- **Pre-college bridge**

Some institutions invite matriculating freshmen on campus for a multi-week summer bridge program before the academic year officially begins. These programs acclimate students to living independently in addition to bridging the knowledge gap between first generation students and their non-first generation peers. Programs may include English seminars and an introduction to academic support services.

- **Student Support Services**

During the academic year, institutions like to provide academic support services for first generation students. One commonly used source of funding is the federal TRIO/Student Support Services program. This program is aimed at all students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds and offers tutoring services in writing, math and science.

- **Mentorship programs**

To help students transition to college, institutions often pair first generation freshmen with older first generation students in formal mentorship programs. These older students serve as a resource for the younger ones to navigate both the academic and the social aspects of college. A few institutions have paid mentor positions, while most use older student volunteers.

- **Leadership opportunities**

First generation programs also focus on leadership development. Since students are often leaders in their families and communities, institutions want to develop their leadership potential.

## IV. OVERVIEW OF PROGRAMS AT CONTACT INSTITUTIONS

Contact institutions offer a wide array of programs for first generation students. The following table outlines these programs:

First Generation Student Programming Across Contact Institutions									
Institution	Students		Programming					Budget	Staff
	Number	Class Year	Pre-College Bridge	Mentoring	Scholarship	Academic Support	Leadership Programs		
University A	150-180	Freshmen only	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	Unavailable	Director and Program Coordinator
College B	24	Freshmen only	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	Unavailable; disbursed through Financial Aid	Director of Community Service
University C	24	Freshmen only	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	\$325,000	Program Coordinator and Program Facilitator
University D	60-70	Freshman through Senior	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	\$1,000 - \$2,000	Retention coordinator
University E	Un-available	Freshman through Senior	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	\$6,000	Assistant Dean and Director of Outreach

## V. MANAGING FIRST GENERATION STUDENT PROGRAMS

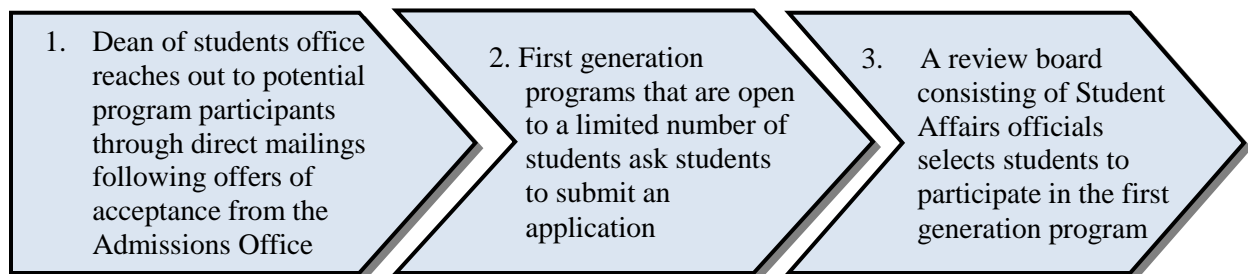
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### Defining First Generation Students

Most contact institutions define first generation students as those whose parents do not have a four-year degree. Parents may have attended some college. The only exception is College B, which defines first generation students as those whose parents do not have any college degree, including an Associate's degree.

### Enrolling Students in First Generation Programs

A student's first generation status is self-reported through his or her initial application to the institution. The admissions office is responsible for communicating a student's status to the dean of students office. Student Affairs then oversees the selection and enrollment of first generation students into a program. The process typically proceeds as follows:



#### Application for First Generation Program

In addition to requiring students to verify their first generation status, contact institutions may ask students to apply to participate in a first generation program. **College B, University A, and University C** have an application process to award scholarships.

The purpose of these applications is to ensure that students understand the program and are willing to commit to a program that will help them graduate. The following application components are standard across contact institutions:

- **Personal statement:** This is an opportunity for the student to describe his or her reasons for joining a first generation student program, and his or her larger college plans.
- **Certificate of commitment:** University C requires students to commit to living in a residential first generation house for their entire freshman year. College B requires students to commit to volunteering 50 hours per school year.
- **Demonstration of leadership:** Since College B's first generation student program is focused on leadership, it seeks a demonstration of leadership in a student's resume or personal statement.
- **Letters of recommendation:** All contact institutions request letters of recommendation to attest to students' interest and dedication to academics.

# V. MANAGING FIRST GENERATION STUDENT PROGRAMS

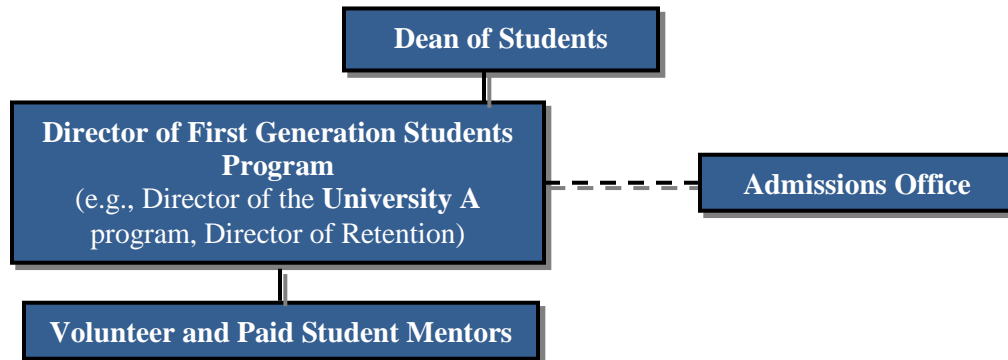
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## Staffing First Generation Programs

Contact institutions staff first generation student programs in one of two ways:

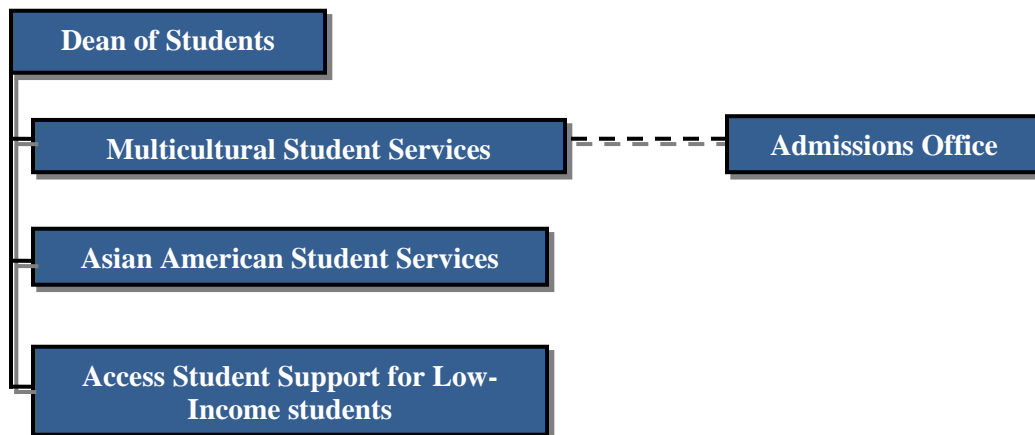
### Centralized Staffing Model:

All contact institutions, with one exception, use a centralized structure to manage and operate first generation student programs. At these institutions, the entire program falls primarily under the purview of one staff member in Student Affairs. This individual typically has other responsibilities as well and reports to the dean of students. The admissions office is also involved, helping supply the initial list of students to target.



### Decentralized Staffing Model:

University E uses a decentralized approach to manage and operate its first generation students program. At University E, several staff members are each responsible for a segment of the first generation student population. Individuals who oversee student affinity groups are responsible for reaching out to the first generation students in each affinity group. They all report to the dean of students.



## VI. THREE PILLARS OF FIRST GENERATION STUDENT PROGRAMMING

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The three major areas of support that contact institutions provide for their first generation students are financial support, social support, and academic support. This section explores different approaches to each type of support offered at contact institutions.

### Providing Financial Support

Since financial barriers are a major reason why first generation students do not graduate from college, many contacts report that their institutions provide financial support for their students. These strategies include:

#### Providing Scholarships

- Since **University C's** first generation student program requires all students to live in a residential house together, it pays for half of students' room and board, which totals about \$3,350 per student. Though many students also receive financial aid from the university, this is not directly part of the first generation program.
- At **College B**, students receive a scholarship that covers up to 50 percent of tuition. The program initially consisted of 36 students who received up to 33 percent tuition. After realizing that this was insufficient support, it reduced the size of the program to 24 students who could receive a greater percentage of tuition.

#### Providing Financial Counseling

- **University E** provides financial counseling through its financial aid program. Though this program is not exclusively open to first generation students, many of its participants are first generation. University E offers financial aid literacy programs on budgeting and navigating the FAFSA, panels on housing and study abroad, and publications with financial information.

## VI. THREE PILLARS OF FIRST GENERATION STUDENT PROGRAMMING

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### Providing Academic Support

Contacts also suggest several strategies for academically supporting first generation students:

#### Mandating a Special For-Credit Course

- **University C** requires all residents of the first generation house to take a semester long one-credit course that meets once a week. The course helps students settle into their environments and introduces students to academic support services around campus.
- At **College B**, students are placed in a learning community where participants all take an English and leadership course together. The leadership course is titled "Leadership through Self-Development," and is taught by the dean of students. The learning community also helps students bond.

#### Providing Targeted Academic Support Services

- **University C** has found that it is more efficient to guide first generation students towards existing academic support services than to design new support services just for first generation students. As a result, the first generation staff directs students towards academic support services without providing them directly.
- **University D** produces a booklet for first generation students of all academic support services. Students receive this booklet when they first arrive on campus.
- All contact institutions also see peer mentors as a strong academic resource as well. Mentors must meet certain GPA requirements at many schools. For example, **University A's** mentors must have a minimum of 3.0 GPAs.

#### Offering Academic Pre-Screening

- **University A's** program offers an academic pre-screening test for all incoming first generation students to determine where they are relative to their peers. Students take the Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory in the fall. Results from the survey might be shared with mentors to target specific skills.

## VI. THREE PILLARS OF FIRST GENERATION STUDENT PROGRAMMING

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### Providing Social Support

Social support initiatives for first generation students include:

#### Mentoring

- In addition to serving as an academic resource, mentors also play an important role in the socialization of first generation students. Thus, all contact institutions offer peer mentoring.
- Contact institutions find that mentorship is most effective if many students are placed in a group, rather than only matched with one other person. **University A** places students in groups of five mentees to each mentor. **University E** matches one mentor to each mentee, but then often groups five of these pairs into a "family."
- Mentor programs are mostly student directed. All student mentors must meet weekly at University A to plan events for their mentees. A student mentor leadership board at **University D** meets regularly to plan social events. This structure allows staff members to serve as advisors rather than organizers.

#### Social Events

- Contact institutions hold informal social gatherings for their first generation program cohorts frequently. These low-cost functions include pizza parties and movie screenings throughout the semester.
- Contact institutions also host more formal events during the year. **University D** sponsors a first generation student gathering over homecoming weekend each year, which serves as a reunion. **University A's** program hosts an annual Halloween party.

#### Targeted Orientation

- University D** invites its first generation students to participate in special orientation sessions that introduce students to academic support services on campus. During this "Week of Welcome," first generation students and their families are also invited to a special reception where they can meet with Student Affairs administrators.

## VI. THREE PILLARS OF FIRST GENERATION STUDENT PROGRAMMING

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### Minimizing Stigma

Overall, contacts do not express many concerns about the stigma attached to first generation student programming. Most institutions have not experienced either pushback from the campus community or apprehensions from first generation students. Contact institutions attribute this positive environment to several strategies:

*“We’re asked about minimizing stigma often, but really have not noticed any negativity towards the [first generation house].”*

- Council Interview

#### Communicate with Campus Community

**University A** implemented a program to build campus support for its first generation students program. The program uses the same model as the LGBT Ally program to allow all members of the campus community to identify themselves as pro-first generation student. The program distributes decals that professors and staff members can place by their office doors. This program heightens campus awareness of the first generation program.

#### Emphasize Uniqueness

All contact institutions recommend taking steps to emphasize the uniqueness of the first generation program. This helps create a bond amongst all participants, similar to the bond amongst students of any other student organization. **University C** and **University A** have created gear for their respective programs. Such clothing serves the dual purpose of promoting the programs on campus. In addition, contacts at **University C** recommend emphasizing to students that they should feel proud of their decisions to join the program, and not marginalized because of their first generation status.

#### Celebrate Student Achievement

In addition to emphasizing the decision to participate in a first generation student program, contact institutions have also formalized some recognition opportunities. **University D** hosts an annual graduation for students graduating from the first generation program. Parents and family are invited to this event.

#### **PROFESSIONAL SERVICES NOTE**

The Advisory Board has worked to ensure the accuracy of the information it provides to its members. This project relies on data obtained from many sources, however, and The Advisory Board cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information or its analysis in all cases. Further, The Advisory Board is not engaged in rendering clinical, legal, accounting, or other professional services. Its projects should not be construed as professional advice on any particular set of facts or circumstances. Members are advised to consult with their staff and senior management, or other appropriate professionals, prior to implementing any changes based on this project. Neither The Advisory Board Company nor its programs are responsible for any claims or losses that may arise from any errors or omissions in their projects, whether caused by the Advisory Board Company or its sources.

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