

## **Supporting First-Generation University Students Series**

### **PART 1: Promoting Academic Success**

A first-generation student is identified as a US student whose parents/guardians have not received a four-year, US bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). 42% of UC Davis students self-identify as first-generation students (UC Davis Undergraduate Admissions and UC Info Center, Fall 2015). Numerous studies have indicated that first-generation students tend to experience a variety of educational, financial, and social barriers that make successful completion of a bachelor's degree more difficult than for their continuing-generation peers (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Covarrubias & Fryberg 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Stephens et al., 2012). However, when faculty partner with administrators and educational support staff, there is much that can be done to ensure the success of first-generation students.

#### **See first-generation students as pioneers in higher education**

One important way to better support first-generation students is to modify the way we think about them, including our perceptions of the ways their prior experiences and backgrounds influence their engagement (Greenwald, 2012). Greenwald (2012) argues that by thinking of first-generation students as “pioneers” in their families and their communities, we can better recognize the unique skills and experiences they bring to our classrooms. An example of how you might do this in your own classroom is to consider what it means to be a first-generation student for different students in your class. The first-generation experience is often perceived to be similar for all such classified students. However, it's important to recognize that first-generation students are also a diverse group in itself (Engle & Tinto, 2008): some are low-income, some are minority/non-White, some are disabled, some are English Learners, some may be undocumented. Keep in mind that not all students share all of the same ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural characteristics.

#### **Recognize some of your students' current life situations**

Engle & Tinto (2008) emphasize the fact that first-generation students face a variety of extracurricular challenges to completing a bachelor's degree.

Challenges	Explanations	Teaching Suggestions
<i>Extensive and diverse demands on their time outside of school</i>	First-generation students often commute, work many hours, and have unusual schedules. They may have part-time enrollment status, interruptions in their enrollment, and occasional impediments to their persistence.	Help students with time management by designing assignments and timelines that allow for research or collaboration to be done outside of class or off-campus. Do not require the use of resources that are limited or only available at certain times.
<i>May face serious financial hardships</i>	Be aware that first-generation students may face financial issues that are similar and different from other students.	Unless students need to buy particular supplies or apps for your class, be cognizant of additional financial burdens. For example, consider using open source software (e.g., R), open source textbooks, and other free course materials if possible.
<i>The sense that they don't fit in at home or at school</i>	First-generation students are developing a new set of language skills, academic skills, and beliefs as they learn to be college students. These may be different from those present in their families and communities.	Be aware that some students may hold contradictory feelings as they may sometimes believe that they do not fully fit in either academia or back in their communities.

<i>They may be bi/multilingual and/or multi-dialectal</i>	Some first-generation students may be bi/multilingual in English and another language(s), or may speak in different dialects in their communities and at home.	Support learning of academic language in your class by clarifying terminology, using synonyms, and explaining the different linguistic demands of academic genres in your discipline.
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### The role of faculty interaction in helping first-generation students succeed

First-generation, college students typically apply to universities and undertake university study without guidance and acculturation from parents and family members who already attended and/or graduated from college. Therefore, their interactions with faculty represent an important source of information on the occluded aspects of college life, as well as guidance on academic preparations, and how to gain social and cultural capital to become successful college students. In fact, interactions with faculty have been shown to have a positive impact on retention of first-generation students in college (Wang, 2012, 2014).

Challenges	Explanations	Teaching Suggestions
<i>May lack a clear sense of how college differs from high school</i>	Some first-generation students may not clearly understand how college differs from high school, or may lack a clear sense of what they need to do in order to succeed in a college class. Additionally, the initial learning curve for first-generation students may be steeper than it is for students who come from college-educated families.	Transparent explanations of course outcomes and expectations is critical in helping first-generation students be successful (Winkelmes et al., 2016). Make sure to clearly outline your expectations in your syllabus, assignment sheets, and other course material, and allow plenty of time for questions. Additionally, Wang (2014) suggests that teachers should offer specific advice on how to succeed in their class, and help first-generation students connect with resources around campus (e.g., <a href="#">TRiO</a> , <a href="#">SASC</a> ).
<i>May lack familiarity with university culture</i>	Many first-generation students may lack familiarity with the culture and expectations of the university. As such, some first-generation students may experience “imposter syndrome,” or feel confusion, intimidation, stress, self-doubt, and low confidence as a result of their lack of familiarity.	Try to emphasize campus resources such as <a href="#">Counseling Services</a> that can help students manage the stress of being in the new environment of the university. If you feel that a student may need more support, reach out to them or contact their advisor if possible.
<i>May lack knowledge or confidence in approaching faculty</i>	First-generation students may not be familiar with the concept of establishing personal relationships with their professor or teaching assistants.	Make sure that students know you and/or your TAs are available to talk if needed (in class, after class, and/or during office hours), and try to be as welcoming as possible towards students so that they feel more comfortable reaching out. It can also help to share that the purpose of office hours is to build supportive relationships between instructors/TAs and students, so that students feel less timid about stopping by.

Adapted from: Lohman, 2015

### Additional Resources

- [Q&A: Stanford's Hazel Markus](#)
- [Grand Valley State University Resource on First Generation Students](#)

- [\*First generation: Best practices for faculty. \[UC Irvine\]\*](#)
- [\*First year experience. \[UCLA\]\*](#)
- [\*"I fit in neither place." Article from Zamudio-Suarez in The Chronicle of Higher Education.\*](#)

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