

Perspectives

Community College
Leadership for the
21st Century

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A considerable body of research indicates that students whose parents have not attended college often face significant challenges in accessing postsecondary education, succeeding academically once they enroll, and completing a degree.

- NCES

Finding extra support can make all the difference in the world for a first-generation student. It's about bridging the gap to help them persist and succeed in higher education.

- JaNice Marshall

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Mission Critical: College Leaders Take Cues from First Gen Students

Daniel P. Corr, EdD

*President
Arizona Western College
Yuma, Arizona*

Let me tell you a story about my supervisor. Her name is Olivia Zepeda, and she came to the United States with her family as a child from Mexico. Like so many of our students throughout the college's 55-year history, she worked in the agriculture industry, picking crops. She later became the first in her family to attend and graduate from college. Her journey from Arizona Western College, where I serve as president, to a graduate degree at Northern Arizona University, eventually brought her back to her community as an educator, a community leader, and the associate superintendent of an elementary school district. She's also one of five members of our college District Governing Board, and therefore, my boss.

So when we talk about the choices we make at our college, from our highest leadership levels, we have a certain perspective guiding our conversations. What's the right amount of tuition to charge? How can we think differently about text books, developmental education, barriers to success, and equity in our most distant learning centers? Mrs. Zepeda reminds us to consider the nearly 66% of our students who, like her, are first generation students.

There's a common mind-set in first generation students that creates a psychological obstacle to success.

Our highly-rural 10,000 sq. mil. district sits on the edge of the U.S.-Mexico and Arizona-California borders, in the middle of a desert that is surprisingly full of vitality, both literally and figuratively. Yuma is the winter vegetable capital of the world, growing 90% of the country's leafy greens in January and February, fed by the Colorado River. We're 3 hours away from the closest metropolitan area, so almost all higher educational opportunities for our residents come through us. Because we have an incredibly supportive community, the college has been able to create powerful partnerships to serve students. From embedded general education classes at the high school level, to all three state universities (Northern Arizona University, University of Arizona, and Arizona State University) co-locating classes and programs on our campuses, to a joint commencement event representing four student bodies (Arizona Western College plus the

three state universities), this is rich environment to help students fulfill their dream of a better life for themselves and their families.

Our students need that kind of care and attention. Almost one in five of them are living with a household income of less than \$20,000 a year. If they're first generation students, they don't have a personal Sherpa to help them navigate higher education. Nobody is carrying the load for them, whether it's financial aid or testing. There's a common mind-set in first generation students that creates a psychological obstacle to success. Even though 2/3 of their classmates are just like them, they tend to believe they are alone, uncertain that they belong. This is the challenge we're facing, and the story we hear over and over again.

It's also my story. My mom and dad were both high school graduates. My dad went right off to the Marine Corps, and my mom worked and raised us. I was the middle of five kids. My older siblings did not attend college, but my sister, who was working, spent a chunk of her salary to send me to Catholic school, where many of my classmates were raised with the idea that college was an expectation. I realized I was just as smart as many of them, and that made all of the difference. If they could do it, I could do it. After I went to college, the mystery sort of evaporated, and my two younger sisters earned college degrees. My older sister found her way back to college and earned a degree. And this fundamentally changed my family's story. When one generation breaks through to higher education, it not only lifts that one family's opportunities and earnings, it has the real potential to lift entire regions, to create equitable, sustainable thriving communities. This is the blueprint for long term, systemic economic development in communities just like Yuma across the country.

Our approach to helping first generation students find success starts with celebration. We want those students to recognize their monumental efforts as part of something larger – to make sure they know they're not alone. We created a First Gen campaign that included personal student stories at our fall semester kick-off, along with bright yellow t-shirts for anyone who identified as First Gen. Now, students along with faculty proudly wear their shirts, and students know they've got advocates in their peers and their professors. We spent the school year telling sharable stories on social media of our first generation students that resonated within our communities, the media, and beyond. We hosted a First Gen reception during the school day, so students could hear from each other about their path to college. For commencement, we ordered special stoles for first

(continued on page 4)

EMERGING LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

First-generation students – those who are the first in their family to attend college – represent a sizeable segment of the shifting populations entering higher education today. Yet a recent NCES study found that first-generation entering college students were significantly less likely than other students to remain enrolled in college or to have completed a college degree, despite the demonstrated economic benefits of college degrees or certificates. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Devin Chambers, MA
 Counselor and Assistant Professor
 College of DuPage
 Glen Ellyn, Illinois

*"I never knew how college worked...
 I just had to figure it out as I went along."*

As a child, I remember my mother recounting stories of how she entered University, with no knowledge of how to navigate the system, write a research paper, or choose a career or major. My grandmother was a young widow, and provided the moral support her children needed, but did not have cultural capital. Back then in the late 1960s, there was little to no support for first-generation students like my mother, yet the college system was easier to navigate and far less expensive. With all of the support programs and focus on first-generation students at the community college level, why do these students continue to lag behind on every success measure?

According to longitudinal data reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), the number of first-generation students have declined as the share of Americans attending college has increased. Like my mother, first-generation students have similarities that affect their success rates. Most have great financial need, are academically less prepared, and tend to work, which all have been shown over decades of research to negatively impact retention and completion.

Our community colleges are making progress in meeting the needs of first-generation students, but we have a ways to go. Our colleges need to address the following: building cultural capital, racial and ethnic achievement gaps, and the career development process. Cultural capital is the knowledge of the higher education process that an individual gains in attending college, which students whose parents attended college pass on to their children via information-sharing and direct assistance. What role do colleges play in building cultural capital? I would argue it is an ethical imperative. Fostering cultural capital begins at enrollment and is not solely the role of enrollment management and student development staff. First-Year Experience courses are a good first step in developing cultural capital, and should be mandatory for all new students. "Success Navigators," case-managers that intrusively help a student from enrollment to completion, is also a promising trend.

First-generation students must also feel they belong at college. For minority first-generation students, it is supporting multicultural centers, culturally-relevant pedagogy, and student success programs tailored to their identifying groups. At times, we fall victim to the thinking of a "rising tide lifts all boats," yet these groups are consistently left to sink. Lastly, having an intentional process in place from enrollment and new student orientation to explore majors and career fields is critical. Even decided students are often never asked "why," or know little about their intended career. Progress will not happen overnight, but our society and our colleges cannot afford to wait any longer.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How can community college leaders best help first-generation students overcome barriers to persistence and success?

Cora Payne, MSA

Associate Dean, Regional Program Planning
 Wayne County Community College District
 Detroit, Michigan

A multitude of valuable resources are available online to provide guidance on first-generation student issues and ways to connect to this population. Such resources should aid community college leaders as they assist first-generation students who are striving to overcome barriers to persistence and success. For

example, college leaders can initiate intensive academic advising processes and provide information on resources for first-generation students during new student orientation. A mentoring and coaching program targeted specifically to help these students build a support network, both at home and at school, can be established. Mentors and coaches can be other first-generation students who have faced similar challenges and can help to provide the feeling that the student is not alone. A 2011 Stanford University study shows that "students who took part in mentoring and coaching services were 10 to 15 percent more likely to advance to another year of college" (Zinshteyn, 2016, p. 2). College leaders can also develop targeted marketing campaigns to first-generation students, and deliver pertinent information to students via email, text messaging, social media, and college website.

Additional recommendations of how college leaders can assist first-generation students to become successful in meeting their academic goals and persisting to graduation include the following. First, implement a first-year seminar course for new students. This could be an introductory for-credit class to assist students to adjust to the college environment and to develop study habits and time management skills. Second, promote the TRiO initiative on campus, which assists students academically and financially. "As a result of TRiO program initiatives, first-generation students persist and graduation rates have increased" (Petty, 2014, p. 261). Third, create competency-based educational (CBE) programs that focus on non-traditional college students, specifically those who cannot participate in the traditional form of taking one or more college courses at the same time, or maintain a specific schedule of courses. Finally, cultivate programs such as learning communities, where a cohort of students can take multiple integrated classes at the same time to collaborate, study with, and support each other.

Redford and Mulvaney Hoyer (2017) state that almost 50% of current students are first-generation college students, and the persistence rate among these students is considerably lower than continuing-generation students. As a first-generation student myself, I faced numerous barriers including, but not limited to, a lack of understanding and knowledge of available financial aid resources, absence of time management skills to balance home, work, and school obligations, and an overall lack of academic preparation. According to Mehta, Newbold and O'Rourke (2011), these are major barriers that many first-generation students face. To mitigate these challenges, college leaders must be creative and develop innovative ways to help these students be successful and persist through degree attainment.

Devin Chambers, MA, is a Counselor and Assistant Professor at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. He earned his MA in Counseling from Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago, and is currently working toward his doctorate in the Ferris State University DCCL program. Devin will be graduating in December, 2018, and his dissertation focus is on creating a success model for undocumented student retention and completion at Illinois community colleges.



Cora Payne, MSA, serves as Associate Dean, Regional Program Planning, at Wayne County Community College District in Detroit. For the past ten years at WCCCD, she has held various positions with progressive responsibilities in the Educational Affairs Division and the School of Continuing Education and Workforce Development. Cora earned her Masters of Science in Administration (MSA) from Central Michigan University, and is currently enrolled in the Ferris State University DCCL program.



NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

First-generation students – those who are the first in their family to attend college – represent a sizeable segment of the shifting populations entering higher education today. Yet a recent NCES study found that first-generation entering college students were significantly less likely than other students to remain enrolled in college or to have completed a college degree, despite the demonstrated economic benefits of college degrees or certificates. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Do you have the programs in place to help first-generation college students succeed?

Alex Casillas, PhD

Principal Research Psychologist, Research Division
ACT, Inc., Iowa City, Iowa

The number of first generation college students (FGCS) in the U.S. is higher than many people realize. According to the U.S. Dept. of Education, college students whose parents did not attend college make up approximately 33.5% of the student population (38.3% at two-year institutions and 25.9% at four-year institutions), with Hispanic students accounting for the largest proportion of FGCS—approximately one third.

In a chapter from a recently-published book, *The First Year of College: Research, Theory, and Practice on Improving the Student Experience and Increasing Retention*, my coauthors (Chen Zuo, Evan Mulfinger, Fred Oswald, all at Rice University) and I lay out some of the FGCS challenges, as well as some programs to help them succeed.

In terms of challenges, FGCS are more likely to come from an underrepresented ethnic group, be working learners (often working for pay 20 or more hours per week), to be financially on their own, to have dependents, and to come from low-income families. Prior to entering college, FGCS often lack sufficient knowledge about postsecondary education options that many continuing-generation students take for granted, including information on how to apply to college, how much it costs to attend, how to obtain financial aid, and examples of what college life “looks like.” Although research on student success has repeatedly identified social and academic integration as one of the best predictors of college retention, FGCS are less likely to live on campus, the most common place where social integration occurs. FGCS also face greater pressure not to go to college.

How can community college leaders best help FGCS overcome barriers to persistence and success? Below are seven examples of programming and resources that have been demonstrated as effective in assisting FGCS and that community college leaders can leverage:

- 1) **TRiO programs and GEAR UP.** These programs include federally-funded and/or matching grants designed to assist underserved learners navigate the educational pipeline from secondary to postsecondary and beyond. These programs provide financial support, guidance, and training to assist FGCS in the preparation for and development in college.
- 2) **Bridge programs.** Such programs involve collaboration between high schools and higher education institutions. For example, in a [recent study](#) conducted by ACT, Latino et al. found that first-generation Hispanic students who participated in accelerated learning in high school (dual credit courses) were more likely to earn higher GPAs during their first year in college compared to first-generation Hispanic students who did not participate (2.64 vs. 2.37).
- 3) **Financial aid.** Need-based scholarships, Pell grants, and on-campus work-study programs have been shown to help FGCS to mitigate the financial burden of attending college. Work-study programs also have the added benefit of facilitating students’ active presence and involvement in the college environment. Latino et al. found that

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

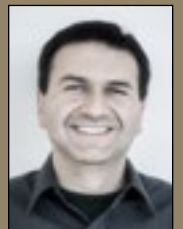
How can community college leaders best help first-generation students overcome barriers to persistence and success?

first-generation Hispanic students who received financial aid were more likely to enroll in their second year of college, compared to first-generation Hispanic students who did not receive financial aid (78% vs. 60%).

- 4) **Living-learning programs.** Such programs create communities that, on a continuous basis, cultivate a sense of belonging by sharing residential experiences, academic activities, and related resources. These have been shown to increase students’ sense of social and academic integration.
- 5) **Programs to combat stereotype threat.** A focus on value affirmation technique and social belonging intervention have been shown to reduce FGCS perceptions that they are “impostors” or don’t belong in a college environment due to their socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, place of origin, or other differences. These interventions have been shown to increase students’ sense of social belonging, reduce stress, and improve FGCS grades.
- 6) **On-campus resources.** Resources such as academic advising, career services, and wellness programs are associated with higher GPAs and higher second-year persistence rates. For example, in [another study](#) conducted by ACT, Latino et al. found that FGCS status was no longer a significant predictor of GPA after resource use was added to the model. Typical first-year GPAs were 2.72, 2.84, and 2.92 for those students who made low, moderate, and high use of campus resources suggesting that these can increase success rates.
- 7) **Education and career planning.** According to a [2017 Gallup survey](#), 54% of Americans with an Associate’s degree would change at least one of their education decisions if they had to do it all over again (mean across education levels was 51%). This and other questions asked in the survey suggest that individuals, including FGCS, would benefit from more—and higher quality—education and career planning. Given that the [student-to-school counselor ratio](#) in the U.S. is 464 students per counselor, community colleges may be in a better position than K-12 institutions to provide FGCS with these services.

Many community colleges already have several of the aforementioned programs and resources in place. If this is the case, community college leaders should be asking themselves whether these are addressing the needs of first-generation college students. If your data are more than a few years old, you should be collecting new data that specifically ask FGCS about their needs and whether your programs are in fact meeting those needs.

Dr. Alex Casillas is a Principal Research Psychologist in the Research Division of ACT, Inc. During his time at ACT he has led the research and development of several behavioral assessments for predicting performance and persistence in educational and workforce settings. He also led a multidisciplinary effort to design and implement a research-based framework that articulates what effective behavior looks like from grades 3 through career as part of the [ACT Holistic Framework](#). He currently leads efforts to engineer assessments and learning solutions using design science and evidence-centered approaches. He has published dozens of articles and chapters in peer-reviewed outlets and has made presentations at national and international conferences. Dr. Casillas received his MA and PhD in Clinical Science from the University of Iowa. He is a proud first-generation college student.



QUICK TAKES Highlights from the Field

First-Generation Students: Approaching Enrollment...

by Center for First-Generation Student Success

Although definitions of the first-generation student may vary, it is clear that first-generation students comprise a large portion of undergraduate students, and their educational journeys, from application through completion, are unique. Given the importance of providing intentional supports and services to first-generation students so equitable environments for success are readily available, this report takes a look at proactive support systems designed for first-generation students.

<https://bit.ly/2pPeu9t>

Stats in Brief: First-Generation Students

by NCES

Using data from multiple sources about various points in the education pipeline and beyond, this study examines the personal, enrollment, academic, and career characteristics of first-generation students. The intent is to describe the experiences of first-generation students during and after enrollment in school, with a specific focus on enrollment and labor market outcomes, and compare their experiences with peers whose parents enrolled in or completed college.

<https://bit.ly/2J4kIP2>



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Mission Critical: College Leaders Take Cues from First Gen Students *(continued from page 1)*

generation students and we ran out days before the ceremony. We took a scary concept and turned it into a point of pride through symbols, stories and ceremony.

Another tactic we use is to weave the story of college into our feeder high schools through active, robust partnerships:

Our approach to helping first generation students find success starts with celebration.

- ▲ Our board approved a \$25 credit hour tuition for students 17 years old and younger (a 70% discount), removing a barrier for low-income students to be able to attend college while still in high school. This proved to be a huge hit with our Joint Technical Education partner, and our feeder schools.
- ▲ We're the first community college in the country to partner with Arizona State University for the American Dream Academy, which helps first generation students find their pathways to a bachelor's degree, and offers advising and financial assistance along the way. In our new model, students who opt to spend a year or two with AWC will still get that help from ASU, and we'll contribute our own.
- ▲ We have grown our dual and concurrent enrollment year over year with the help of visionary high school principals and our own faculty who know that if we can get a high school student to complete two college-level classes, their chance of finishing a college credential or degree increases exponentially.
- ▲ We're piloting developmental Math at San Luis High School right now, hoping to remove the burden placement tests create by designing aligned curriculum and learning outcomes that translate to college.
- ▲ We're teaching college English at Yuma High School five days a week, embedded in the HS schedule. Our professor, our curriculum, their campus and their classroom, meeting students exactly where they are. These students are earning both high school and college credit while setting the example for their peers to consider their own potential to go to college.

When first generation students get up the nerve to apply to college, we make them jump through many hoops. There's the application, the financial aid process, and then there is testing. Imagine, as a student with no higher-education expert in the family, and you are not sure you are college material, you come to campus, sit in a quiet room, and pour over an intimidating English or Math test, only to have somebody tell you that, in fact, you are not qualified. You can start college, but it will be at a college-prep level. You can't even start classes in your subject-area until you've made it through developmental education courses. It's hard to stay motivated, to feel worthy, when everywhere you turn you feel unworthy. At AWC, we're in the 2nd year of a Strategic Planning process that includes conversation about how our first touch points, practices, and early communications with students alleviate this doubt and reinforce the message that college is for everyone.

Teams at AWC are also refining our Satisfactory

Academic Progress practice to remove stigma and fear, and offer more support. Our past de-registration for non-payment process removed students from classes before school started without much effort to retain. We're taking a team approach to changing that and experienced great success this summer rethinking the way our teams help keep these students – who clearly want to be here – in those classes.

Many of these conversations and ideas have risen to the surface for our faculty and staff through our AWC Strategic Plan 2025, which was created over 14 months with the help of nearly 2,600 faculty, staff, student and community participants.

Our new Mission is: Transforming lives through education and partnerships to create thriving communities.

Our new Vision is: Cultivating generations who value knowledge, foster independence, eliminate poverty, and create vital, equitable and sustainable communities.

Our BHAG (Big, Hairy Audacious Goal) is: Double the rate of earned baccalaureate degrees in the two counties we serve by 2035.

In all my years in higher education, I've never worked with such a powerful Mission or Vision statement, or such an ambitious goal.

Everyone can play a part in making first generation students feel like they belong. We can work to demystify college.

Everyone can play a part in making first generation students feel like they belong. We can work to demystify college. We can create opportunities to get into college, to stay in college, and to complete. We can choose institutional language that supports instead of scares. We can make sure these students know they're not alone – that some of their professors and administrators know what it's like to be the first to go to college. When we do these things, we are creating equitable, sustainable change, which I am convinced will translate into better lives for our students, and stronger economies for the communities we serve.

Dr. Daniel P. Corr began his tenure as the ninth President of Arizona Western College (AWC) in July 2016. During his tenure, he has been committed to building on the tremendous success achieved by AWC and has already become an active member of the many communities served by the college. He has focused his early efforts on facilitating student success, increasing access to higher education, executing a newly adopted strategic plan, and fostering a climate of innovation, collaboration, and stewardship at AWC. Prior to assuming the role of AWC's President, Dr. Corr held a variety of instructional and administrative positions at four different community colleges in Arizona and Illinois. All told, he has over 25 years of experience at the community college level. He serves on a number of local, state, and national boards, serving as an AACC Commissioner and a Higher Learning Commission Peer Reviewer. In 2017, the Arizona Governor appointed Dr. Corr to serve on the Arizona State Board of Education. However, his greatest passion is for AWC's students and their success.

