

Defining First-Generation College Student

In an effort to strengthen colleges' academic, nonacademic, and financial support services for first-generation college students, CCRC is conducting an exploratory study of the support networks of first-generation students to better understand who they turn to for academic and nonacademic assistance and how they seek help when they need it. But what does it mean to be a first-generation college student?

Our Survey Sample

All 2,079 students who took our survey in spring 2022 met the federal definition of a first-generation college student: Neither parent had completed a bachelor's degree.

Higher education policy, practice, and research typically treat first-generation students as a monolithic group. But first-generation students are demographically diverse and come to college with a range of experiences and information that shape their college journey. Having siblings or other family members with college experience may directly and indirectly influence how first-generation students progress through college, their reasons for pursuing higher education, and the support they receive in making decisions about college, according to recent research.¹ CCRC's study highlights variation among first-generation college students.

25% of students in the survey sample did not see themselves as a first-generation college student, despite meeting the federal definition.

Many students either do not know what the term means or do not know how it is defined. Communicating a clear definition of the term can help colleges identify which of their students are first-generation and can also improve students' awareness of the services on campus that can help them succeed. Colleges can also help students recognize the strengths and benefits that first-generation college students bring with them to higher education, such as high aspirations and the drive to persist through obstacles.

"I think starting off in college, I didn't think much about [the first-gen identity], but the more I thought about it, it's like, oh, it's really important. Yeah, it's just really important. And [college is] something not a lot of people have access to and are able to experience. ... I'm grateful to be able to attend college."

Elena, a community college student

¹ Ceja, M. (2006). Understanding the role of parents and siblings as information sources in the college choice process of Chicana students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(1), 87–104. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/192403/summary>
Roksa, J., Silver, B., Deutschlander, D., & Whitley, S. (2020). Navigating the first year of college: Siblings, parents, and first-generation students' experiences. *Sociological Forum*, 35(3), 565–586. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/soef.12617>

First-Generation Students With Family Members Who Attended College

Seventy-three percent of four-year college students and 67% of two-year college students in our survey said that they have extended family members who attend or have attended college in the past. Sixty-three percent of the four-year public college students received college advice from family members, compared to 56% of the two-year college students.

"[My cousin is] in school now at University of Maryland. ... When I have homework questions or when we are taking similar classes ... we turn to each other and say, 'Hey, do you know what this is?' or 'Can you help me?' So she's almost like my tutor, like a study buddy."

Aaliyah, a community college student

"My brother is an electrical engineer, so I had already experienced a little bit of what he went through when he was in college. So I knew it was going to be a hard major, but I knew I could do it."

Karina, a university student

Students at four-year institutions

73%

have extended family members who attend or have attended college

23%

had no extended family members who attend or have attended college

4%

weren't sure about their extended family's educational status



63% received college advice from family

Students at two-year colleges

67%

have extended family members who attend or have attended college

29%

had no extended family members who attend or have attended college

4%

weren't sure about their extended family's educational status



56% received college advice from family

Implications for Colleges

- Adopting a definition of first-generation college student that is consistent with the federal definition and that highlights the diversity in parental education levels within this group can improve identification of and outreach to first-generation students.
- Defining first-generation broadly, consistent with the federal definition, may help more students who could benefit from institutional support see themselves as part of this group.
- Learning more about the higher education experiences of their first-generation students—including how they leverage information from family members and what institutional supports they tend to use—can help colleges adjust and better target their support efforts..