Higher Education Entrance Support for First-Generation College Students
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Executive Summary
First-generation college students face disadvantageous circumstances in the United States, which systemically prevent them from enrolling in and completing postsecondary education, a goal that their continuing-generation counterparts more easily and more commonly reach. Many first-generation college students are immigrants, people of color, low-income, carry family responsibilities, and face discrimination because of their intersectional identities. No matter how capable a first-generation college student is, the college application and enrollment process are unimaginably more strenuous for them. Lack of social capital, personal, and professional networks, family engagement because of barriers, career knowledge, academic support, financial literacy, and finances are just some of the disparities that hold these students back. Both the United States and these students benefit from their ability to attain degrees.

Congress must provide more support to first-generation college students in order for equality, as the United States promises, to be reached between them and continuing-generation students. Supports that accommodate for the disparity between these groups include academic counseling, extracurricular opportunities, application guidance, college research guidance, financial aid advice, greater family engagement, and more. Most critically, these supports must be made accessible to these students, and targeted to truly make an impact for first-generation college students.

Problem Statement
First-generation college students face greater challenges in applying to and enrolling in higher education than their peers whose parents attended postsecondary
schools. Not only do fewer first-generation college students enroll in postsecondary education compared to their continuing-generation counterparts, only 58% of these first-generation college students do so within three months of completing high school\(^1\). This stall in attainment of higher education is a manifestation of the financial struggles that a majority of the first-generation college student population faces, aligning with the reality that 92% of first-generation college students' households earned less than $75,000 annually\(^2\). The majority of the first-generation college student population are people of color, whereas only 30% of continuing-generation students are people of color\(^3\). This means that first-generation college applicants also face the challenges and complications faced by people of color in the United States, adding on to their obstacles. This prevents first-generation college students from attaining degrees that provide them with financial security and allow them to contribute to the economy. Having a lack of first-generation college students in higher education also makes schools and workplaces less diverse, having a negative impact on society.

The largest challenge faced by first-generation college students is the lack of cultural and social capital. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge and experience possessed by college-attending parents that can assist their children in the process of preparing for and applying to higher education. First-generation college students miss out on many conversations and inherent knowledge that students whose parents obtained degrees receive. Social capital refers to the networks and relationships among people who live and work together. First-generation students lack the connections, or social capital, of continuing-generation families. These connections and relationships are critical to access opportunities. This disparity in cultural and social capital leads to a lack of preparation to enroll in higher education: 29% of first-generation college students compared to only 14% of continuing generation students had not thought about taking standardized tests by their sophomore year of high school\(^4\). Additionally, first-generation

\(^1\) Early Millennials: The Sophomore Class of 2002 a Decade Later (NCES 2017-437) National Center for Education Statistics
college students take an “academically focused curriculum\(^5\)” at less than half the rate of continuing-generation students. Many ambitious and capable students face the reality that their hard work has not been concentrated in areas deemed by institutions of higher education as the most important. This occurs due to a lack of knowledge and systems that purposefully prevent certain students from accessing resources.

Many people of color and immigrants make up the first-generation college student body, and this is due to a variety of systemic issues. Factors such as redlining, gentrification, and racism cause drastically different conditions for people of color and immigrant first-generation college students. Their schools are underfunded, leading to a less rigorous curriculum, fewer prestigious course options, little to none or low-quality extracurriculars, and insufficient counseling and support. These factors take away enormous value in a holistic college application, even from a student who would have been Ivy League-worthy if they had had access to the same opportunities in a predominantly white neighborhood. Racism vets another struggle against these students, as those in positions of power (law enforcement, employers, judges, principals, etc.) can hold their prejudices and assumptions against students. When this behavior is shown from the people in power, it can end in a student being removed from a class they desired and other unfair situations.

There is also a language barrier for some first-generation college students that leads to a lack of access to higher education. The education system’s inability to support students beyond mere translated pamphlets and official forms shows. First-generation college students deserve counseling and connections to people who can guide them through the college application process in their strongest language. There are many people around the world who are not fluent in English, yet intelligent. The only difference in this case is that some of these intelligent people are trying to apply to college in the United States.

Postsecondary education attendance is important for first-generation college students because it is highly associated with beneficial outcomes for the student. These include full-time employment, higher pay, and longer-term employment, among others.

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\(^5\) *Academic Pathways, Preparation, and Performance—A Descriptive Overview of the Transcripts from the High School Graduating Class of 2003–04* (NCES 2007-316) National Center for Educational Statistics
On average, young adults who earned a bachelor’s degree earn significantly more than those with a high school diploma. Every American student deserves equal opportunity to achieve higher education and the subsequent related benefits according to American values of equality. However, first-generation college students require greater support to reach the same opportunities as their better-resourced peers.

When students do not attend postsecondary education, it can have a negative impact on the national economy as a whole. Adults who graduated from college experience nearly half the unemployment rate as adults who possess a high school diploma. On a larger-scale study of adults with no high school diploma to adults with doctorates and every degree in between, it has been found that unemployment rates dramatically decrease as the level of achieved education increases\(^6\). Employers are more inclined to hire workers who have experience, and higher education is a form of valuable experience that many employers greatly desire\(^7\). Furthermore, the economy is dependent on how well an individual can secure and maintain employment. In times of economic downturn, it has been observed that those individuals who maintain employment are ones with postsecondary degrees.

President Thomas J. Snyder of Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana says “More access [to higher education], not less, is what is needed to compete in a global economy.” Similarly, Community College League of California President Scott Lay states “California community colleges are our state’s best economic stimulus.” These leaders in higher education are aware of the necessity of the work their institutions provide in upholding the economy. Furthermore, 4-year institutions of higher education such as Yale encourage diversity in the student body: Senior Associate Dean of Yale College, Dean Howard believes “the different backgrounds and experiences FGLI [First-generation/Low-income] students bring with them are not deficits, but assets.” Dean Howard puts it upon himself to help Yale students “lower barriers” and integrate heterogeneously, creating diversity in which he believes students can “thrive.”

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\(^7\) *Employers Agree: College Degrees are Worth It*, Association of American Colleges and Universities
As a majority of first-generation college students are people of color or immigrants who have been immersed in a unique cultural background, their involvement in higher education and the workforce increases diversity. The importance of diversity should be greatly appreciated by business leaders who wish to serve a wide range of customers optimally. In the tech industry especially, diversity benefits the industry because different perspectives and cultural backgrounds can more appropriately represent the demographics of the users of a technological product. A group with an extensive range of life experiences can pinpoint more opinions that the users may have and accommodate these in the creation of the product, avoiding the release of a product that completely overlooks the needs of an entire group of people. Diversity is a powerful asset that inspires creativity and drives innovation.

Conversely, when a workplace or school lacks diversity, it can be problematic for all students. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk emphasizes “the danger of a single story,” in which one perspective alone inflicts damage to an individual and to a society. This condition causes people to wholeheartedly believe in an incomplete perspective and hold uneducated opinions against each other. Human differences are emphasized, bringing people apart rather than together. This impedes teamwork and the ability to build each other up, resulting in lost productivity. When a school has first-generation college students, it is more diverse, and benefits from this diversity. When it is not diverse, the entire student body—and even professors—are unable to reach its full potential.

The most critical form of support that first-generation prospective college students need is information and resources about the college preparation and application process. High school students do not always have the time or knowledge to start immersing themselves in the world of college applications until halfway through their junior year. This is far too late because, optimally, students should have spent their entire high school time engaging in extracurriculars and demonstrating their skills and interests. Students should have studied for and taken standardized tests sooner. They should have started saving money for tuition and applying for scholarships as early as possible. Students should have thought about their options after high school earlier to plan and prepare. Competitive college applicants should have familiarized themselves
with the culture of admissions far earlier. Whereas their continuing-generation counterparts have grown up with this knowledge in mind and opportunities at hand, vast amounts of opportunities are lost for first-generation college students because they start too late. This is why they need targeted support.

First-generation college students also need more support in completing aspects of the application and enrollment process. They need guidance in researching and learning about schools to find what is best for them and their circumstances. First-generation college applicants need and should have access to personalized support to fill out applications, write essays, conduct interviews, and more. They may need academic or financial support. Many will need a mix of these, and what is most critical is that these supports must be made easily accessible in person and through technology. There are resources available, but they are unrealistically expensive, or require students to voluntarily sacrifice class time. Places where students will most likely go to reach out for help, mainly high school and middle school counseling offices, should have these supports ready to provide or to the ability to direct students to them.

In fact, an overwhelming majority of these students expect (suggesting they desire and strive to work towards) at least enrolling and getting some postsecondary education. 68% expected to earn a bachelor’s, master’s degree, or even higher. Unfortunately, only a fraction of these students were able to achieve their expectations. There are supports that can help first-generation college students successfully enroll in postsecondary schools. With focused resources, first-generation college students can have the tools and support they need to successfully enroll into the postsecondary opportunity of their choice.

Policy Recommendations

Supports for first-generation college students may not just exist, they have to be accessible to the people they target as well in order to be effective. This means increasing language diversity, overcoming the technology divide, being available at locations that will have the most impact, and making sure the institutions that have all

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the power are knowledgeable about these students’ circumstances and want to help them succeed. Accessibility can be accommodated if programs are in places that the target audience already readily visits—schools, for example. This will also allow for students to participate with ease and more commitment in these programs, increasing their efficacy. Many students who need help are unaware of the presence of support programs, so they need to do more effective and targeted outreach in order to reach them.

**Recommendation 1**

Congress should pass legislation that directs the Secretary of Education to direct funding to school districts to implement a college application and cultural prep curriculum for every student who needs it, but with a priority for first-generation college students. This curriculum should be a minimum of one month long in the beginning of freshman year of high school, and followed by a minimum of a one month long second portion implemented during the spring of junior year (before college application season). The first part of the curriculum must provide education on the most impactful ways to engage in extracurriculars, counseling resources, language resources, course selections, financial readiness, and test-taking. The second portion of the curriculum must provide college research strategies, help filling out applications for schools and financial aid, personal statement crafting guidance, and more financial aid resources. During both months of the curriculum, as well as all the time between, there must be counselors available for students to refer to with concerns and questions. This program should be taught as a class during lunchtime (eating is permitted). If the school has no set lunchtime, it should be implemented after school, or during another time that students can easily accommodate.

**Recommendation 2**

Congress should pass S.943/H.R.2006, the College Equity Act, which allows funding for institutions of higher education to improve their recruitment programs in terms of addressing inequities in recruitment, admissions, and support. The bill allows for institutions to better serve disadvantaged communities of
students, including first-generation college students. Specifically, the Department of Education must award grants to Institutions of Higher Education to conduct equity audits that review their policies, practices, and resources (e.g., admission policies, financial aid, and faculty diversity) to identify areas that might produce gaps in outcomes by certain identity factors. Identity factors include gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, income, criminal background, military service, first-generation students, students with disabilities, student parents, and transfer students.

**Recommendation 3**

Congress should pass S.2250/H.R.3933, the America’s College Promise Act. The bill will support programs that provide academic and social support, student advising, family engagement, the college search and application process, and targeted learning programs. The America’s College Promise Act makes community college an affordable, reliable, and effective higher education for students to rely on. Specifically, the bill requires the Department of Education to award grants to eligible states and Native American tribes to pay the federal share (75% of the average resident community college tuition and fees per student) of a program that provides funds to community colleges for waiving resident tuition and fees. The bill also requires each state to ensure that a participating institution offers academic credits that are fully transferable to a four-year institution. In addition, the bill establishes a grant program to encourage certain minority group students to enroll in and complete baccalaureate programs by requiring a university that receives grant funding to waive or significantly reduce tuition and fees for such students.