Northwestern | SEARLE CENTER
FOR ADVANCING LEARNING AND TEACHING

Supporting First-Generation College Student Success

Brief Description
Teaching and learning strategies to support first-generation college students, which have been empirically demonstrated to increase motivation, retention, and deep learning.

Introduction
Definitions of first-generation college students (FGCS) vary; the U.S. Department of Education reports 33% of undergraduates in the US are FGCS, while the Center for First-Generation Student Success reports 56% (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019). Though varied definitions result in differing statistics, one thing is clear: FGCS are a significant part of the undergraduates we teach. At Northwestern, FGCS enrollment has been steadily increasing over the past several years: the Class of 2026 is 15.3% FGCS, up from 13.2% with the Class of 2024 (Northwestern University, 2022).

It is important to be aware that FGCS are more likely to encounter barriers to education that result in lower retention and graduation rates than their continuing-generation (non-FGCS) peers as well as increased stress and poorer well-being. Outdated considerations of the causes of lower retention and graduation rates of FGCS use a deficit model, suggesting FGCS are less capable of educational success. A critical reflection of higher education, however, illuminates

structural barriers that have underserved FGCS, prompting us to promote equitable teaching practices. This guide presents evidence-based strategies that have been empirically demonstrated to improve academic success, retention, and well-being among all students, with a particularly positive impact on FGCS.

Definition

The criteria for defining FGCS differs from institution to institution. Northwestern defines FGCS as those who "represent the first generation in their families to graduate from a four-year university" while also recognizing the variety of ways individuals identify with the term. At other institutions, definitions stipulate that FGCS are those whose parent(s) or guardian(s) received no postsecondary education whatsoever, while others exclude students whose older siblings have received any postsecondary education. These varied definitions can create confusion around the identities of both FGCS and continuing-generation college students (students who do not identify as first-generation).

These varied definitions can also deter students from utilizing services that would benefit them. For instance, education writer Rachel Gable reports that a small, but "not insignificant number" of continuing-generation college students feel like first-generation college students, although they do not technically fit the definition (Gable, 2021). Due to the hazy demarcations of FGCS and the self-reported needs of students unfamiliar with postsecondary education, Gable suggests the potential importance of making programming and services readily available to FGCS and all students who feel they could benefit from them (Gable, 2021). Michael Fitzpatrick, Senior Director of Northwestern's Office of FGLI (First-Generation, Lower-Income) Initiatives, notes that programming and services developed for FGCS are typically developed in a way that benefit all students who engage with them, with particularly positive effects for FGCS.

Finally, each FGCS has individual intersectional identities and lived experiences that shape their educational journeys. Therefore, while many FGCS will share common assets and encounter common barriers to education, educators should honor their individual skills and needs.

Recommended Strategies Overview

While the educational experiences of FGCS will be individual, empirical research shows that FGCS are more likely to possess certain assets and to encounter certain challenges in their educational paths than their continuing-generation peers. Familiarity with these commonalities equip faculty to better understand their students and to implement strategies to support their success.

Pre-college preparation and support is an important factor in the academic success and well-being of FGCS, an aspect that is outside the purview of many instructors of higher education. However, there are many effective, evidence-based strategies that **meet students where they**

are by breaking down inequitable barriers to academic achievement and supporting students in utilizing their strengths to navigate the hidden curriculum of the college landscape.

Common Assets and Strategies to Harness Them

Asset: Self-Determination

FGCS are typically self-determined individuals who "act as the primary causal agents in their lives, demonstrating behaviors that are autonomous, self-regulating, psychologically empowering, and self-realizing" (Watts et al, 2023). Along with this comes a trend of self-reliance and the ability to figure out complex systems and expectations.

Strategy: Reach In

Lisa Nunn—sociology professor, director of the Center for Educational Excellence at the University of San Diego, and author of *College Belonging: How First-Year and First-Generation Students Navigate Campus Life* (2021)—asserts that FGCS' self-reliance often results in them reaching out for help only as a last resort. To ameliorate this, she suggests *reaching in*: establishing mentorship routines that support students long before students finally reach out. Nunn states that preemptive strategies, such as those suggested throughout this guide, help FGCS students navigate higher education more efficiently, minimizing the setbacks from trial and error and saving time by avoiding strategies that ultimately yield few benefits (Nunn, 2021).

Julie Carballo, Assistant Dean of Students for First Generation and Military Affiliated Initiatives at North Central College and Founding Director of Cardinal First, recommends that instructors encourage students to view "help-seeking" as a regular practice of successful students, not only struggling students. She suggests reminding students that resources such as The Writing Place and Academic Support and Learning Advancement (ASLA)—while free to access—are actually services already paid for by tuition, fees, grants, and scholarships.

Strategy: Empower Students to Advocate for Themselves and Their Needs

Jesus Galvan, Assistant Director of Northwestern's Student Enrichment Services, emphasizes that empowering students to advocate for themselves is key to accountability and success. He shares several ways this can be cultivated in the classroom. To define and establish accountability, instructors and students can set clear expectations for communication, and instructors can remind students of important considerations as they approach deadlines. Throughout the course, instructors can normalize and recognize unexpected challenges and conflicting schedules students may face, encouraging them to reach out for the support they may need. This approach helps to keep lines of communication open, allowing instructors and students to work together to prevent or resolve potential issues.

Asset: Work Experience

FGCS are more likely to have professional work experience than their continuing-generation peers, possessing work-related skills such as problem solving and the ability to juggle multiple responsibilities.

Strategy: Hone Time Management and Study Skills

Although FGCS typically have experience and developed skills when it comes to balancing family and work-related responsibilities, they can benefit from further guidance in developing time management and study skills for an academic context. Taking time to help FGCS envision ways to align their professional skills and their educational skills is another important form of anticipatory socialization that will better prepare FGCS for future career success. Planning how and when one will accomplish academic assignments is essential to negotiating schedules and other responsibilities, and many students can benefit from learning how to block off dedicated time for academic work. Scaffolding assignments by breaking large projects into smaller, sequenced component parts is a useful way to model this in the classroom.

Additionally, encouraging or incorporating peer support can help students to recognize the value of peer study and prompt them to schedule time for it. It is especially valuable to incorporate peer support during class time, as many FGCS have outside commitments that make it difficult or impossible to connect with peers outside of class.

Common Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Them

Challenge: Financial Stress

Many FGCS report struggles with financial stress and uncertainty, and many FGCS work part- or full-time jobs to support their education and/or families. The uncertainty over rising education costs year to year as well as worry over whether scholarship and grant funding will come through can be major stressors ([Watts et al, 2023](#)). Additionally, financial responsibilities may make it extremely challenging for FGCS to take low- or unpaid internships and other opportunities (like study abroad programs) that augment learning and provide career-specific skills and professional networking.

Strategy: Recognize the Importance of Mentors and Advisers

Positive interactions with professors, peers, and staff are an important aspect of students' academic success, motivation, and retention ([Watts et al, 2023](#)). Keeton et al ([2022](#)) assert that "faculty-student interactions are central to shaping social and academic outcomes for college students, particularly for FGCS and students of color." Consider the roles you play as a formal or informal adviser/mentor and how you can direct students to resources, such as conference-funded scholarships, that they might not know about. For instance, Northwestern provides funding that offsets the financial barriers of valuable opportunities including unpaid internships ([Summer Internship Grant Program](#)), study abroad programs ([Summer Aid & Scholarships](#)), and

undergraduate research ([Academic Year Undergraduate Research Grants and Undergraduate Research Assistant Program](#)).

Let students know that office hours are student hours: a good opportunity to discuss scholarship opportunities, professional networking, and available resources in addition to course content and study strategies. You may also provide examples of questions students might come to office hours with. Consider making office hours a potential course requirement and, ensure office hours are accessible to students who live and/or work off campus by holding a range of office hours, including opportunities to meet virtually and in the evening.

First-Gen Student Voices

"You don't need to know what you need help with to talk to me.
You don't need to have questions or smart questions to come to office hours."

—Nancy Zhen, Class of 2025
on how instructors can invite students to establish relationships with faculty

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Challenge: Hidden Curriculum

The hidden curriculum is typically defined by education scholars as "a process and set of everyday practices that, while remaining unacknowledged and unexamined, nonetheless serve to maintain the status quo or support a dominant worldview" ([Gable, 2021](#)). In short, it is a set of implicit expectations and procedures that have traditionally gone unstated. In the university context, hidden curriculum can be found at both the institutional and course level. For example, participating in extracurricular activities can provide valuable opportunities for mentorship and professional networking that can help students excel during and after college. However, the importance of mentorship and networking as well as the way participation in extracurriculars facilitates this relationship building may not be clearly communicated to students. *See [In Brief: Revealing the Hidden Curriculum in Our Courses](#) to learn more about the hidden curriculum.*

Strategy: Name and Interrogate the Hidden Curriculum

Examine the hidden curriculum of your course and make it explicit. Examples include your expectations for students, how you assess participation and in-class discussion, and how you will grade particular assignments. Rubrics are an effective way of making expectations and criteria transparent. Visit our [Grading and Rubrics](#) webpage for details and examples. Rachel Gable, author of *The Hidden Curriculum* (2021) writes: "At the very least, making the hidden curriculum explicit will provide many first-generation college students with a clearer guide to 'how it's done.' Even better, to make the hidden curriculum explicit by identifying, examining

and debating it in public is to acknowledge that the rules we assume to be 'how it's done' can be redrafted."

Challenge: Lack of Familiarity with Campus Support Services and Resources

Related to the hidden curriculum, many FGCS may be unfamiliar with campus resources, support services, and how to access them. Whereas continuing-generation students may hear about resources—such as writing centers, laptop lending, and career advising—from parents or older siblings, many FGCS must seek them out on their own. Adding to this challenge, FGCS may view supports such as peer tutoring as remedial interventions rather than proactive tools. *See Campus Resources for more information about some of the resources and services available at Northwestern.*

Strategy: Facilitate Connections with Campus Supports and Resources

Reach out to students early in the course and be explicit about connecting them with campus resources (Keeton et al, 2022). Consider including not only a list of resources in your syllabus, but short explanations of what they are and what they can do for students (Nunn, 2021). Throughout the course, remind students of those resources in class. For instance, consider displaying a specific resource website on the board as students come into class or saying, "Your final paper is due in two weeks. This is a good time to make an appointment at the Writing Center, where they can help you develop an outline, review a draft, or proofread your final version."

There are several ways to improve the likelihood that students will take advantage of such resources. When introducing resources, Julie Carballo suggests stating that the resources are included in the cost of tuition and are tools utilized by successful students, not just struggling ones. She also suggests providing a *warm handoff*, a "simple and personalized way to introduce someone to new connections and thus broaden their network" (Felten et al., 2023). An instructor, staff member, or mentor can facilitate a warm handoff by personally introducing a student to another faculty/staff member, either virtually or in person. Consider having students visit a writing center or tutoring session as a potential course requirement, encouraging students to take advantage of these resources whether or not they feel they are doing well in the class.

Challenge: Unclear Expectations

Perceived communication issues are a frequently cited barrier to academic success, and FGCS often report frustration with unclear course, assignment, and/or activity expectations as well as disorganized course materials and resources (Watts et al, 2023).

Strategy: Establish Clear Expectations and Communication

Transparency and clear communication benefit all students. In the classroom, Keeton et al (2022) advise making expectations about the syllabus, assignments, and classroom engagement

clear. This eliminates guesswork and allows students to plan accordingly. At the degree level, pathways to degree completion must be clear, and program outcomes should be relevant to the world (The Boyer Commission, 2022). Clarity, however, does not mean policies must be rigid; instead, articulate flexible policies, such as those on accepting late work, in your syllabus. Michael Fitzpatrick reports that Northwestern students have expressed appreciation for such clear, flexible policies.

To communicate with students clearly and effectively, Keeton et al suggest using multiple means of communication to reach students, especially those showing signs of struggle (2022). Such modes include email, Canvas announcements, and in-person conversations before or after class. Consider scheduling check-ins with students at key points throughout the course (before the drop date, midterm, and so forth) so students can make informed decisions about whether or not they will be successful in the course. At these check-ins, faculty can provide support and clear guidance on what steps students would need to take to succeed in the course.

Strategy: Build in Scaffolding

Scaffolding is "a process of strategically breaking assignments into steps that sequence and support learning" (Keeton et al, 2022). Breaking down assignments in this way allows students to practice the building blocks that compose more complex assignments while also providing regular opportunities for feedback. Scaffolding can also be applied to lesson plans and course development as instructors can scaffold learning experiences that bridge preexisting student knowledge with course goals for new learning. By connecting new content with preexisting knowledge, students gain a better capacity to articulate their deepened understanding.

Strategy: Embrace Equity-Minded Curriculum and Equitable Assessment

"Equitable assessment should work to ensure that learning outcomes, and how we assess those outcomes, are done in ways which do not privilege certain students over others; that data-informed changes are not benefiting one student group over others; and that assessment efforts are not conducted with only one dominant perspective or voice leading the process" (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). Using an equitable assessment framework, provide regular assessment and feedback so students can chart their progress and identify areas for growth as early as possible. *Searle's website has robust resources on Assessment.*

Challenge: Disconnect with Campus

FGCS typically have less time to participate in extracurricular activities due to work and family responsibilities, which may make it more difficult to develop peer/faculty support networks and to feel part of the campus community. Jesus Galvan explains that this disconnect can also be attributed to socioeconomic barriers, lack of cultural capital, and sense of not-belonging and/or imposter syndrome, which may make it more difficult for FGCS to find a sense of belonging or connection, especially when considering the intersection between socioeconomic status, appearance, cost to participate, and presence.

Strategy: Encourage Campus Activities and Engagement

Student engagement in social and educationally purposeful activities supports first-year students to achieve higher grades and overall satisfaction, as well as persistence to the second year of college" (Griffin et al, 2022). Because FGCS typically have less time to devote to extracurricular activities than their continuing-generation peers, consider incorporating social and educationally purposeful activities into your syllabus. For instance, consider carving out class time or time typically devoted to traditional homework assignments to attend a campus lecture, museum exhibit, or campus production. Look for opportunities directly related to course content that allow students to engage with one another and the campus community.

To encourage students to make use of resources to engage in campus activities, Julie Carballo suggests articulating the value of engagement on campus in terms of leadership, network building, and skill building—areas of development that prepare students for future employment, graduate school, and life after college. However, Jesus Galvan reminds us that time and money are often interrelated deterrents to engagement. Therefore, it is best that opportunities taking place outside of class time be both optional and free of charge. Northwestern's Student Activities Assistance Fund provides support for activities that incur costs to students.

Strategy: Utilize Active and Collaborative Learning

Supporting an integrated approach, collaborative learning has been demonstrated to deepen learning, promote student retention and self-esteem, improve critical thinking and metacognition, and to expose students to diverse perspectives (Qureshi et al, 2021). Collaborative learning may occur in pairs or groups, and examples of activities include small group discussion, peer editing, simulation activities, and the use of collaborative technologies such as Perusall (available through Canvas). *Read more about inclusive teaching and collaborative learning in Principle 7 of Northwestern University's Principles of Inclusive Teaching.*

First-Gen Student Voices

"Looking back at my undergraduate years, I am grateful for the collaborative learning I engaged in with my peers, valuing the diversity of our shared experiences and expanding our thinking to consider multiple perspectives. Within these transformative learning spaces, we fostered a community that uplifted, challenged, and supported each other.

Collaborative learning can help students break out of their shells, find their voice, and feel seen."

—Liliana Leon, Class of 2024

Challenge: Family Responsibility

FGCS are more likely to have children and dependents. They are also more likely to provide necessary financial contributions to their family or household. These caregiving and financial responsibilities require time and attention. FGCS students may also experience home environments that are not conducive to academic productivity, such as a lack of a quiet study space (Watts et al, 2023).

Strategy: Think about Space

Instructors often have little control over the spaces they and their students use on campus. However, faculty members—especially those in leadership positions such as Chair or Director of Graduate Studies—can advocate for how spaces are created and used. Architects, interior designers, and university administrators recognize the needs of FGCS students, asserting that campuses benefit from accessible kitchenettes, showers, and laundry facilities (Edelman, 2023). Consider whether students in your departments or programs have access to places to store food brought from home; secure belongings, books, and winter gear; comfortably express breast milk, and so forth. Share resources available within your departments and around campus. For instance, Northwestern has lactation support and rooms across campus, like the one located at the Searle Center.

Challenge: Guilt

Related to family responsibility, FGCS commonly report feelings of guilt. Many FGCS worry about their families and may dedicate significant time and resources to helping support them. Others may experience "achievement guilt," discomfort with the opportunities, resources, and achievements their families may not have access to (Covarrubias et al, 2015). Achievement guilt has been linked to depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem.

Strategy: Draw Connections between Education and Career Trajectories

Exploring how students' education, work, and future careers benefit their communities helps to mitigate achievement guilt, making [Community Engaged Learning](#) particularly impactful. The [Boyer Report,](#) a nationally recognized agenda for U.S. research universities to enhance undergraduate education, shares that students benefit from early introduction to career opportunities, emphasizing that the ability to pictures themselves in a career and see the trajectory from their education into that career increases motivation toward degree completion.

First-Gen Student Voices

"As a first-gen low-income (FGLI) student, I chose career goals
that I thought society would approve of because I didn't want to disappoint my family.
Now, I know that what will make my family, and most of all, *me* happy is thinking for
myself, and acting based on what *I* want in life. I believe in my own power to make my
own goals and follow my own values, and I hope that other FGLI students like me can
learn to do the same."

—Nancy Zhen, Class of 2025

Challenge: First-Year Adjustment

Combined, the common challenges faced by FGCS inhibit first-year adjustment, resulting in lowered retention (especially between the first and second year of postsecondary education) as well as delayed time graduation ([Griffin et al, 2022](#)).

Strategy: Draw on Your Students' Cultural Strengths

In *Teaching Across Cultural Strengths* (2016), education scholar-practitioners Alicia Chávez and Susan Longerbeam delineate a spectrum of cultural epistemologies that range from individuated (individualistic) cultures to integrated cultures (those that value collaborative, holistic, contextualized learning). They argue that western academia traditionally values individuated learning (e.g., the preference for single-authored papers in many disciplines), warning that "students from integrated cultures and educational experiences find few of their own natural modes of learning within the highly individuated educational cultures of most college classes" (Chávez and Longerbeam, 2016). Honoring students' cultural strengths and modes of learning bridges students' college careers and lives outside of school, helping to ease possible feelings of disjuncture. *Teaching Across Cultural Strengths* offers practical advice for balancing both individuated and integrated approaches in the classroom. Additionally, [Principle](#)

3 of Northwestern University's Principles of Inclusive Teaching provides asset-based teaching strategies which harness students' cultural strengths.

Strategy: Invest in High-Impact Practices

High-Impact Practices (HIPs) are a set of eleven teaching and learning practices that have been empirically demonstrated to benefit educational engagement, learning, and persistence. Recognized by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, these practices have especially significant gains for students whose demographic backgrounds have been historically underserved by higher education. Examples of HIPs include capstone courses and projects, community engaged learning, and common intellectual experiences such as those offered by Northwestern's One Book. *Learn more about the eleven practices on our High-Impact Practices focus area page.*

Strategy: Acknowledge Accomplishments

Encourage students to acknowledge and take pride in their accomplishments, including maintaining solid grades, overcoming challenges, receiving scholarships and grants, being admitted to honor societies, and making the dean's list. Developing self-awareness of personal accomplishments helps to maintain motivation, a key factor in student retention (Watts et al, 2023). Michael Fitzpatrick notes that this is especially important at an institution like Northwestern where there can be competition among the student body. He suggests that instructors remind students that there is no one perfect path to graduation, and individuals should determine their own way: the one that is best for them.

Conclusion

Representing an increasingly significant portion of postsecondary student bodies, first-generation college students typically possess assets well-suited to achieving academic success. However, FGCS continue to face common obstacles to academic success, retention, and well-being. The learning and teaching strategies outlined in this guide have been empirically demonstrated to benefit all students, with particularly positive effects for FGCS including deeper learning, improved motivation and retention, and timely progress to graduation.

Campus Resources

In the spirit of cultivating a relationship rich environment, we have identified campus resources relevant to First-Generation College Students. Consider including these resources in your syllabus and/or on your Canvas course.

Academic Support and Learning Advancement

ConnectNU

I'm First Faculty & PhD Directory

Global Learning Office: First Generation

Laptops: University Library Loaner Program

Northwestern Career Advancement: Career Resources for First Generation and/or Low-Income Students

Office of FGLI Initiatives

Student Activities Assistance Fund (SAAF)

Student Enrichment Services: I'm First

Summer Internship Grant Program

The Writing Place

Recommended Reading

Gable, R. (2021). *The Hidden Curriculum: First generation students at legacy universities.* Princeton University Press.

Miller, J. (2023). *Rising class: How three first-generation college students conquered their first year.* Farrar.

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How to Cite this Guide

We are here for you. As you engage in ongoing reflection about ways to enhance teaching and deepen student learning, The Searle Center offers thought partnership and support. Check our calendar of events or reach out to teach@northwestern.edu to schedule a consultation.