

## About First Generation College Students

Students with college-educated parents have a competitive edge over others in college admissions (Crosnoe & Muller, 2014). About a third of undergraduates in the U.S.A are first generation college students (Escarcha 2018). The National Center for Educational Statistics indicates that, in the 2011-12 school year, 33.5% of undergraduate students had parents whose level of education was high school or less; 25% of White and Asian-American students, 41% of African Americans, and 61% of Latino were classified as first generation students (first-gen).

First generation students are at a disadvantage in pursuing higher education for a variety of reasons, often economic, social, informational, and preparatory inequities. The inequities can inhibit the aspirations of any student for going on to higher education (Castellanos & Martinez 2017, Falcon 2015).

An example is the income disparity between first-gen and non-first gen families. According to the Post Secondary National Policy Institute, students whose parents earned a college degree have a median annual household income of \$99,635. First-gen families have a median annual household income of \$37,565. Those students from poor families frequently have to assist with financial essentials. And having a job can interfere with schooling and planning for higher education (Gándara & Contreras 2009).

Test scores commonly are crucial for admission into many universities. Test scores can be improved through rigorous practice, which often includes expensive private lessons outside of regular school hours, or college prep academies. When a family priority is survival, non-essentials fall out of consideration. And, for those who do make it into college, data from the Pell Institute indicate that 54% of first-generation students were financially on their own compared to only 27% of non-first-generation students.

### Opportunity and Awareness Gaps

*The opportunity gap* is associated with factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, community wealth, familial situation, English proficiency, and more. These conditions, which are beyond a student's control, often reduce equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond, contributing to the national achievement gap and subsequent life inequities.

*The awareness gap* describes the gulf between what students know and don't know about college admission and success (Markowitz 2017). While data are not available specifically for first-gen students, the U.S. Department of Education reports that 44% of four-year students who did not seek financial aid assumed they were not eligible. A study found that 75% of parents with household incomes under \$25,000 could not identify scholarships, grants, or loans as a means to pay for college. The same study demonstrated that 60% of parents whose household income was under \$50,000 expressed a need for more information on how to finance their child's education. Meanwhile, only 37% of families with household incomes of \$75,000 and higher stated need for additional information. Most first-gen families have a median annual household income of less than \$40,000. Having parents who successfully navigated higher education provides students with a readily accessible and informed resource about college financing, preparation, admissions, and survival (Institute for College Access & Success, 2008).

---

\*The material in this document is an edited version of a project report by Axel Lopez as part of his involvement with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA.

The center is co directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Website:  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>      Send comments to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

## Current School Practices

It is accepted practice for schools to have college readiness programs (e.g., provide information about requirements for college acceptance, where and how to apply for admission and financial aid). The aim is to address the awareness gap and increase interest in going on to higher education (Castellanos & Martinez 2018). Note: Nearly half of first generation students attend a community college, compared to 25% of students with college-educated parents (Escarcha 2018).

Provision of essential supports that address the opportunity gap are less common. The failure to adequately address barriers to learning and teaching contributes to dropping out in high school and poor survival of too many who do go on to college. Low-income, first generation, and minority students often need such supports to enable success in college. Note: 90% of low income, first generation college students do not graduate within six years (EAB, 2019).

### **Axel Lopez, an undergraduate working at our Center reported on his experience in high school**

*There is a need for teachers, administrators, counselors, and other school agents to establish a personal connection with students, be knowledgeable about the barriers students encounter, and provide supports and encourage aspirations beyond high school. That is what I experienced as a first generation college student. I felt cared for and incredibly motivated to continue my pursuit, and I knew I'd be supported every step of the way. I cannot thank my teachers and counselors enough for really tailoring their approach to my needs.*

## Concluding Comments

It is clear that schools can and should play comprehensive and effective roles in dealing with the broad range of concerns that affect learning. Addressing interfering factors (both internal and external) is essential for enhancing equity of opportunity and enabling success at school and beyond. Therefore, problems affecting first-gen students cannot be ignored. However, it is important to remember that the conditions they experience also affect many other students.

Schools are expected to play a significant role in helping *all* students who encounter barriers to succeeding at school. Given the overlapping nature of the problems manifested by different subgroups of students, policy makers must move beyond the tendency to design so many separate assistance programs. Instead, school improvement efforts need to (1) unify all activities at a school for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and then (2) develop them into a comprehensive and equitable system that weaves together school and community resources.

For more on school improvement practices designed to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for preventing problems and providing all students with essential supports, see the following (free) resources from the Center at UCLA:

- >Addressing barriers to learning: In the classroom and schoolwide  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)
- >Improving school improvement  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

## Sources Used in Preparing this Resource

- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2018). *Unemployment rate 2.1 percent for college grads, 3.9 percent for high school grads in August 2018*.  
[https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2018/unemployment-rate-2-1-percent-for-college-grads-3-9-percent-for-high-school-grads-in-august-2018.htm?view\\_full](https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2018/unemployment-rate-2-1-percent-for-college-grads-3-9-percent-for-high-school-grads-in-august-2018.htm?view_full)
- Castellanos, M. & Martinez, E. (2018). Catching them early: An examination of Chicano/Latino middle school boys' early career aspirations. *Urban Review*, 50, 378-401.  
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11256-017-0438-5>
- EAB (2019). *90% of low-income, first-generation college students don't graduate on time*.  
<https://eab.com/insights/daily-briefing/student-success/90-of-low-income-first-generation-college-students-dont-graduate-on-time/>
- Crosnoe, R. & Muller, C. (2014). Family socioeconomic status, peers, and the path to college. *Social problems*, 61, 602-624. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4276340/>
- Escarcha, K. (2018). *7 Fast Facts about your first generation students*.  
<https://eab.com/insights/daily-briefing/student-affairs/7-fast-facts-about-your-first-generation-students/>
- Falcon, L. (2015). Breaking down barriers: First-generation college students and college. *Innovation Showcase*, 10, online.  
<https://www.league.org/innovation-showcase/breaking-down-barriers-first-generation-college-students-and-college-success>
- Gándara, P. & Contreras, F.(2009). *The Latino education crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674047051>
- Institute For College & Success (2008). *Paving the way: How financial aid awareness affects college access and success*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED540080>
- Markowitz, T. (2017). The barriers to success and upward mobility for first generation students and how to fix the problem. *Forbes*.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/troymarkowitz/2017/08/08/the-barriers-to-success-and-upward-mobility-for-first-generation-students-and-how-to-fix-the-problem/#7fdd0d9d1cb3>

**For links to resources designed to improve the transition to college, see the Center's Quick Find on this topic at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/transitiontocollege.htm>**