Understanding the Mental Health Challenges of
First-Generation College Students: A Student's Analysis*

First-generation college students (defined as those whose parents do not hold a bachelor's degree or higher) make up about one-third of all undergraduates in the U.S., and many come from underrepresented or low-income backgrounds.

While the transition to college is challenging for many students, research shows that first-generation students experience higher rates of depression and anxiety and are less likely to receive therapy compared to their continuing-generation peers.

This resource highlights factors contributing to first-generation college transition challenges and offers examples of ways colleges can provide more effective academic, social, and, culturally-responsive supports.

Understanding the Pressure

The challenges faced by many first-generation students are shaped by the intersection of academic pressures, high family expectations, and a cultural mismatch between home and school.

Academic & Financial Pressure

Academically, first-generation students are often underprepared for rigorous college coursework and tend to earn lower grades during their first year. Many report feeling overwhelmed by deadlines, paper requirements, and the "unwritten rules" of college. This adjustment to new academic expectations adds to stress during the transition. The pressure is heightened because earning a degree is often seen as the main opportunity to create stability for themselves and their families. This can lead to chronic stress, reduced motivation, exhaustion, detachment, and burnout.

Family Expectations & Guilt

Many first-generation students pursue higher education with "interdependent motives," such as wanting to make their family proud or support them financially. They often continue to fill family roles while in college, such as translating, caring for siblings, or providing emotional and financial support. Balancing these responsibilities while adjusting to college life can create additional stress and guilt. Some even experience "family achievement guilt," which is a feeling that pursuing education is separating them from loved ones. When these family expectations overlap with academic demands, students may feel pressure from multiple directions at once, making the transition especially overwhelming.

Cultural Mismatch

Colleges typically emphasize independence and individual achievement. This often conflicts with the values of those first-generation students' families who prioritize close-knit ties and shared success. During the transition, navigating these different expectations can leave students feeling torn between family values and college norms, contributing to stress and isolation. Cultural conflict can intensify other stressors, especially when institutions do little to account for cultural differences.

Campus Supports and Programs

Institutions of higher education have implemented various student support programs. These include programs to ease the transition to college and provide guidance, skills, and a sense of belonging. The following are some examples.

Enhanced Academic Support

Programs like CUNY's ASAP and UCLA's Academic Advancement Program (AAP) provide consistent, individualized advising, tutoring, and structured support to help students manage academic demands. These resources are intended to reduce stress as students adjust to new coursework and expectations.

Transition Programs

Summer bridge programs and learning communities are designed to help students strengthen academic skills, build confidence, and foster a sense of belonging before the first year starts. By addressing both academic and social aspects of the transition, these programs aim to prepare students to navigate college life more effectively.

Counseling & Peer Mentoring

Campuses offer psychological services (e.g., counseling, psychotherapy workshops). Peer mentoring programs also are organized to pair new students with advanced students from similar backgrounds. These supports are intended to help students adjust emotionally and socially and counter stress and feelings of not belonging.

Identifying the Gaps: Where Support Falls Short

While necessary, prevailing supports are insufficient. The majority of supports focus primarily on student coping with academic achievement (GPA, retention) and underplay the nature and scope of the factors interfering with student learning and teaching and the range of student needs.

Support Often is Too General

Most programs are designed for the general student population and overlook the needs of students with intersecting identities (e.g., low-income, first-generation). Even programs that do consider these matters (e.g., UCLA's *First To Go* – https://firsttogo.ucla.edu/), typically do not focus directly on mental health concerns. The transition to college is not treated as a critical intervention window. Few programs that mention transition support directly address the spike in stress, cultural conflict, and family pressure that occurs during the first year. And there is little data on the impact initiatives beyond the first year.

Family Culture Overlooked

Moreover, the impact of family and cultural expectations on students' well-being often is given short shrift students are left to navigate conflicting values and emotions on their own.

Participation is Low

Stigma, lack of time due to work or family obligations, and unfamiliarity with what is available often discourage first-generation students from seeking help.

System changes to reduce pressures are rare

Many institutional factors that increase student stress could be modified,

Some Commonly Suggested Practice, Policy, and Research Recommendations

- Integrate mental health supports directly into academic and advising system

- Prepare advisors, faculty, and peer mentors to recognize signs of stress and understand how cultural values and family expectations affect students.

- Develop bilingual orientations, workshops, and outreach for families to help them understand the college transition and reduce stigma around mental health

- Establish policies that unify and develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports for addressing the overlap of academic, family, and cultural pressures instead of treating these stressors separately and that ensure collaboration between support providers (e.g., counseling services, academic advising, student affairs)

- Provide dedicated, long-term funding for preventive and culturally responsive mental health programs, not just short-term grants

- Include mental health and well-being as core metrics when evaluating student success, not just grades and retention rates

- Increase research efforts to clarify

  >the impact of system-level efforts such as integrated advising models on student mental health, not just individual coping skills

  >how stigma, cultural norms, and family expectations create barriers to students using available campus supports

  >how academic, family, and cultural pressures interact over time, especially during the transition to college, so that colleges can design more holistic and culturally responsive supports.

Concluding Comments

To truly support first-generation students, institutions of higher education must move beyond just helping individual students cope. System changes are essential to preventing and correcting problems related to the variety of factors that interfere with student success. Development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports requires both reducing pressures and improving coping. And such a system is needed to support student transition into college and remain active through to graduation.

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