

First-Generation Student Script 2.0

*I am from the photos on the refrigerator,
cardboard caps and polyester gowns.
I am from the home where no one has received a degree, not even me, but the thought of almost being there.
I am from the bamboo tree,
that stands so tall, which reminds me of myself –
Turning heads and breaking hearts.
I am from school and home,
from Mom and Dad who were my first teachers.
I'm from do your homework
and then you can play.
I'm from education is key
and everything else comes after.*

*I'm from superstitious beliefs,
like fruits and vegetables of knowledge (that I don't really eat, but I'm smart anyway).
From the grandparents who weren't able to send their children to school,
the parents who gave my siblings and I the opportunity to do so.*

*In the closet is a plastic container
filled with certificates,
report cards of A's & B's
that foreshadowed my parents' dreams.
I am from the family who made me a first-generation college student with my sister and brother who will continue the
legacy.*

The poem "Where I am From", by Ahalia Persaud speaks to the rich and varied backgrounds first-generation students bring to our colleges and universities. By some estimates, over half of undergraduate students today can be considered first-generation. The success of first-generation students is a priority at Bellevue University, and instructors play a pivotal role. Here you will learn more about first-generation students, the challenges they face, and the strengths they bring to our classes.

First, who is a first-generation student? A first-generation student is a student whose parents, or legal guardians, have not earned a bachelor's degree. First-generation students are a subset of the broader group, "at-risk" students, which includes women, minority students, low-income students, and students with disabilities.

Knowing who a first-generation student is, reminds us that some students come to college without the cultural background that helps with the pathway to success. Students may be unfamiliar with the rules and expectations of college life, and may not know the terminology we use so freely, in higher education.

The characteristics of first-generation students are intersectional. Over 20% of first-generation students are also low-income students, per Pell eligibility, and 27% of Hispanic higher education students are first-generation. These intersecting characteristics, shape students' perceptions and experiences in significant ways.

Let's look at some of the challenges first-generation students may face. As faculty, we must understand the experiences of first-generation students to effectively support them in the classroom.

Not all first-generation students are the same; however, many experience challenges with their family lives. First-generation students often have lower levels of financial support from family members, and may be working to help support their family. Students may also experience anxiety about the family's well-being. At the same time, some family

members may not fully understand, or appreciate the student's commitment to their academic success. Some family members may see the student as turning their back on the family by attending college. Many first-generation students report intense feelings of "breakaway guilt", which is the belief that pursuing a college degree, means leaving their family behind.

Mahad Olad powerfully captures the tension felt by many first-generation students, writing,

"I hail from a community that has been emotionally and psychologically traumatized by decades long civil war, mass migration and displacement. Millions of Somalis have resettled all over the globe, forming exceptionally tight-knit communities in their host countries as a survival mechanism. Family, religion, and community are the nucleus of Somali life.

The decision to pursue postsecondary education outside of my home came with the price of leaving my family behind. It was emotional and tumultuous. Many first-generation students — particularly those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds like me — struggle to reconcile two frequently opposing forces: family membership and educational mobility. What are we supposed to do when our familial obligations conflict with our academic and professional aspirations? I still don't have an answer to this question."

First-generation students use campus resources, such as tutoring, academic advising, and health services less often than their peers. There are several possible reasons for this. First, they may not be aware of the range of services available to them, or may be concerned that there are costs associated with the services. Second, they may assume that their work and family obligations will prevent them from accessing services. And finally, first-generation students' unwillingness to access help may be related to "imposter syndrome", which is the feeling that they don't belong, or don't have the skills or intelligence to succeed in college.

First-generation student Jared Jaramillo explains,

"You feel like the only reason you are there is because somebody made a mistake. You feel like any moment you are going to slip up. You are going to make a mistake so big, and somebody is going to tell you to just go home."

Now that we know who our first-generation students are, and have greater awareness of the challenges they may face, we can think of strategies to support their success in our classes. At Bellevue University, we take an assets-based approach to working with first-generation students. We know that these students, by their "first" status, bring distinctive strengths including reflexivity, optimism, academic resilience, goal-orientation, civic-mindedness, and proactivity to the university. Our job is to help them maximize these strengths for their academic success. The libguide following this video, will help you identify strategies to help our first generation students.

References

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