

Recognizing the Strengths of First-Generation Graduate Students: Naming Barriers and Identifying Opportunities

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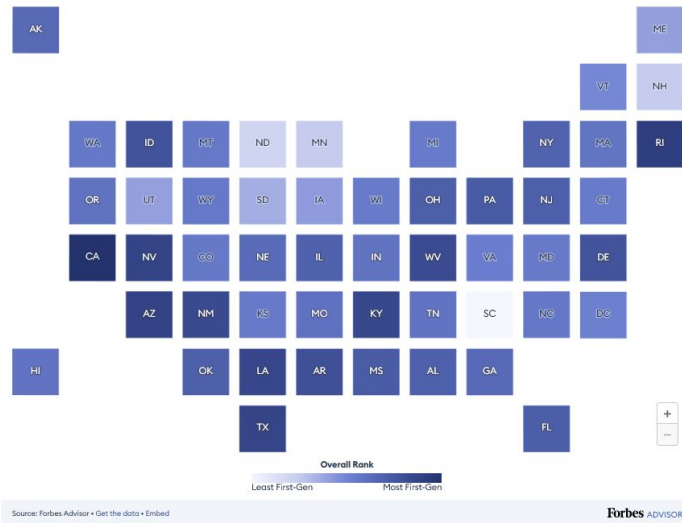
AGENDA

- Definitions and Demographics
- Snaps shots from research and lived experience
 - Jehangir
 - Nguyen
 - Wallace
- Recommendations & Implications for Practice

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: A NATIONAL SNAPSHOT

The States With the Most First-Generation College Students

State ranking is determined by the percentage of students whose highest-educated parent did not attain a college degree. To see the overall rank and the percent of first-generation students, hover over each state.



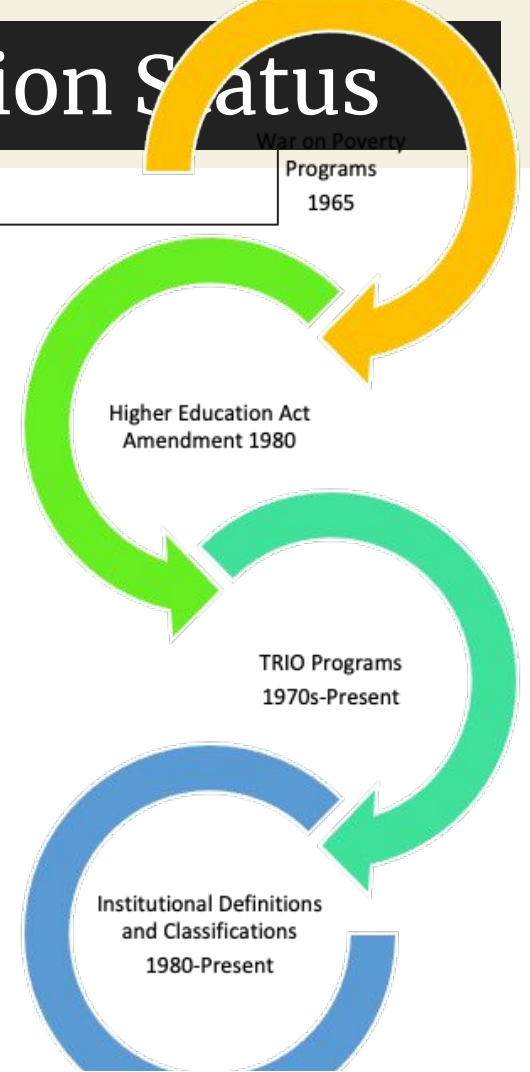
- 56% of today's undergraduates are first-generation (Forbes, 2023)
- FG students are disproportionately poor and working class, female and students of color (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018)
- Many FG students are bi- or multi-lingual. English is not a first language for ~20% of FG students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018)

Historicizing First-Generation Status



Dr. Arnold Mitchem speaks to students in the Education Opportunity Program in 1984. Photo courtesy of Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Raynor Memorial Libraries, Marquette University.

(Jehangir & Romasanta, 2021)

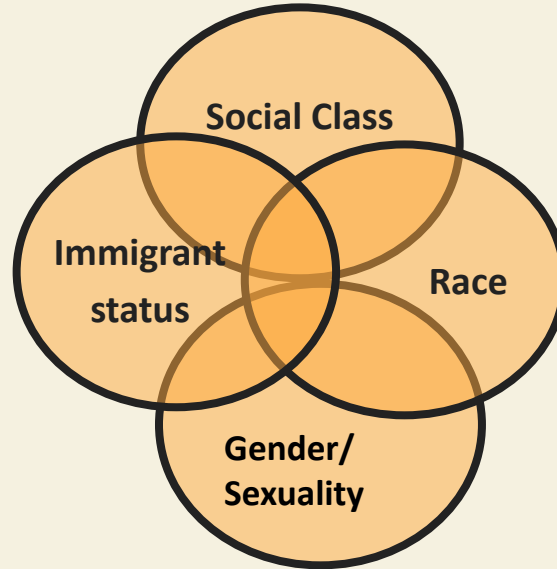


Language, Labels & Connotations

- ◎ **Lack of consensus on definitions (Toutkoushian et al., 2021)**
 - How does your campus define first-gen?
- ◎ **Narrative of Lack - “dominant and problematic ways of operationalizing FG term” (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018)** that focus on the **individual** rather than the **ecology** of the systems and structural force that perpetuate inequities
 - What is the institutional narrative of FG students
- ◎ **Moving from monolith to complexity**
 - Disaggregated data

FIRST GEN COMPLEXITY

First-Gen college students are the first in their family of caregivers to pursue a 4-year degree.



“The way we imagine discrimination or disempowerment often is more complicated for people who are subjected to multiple forms of exclusion. The good news is that intersectionality provides us a way to see it” (Crenshaw, 2017)

Our Definitional Stance

We define **first generation** to be students whose caregivers have not earned a college degree in the United States (Ardoin, 2021). This includes: *caregivers with some college, 2 year degrees, siblings*

First Gen Plus: an individual who is a first-generation student as well as inhabiting other intersectionally marginalized identities (BIPOC, poor and working class, disabled, LGBTQIA+, etc; Whitley et al., 2018)

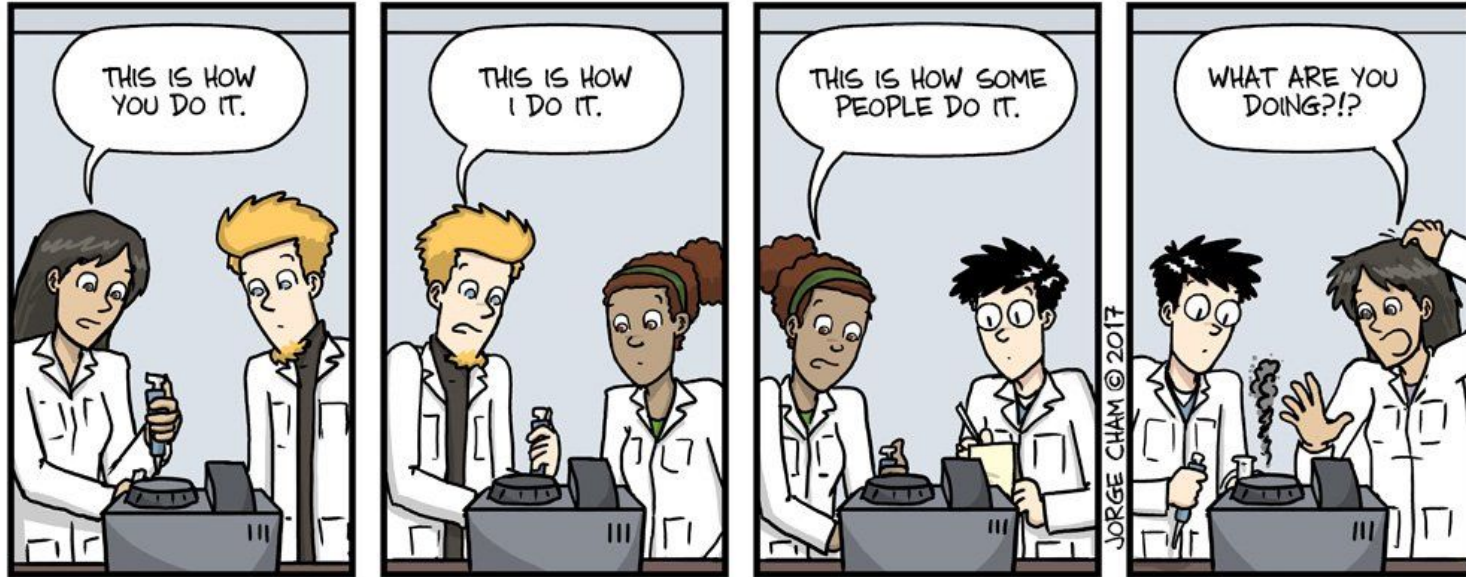
First Gen Graduate student is a student enrolled in a graduate program whose primary caregiver(s) did not earn a 4 year college degree.

Data on First-Gen College Students in Graduate School

- **Center for First-Generation Student Success (NASPA) 2015-2016 Graduate Fact Sheet**
 - **23% of first-generation college graduates enrolled in postsecondary education** within a year of completing a bachelor's degree.

- **National Science Foundation 2021 Survey of Earned Doctorates**
 - Approximately **28% of earned doctorates across discipline** are students who are first in their family to go to college and graduate school.

TRAINING TELEPHONE



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Hidden curriculum as a set of norms, values, and expectations that govern interactions among students, faculty, staff and administrators (Smith, 2014)

These norms and expectations are often implicit and become imbedded into policy and practice and socialization to academia with specificity to context of field, discipline, institution.

Quote 1

There are so many black boxes – things I had no idea about without help... How do you write your CV, how do you interview...I think there is a lot of **hidden culture** behind academia that isn't super explicit...things you are expected to just know. Brings up a lot of that imposter syndrome stuff because you are trying to hide background and hide weakness.

When I go home—it is **jarring juxtaposition**. I study this stuff— so I go home and see all the disparity sort of playing out

Mai, Hmong American FG Grad student (she/ her)

Quote 2:

Defining my first generation identity has been also really intertwined with other aspects. I'm a person of color, the only one in my lab, and I come from a working class family and I had a career as a waitress for 10 years.

And all of that, for me was coming into graduate school and being completely lost. I didn't know how to behave, because the way the culture is and just felt like it wasn't accepted here and people kind of looked down on me. So, for me, it was just kind of an identity of confusion and not understanding how I fit in.

- Cory, African-American STEM FG Graduate Student (she/ her)

Themes from FG Grad Research Study

**Naming and Navigating
Black Boxes**



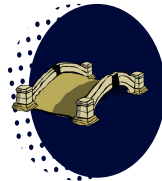
Ivory Tower Socialization



Building Capital



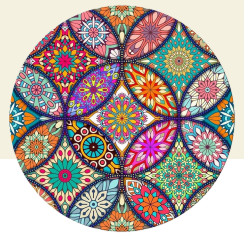
**Jarring
Juxtapositions**



Finances/Mental Health



Resistance Capital & Community Cultural Wealth



I empathize that my journey as an academic has been very similar to what my parents' journey has been as immigrants, because they left Mexico to seek better opportunities elsewhere, economically, socially.

And so they, in a lot of ways, had to do the same thing that I did (for graduate school) where it's like you had to leave your whole family. You didn't even have a family.

You had to go to this place where you've never been. You don't really connect with the culture. You can't really see your family all that often. It was all these weird situations. And I talk about that with my mom now. I'm like, "Yeah.. we just uprooted ourselves and trying to do something better for ourselves later."

But it's such an interesting transition in terms of the resiliency that it takes to be a first-gen college student, and then have that transfer into being a first-gen grad student. **I think about that a lot, that from start to finish, we're unique in our adaptability...**

Glorira, Chicana FG Grad Student(she/ her)

Recommendations for Practice

Get the numbers:

Who are your FGGS students?

- class
- race
- ethnicity
- rural/urban
- international

Admission App
Language for FG

Re-Design

- Name FG early and often
- Graduate student orientations
- New faculty orientations

Hidden Curriculum Audit

- Unpacking jargon & coded language
- Roadmap to Milestones

Cultivate Community

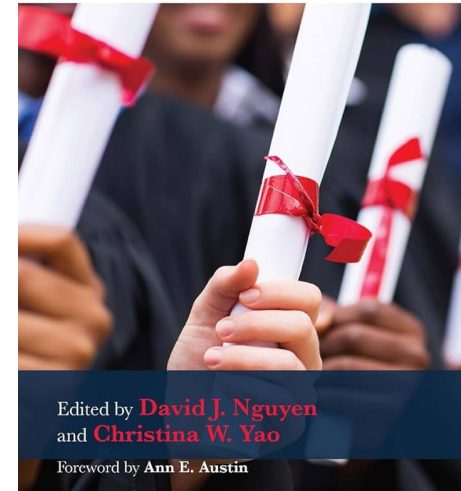
- Post admission support
- FG graduate student spaces
- Faculty/ Staff visibility and narratives

Institutional Ways of Supporting Graduate Students

Many graduate students...

- ◉ Have complex lives (e.g., partners, families, caregiving)
- ◉ Are unfamiliar with the hidden curriculum of graduate school
- ◉ Are financially independent
- ◉ Have unique career development needs
- ◉ Need peer groups
- ◉ Need validation and support

A HANDBOOK FOR SUPPORTING TODAY'S GRADUATE STUDENTS



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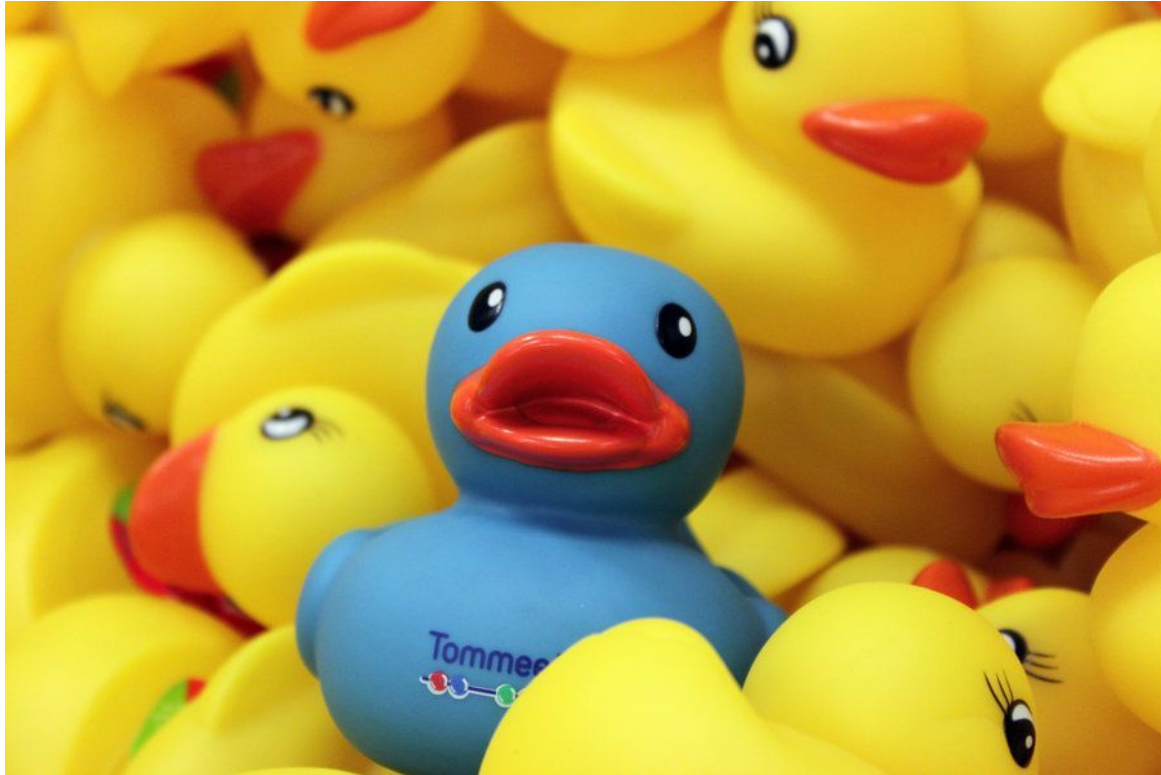
A Handbook For Supporting Today's Graduate Students

- **Overview**
 - Summarizes extant literature, highlights trends among graduate student populations today, and highlights what some institutions do to support students
- **Book Goals:**
 - Be a resource for people trying to think about how to serve today's graduate students.
 - Offer some exemplars of what some institutions are are doing really well
 - Think about the whole student, but focuses more on things outside the "classroom"
- **Content (organized in 3 parts):**
 - Navigating Contexts and Identities (6 chapters - Online Students, Hidden Curriculum, First Gen)
 - Addressing Academic and Professional Skill Development. (4 chapters - Professional Development, Teaching Development, Scholarly Voice, International Opportunities)
 - Supporting Students Outside Classroom (5 chapters - Mental Health, Career Development)

“Low Cost” and Practical Ways to Support All Graduate Students

- ◉ Departmental student organizations to fill in the gap around “hidden curriculum” associated with grad school
- ◉ Campus mental health resources are featured and accessible to graduate students
- ◉ Normalizing help-seeking behavior amongst graduate students
- ◉ Making funding available for graduate students to participate in professional association experiences
- ◉ Promote resources dedicated to graduate student career development

Support for First Generation Student Specifically



Support for First Generation Student Specifically

- Recognize not everyone has access AND understanding of the same information (re: funding, research opps, job talks, career, legitimacy)
- Leverage orientation as a required experience to ensure that *all* students have access to the same expectations
- Consider peer mentoring or social events as a strategy for connecting, connectivity, and engagement
- Feature first generation faculty members in communications and events, such as getting started with research or “what I wish I knew series” (also create recognition of FG faculty and staff)
- Help FG students with figuring out ways to communicate with family
- Invite FG Grad students to participate in National FG Day events
- Promoting a culture of academic and personal help-seeking behavior

Meet Jason



My Background



My Worldview



My Passion

@FirstGenDocs

- ★ Purpose:
 - Affirming the experiences, amplifying the voices, and celebrating the brilliance of first-generation doctoral students (FGDS)!

- ★ Who we serve:
 - FGDS
 - Aspiring FGDS
 - FGDrS

- ★ What we do:
 - Monthly Twitter chats
 - Virtual Writing Retreats
 - Virtual Celebrations

Learning from Black FGDS

- ★ Addressing the whole student
- ★ Dangers of academic elitism
- ★ Family values
- ★ Labor of self-advocacy
- ★ Intersectionality
- ★ Nevertheless, We Persist

Wallace, J. K. (2022). Nevertheless, we persist: Exploring the cultural capital of Black first-generation doctoral students at non-Black serving institutions. *The Review of Higher Education*, 45(4), 515-548.

Considerations and Recommendations

- ★ Name it.
- ★ Center asset-based literature
- ★ Culturally-salient research
- ★ Recognizing differing forms of capital
- ★ Challenge impostorism
- ★ Get creative with interventions
- ★ Move beyond admission
- ★ Be mindful of grad retention
- ★ Continually demystify the process
- ★ Acknowledge the pressures
- ★ Believe in us

Presenters



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