

# *Supporting The Success Of First-Generation College Students: Challenges And Solutions*

Ifeoma Blessing Edoaka

University of Nigeria Nsukka

Nigeria



**Abstract:** First-generation college students (FGCS) face a unique set of challenges that can hinder their academic, financial, and social success in higher education. These challenges often stem from a lack of familial academic experience, limited financial resources, and unfamiliarity with institutional systems. This paper explores the multifaceted barriers encountered by FGCS, including academic preparedness gaps, financial stressors, social isolation, and conflicting family expectations. Drawing from research and personal experience, it also proposes practical, evidence-based solutions that student affairs professionals can implement to improve outcomes for FGCS. These include bridge programs, peer mentorship, financial literacy initiatives, culturally responsive support services, and family engagement strategies. The paper advocates for a holistic and inclusive approach to student support that empowers FGCS to thrive academically and personally throughout their college journey.

**Keywords:** Supporting Success, First-Generation College Students, Challenges, Solutions.

## **Introduction**

The role of higher education as a transformative vehicle for personal and professional growth is widely acknowledged. However, for first-generation college students (FGCS), the path to success is often fraught with challenges that many of their peers may not face. First-generation students are those who are the first in their families to attend college, and while they possess unique strengths—such as resilience and determination—these strengths often come in the face of significant academic, social, financial, and psychological hurdles [1].

Drawing from my own experiences as a first-generation college student, this paper analyzes the multifaceted challenges FGCS face and proposes a range of practical solutions that student affairs professionals can implement to support their transition and ongoing success. Key themes include academic preparedness, financial stressors, social adjustment, familial expectations, and the need for institutional support systems.

## Understanding the Unique Challenges Faced by First-Generation College Students

### 1. Academic Preparedness

**Pre-College Academic Gaps:** Many FGCS come from under-resourced schools that lack access to honors curricula, AP classes, or specialized academic programs, resulting in unpreparedness for college-level expectations [2]. This leads to struggles with critical thinking, academic writing, and self-directed research.

**Struggles with Study Techniques:** Without models for effective study habits or time management, FGCS often find themselves overwhelmed by academic demands, especially in lecture-heavy or research-based courses [2].

**Lack of Family Academic Support:** Without college-experienced family members, FGCS lack guidance in course planning, assignment review, or time allocation, leaving them to navigate the academic system largely on their own [3].

### 2. Financial Barriers

**Tuition and Living Costs:** The rising cost of tuition, textbooks, and living expenses creates immense pressure, particularly for FGCS from low-income backgrounds. Many must work long hours to make ends meet [4].

**Uncertainty about Financial Aid:** FGCS often struggle to understand how to apply for financial aid or scholarships, frequently missing out on opportunities due to unfamiliarity with systems like the FAFSA [5].

**Pressure to Support Family:** In many cases, FGCS face competing responsibilities—supporting family members while trying to finance their education—contributing to stress and reduced academic engagement [4].

### 3. Social Adjustment and Cultural Capital

**Feelings of Isolation and Alienation:** Lacking the cultural capital that many of their peers possess, FGCS may feel like outsiders in academic spaces. They often miss out on informal norms of college life, such as approaching professors or participating in study groups [3].

**Imposter Syndrome:** Many FGCS report feeling unworthy or like “frauds” within the university setting, particularly when there are few visible role models or mentors from similar backgrounds [1].

**Cultural and Familial Expectations:** Students may be pulled between academic demands and family expectations, especially when expected to maintain caregiving roles or contribute financially at home [2].

### 4. Family Dynamics

**Increased Responsibilities:** FGCS often juggle caregiving, errands, or family finances in addition to their studies, which limits their capacity to focus on academics [3].

**Misaligned Expectations:** Families unfamiliar with the rigor of higher education may push students to take on part-time jobs or help at home without understanding the academic consequences [5].

**Limited Parental Guidance:** Without someone to advise on internships, career paths, or course selections, FGCS may miss out on developmental opportunities crucial to long-term success [2].

### 5. Navigational Challenges

**Unfamiliarity with College Systems:** Whether it’s registering for classes or scheduling academic advising, FGCS frequently experience difficulty navigating higher education systems due to lack of exposure [4].

**Unawareness of Resources:** Many are unaware of academic support centers, mental health counseling, or writing labs and hesitate to seek help even when in need [5].

## The Role of Student Affairs Professionals in Supporting FGCS

### 1. Enhanced Academic Support

**Bridge Programs and Orientation:** Institutions can offer summer bridge programs that expose FGCS to college norms and academic expectations, improving confidence and retention [1].

**First-Generation Seminars:** Workshops designed for FGCS can build their academic toolkit while normalizing their experiences and challenges [2].

**Peer Mentoring:** Establishing mentorship programs between upperclassmen and incoming FGCS provides critical emotional support and community building [3].

### 2. Financial Aid Support and Literacy

**Personalized Financial Counseling:** Dedicated financial aid counselors who understand FGCS needs can demystify the aid process [5].

**Financial Literacy Workshops:** Institutions should offer training on budgeting, loans, and long-term planning to promote financial independence [5].

**Emergency Financial Aid:** Access to emergency funds can prevent crises from derailing academic progress [4].

### 3. Creating a Sense of Belonging and Community

**First-Gen Support Centers:** Dedicated spaces can serve as hubs for peer networking, academic resources, and community programming [1].

**Social Events and Recognition:** Events like First-Gen Celebration Week can affirm FGCS identities and foster pride in their achievements [3].

**Cultural Awareness Campaigns:** Training faculty and staff to understand FGCS challenges can build a more inclusive campus climate [2].

### 4. Engaging Families and Guardians

**Family Orientation Sessions:** Sessions that explain the academic calendar, student responsibilities, and campus culture can help families better support their students [5].

**Regular Communication:** Sharing newsletters and updates with families bridges the knowledge gap and encourages informed support [5].

**Virtual Family Communities:** Creating online forums allows FGCS families to connect, share insights, and build networks [3].

### Conclusion

First-generation college students bring extraordinary determination to their academic pursuits but face systemic barriers that jeopardize their success. With the right institutional support—including academic preparation, financial guidance, and inclusive programming—FGCS can thrive. Student affairs professionals must lead the charge in fostering a responsive and supportive campus culture that affirms the potential of these trailblazers [1], [3], [5].

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