Examining the Intersectional Student Veteran and First-generation Identities

Julie Carballo, Director of First-generation Programs and Veteran & Military-Affiliated Student Services, North Central College

Deana Waintraub Stafford, Assistant Director, Center for First-generation Student Success
The Center for First-generation Student Success is a key initiative of NASPA and a joint initiative with The Suder Foundation, a family operating foundation based in Plano, TX.

THE SUDER FOUNDATION

The Suder Foundation was founded from Eric and Deborah Suders’ vision to design an innovative program that would dramatically increase the graduation rates of first-generation college students—those who are first in their family to attend college. For several years prior to starting the foundation, the Suders endowed scholarships at The University of Texas at Austin (UT) and West Virginia University (WVU) in order to help students with middle-range academic credentials and financial need who wanted to go to college but couldn’t afford it. They naïvely thought that financial assistance alone would assure the students’ success. They quickly learned this was not the case.

LEARN MORE
VISION
Driving higher education innovation and advocacy for first-generation student success.
The Center is the premier source of evidence-based practices, professional development, and knowledge creation for the higher education community to advance the success of first-generation students.
Center Strategic Priorities

Connect and Recognize

Knowledge Creation & Evidence-based Practices

Innovative & Scalable Solutions

Thought Leadership & Advocacy
Our #firstgen Team

Sarah E. Whitley, Ph.D
Senior Director

Sarah M. Umbarger-Wells
Associate Director, First Scholars Initiatives

Deana Waintraub
Stafford
Assistant Director

Jessica Colorado
Program Coordinator

Diane Schorr, J.D.
Director, First-generation Advocacy & Initiatives

Early 2020
Assistant Director, First Scholars Initiatives

Early 2020
Assistant Director, First Scholars Initiatives

Early 2020
Center Program Assistant (DC)

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Download the free executive summary, full report, and resources from [bit.ly/Center4yrLandscape](http://bit.ly/Center4yrLandscape)
The Goal of the Landscape Study

Understand…

- how institutions are currently serving first-generation students
- what challenges they encounter in providing the most effective support
- how first-generation students perceive their institutional experience.

These findings shape the Center’s ability to provide the most value driving innovation and advocacy for the success of first-generation students.

We also uncovered…

a deeply impassioned community of first-generation practitioners and advocates focused on instigating systemic change across their institutions to become more student-centric and data-informed.
01

Context and Methodology
33% of currently enrolled undergraduates are first-generation.

Degree Attainment in 4 years:

- First-generation: 27%
- Continuing-generation: 42%

U.S. Department of Education, 2014

Higher Education Research Institute, 2011; 2018
Methodology

NASPA partnered with Entangled Solutions to achieve these goals through a two-phase research approach:

**Phase 1**

- Interviews with **77 faculty, administrators, and leaders** knowledgeable on first-generation approaches
  - Representing **45 institutions**
- Interviews with **15 leaders** at 12 student success nonprofits
- Interviews with **40 first-generation students** through focus groups at 8 institutions.

**Phase 2**

- Nationwide survey of 371 total faculty, administrators, and thought leaders across 273 institutions
  - 54% public and 46% private 4-year institutions
  - Working across student affairs (47%), academic affairs (25%), student success (15%), enrollment management (7%), and diversity and inclusion (6%)
82% of institutions surveyed offer programs and/or services that specifically support first-generation students*

“We are socialized into the complexity of higher education institutions, but an audit into internal processes can reveal many potential improvements to break down barriers for first-generation students.”

Leslie Pendleton, Senior Director, Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars Program, University of Florida
The First-generation Identity
The First-generation Identity

- Defining to align, design, and measure
- Understanding, to serve students better
- Considering intersectionality
- Shifting to an asset-based lens
Defining First-generation

Percentage of institutions with a formal definition of first-generation

Which most closely aligns with your institutional definition of first-generation college student?

- Neither parent or guardian earned a four-year college degree: 56%
- Neither parent earned a four-year college degree from an institution in the U.S.: 15%
- Neither biological parent earned a four-year college degree: 12%
- Neither parent entered any form of higher education: 8%
- Neither parent completed education beyond the associate/two-year degree: 2%
- Neither parent or guardian with primary influence on the student at age 16 earned a four-year college degree: 1%
- Other: 6%
"I have a moral responsibility that’s fallen upon me especially since I am the only child. I don’t have any other options of someone else to lean on. It falls on me. First-generation means I have to get it done."

Anna, first-year, first-generation student, University of Texas, Arlington

"I think when I realized I was first-gen was when I came and I moved in, in the fall, by myself. And everybody during move-in day was with their parents, and all of my suitemates had people, had carloads of stuff, and I had a suitcase"

Molly, first-year, first-generation student, Cornell University
Intersectionality - or “First-gen Plus”

Students may be

- first-generation
- first-generation + minority
- first-generation + LGBTQI
- first-generation + low-income...

A driving factor for where support programs reside on a campus, but assumptions can lead to gaps and misconceptions

Diversity of identities within “first-generation” is a mobilizing force across institutions

- Faculty and staff who were first-generation themselves are highly engaged.
- The broad representation of the first-generation identity can serve as a powerful catalyst for greater institutional change.
Shifting from a Deficit to Asset-Based Lens

“We need to help first-generation students understand the assets they bring to the academy, their job, and society so that they can begin to see that being an outsider is an asset”

William Durden, President Emeritus, Dickinson College

- The challenges first-generation students face are too often perceived as shortcomings of the students themselves
- Programs are shifting from “shortcomings” interventions to celebrating and enhancing the unique assets of first-generation students
- Institutional culture shift - contributing to a feeling of belonging and inclusion
College-students come to universities and colleges with multiple intersecting identities (Shields, 2008).
Percentage of Undergraduates in U.S.

Student Veterans: 5%
First-generation College Students: 33%

Ithaka S+R, 2019
U.S. Department of Education, 2014
Student veterans are more likely to be first-generation than their non-veteran peers.

>60%

National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE]
# Parallel Characteristics

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT VETERANS</th>
<th>FIRST-GEN STUDENTS</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Hidden Identity</td>
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<td>- Unfamiliar with College Culture</td>
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<td>- Unfamiliar with Student Role</td>
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<td>- Challenges in Transition</td>
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<td>- Higher representation of Non-traditional Age</td>
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<td>- Student of Color</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Low-income</td>
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<td>- Working Full- or Part-time</td>
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<td>- Desire for Structure</td>
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Parallel Experiences: First-gen Students and Student Veterans

IMPOSTER PHENOMENON

What I Know

What I Think

Others Know
Themes: First-generation Student Veterans

- Community
- Guidance
- Academic Success Strategies
- Connections
Desire for Community
“Being a first-generation student veteran was challenging because we don’t necessarily identify with many of our peers. We are often older than them, and as vets we tend to keep to ourselves. As undergraduates, the veterans program on campus helped us connect with other vets and hold each other accountable academically. You meet people who share similar views and help each other navigate through the college experience.”

Jorge Hernandez, Ph.D.* (Army)
First-generation Student Veteran
Graduate Student
University of Illinois at Chicago
“I feel like the whole community is involved in my goals and committed to my success.”

Joseph (Army) First-generation Student Veteran Graduate Student North Central College

“I can honestly say the community here has always been great. I was initially worried about how I would fit in - with me being a veteran and having been out of school for years - but due to the small town atmosphere this campus has, I feel like I’ve always been here.”

Paul (USMC) First-generation Student Veteran Undergraduate Student, North Central College
Desire for Guidance

- Specialized Advising
- One-on-one mentoring
- Identifying & Translating Strengths gained during the military
- Veteran Success Team
I came to NC thinking I would feel isolated in being first-gen and military-affiliated. It was reassuring to learn that there was a Student Veterans Alliance and a first-gen program. Because of these organizations, I feel connected to - and supported by - others in the NC community. Without these organizations, I may not have been able to meet and form connections with other students and faculty that are military affiliated and/or first-gen.

TaCoya H (Army reservist/ROTC cadet)
First-gen Student Veteran
Desire for Academic Success Strategies

• Time Management
• Info in VRC and Welcome Folder
  – The Writing Center
  – The Speaking Center
  – Tutoring
• University Studies for Student Veterans USSV
Understanding What it Means for First-gen Student Veterans

The guidance provided by the veteran community and first-gen community helped guide me through the chaos of college. I needed to learn how to adjust to civilian life and to be a successful as a college student because my parents and brothers didn’t go to college.

Justin S (Army)
First-gen Student Veteran
North Central College
Desire for Connections

Matthew Burden
Vice President of Information and Technology, Student Veteran Mentor and U.S. Army Veteran

Linkedin

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The staff in the Veteran & Military Student Services provided multiple networking opportunities that helped me tremendously as graduation approached.

Andrew (Air Force)  First-generation Student Veteran Graduate Student
North Central College

“I feel like the whole community is involved in my goals and committed to my success.”

Joseph (Army) First-generation Student Veteran Graduate Student
North Central College
Questions/Comments/Discussion

Julie Carballo
North Central College
jmcarballo@noctrl.edu
630-637-5155

Deana Waintraub Stafford
Center for First-generation Student Success, NASPA
dstafford@naspa.org
References


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References


Resources

- NASPA Veterans Knowledge Community
- Student Veterans of America
- Post-Secondary National Policy Institute
- VA Campus Toolkit
- National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST of SVA)
- Institute for Veterans and Military Families