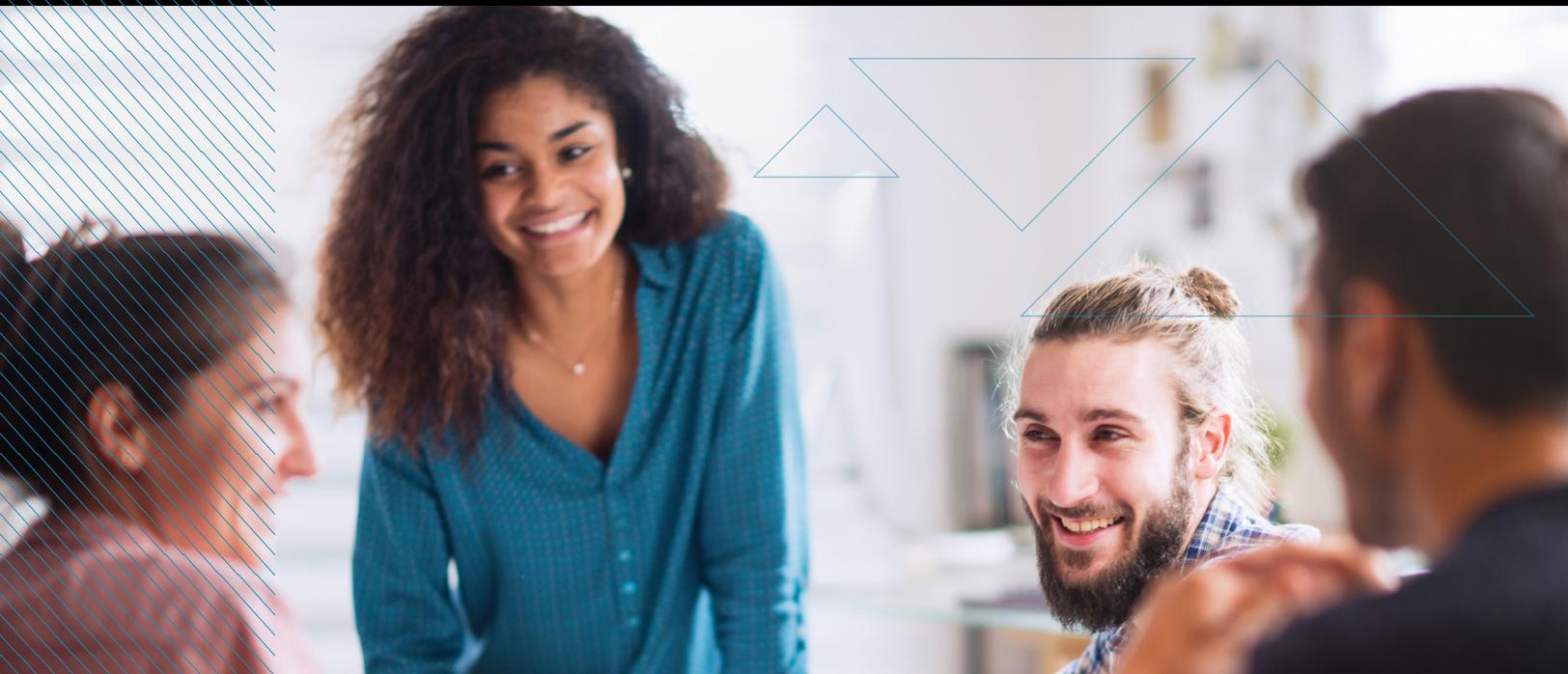




RESOURCE GUIDE

SUPPORTING FIRST-GEN GRADUATE,
PROFESSIONAL, OR DOCTORAL STUDENTS



Matthew Newlin, EdD

ABOUT THE CENTER

Established in June 2017 as an initiative of NASPA and The Suder Foundation, the [Center for First-generation Student Success](#) (Center) drives innovation and advocacy as 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. As college and university leaders and practitioners are actively seeking avenues to best meet the specific needs of first-generation students, the Center leads scholarly discussion, information sharing, networking, and program development and relies upon alignment with [four strategic priority areas](#) for success.

ABOUT RESOURCE GUIDES

In collaboration with experts in the field, the Center for First-generation Student Success has curated resource guides covering a variety of topics specific to first-generation student success. The purpose of the resource guides is to offer supplemental items and create stronger connections to topics covered. Each will include an overview, recommendations, a list of articles and/or examples featuring helpful approaches, and references. To remain current, these resource guides will be updated periodically.

AUTHOR



Matt Newlin, EdD, is a practitioner and educator with more than 15 years' experience supporting and advocating for first-generation and low-income students. Matt most recently served as director of rural initiatives with College Advising Corps (CAC) where he worked to increase postsecondary enrollment for students from rural and small-town communities.

Prior to CAC, Matt worked at both public and private universities in a variety of student affairs and enrollment management positions. At the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University he established the school's first need-based scholarship; a first-generation student support program; and campus wide financial literacy initiatives.

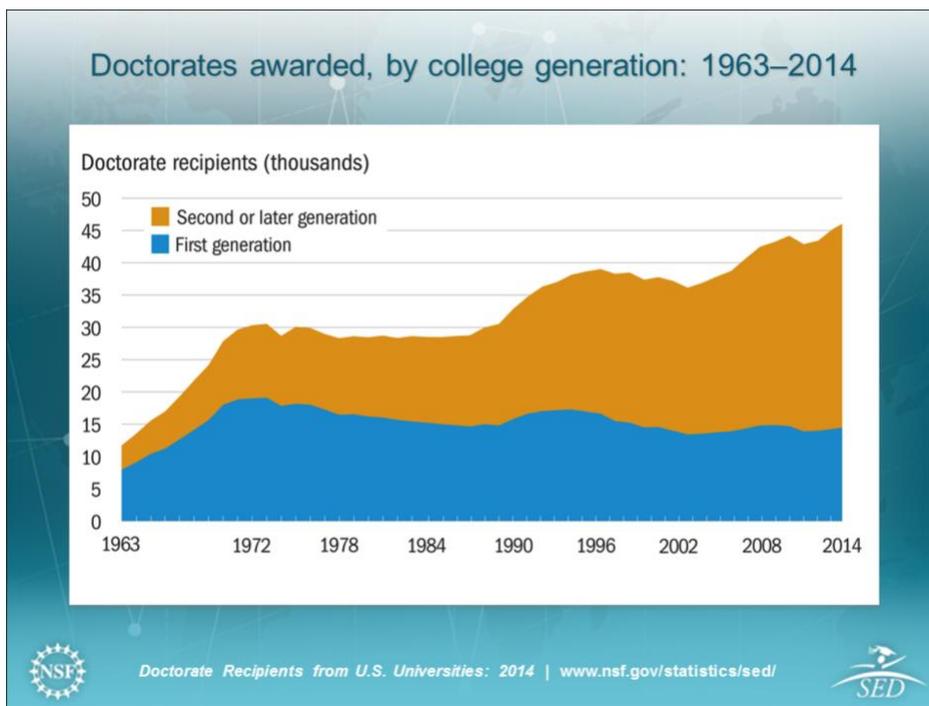
Matt holds a Doctor of Education in higher education leadership from Maryville University, a Master of Education in higher education from the University of Missouri–St. Louis, and two Bachelor of Arts degrees (Communication and English) from the University of Missouri–Columbia. Learn more about Matt by visiting mattnewlin.com.

OVERVIEW

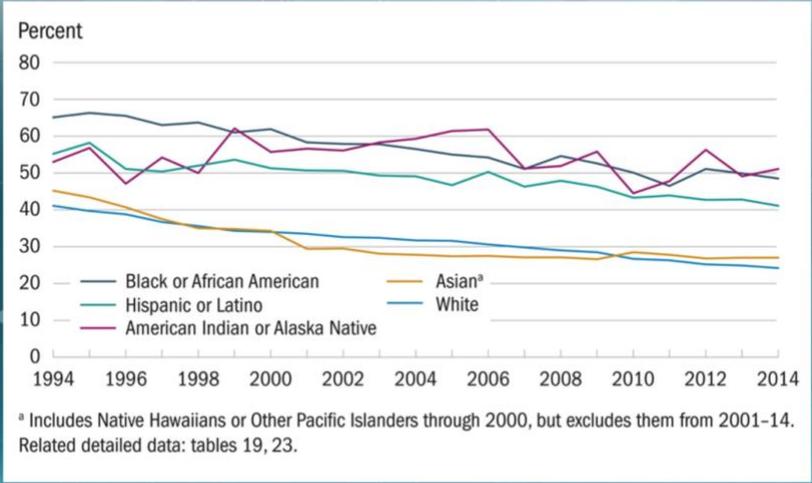
First-generation students who pursue education beyond the baccalaureate level is still an under researched topic, but the extant literature available is valuable to practitioners. Research has found that first-generation students are more likely to be from underrepresented groups (Roksa et al., 2018) and that race and gender can exacerbate the challenges first-generation students face in graduate programs (Holley & Gardner, 2012). These challenges can include cultural expectations and familial obligations (Lester Leyva, 2011; Martinez, 2018; Willison & Gibson, 2011), as well as finding a community of peers and feeling a sense of belonging (Gardner, 2013; Martinez, 2018).

Practical degrees with real-world impact tend to attract first-generation students (Holley & Gardner, 2012; Gardner, 2013), who often seek programs with clear career paths. Academic preparation is critical for first-generation students pursuing graduate degrees, and practitioners should identify ways to prepare students for the rigor of graduate-level work. Beneficial supports include formal mentoring programs (Piatt et al., 2019), summer institutes and/or bridge programs (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016), and research opportunities (Willison & Gibson, 2011).

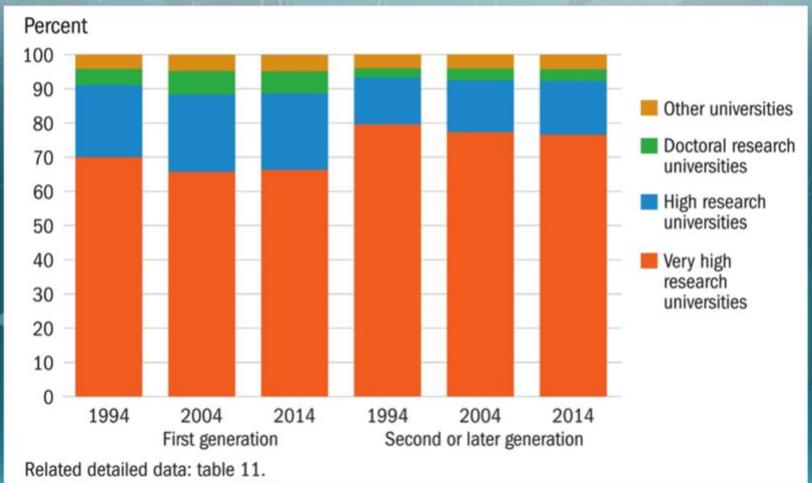
In 2014, the [National Science Foundation \(NSF\)](#) demonstrated the disparity in first-generation student enrollment at the graduate level, depicted in the visuals below:



U.S. citizen or permanent resident doctorate recipients who were first-generation college graduates, by ethnicity and race: 1994–2014



Doctoral institution type, by college generation: 1994, 2004, 2014



RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is critical that institutions utilize an [asset-based](#) framework when developing campus resources, programs, and services for first-generation students. [Dr. Africa Hands](#) (2020) states:

An asset-based approach intentionally considers the abilities and knowledge that students carry with them based on their lived experiences and that may be engaged in the classroom. This includes things like a students' resourcefulness, self-reliance, problem-solving, ability to create information networks, optimism, goal-orientation, and experience with formal systems.

What if instead of the 'don't haves,' we acknowledge and nurture the 'do haves'?
- To the extent possible, do not employ a [deficit mindset](#) when creating programs or events for first-generation students pursuing graduate school. Help them understand how they will improve the quality of the school or program they attend by bringing new perspectives and backgrounds to an often very homogeneous environment. By helping them build their confidence, you will increase the likelihood they'll apply to more prestigious or elite institutions, where first-generation students are the most underrepresented.
- Create a "[jargon dictionary](#)" to which advisors and students can refer during meetings, workshops, or informal conversations. Graduate school is arguably more jargon-filled than undergraduate programs because students will be expected to understand universal terminology (e.g., dissertation, field research, assistantship) as well as discipline-specific terms and acronyms that can vary from school to school.
 - Review marketing materials and curriculum guides for your institution's graduate programs. Pull out common and not-so-common terminology to start building your dictionary.
 - If there is a centralized whiteboard, Slack chain, or social media platform, encourage students, faculty, and staff to add to a running list of jargon terms. To get students to participate, offer them incentives to add to the list as they are researching graduate schools.

- It is not always easy to [define](#) who is a first-generation student; this can be especially difficult for graduate schools, which have a large number of international students. Institutions need to establish a clear definition for who is considered a first-generation graduate student. Here are some things to consider:
 - Is your institution following the [federal guideline](#) (i.e., “An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree”) or institutional definitions?
 - If a parent completed “some college,” would that disqualify a student to be considered first-generation?
 - If the parent(s) completed a bachelor’s degree in another country, does that qualify the student as first-generation?
 - At the graduate level, does first-generation mean “first to complete a bachelor’s degree” or “first to complete a graduate degree”?
 - Remember: The graduate school experience is *very* different from the undergraduate experience; often parents’ cultural capital does not translate to the graduate-school environment.

- Work with the faculty senate (or faculty governance body) and faculty in various departments to build undergraduate research opportunities for first-generation students considering graduate school. In particular, seek out faculty who are first-generation and/or whose research interests focus on underrepresented students or populations.
 - One way to incentivize faculty participation is to suggest that a current undergraduate could help research and apply for grant opportunities for this type of position.
 - Work with the financial aid office to identify and/or create federal work-study positions that enable students to work closely with faculty. Keep an updated list available for students to check.

- Mentoring can have a significant impact on the likelihood of graduate enrollment. Develop a mentoring program that includes staff and faculty who identify as first-generation college students or graduates. Create formal and informal opportunities for students to engage with mentors and learn about their journey to and through graduate school.
 - Work with organizations such as the [National Research Mentoring Network](#) and the [National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity](#) to build

programs that address the needs of future graduate students.

- Develop graduate-school preview events. Send out surveys to students to identify the most common degrees and/or fields of study they are considering. Work with the faculty and academic departments/schools at your institution to host events or workshops where students can learn about what to expect in that type graduate program.
 - Be careful that the admissions team for those programs do not see this a recruiting opportunity for prospective students. Work directly with the academic affairs department to invite faculty and research staff.
 - Identify both “big name” faculty and faculty early in their careers to speak to students. Assistant professors and those recently out of graduate school can share timely insights into what graduate school was like for them.
- Financial aid is crucial to most graduate students. Work with your financial aid office – particularly if there are individuals who work directly with graduate students – to host workshops on:
 - Applying for financial aid as a graduate student
 - Comparing cost among several graduate programs
 - Understanding loan repayment
 - Budgeting and building credit
 - Fellowships and assistantships
 - Balancing part-time employment and graduate school

These programs can help give students an advantage when they enroll. Additionally, when they begin researching graduate schools, they will know which questions to ask and what information they need to seek out.

- One of the most intimidating parts of graduate school is the inevitable research requirement. To assuage your students’ fears – and build their confidence – work with the institutional research office, faculty, research centers, grant writers and so on, to develop workshops focused on graduate-level research. Introduce common types of research methodologies (e.g., quantitative vs. qualitative, mixed methods), statistical software, writing literature reviews, and other topics. You will not make your students experts, but you will expose them to common words, phrases, and tools that will make them feel more prepared when they begin school.

- The [McNair Scholars program](#) is a federally funded TRIO program that aims to prepare first-generation and low-income students for doctoral studies through undergraduate research opportunities. If there is not a McNair Scholars program on your campus, find [regional organizations](#) that can help build graduate-school preparation programs for your students.

RESOURCES

- The Center will soon release a comprehensive toolkit that is turnkey and deliverable in multiple ways. This offering will be available for purchase by visiting the [First Scholars page](#).
- Books for students and practitioners: The following are written with current and future students in mind; however, both offer excellent insight into the hidden curriculum and challenges graduate students face. Students affairs professionals should be familiar with these resources and encourage students to read them. Institutions might consider creating a lending library for students with financial constraints.
 - [Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum](#) by Jessica McCrory Calarco, PhD
 - [Grad School Essentials: A Crash Course in Scholarly Skills](#) by Zachary Stone, PhD
- Institutional Examples:
 - University of Washington Graduate School - [Core Programs for First-Generation Graduate Students](#)
 - UCLA First to Go - [First-Generation Graduate Student Council](#)
 - UNC - Chapel Hill Graduate School - [Carolina Grad Student FIRSTS](#)
 - UCSF Student Academic Affairs - [First Generation Support Services](#)
- [TheSociologyPhDandMe](#)
- [Get a Life, PhD](#)
- [RaulPacheco.org](#)
- [Universities Look to Add More Support For First-Generation Graduate Students](#) from EdSurge
- [The Hidden Challenges for Successful First-Generation Ph.D.s](#) from Inside Higher Ed
- Handling toxic environments and bullying:
 - [Graduate School Should Be Challenging, Not Traumatic](#)
 - [The Emotional Toll of Grad School](#)
 - [A Very Mixed Record on Grad Student Mental Health](#)
 - Additionally, work with the ombudsperson assigned to graduate students at your institution to provide resources and support to students.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The Association of American Medical Colleges released a [toolkit](#) for first-generation medical students.
- [Empowering First-Generation College Students](#) Facebook Group
- Twitter Handles: [@FirstGen_Juice](#) and [@firstgendocs](#)
- Podcasts:
 - [BLK + IN GRAD SCHOOL](#)
 - [Admissions Straight Talk for Grad School Applicants](#)
 - [Educate Me: Surviving and Thriving in Graduate School](#)
 - [The Unlikely Academic](#)
 - [Grad School Femtoring](#)
 - [How to Do Grad School](#)
 - [#CiteBlackWomen](#)

The Center for First-generation Student Success, NASPA, does not endorse any third-party services; it is recommended that institutions appropriately vet any third-party platform or service.

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