Supporting First-Generation University Students Series
PART 1: Promoting Academic Success

A first-generation student is identified as a US student whose parents/guardians have not received a four-year, US bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). 42% of UC Davis students self-identify as first-generation students (UC Davis Undergraduate Admissions and UC Info Center, Fall 2015). Numerous studies have indicated that first-generation students tend to experience a variety of educational, financial, and social barriers that make successful completion of a bachelor's degree more difficult than for their continuing-generation peers (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Covarrubias & Fryberg 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Stephens et al., 2012). However, when faculty partner with administrators and educational support staff, there is much than can be done to ensure the success of first-generation students.

See first-generation students as pioneers in higher education

One important way to better support first-generation students is to modify the way we think about them, including our perceptions of the ways their prior experiences and backgrounds influence their engagement (Greenwald, 2012). Greenwald (2012) argues that by thinking of first-generation students as "pioneers" in their families and their communities, we can better recognize the unique skills and experiences they bring to our classrooms. An example of how you might do this in your own classroom is to consider what it means to be a first-generation student for different students in your class. The first-generation experience is often perceived to be similar for all such classified students. However, it's important to recognize that first-generation students are also a diverse group in itself (Engle & Tinto, 2008): some are low-income, some are minority/non-White, some are disabled, some are English Learners, some may be undocumented. Keep in mind that not all students share all of the same ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural characteristics.

Recognize some of your students' current life situations

Engle & Tinto (2008) emphasize the fact that first-generation students face a variety of extracurricular challenges to completing a bachelor's degree.

Challenges	Explanations	Teaching Suggestions
Extensive and diverse demands on their time outside of school	First-generation students often commute, work many hours, and have unusual schedules. They may have part-time enrollment status, interruptions in their enrollment, and occasional impediments to their persistence.	Help students with time management by designing assignments and timelines that allow for research or collaboration to be done outside of class or off-campus. Do not require the use of resources that are limited or only available at certain times.
May face serious financial hardships	Be aware that first-generation students may face financial issues that are similar and different from other students.	Unless students need to buy particular supplies or apps for your class, be cognizant of additional financial burdens. For example, consider using open source software (e.g., R), open source textbooks, and other free course materials if possible.
The sense that they don't fit in at home or at school	First-generation students are developing a new set of language skills, academic skills, and beliefs as they learn to be college students. These may be different from those present in their families and communities.	Be aware that some students may hold contradictory feelings as they may sometimes believe that they do not fully fit in either academia or back in their communities.

They may be bi/multilingual and/or multi-dialectal	Some first-generation students may be bi/multilingual in English and another language(s), or may speak in different dialects in their communities and at home.	Support learning of academic language in your class by clarifying terminology, using synonyms, and explaining the different linguistic demands of academic genres in your discipline.

The role of faculty interaction in helping first-generation students succeed

First-generation, college students typically apply to universities and undertake university study without guidance and acculturation from parents and family members who already attended and/or graduated from college. Therefore, their interactions with faculty represent an important source of information on the occluded aspects of college life, as well as guidance on academic preparations, and how to gain social and cultural capital to become successful college students. In fact, interactions with faculty have been shown to have a positive impact on retention of first-generation students in college (Wang, 2012, 2014).

Challenges	Explanations	Teaching Suggestions
May lack a clear sense of how college differs from high school	Some first-generation students may not clearly understand how college differs from high school, or may lack a clear sense of what they need to do in order to succeed in a college class. Additionally, the initial learning curve for first-generation students may be steeper than it is for students who come from college-educated families.	Transparent explanations of course outcomes and expectations is critical in helping first-generation students be successful (Winkelmes et al., 2016). Make sure to clearly outline your expectations in your syllabus, assignment sheets, and other course material, and allow plenty of time for questions. Additionally, Wang (2014) suggests that teachers should offer specific advice on how to succeed in their class, and help first-generation students connect with resources around campus (e.g., TRiO, SASC).
May lack familiarity with university culture	Many first-generation students may lack familiarity with the culture and expectations of the university. As such, some first-generation students may experience "imposter syndrome," or feel confusion, intimidation, stress, self-doubt, and low confidence as a result of their lack of familiarity.	Try to emphasize campus resources such as Counseling Services that can help students manage the stress of being in the new environment of the university. If you feel that a student may need more support, reach out to them or contact their advisor if possible.
May lack knowledge or confidence in approaching faculty	First-generation students may not be familiar with the concept of establishing personal relationships with their professor or teaching assistants.	Make sure that students know you and/or your TAs are available to talk if needed (in class, after class, and/or during office hours), and try to be as welcoming as possible towards students so that they feel more comfortable reaching out. It can also help to share that the purpose of office hours is to build supportive relationships between instructors/TAs and students, so that students feel less timid about stopping by.

Adapted from: Lohman, 2015

Additional Resources
- *Q&A: Stanford's Hazel Markus*
- Grand Valley State University Resource on First Generation Students
- *First generation: Best practices for faculty. [UC Irvine]*
- *First year experience. [UCLA]*

- "I fit in neither place." Article from Zamudio-Suarez in *The Chronicle of Higher Education.*

Citation
Center for Educational Effectiveness [CEE]. (2018). Supporting First-Generation University Students Series. *Just-in-Time Teaching Resources.* Retrieved from https://cee.ucdavis.edu/JITT

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Supporting First-Generation University Students Series
PART 2: Strategies for Transparent Teaching

Engle & Tinto (2008) argue that "due to the changing demographics of the United States, we must focus our efforts on improving postsecondary access and success among those populations who have previously been underrepresented in higher education, namely low-income and minority students, many of whom will be the first in their families to go to college" (p. 2). Improving the educational outcomes of first-generation students is an important responsibility shared by faculty, staff, and administrators, and doing so means implementing pedagogical strategies that will ultimately benefit all types of students (i.e., diverse students, domestic students, international students, transfer students, and English Learners).

Clarify your expectations
In their study, Collier & Morgan (2008) found that there are often vast differences in perspectives between faculty and students on expectations for the classroom. The researchers emphasize the importance of helping first-generation student learn to master the role of being a college student. For example:

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Communicate high expectations	Communicate high expectations for all of your students, in a supportive way. For first-generation students, communicate that they belong in university and that they are capable of achieving at the highest levels.
Explain your teaching approach	Briefly explain your teaching approach (Winkelmes et al., 2016). This helps students understand what they are expected to do to succeed and how your teaching approach will help them learn.
Clarify activities	Clarify the different activities that make up your class, as well as expectations for these activities (e.g., lecture, sections, labs, office hours).
Model expectations	Model what you expect students to do so that students can perform in ways that meet your high expectations.

Make your assignments and exams more transparent and culturally inclusive
Winkelmes et al. (2016) found that providing greater transparency on assignments significantly improved academic outcomes for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students. Some strategies for increasing transparency include:

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Be explicit with your expectations	Be explicit about what you expect student to do for different assignments and how to prepare for exams. Provide outlines, study guides, and examples of strong/weak work. Check if your exam questions define the learning outcome or performance to be assessed, specify the scope of content to be covered, and use non-ambiguous, simple language. Develop and use rubrics for all your graded assignments, and share these rubrics with your students early (Stevens & Levi., 2005).
Check for bias in assignment and exam designs	Check your assignments and exams for clarity, as well as bias related to ethnicity, gender, culture, religion, class, language, or processes. Consider if an exam assumes prior cultural knowledge and/or US-specific cultural knowledge (that was not covered in class or in the content). Have a colleague or teaching assistant read and/or complete the exam and provide you with feedback.

Develop students critical analysis skills	Help students understand what it means to evaluate and critique ideas. Some first-generation students may come from socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds that see criticism as a personal attack to authority. Some first-generation students may not be familiar with the academic process of evaluating and critiquing ideas that is part of the US college culture.

Apply principles of effective adult learning to your teaching

The principles of effective adult learning emphasize the value of students' prior life and non-traditional learning experiences. Stephens et al. (2015) found that participants from underrepresented backgrounds in their study that were encouraged to reflect on their experiences learned to perceive the challenges and obstacles they faced in college as sources of strength. Here are a few strategies you can implement in your own classroom:

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Emphasize learning outcomes	Winkelmes et al., 2016 suggests emphasizing the learning outcomes of your course, and explaining how specific tasks/projects are designed to help students achieve those outcomes. Be transparent in communicating the learning outcomes in your syllabus, teaching materials (e.g., lecture slides, lesson plans, etc.), and assignments.
	Have a discussion with your students about what they will know, what they will be able to do, and the types of attitudes and social/career skills that they will develop by the end of your course. Give your students time to ask questions and/or clarify your expectations. Have students write personal and career goals that they want to achieve during the term, and then have them connect those goals to the learning outcomes of your course.
Implement authentic activities and assignments	Consider designing your course around authentic assignments and practical tasks. The goal of these assignments are to help students not only understand what they are learning, but why they are learning it, and how it will apply to their work in the future. For example, inquiry- or problem-based projects provide students with opportunities to engage in the types of writing and problem-solving common in their disciplines or careers, and could allow students to interact with established members of their discipline or professionals in their career area.
	Also consider using practical projects that give students something they can take with them from your course (e.g., research they might continue in the future, documents they can use later, etc.). Focus on transferable skills that advance critical thinking and problem-solving for life outside the university.
Scaffold learning experiences	Provide structured and/or scaffolded learning experiences to help students move to more independent problem solving and learning. For example, you could provide more structure in the beginning of the course when students are less confident, and then let them take more responsibility for their learning as the term progresses.
Help students make connections between your class and their major/minor	Help students understand how your class fits into a major/minor and into students' academic and professional preparation. Collier & Morgan (2008) emphasize that first-generation students may be missing knowledge of university culture that their continuing-generation peers may already have, such as an understanding of the connections between course, majors/minors, disciplines, and career paths.
Encourage students to make use of their prior knowledge and experiences	Tap into students' prior experiences and prior knowledge and help them explore how they can apply it to the new content. First-generation students often have valuable knowledge and experience that they can apply to the classroom if invited to do so.

Adapted from: Lohman, 2015

Additional Resources
- *Q&A: Stanford's Hazel Markus*
- Grand Valley State University Resource on First Generation Students
- *First generation: Best practices for faculty. [UC Irvine]*
- *First year experience. [UCLA]*
- "I fit in neither place." Article from Zamudio-Suarez in *The Chronicle of Higher Education.*

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Wibrowski, C. R., Matthews, W. K., & Kitsantas, A. (2016). The role of a skills learning support program on first-generation college students' self-regulation, motivation, and academic achievement: A longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 0*(0), 1-16.

Winkelmes, M. A., Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J., & Weavil, K. H. (2016). A teaching intervention that increases underserved college students' success. *Peer Review, 18*(1/2), 31-36.

Supporting First-Generation University Students Series
PART 3: Strategies for Encouraging Academic Engagement

Pascarella et al. (2004) emphasize the importance of academic and classroom engagement for first-generation students. They contend that first-generation students may benefit from their academic experiences comparatively more to their continuing-generation peers because these experiences build cultural capital they might otherwise not have access to (Pascarella et al., 2004). Additionally, access to consistent, timely feedback can help first-generation students as they acclimate to the differing demands associated with academic work in college. Here are a few ways you can promote engagement in your classroom, while also encouraging students to access and utilize feedback:

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Encourage students to set goals	Encourage students to set their own learning goals and develop a personal plan for achieving them. Have them reflect on those goals throughout the term, so that they can see their own progress.
Implement reflection activities	Incorporate student reflection, self-assessment, and peer-review activities. These type of activities allow students to engage actively not only with their own learning process, but their peers' as well.
Incorporate more active and collaborative learning	Implement active learning activities, and provide students with numerous opportunities for collaboration. See our resources on active and collaborative learning (linked below in Additional Resources).
Help students relate course objectives to their lives	Motivate students by helping them see how course materials and course experiences may relate to their lives and goals, as well as those of their families and communities
Create opportunities for outside engagement	Direct students to activities that blend personal and community engagement, such as service learning, undergraduate research, and internships

Encourage students to seek help and feedback
Current research on supporting the retention of first-generation students emphasizes the importance of providing students with resources for accessing academic support, both inside and outside of your classroom (Brazil-Cruz & Martinez, 2016; Coffman, 2011; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Swecker, Fifoit, & Searby, 2013; Wibrowski, Matthews, & Kitsantas, 2016). Some strategies for this include:

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Make feedback an important part of class	Make help- and feedback-seeking an integral part of your class activities. Help students see that it is normal to be vulnerable, seek support, and receive feedback. See our series on "Effective Feedback" for more suggestions on this.
Point students to other resources on campus	Be aware that many students may lack knowledge about, and access to, academic resources such as the Library. Plan for an activity that introduces students to the Library, its services, and the type of help that they can receive from a librarian.
	Help students navigate the higher education system and identify resources where they can receive the help. Include information on various university support services in your syllabus (e.g., SASC Writing Assistance, Student

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- "I fit in neither place." Article from Zamudio-Suarez in *The Chronicle of Higher Education.*

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Winkelmes, M. A., Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J., & Weavil, K. H. (2016). A teaching intervention that increases underserved college students' success. *Peer Review, 18*(1/2), 31-36.

Supporting First-Generation University Students Series
PART 4: Fostering Social and Community Integration

Engle & Tinto (2008) highlight the challenges first-generation students face in becoming engaged socially in campus life, with barriers ranging from hours spent working off-campus for financial reasons, to difficulties adjusting to the emphasis on independence that is a hallmark of university culture. Yet, in their study, Soria & Stebleton (2012) found that first-generation students were more likely to be academically engaged if they felt like they belonged, arguing further that "the greater the sense of belonging to the academic and social community for students, the more likely it is that students will persist toward graduation" (p. 681). Here are a few suggestions on how to foster social and community integration for first-generation students:

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Design your class to fit a diverse range of student needs	Consider that students from college-educated families and those who are first-generation may understand and approach the classroom in vastly different ways, and may therefore have different needs.
Implement active and collaborative activities	Consider incorporating collaborative, active learning activities so that students can become acculturated to their peers and establish new friendships. Research has found that first-generation students may especially benefit from collaborative learning opportunities (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Soria & Stebleton, 2012, Loes et al., 2017). For examples of active learning activities, see our resource series titled "Activating Your Lecture" and "Strategies for Covering Content"
Encourage students to work with a variety of their peers in class	Implement active learning activities that ask students to collaborate with a variety of their peers, and not just their friends in class. Monitor the language that is used in class so that it does not create in-groups and out-groups in terms of prior academic experiences
Create opportunities for personal relevance	Have students discuss personal interests and personally-relevant activities, like extracurricular activities, volunteering, service-learning, and discipline-specific organizations and activities.
Encourage networking and professional development	Show interest in your students' extracurricular activities and professional networking efforts. This could include building a service learning component into your course, or offering extra credit for attending networking events or meeting with professionals in the field. Also, engage with students with outside-of-class activities, such as poster days, presentation opportunities, competitions, professional organizations, and independent study.
Help students build networks of support	Encourage all students to create networks of support (i.e., to "shrink" a larger campus into a more manageable community). Make sure they are aware of various cultural, ethnic, religious, hobby, or interest clubs on campus that can offer social and academic support.
If first-generation, self-identify	If you are a first-generation faculty member, publicly identify yourself as such and invite students to ask questions and learn more about your academic journey or visit you during office hours

Additionally, Stephens et al. (2012) found that the emphasis on independence in college can have adverse effects on first-generation students, who may come from community-based backgrounds where interdependence and collectivism is emphasized. To mitigate this:

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Help students balance school and home	First-generation students may have a strong sense of responsibility to their families (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Moreno, 2016). Show understanding as students learn how to best balance their school needs with their family needs.
Foster independence *and* community membership	Encourage students to explore how they can focus on their independent goals *and* still be part of the academic community and of their communities (Covarrubias, Herrmann, & Fryberg, 2016).
Recognize students strengths	Recognize and validate first-generation students' common strengths, such as a pioneering spirit, resilience, teamwork, and a strong commitment to earning a professional degree.

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