

SUPPORTING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

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CollegeWeek **Live**



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INTRODUCTION

Higher education expands opportunities for students, yet making the transition to college proves difficult for many underserved populations. The percentage of first-generation students enrolling in four-year institutions has steadily declined since 1971, according to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program.

School counselors can play a key role in supporting first-generation students in the path to college. In fact, first-generation students report that they are likely to rely on the advice of a high school counselor in deciding to attend a particular university. The challenge for counselors is finding the time to give each student individual attention. Most high school counselors are supporting a large volume of students and managing myriad responsibilities. Although the American School Counselor Association recommends one counselor for every 250 students, the average counselor works with upwards of 471 students a year.

Fortunately, there are many wonderful programs available to augment counselors' great work. In this e-book, we'll share proven methods for helping first-generation students to get accepted and to succeed in college.

PREP STUDENTS BEFORE HIGH SCHOOL



“It’s easy to assume that a student isn’t interested in college if they haven’t come forward for help,” said Karin Elliott, Executive Director for the National Partnership for Educational Access. “However, counseling first-generation students is different than it is for students whose family members have experience attending college. Often first-generation families don’t know what to ask when it comes to preparing for college.”

To overcome these issues, educators should help students to see the value of a college education before they get to high school. “Underserved students don’t have access to as many college resources,” said Elliott. “Starting from a very early age, if they’re not getting into the classes they need to progress, or they are facing issues at home, they get further and further behind.”

To help prevent these problems, educators are beginning to talk about college to elementary school students. “It’s a strategy that changes students’ aspirations,” said Elizabeth Morgan, Director of External Relations for National College Access Network. For example:

- ✎ The Center for Educational Partnerships at UC Berkeley offers vocabulary lessons and fun “college day” lesson plans that are part of an elementary school curriculum.
- ✎ Organizations like the College Foundation of North Carolina offer college planning timelines and animated online tools that educators can use to get students thinking about college and career goals early on.
- ✎ The Chicago Public School System created classroom lessons that expose elementary school children to college and career pathways they may not have encountered in their community.

GIVE PARENTS MULTIPLE OPTIONS TO GET INVOLVED

Reaching parents of first-generation students often requires some ingenuity. Here are some tips on helping parents to be part of the process.

Encourage parents to spend time at their child's high school. “Giving parents opportunities to get involved after school or on weekends can make a huge difference in how well their child does in school,” said Juan Garcia, Assistant Vice President for ACT, Inc. “However, parents who aren’t fluent in English may be reluctant to get involved in their child’s school, or may simply be unaware that there are opportunities to do so. In some cultures, parents aren’t asked to go to the school unless their child is in trouble. High schools may send flyers home with students about a meeting, but it’s helpful to take the extra step to make a personal phone call or email to make these parents feel welcome and part of the community.”

Look beyond school hours. Parents of first-generation students often work long hours, making it difficult to participate in college information sessions during the day. For added convenience, many high school counselors invite parents to join evening information sessions or online meetings where they can log in from home or from their mobile device. This could include an early breakfast meeting to learn how to complete the FAFSA, an online college fair where parents can speak with admissions counselors from multiple colleges, or one-on-one sessions with a high school counselor where parents can share individual concerns and questions. Some counselors even take the extra step to speak about college opportunities at local church groups and community get-togethers.



🎓 **Go where the parents are.** ACT partnered with a local high school counselor to host an information table at a local plant that employed many area parents. They stayed on-site through three work shifts, ensuring that all parents had an opportunity to learn about college opportunities for their children. More than 200 parents attended the information session. “We were welcomed with open arms,” Garcia said. “The parents were motivated to get their kids into school. They don’t want their children having to work the same kinds of jobs they have.”

🎓 **Demonstrate the value of a college education.** “Let parents know that their child is a great student and why earning a degree will benefit them,” said Chelsea

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🎓 **Break through language barriers.** Be sure there’s someone at the school or within your network of college organizations who is fluent in the parents’ native language and can help them navigate the complexities of college admissions.

M. Jones, Student Support Associate for the nonprofit Center for Student Opportunity. “Some high school students are already working and taking care of younger siblings, so it’s understandable for parents to be concerned about the impact on the family if they attend college. High school counselors can reassure parents that their child can succeed in college, and reinforce the long-term financial benefits of the child having a degree.”



PARTNER WITH LIKE-MINDED ORGANIZATIONS

“**P**eople say that finances are a barrier to college, but there’s a lot of financial aid available,” said Elizabeth Morgan, Director of External Relations for National College Access Network. “Students can find affordable pathways if they get the right advice. Often counselors may direct low-income students to community colleges, but there may be four-year universities that offer more financial aid. You just need to know where to look.”

“Information is power,” said Garcia. “You can help your students by spreading the word about free community resources available to them.” For example:

- 🎓 10,000 Degrees offers workshops and one-on-one sessions to help students select a college and complete applications for enrollment and financial aid.
- 🎓 I’m First helps first-generation students access institutions that offer financial and other support.
- 🎓 ACT helps families learn the lingo about financial aid, grants, and scholarships.
- 🎓 The College Board hosts online events such as Paying for College at CollegeWeekLive.com, where families can get step-by-step guidance on completing the FAFSA, finding the best scholarships, and more.
- 🎓 The National College Access Network teaches students personal finance basics through its online financial education program, Financial Avenue.
- 🎓 The National Partnership for Educational Access created firstgenerationstudent.com, which offers financial aid resources, including advice for students who are undocumented, homeless, or in foster care.

**“Information is power.
You can help your students
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Juan Garcia, Assistant Vice President
of ACT, Inc.

ACT[®]

START A DIALOGUE

Sharing college prep information is just the start. It's so important for students to know they have someone they can trust who they can talk with about both their aspirations and about their challenges. Counselors approach this in a variety of ways.

🎓 **Be a good listener.** "We work hard to make sure our office is welcoming and kids know they can come to us," said Rochelle Bostic, counselor at East Montgomery High School in Jackson Springs, North Carolina.



🎓 **Share personal experiences.** One of Bostic's students is an undocumented student who's in the process of earning his doctorate. He spoke with the students about his college journey. "The kids were hanging on his every word! He now works for the local community college, and students have made a connection with him. It shows them that college is possible."

🎓 **Host a college boot camp.** A group of students at East Montgomery High School recently participated in an in-depth college boot camp where they explored everything from avoiding college debt to writing personal statements, choosing interview outfits, and prepping for the ACTs and SATs. Bostic brought in powerful speakers who talked about their decision to go to college. In addition, she arranged an online meeting where students could text chat with an admissions counselor from a local college. This gave them the opportunity to ask questions they might not feel comfortable doing in a larger college orientation. She also arranged for a local store to donate food for the students, which was a draw for several students from low-income households.

Network. Bostic has built fruitful relationships with many like-minded area organizations that help support her students. A network of community college loan officers is available to consult if she encounters a FAFSA question she can't answer, while an area business often provides snacks for low-income students during the SATs.

In addition, Bostic visits college fairs each year, approaching each admissions counselor to find out what the latest policies are for accepting undocumented students. She reaches out to find out

which students she can send them. These personal relationships have proven fruitful. Some colleges will even work internally to help her students to find private funds. "Having these relationships really helps," she said. "If enough of us work together, we can break the cycle of poverty."

Keep in touch with students. In the days leading up to the SATs, educators at East Montgomery High School remind students how to prepare for the test, even sending a text message the night before reminding them to get a good night's sleep and eat a good breakfast before the test.



SPARK THE IMAGINATION

The first step in college prep is getting students motivated to earn a degree. Here are a few ways educators are getting first-generation students excited about attending college.

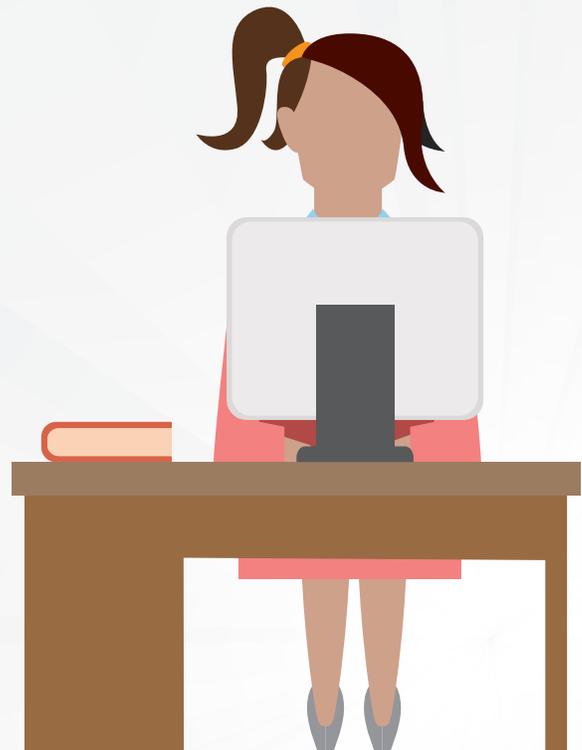
Let students know college is possible. “Telling students they can go to college, no matter what their income is...that’s a powerful message,” said Scott BonDurant, Manager of the College Success Program for 10,000 Degrees.

Share career opportunities. Educators are encouraging students to attend events such as career spotlight presentations and STEM Expos to open their eyes to the career opportunities available to them with a college degree.

Get to the heart of students’ interests. Many counselors and teachers are using the free ACT Profile Tool to help students hone in on their interests and abilities. “Students take the test and see themselves in a different light,” said Garcia.

Instill college pride. To pique students’ interest in various college environments, High School Counselor Doris Graves of Channelview High School designated a team of respected students, teachers, and counselors to be college trailblazers. They wore college t-shirts, invited students to participate in online college fairs, and encouraged them to write about their college exploration experiences.

Help students get on campus tours. The Steppingstone Foundation, which houses the National Partnership for Educational Access, supports students in transitioning from high school to college. “Many parents don’t have resources to travel to colleges, so we’ve arranged for campus tours,” said Cate Gardner, Associate Director of the National Partnership for Educational Access. “It’s an amazing experience. For some of these students it’s their first time leaving Boston. We’ve arranged for a panel of first-generation students to speak with them. Seeing someone on campus who they can identify with makes a huge difference.”



First-generation students are likely to need more assistance in preparing for the rigors of college course loads. High school counselors can play an important role in setting their expectations and helping them build the skills they need.

🎓 Educate yourself about the institutional outcomes at public institutions near your school. First-generation students need to know what resources each school has in place to help ensure that they graduate and to help make them feel comfortable there. “We need to shift the lens in the college selection process to focus more on the resources that students can take advantage of to succeed,” said Jones. “For example, many colleges and universities offer transition programs specifically for first-generation students. This gives students assurances that their needs will be met, academically, socially, and emotionally.”

🎓 Teach time management skills. “Often college is the first time students are on their own, so it’s easy to get into trouble studying and preparing for your next class,” said Garcia. “Teaching time management and study skills can give students a huge advantage. For every hour they’re in class, they should be studying for two hours.”

🎓 Encourage students to participate in summer bridge programs. Bentley University provides a summer transition program for high potential students who have faced academic, socioeconomic, and/or personal challenges beyond their control.

GET STUDENTS TO THINK LONG TERM

The program involves monitoring each student’s academic progress and providing academic advising, counseling, and referrals. Realizing the importance of support at home, the staff also collaborates with students’ families and guardians. In addition, students can attend a six-week summer residential program that will earn them two Bentley course credits.

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Chelsea M. Jones, Student Support Associate for the nonprofit Center for Student Opportunity



TAP INTO CAMPUS SUPPORT SYSTEMS

First-generation students have a lot on their plate, and they have fewer fail safes, particularly if they're attending a community college," said BonDurant. "There's typically no RA or professor reaching out to them, so it's easy to fall through the cracks." There are a number of steps counselors can take to help students succeed once they're in college.

 **Help students access on-campus support and free college readiness resources.** Having personal support from advisors or teachers helps students stay in school. For example, AVID teacher Alfie Wheeler of Manteo High School helps his students get to know admissions counselors at the colleges and universities they're interested in attending. He uses CollegeWeekLive's Advisor Center to invite universities to meet online with his 11th grade students. Each Friday, students can video chat with admissions counselors at those schools. This helps students gain a sense of community and understand what support systems are in place to help them succeed in college.

 **Connect students with their peers.** It's also important for college students to have a social support system. According to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, "first-generation students are far less likely to live on campus in their freshman year, which can impact academic success as well as social integration." Counselors should encourage college-bound students to establish peer-to-peer communications that will help them stay on track once they're in school.

"Peer mentoring on campus can work wonders," said Jones. "As soon as a first-generation freshman arrives on campus, they're paired up with a first-generation senior, who they can talk with frankly about their experiences and who can help them navigate





National
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“Simply helping students to understand college life and how the university works can have a tremendous impact.”

Elizabeth Morgan, Director of External Relations for National College Access Network

the system. They’re not likely to go and talk with a professor if they encounter challenges, but by having someone close in age with a similar background, they’re able to open up more easily and work through issues.”

 **Help students get acclimated.** Strongly encourage students to take advantage of priority registration, specialized tutoring, and other campus resources, which have proven to increase their odds of graduating. “Simply helping students to understand college life and how the university works can have a tremendous impact,” said Morgan.

“There are many first-generation programs that allow students to move into their dorm and get acclimated to campus early,” said Jones. “They go to information sessions, register for classes, and meet other first-generation students. It’s an amazing opportunity to create a space where students can get everything out of the way before college really begins to ramp up.”



About CollegeWeekLive

CollegeWeekLive provides a highly effective way of engaging with first-generation students and their families throughout the enrollment process and beyond. High school counselors and other educators are using CollegeWeekLive to help students make informed decisions about college. Perhaps more importantly, they're using the site to find the right resources and personal connections at the school they plan to attend. Forging these early relationships will help increasing students' ultimate chances of success.



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