

14

First-Generation College Students: How Campus Support Predicts Success

Dr. Vijay Kumar Gupta*

Resident of Dhakamandi, Teh - Buhana, Distt. - Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan, India.

*Corresponding Author: shikhanandinibadal@gmail.com

Abstract

Higher education is widely regarded as an important pathway for social mobility, economic advancement, personal development, and the expansion of opportunities. However, access to higher education does not necessarily guarantee academic success, persistence, or completion. Students enter colleges and universities with different levels of economic resources, educational preparation, social networks, cultural knowledge, and family experiences. Among these diverse groups, first-generation college students (FGCS) represent a particularly important population because they are the first members of their immediate families to enter higher education. Their experiences often differ significantly from those of students whose parents have already attended college.

Keywords: Social Mobility, Economic Advancement, Personal Development, FGCS, Higher Education.

Introduction

First-generation college students frequently enter higher education without the benefit of family members who can directly explain academic expectations, institutional procedures, course selection, financial aid systems, campus culture, or professional pathways. While families may provide strong emotional encouragement and motivation, they may not possess the institutional knowledge required to navigate a complex higher education environment. Consequently, the transition to college can involve academic, social, cultural, financial, and psychological challenges.

The concept of student success has also expanded beyond traditional measures such as grades and graduation. Contemporary perspectives consider academic achievement, persistence, engagement, belonging, wellbeing, skill development, career preparation, and successful completion of educational goals.

From this perspective, the institutional environment plays a crucial role in shaping student outcomes.

Campus support may include academic advising, mentoring, tutoring, counseling, financial assistance, career services, peer networks, faculty interaction, student organizations, orientation programmes, and other institutional resources. Such support can help students understand institutional expectations, develop academic confidence, establish meaningful relationships, and overcome barriers to persistence.

For first-generation students, these forms of support may be especially significant because campus-based resources can partially compensate for the absence of inherited college knowledge. Therefore, examining how campus support predicts student success is important for understanding not only individual educational outcomes but also institutional equity and social inclusion.

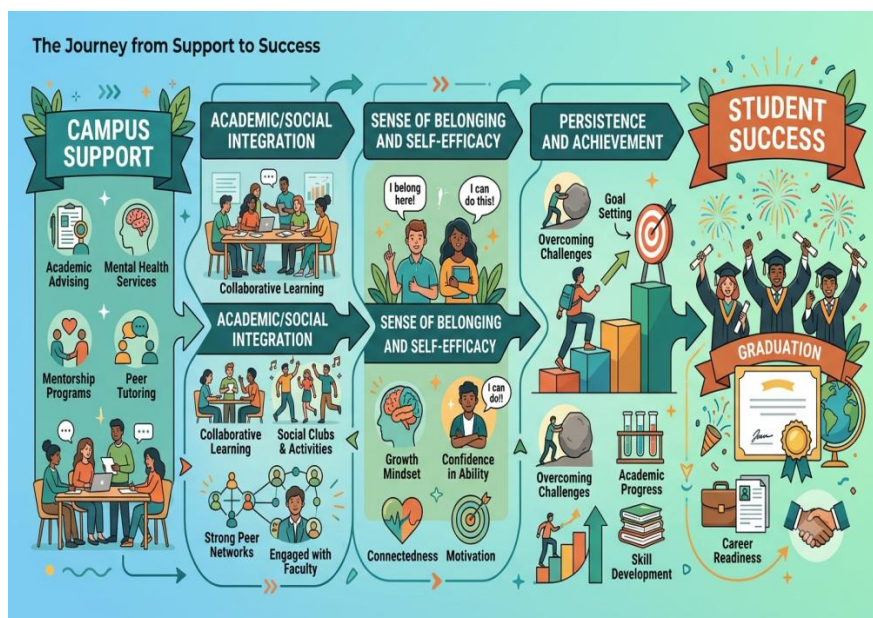
Conceptual Background

The concept of first-generation college students is situated within broader discussions of educational inequality, social mobility, access, retention, and student development. Higher education institutions are not merely academic spaces; they are complex social environments in which students must learn how to interpret expectations, develop relationships, access resources, and construct their academic identities.

Students whose parents have attended college may enter higher education with a form of accumulated educational knowledge. They may have greater familiarity with academic language, course registration, examinations, faculty interaction, financial aid, internships, and career planning. First-generation students, in contrast, may need to acquire much of this knowledge after entering college.

This difference does not imply that first-generation students lack ability or motivation. Rather, it highlights differences in access to institutional and cultural resources. Many first-generation students demonstrate strong aspirations, resilience, determination, and commitment to education. However, their academic potential may be affected when institutional structures are difficult to understand or when available support services are inaccessible or poorly communicated.

The conceptual relationship between campus support and student success can therefore be understood through a simple pathway:



In this framework, campus support is not necessarily expected to influence success only through direct assistance. It may also operate indirectly by strengthening students' confidence, institutional belonging, academic engagement, social integration, and capacity to navigate college life.

Meaning of First-Generation College Students

The term first-generation college student generally refers to a student whose parents or guardians have not completed a college or university degree. The precise definition may vary across countries, institutions, and research studies. Some definitions focus on whether either parent attended college, while others specifically consider whether a parent completed a bachelor's degree.

The concept is important because parental educational attainment can influence the resources, expectations, information, and social networks available to students. Parents who have experienced higher education may be able to provide practical guidance about academic planning, communication with faculty, selecting courses, applying for scholarships, preparing for examinations, and considering postgraduate or professional opportunities.

However, first-generation status should not be interpreted as a deficit characteristic. Being a first-generation student does not mean that a student is academically weak, socially disadvantaged in every respect, or incapable of succeeding. Instead, it identifies a particular educational background that may shape the student's interaction with the higher education system.

First-generation students are also not a homogeneous group. They differ according to socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, geographical location, school background, age, employment status, family responsibilities, and academic preparation. Therefore, first-generation status should be examined together with other contextual factors.

Characteristics and Educational Experiences of First-Generation Students

First-generation students often exhibit a combination of distinctive strengths and challenges. Many enter college with strong educational aspirations because higher education represents an opportunity for personal and family advancement. Some may perceive themselves as role models for younger siblings or as contributors to the long-term socioeconomic development of their families.

At the same time, they may encounter difficulties in understanding the unwritten rules of higher education. These rules may include knowing when and how to approach professors, how to seek academic assistance, how to select courses strategically, how to participate in professional networking, or how to identify opportunities outside the classroom.

Financial considerations may further influence their educational experiences. Students from families with limited financial resources may need to balance academic responsibilities with paid employment. Family obligations may also affect their ability to participate in extracurricular activities, internships, campus events, or informal social networks.

Another important dimension is the development of academic identity. Students may initially question whether they belong in a university environment, particularly when they perceive other students as more academically or socially prepared. Supportive institutional environments can help address these concerns by creating opportunities for interaction, recognition, encouragement, and participation.

Concept of Campus Support

Campus support refers to the academic, social, emotional, financial, administrative, and career-related assistance made available to students by higher education institutions and members of the campus community.

Campus support may be formal or informal. Formal support includes institutional programmes such as academic advising, tutoring, mentoring, counseling, scholarships, financial aid, orientation programmes, career counseling, disability services, and student development initiatives. Informal support may emerge through relationships with faculty members, classmates, peer mentors, student organizations, and other members of the university community.

For first-generation students, the availability of support is important, but accessibility and usability are equally significant. A university may have numerous

services, yet students may not benefit from them if they do not know that the services exist, do not understand how to access them, or feel uncomfortable seeking assistance.

Thus, effective campus support involves more than simply providing resources. It requires creating an institutional culture in which students feel that seeking help is legitimate, accessible, and encouraged.

Major Forms of Campus Support

Campus support can be broadly classified into several interconnected dimensions.

- **Academic support** includes tutoring, study skills programmes, writing assistance, supplemental instruction, faculty consultation, and academic advising. Such services can help students understand course expectations and improve their academic performance.
- **Mentoring support** provides students with guidance from faculty, staff, senior students, or trained mentors. Mentors can help students establish academic goals, develop confidence, and understand institutional processes.
- **Social and peer support** enables students to establish relationships with classmates and other members of the campus community. Peer networks can reduce feelings of isolation and strengthen students' sense of belonging.
- **Emotional and psychological support** includes counseling, wellbeing programmes, stress-management initiatives, and supportive relationships. These services can become especially important when students experience academic pressure, financial difficulties, family responsibilities, or uncertainty about their future.
- **Financial support** may include scholarships, grants, fee assistance, emergency funds, work-study opportunities, and financial counseling. Financial stability can reduce pressures that might otherwise interfere with academic participation.
- **Career support** includes career counseling, internships, employment preparation, professional networking, résumé development, and interview training. Such support can help students connect their education with future employment opportunities.

Campus Support and Sense of Belonging

A student's sense of belonging refers to the perception that they are accepted, respected, valued, and socially connected within the educational environment. Belonging is particularly relevant for first-generation students because unfamiliar institutional cultures may initially create feelings of distance or uncertainty.

Supportive faculty relationships, peer networks, mentoring programmes, student organizations, and inclusive institutional practices can contribute to belonging. When students feel that they are legitimate members of the academic community, they may become more willing to participate in class, seek assistance, interact with faculty, and engage in campus activities.

Belonging can therefore serve as an important mechanism through which campus support contributes to student success. A student who feels connected to the institution may be more likely to remain enrolled, persist during periods of difficulty, and develop stronger academic motivation.

Campus Support and Academic Success

Academic success is traditionally measured through indicators such as grade point average, examination performance, course completion, progression, and graduation. However, these outcomes are influenced by multiple factors, including prior preparation, motivation, financial circumstances, institutional environment, and access to support.

Campus support can contribute to academic success by reducing barriers to learning. Academic advisors can help students select appropriate courses; tutors can provide additional instructional assistance; faculty mentors can clarify academic expectations; and peer groups can facilitate collaborative learning.

For first-generation students, these supports may have particular importance because they can provide forms of academic guidance that might otherwise be unavailable within the family environment. Consequently, campus support can function as an institutional resource that helps transform educational aspirations into measurable academic outcomes.

Campus Support and Persistence

Persistence refers to a student's continuation in higher education despite academic, financial, social, or personal challenges. Persistence is especially important for first-generation students because successful completion of a degree may involve navigating multiple barriers over several years.

Students who receive timely academic advising, mentoring, financial assistance, and social support may be better equipped to respond to difficulties. Support can help students interpret academic setbacks as manageable challenges rather than as evidence that they do not belong in higher education.

Institutional responsiveness is therefore an important component of persistence. When students perceive that the institution recognizes their needs and provides meaningful assistance, their commitment to continuing their education may increase.

Campus Support as a Predictor of Student Success

The relationship between campus support and student success can be conceptualized as both direct and indirect. Directly, support services may improve students' academic knowledge, financial stability, or access to professional opportunities. Indirectly, support can influence psychological and social factors such as self-efficacy, belonging, motivation, engagement, and institutional commitment.

The predictive relationship may be represented as:



This conceptualization recognizes that student success is multidimensional. A supportive campus environment may increase the likelihood that first-generation students will use institutional resources, build relationships, develop confidence, and remain engaged with their educational goals.

The predictive value of campus support should nevertheless be interpreted carefully. Support alone cannot eliminate structural inequalities. Family income, prior educational experiences, employment responsibilities, geographical circumstances, and institutional characteristics may also influence outcomes. Therefore, campus support should be viewed as one important component within a broader system of factors affecting student success.

Significance of Studying Campus Support for First-Generation Students

Studying campus support for first-generation students has significance at the individual, institutional, and societal levels.

- At the **individual level**, effective support can contribute to academic achievement, confidence, persistence, wellbeing, and career development.
- At the **institutional level**, understanding support needs can help colleges and universities design more responsive advising, mentoring, financial assistance, and student-development programmes. Institutions can use evidence regarding student experiences to identify gaps between available services and actual student needs.

- At the **societal level**, improving the educational outcomes of first-generation students can contribute to social mobility and the reduction of educational inequalities. When students become the first members of their families to complete higher education, the benefits may extend beyond the individual to families and communities.

Therefore, the study of first-generation college students should move beyond the question of whether these students face difficulties and instead examine which institutional conditions enable them to succeed. Campus support represents one such condition because it can provide students with resources, relationships, information, and opportunities that facilitate successful navigation of higher education.

Emerging Research Perspective

Contemporary research increasingly emphasizes a shift from a deficit-oriented understanding of first-generation students toward an asset-based perspective. Instead of viewing these students primarily in terms of what they lack, researchers increasingly recognize their resilience, motivation, adaptability, family commitment, and capacity to negotiate complex educational environments.

This perspective also changes the role of the institution. Rather than expecting students to independently adapt to existing institutional structures, colleges and universities are encouraged to create environments that are transparent, inclusive, accessible, and responsive to diverse student backgrounds.

From this standpoint, campus support is not merely an additional service. It represents an institutional mechanism through which educational opportunity can be converted into meaningful educational success.

Conclusion

First-generation college students constitute an important and growing component of higher education. Their educational journeys are shaped by a complex interaction of individual aspirations, family circumstances, academic preparation, financial conditions, social relationships, and institutional environments. Although first-generation status may be associated with particular challenges in navigating higher education, it should not be interpreted as an indicator of limited ability or potential.

Campus support can play a critical role in creating conditions under which first-generation students can translate their aspirations into academic achievement and degree completion. Academic advising, mentoring, peer relationships, counseling, financial assistance, career services, and inclusive campus practices can provide students with resources and forms of guidance that facilitate academic integration, belonging, engagement, and persistence.

The central proposition of this chapter is therefore that student success is not determined solely by individual effort; it is also shaped by the institutional environment in which that effort occurs. Understanding how campus support predicts success can help higher education institutions develop more equitable and student-centered policies. For first-generation students in particular, accessible and meaningful support can serve as an important bridge between entering college and successfully completing the educational journey.

Accordingly, examining the relationship between campus support and student success provides an important framework for understanding educational equity, institutional responsibility, and social mobility in contemporary higher education.

References

1. Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. Jossey-Bass.
2. Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
3. Collier, P. J. (2000). Developing social capital in first-year students through student-faculty interactions. *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 12(1), 17–34.
4. Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students*. Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.
5. Gibbons, M. M., Rhinehart, A., & Hardin, E. (2019). How first-generation college students adjust to college. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 20(4), 488–510.
6. Gloria, A. M., & Robinson Kurpius, S. E. (2001). Influences of self-beliefs, social support, and collective self-esteem on the persistence of Latino undergraduates. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 29(3), 173–190.
7. Hausemann, L. R. M., Schofield, J. W., & Woods, R. L. (2007). Sense of belonging as a predictor of intentions to persist among African American and White first-year college students. *Research in Higher Education*, 48(7), 803–839.
8. Ishitani, T. T. (2006). Studying attrition and degree completion behavior among first-generation college students in the United States. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 77(5), 861–885.

9. Jehangir, R. R. (2010). *Higher education and first-generation students: Cultivating community, voice, and place for the new majority*. Palgrave Macmillan.
10. Karp, M. M., O'Gara, L., & Hughes, K. L. (2008). Do support services at community colleges encourage success? *Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University*.
11. Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 75(3), 249–284.
12. Perna, L. W. (2006). Studying college access and choice: A proposed conceptual model. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 21, pp. 99–157). Springer.
13. Rendón, L. I. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education*, 19(1), 33–51.
14. Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Johnson, C. S., & Covarrubias, R. (2012). Unseen disadvantage: How American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(6), 1178–1197.
15. Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge.
16. Terenzini, P. T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T., & Nora, A. (1996). First-generation college students: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development. *Research in Higher Education*, 37(1), 1–22.
17. Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
18. Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. University of Chicago Press.
19. Ward, L., Siegel, M. J., & Davenport, Z. (2012). *First-generation college students: Understanding and improving the experience from recruitment to commencement*. Jossey-Bass.
20. Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). "It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people": The role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(6), 707–722.

