

# Understanding First-Generation Students: Financial, Academic, and Well-Being Insights

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October 2025

Mentzer, Lydia (2025). Understanding First-Generation Students: Financial, Academic, and Well-Being Insights. Trellis Strategies.



## Introduction

First-generation college students (defined at Trellis Strategies as those whose parents or guardians have not participated in postsecondary education) represent a significant segment of the student population. These students often face unique barriers to college access, persistence, and program completion.<sup>1</sup> Research consistently shows that first-generation students face structural and cultural barriers in higher education. While 70 percent of continuing-generation adults have bachelor's degrees, only 26 percent of first-generation adults reach the same educational achievement.<sup>2</sup>

Without the benefit of parental college experience, first-generation students may lack access to the cultural capital that supports their continuing-generation peers, such as understanding syllabi, utilizing office hours, and navigating academic expectations.<sup>3-7</sup> First-generation students have been found to obtain degrees at lower rates, receive lower starting salaries, and accumulate less wealth over a lifetime compared

to continuing-generation students.<sup>8</sup> Tailored strategies specifically for first-generation learners can help bridge the gap in these essential outcomes, particularly as students make decisions on the value of higher education for their potential earnings.

In the 2024 administration of the Student Financial Wellness Survey<sup>9</sup> (SFWS), 36 percent of students self-identified as the first in their immediate family (parents, guardians) to attend college. This is in line with national estimates from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and other sources that use a similar definition of first-generation. Closer examination of these students' financial, situational, and academic realities in the 2024 SFWS helps reveal the struggles that first-generation students often face, and how institutions can better support first-generation learners to produce equitable outcomes and achieve academic success.

Financial Characteristics

Financial hardships make it more difficult for students to concentrate on their academic journeys, often impacting areas of student life including their social, academic, and professional engagements. In the 2024 SFWS, financial stress was more prominent among first-generation students. Eighty percent of first-generation students reported experiencing financial difficulties, compared to 67 percent of their continuing-generation peers. While both groups reported working for pay at similar rates (67 percent), first-generation students were more likely to report working 40 or more hours per week (49 percent vs 39 percent) and report that their jobs interfere with their ability to engage in extracurricular activities at their institutions (62 percent vs 52 percent).

First-generation students were more likely to run out of money six or more times in the past year (37 percent vs 22 percent), expressed greater concern about paying monthly expenses (63 percent vs 48 percent), and concerns about covering the cost of school (69 percent vs 48 percent). While financial concerns are common among all college students, first-generation students are more vulnerable to experiencing them and feeling their impacts. Rather than focusing on their academic needs, these students often choose between their studies and being able to maintain their essential needs.

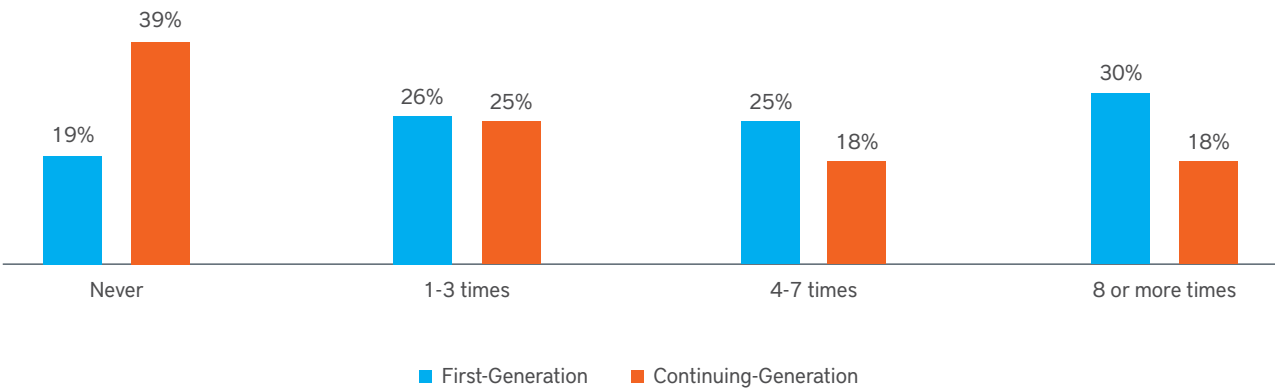
These students also reported higher difficulty with the 2024 FAFSA process (37 percent vs 31 percent) and expressed that these issues caused stress and anxiety about their financial situations (80 vs 75 percent). In addition, first-generation students were less likely to receive support from their families and more likely to be independent students (55 percent vs 41 percent). In previous research from Trellis Strategies, personal finance issues contributed to over forty percent of students stopping out of their academic journeys.<sup>10</sup> This, paired with the difficulties students have focusing on academics

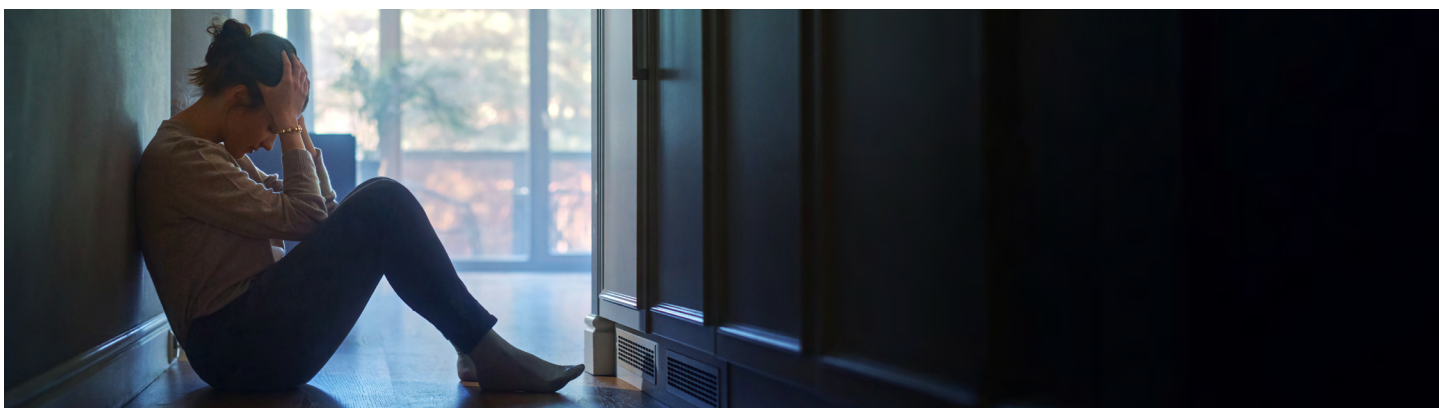


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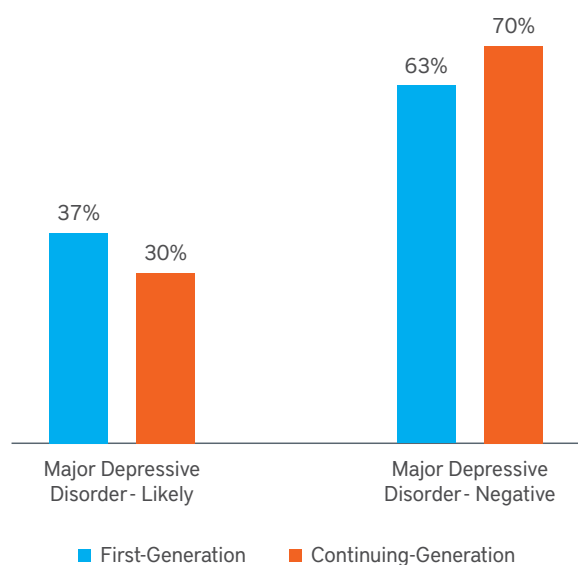
while experiencing hardships demonstrates the significant impacts that financial hardships can have on student success. Since first-generation students are more likely to experience these hardships, tailored interventions to match and provide support to these students are essential.

Q40: Since January 1, 2024, approximately how many times did you run out of money?

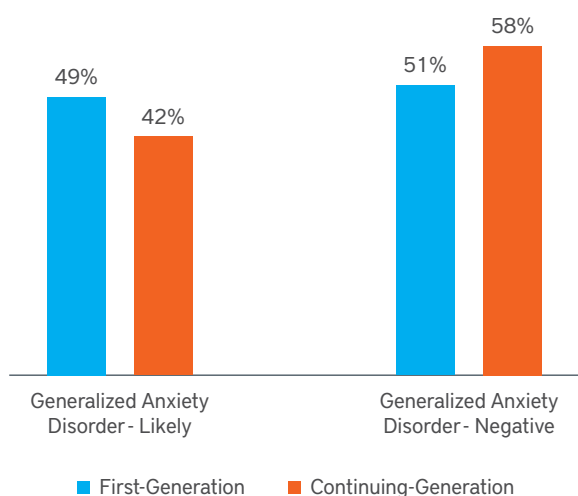




Q69-70: Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2)



Q71-72: Generalized Anxiety Disorder 2-item Scale (GAD-2)



## Mental Health

Mental health is another fundamental aspect to student success, wellness, and sense of belonging. A student's mental health plays an essential role in their program persistence and completion.<sup>11</sup> Similar to financial issues, poor mental health also disproportionately affected first-generation students. Thirty-seven percent of first-generation students reported symptoms of depression (compared to 30 percent of continuing-generation students), and 49 percent reported symptoms of anxiety (compared to 42 percent of their peers).

For vulnerable populations such as first-generation students, struggles with mental health issues can be exacerbated by adjustments to unfamiliar academic environments, often not knowing where to turn for support. Institutions can improve student mental health by creating low-cost mental health services, encouraging sense of community through social events, and creating inclusive spaces for students to gather and connect. For first-generation students, promotion of these new and existing services are essential, as many are unaware of the robust services higher education can provide.

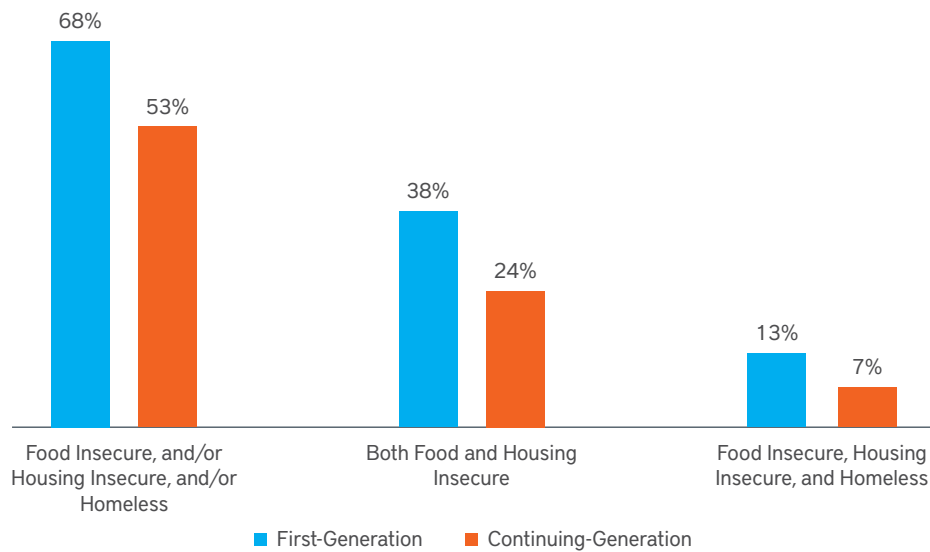
## Basic Needs Insecurity

Lacking stable living environments and nutritious meals shifts student priorities from academic performance to providing for their basic needs. First-generation students were also more likely to experience basic needs instability. Eighteen percent of first-generation students scored high on the homelessness risk scale (vs. 12 percent of continuing-generation students), and 53 percent reported low or very low food security (vs. 39 percent continuing-generation students).

Thirteen percent of first-generation students were classified as insecure across all basic needs, nearly double the rate of continuing-generation students (7 percent), and 68 percent were insecure in at least one basic need, compared to 53 percent of continuing-generation students. Prior research has found that students with three or more instances of housing insecurity had GPAs lower by 0.30 points and had lower mental health outcomes than their peers.<sup>12</sup>



### Basic Needs Insecurity



### Additional Hurdles & Interventions

In addition to financial and mental health challenges, first-generation students often carry additional responsibilities that can impact their academic progress. Twenty-five percent of first-generation students are parents or legal guardians, compared to 14 percent of continuing-generation students. Among those with children, 27 percent of first-generation students reported missing at least one day of class due to lack of childcare, compared to 20 percent of continuing-generation students with children. Balancing family obligations while enrolled can pose significant challenges to students' academic and financial stability, often impacting their post-college lives in addition to their academic journeys.

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A compelling case study by Holt and Winter (2018)<sup>13</sup> examined five four-year postsecondary institutions in Missouri that implemented targeted interventions to support first-generation college students. The study identified three core strategies that contributed to improved student outcomes. First, institutions cultivated a caring and coordinated community of support, which included proactive advising, counseling services, and peer support networks. Second, early college

experiences such as summer bridge programs and first-year seminars helped students acclimate to academic expectations and build confidence in navigating college life. Third, structured tutoring and mentoring programs provided academic reinforcement and personal guidance, which were especially impactful for students lacking familial college experience.

The study concluded that comprehensive, culturally responsive support systems (rather than isolated interventions) were most effective in promoting persistence and degree completion among first-generation students. Creating a “family” with faculty and peer relationships for first-generation students increased student retention, campus-integration, learner self-perception, and college satisfaction.

### Conclusion

These findings highlight the complex and intersecting challenges faced by first-generation students. While they bring resilience and determination to their educational journeys, first-generation students often navigate higher education without the same resources, support systems, or institutional familiarity as their peers. Addressing these disparities requires intentional strategies that support first-generation students holistically academically, financially, emotionally, and socially. These interventions could include first year experience courses, mentorship programs, and faculty training that provide academic and emotional support while demystifying the college process.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>10</sup> Trellis Company. (n.d.). College student re-engagement surveys: Insights and outcomes. <https://www.trelliscompany.org/college-student-re-engagement-surveys-insights-and-outcomes/>
- <sup>11</sup> Jeffries, V., & Salzer, M. S. (2022). Mental health symptoms and academic achievement factors. *Journal of American College Health*, 70(8), 2262-2265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1865377>
- <sup>12</sup> Kornbluh, M., Wilking, J., Roll, S., & Donatello, R. (2022). Exploring housing insecurity in relation to student success. *Journal of American College Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2068016>
- <sup>13</sup> Holt, J. K., & Winter, L. B. (2018). Improving college outcomes for first-generation students. *eJournal of Public Affairs*. <https://www.ejournalofpublicaffairs.org/improving-college-outcomes-for-first-generation-students/>

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## About Trellis Strategies

Trellis Strategies is an experienced research partner dedicated to advancing education and workforce development. With nearly 40 years of expertise, we specialize in qualitative and quantitative research services, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and case studies. Our proficiency in qualitative research and quantitative analyses enables us to extract insights from extensive datasets, guiding strategic decision-making in areas such as student success and outcomes.

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