



First-Generation Students: Examining the Influence of Resources on the Collegiate Experience

Anthony J. Cuevas & Jose David Melendez



Relevant Terms & Definitions

- **First-Generation Student:** any college student who is the first member of their immediate family to attend an institution of higher education
- **Interdependent Mindset:** to accomplish educational and professional goals for the resulting impact it may have on other people, especially family members or dependents
- **High-Impact Practices:** “Activities that benefit students and encourage learning in unusually powerful ways” (Kuh, 2008), and that lead to “greater engagement and retention among undergraduate students” (Kilgo, Ezell Sheets and Pascarella, 2014)
- **Social Capital:** the wealth/value in a relationship between a person, another person(s) or group(s) (Walpole, 2003)
- **Cultural Capital:** hidden knowledge that is not necessarily taught in schools and is shared within certain social groups (Walpole, 2003)

Student Population Overview

- First-generation college student is a term that is inherently complex—it’s definition can change depending on the institution, time, and personal opinion.
- “A common theme across interviews included institutions grappling with the selection of a common definition, revisiting their current definition in an effort to realign with current student needs, or reconsidering how definitions align with admissions practices and funded programs that require a specific definition for reporting purposes” (Whitley, Benson, & Wesaw, 2018, pg. 17).
- Reports and surveys across time have presented conclusive evidence that first-generation college students are among the highest need at any given university, especially four-year institutions.

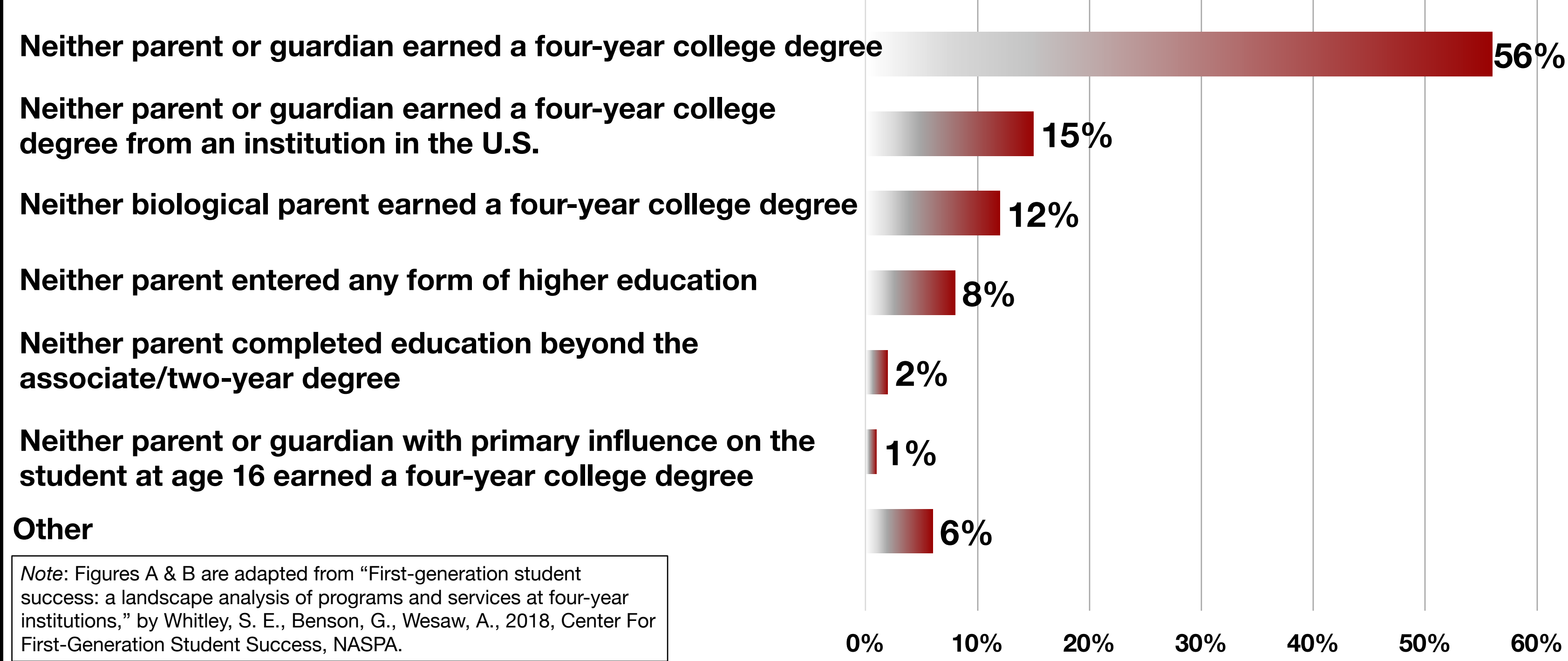
Historical Background

- Multiple reports suggest the percentage of first generation-students has sharply declined over the past 4 decades, as greater numbers of U.S. citizens have earned Bachelor’s degrees (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018).
- Many first-generation students are also low-income. In 2008, there were more than 4.5 million low-income, first generation students—about a quarter of the entire undergraduate population (Engle & Tinto, 2008).
- Research shows first-generation college students are more likely to drop out of four-year institutions before their second year than other categories of students. They are also less likely to return to school when compared to their peers (Choy, 2001).

Current Challenges of First-Generation Students

- “First-generation students make up a third of all college students. Yet only 27 percent of this group graduates within four years” (Whitford, 2018).
- Since first-generation students are the first in their immediate family to attend college, they are at a disadvantage regarding knowledge of higher education systems (lack of cultural capital) and resources available (Smith, 2015).
- Numerous studies have shown that, when compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students have lower persistence rates at four-year institutions. First-generation students are most likely to drop out within their first two years of attendance (Ishitani, 2016).
- First-generation students struggle developing an independent mindset while in school; instead they will often keep a previously learned interdependent mindset (Herrmann & Varnum, 2018).
- Many first-generation college students work high amounts of hours while attending school because of financial obligations back home, which has direct negative impacts on pursuing educational and personal experiences (Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017).
- Higher education institutions define first-generation students differently (see figure A), which can affect financial aid opportunities (Mangan, 2015).

Figure A: Differences in Defining First-Generation

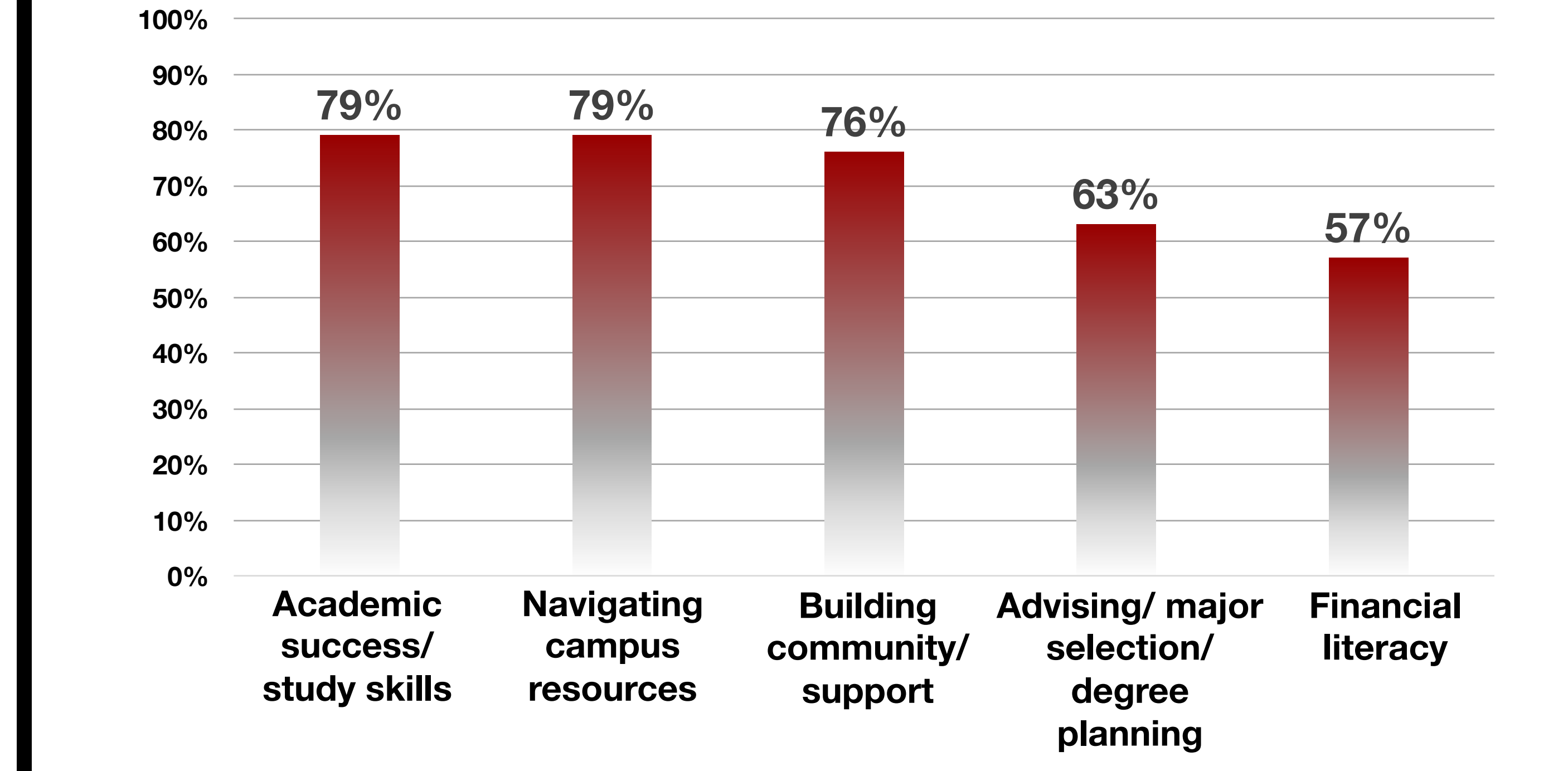


Implications for Higher Education

- Implement cohort-based programming for first-gen students. Focus programming on network building and creating resource hubs for first-generations students (Whitley, Benson, & Wesaw, 2018).
- Improve sense of belonging for first-generation students.
- Utilization of high-impact practices directed specifically at first-generation students can work towards increasing retention rates and overall student engagement.
- Increase accessibility of “point person” and have specified location on campus for first-generations student support. Only 50% and 48% of campuses reported having such resources for students, respectively (Whitley, Benson, & Wesaw, 2018, p. 44).
- Universities must adhere to implementing and improving the resources defined in the section labeled “Priority Campus Resources” above to better serve first-generation students.

Priority Campus Resources

Figure B: Top 5 reported campus resources for first-gen students



- According to 2018 NASPA report, resources provided to first-generation students vary widely from campus to campus. Participating schools reported these resources as priority for first generation students (Whitley, Benson, & Wesaw, 2018).
- **Academic success/study skills:** providing the tools needed to effectively study, teach time management, and meet educational goals defined by student
- **Navigating campus resources:** developing an easy to understand guide of campus resources, focusing on personal, academic, and financial needs
- **Building community/support:** designate a space for first-generation students to gather as a group, collaborate, support one another through challenges, and cultivate their own shared social capital
- **Advising/major selection/degree planning:** designing advising approaches that support student interests, set goals, and promote timely graduation
- **Financial literacy:** ensuring that all first generation-students comprehend their financial aid package, while in school and after graduation

References

Cataldi, E. F., Bennett, C. T., & Chen, X. (2018). First-generation students: College access, persistence, and post bachelor’s outcomes. Stats in Brief (NCES 2018-421). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics.

Choy, S. P. (2001). Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment. The Condition of Education (NCES 2001-126). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics.

Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students. Washington, D.C.: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.

Herrmann, S. D., & Varnum, M. W. (2018). Utilizing social class bicultural identity integration to improve outcomes for first-generation college students. Translational Issues In Psychological Science, 4(2), 165-175. doi:10.1037/tps0000159

Ishitani, T. T. (2016). First-generation students’ persistence at four-year institutions. College & University, 91 (3), 22-34.

Katreovich, A. V., & Aruguete, M. S. (2017). Recognizing challenges and predicting success in first-generation university students. Journal Of STEM Education: Innovations And Research, 18(2), 40-44.

Kilgo, C. A., Ezell Sheets, J. K., & Pascarella, E. T. (2014). The link between high-impact practices and student learning: some longitudinal evidence. Higher Education, DOI 10.1007/s10734-014-9788-z.

Kuh, G. D. (2008). High-impact educational practices: what they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Mangan, K. (2015). The challenge of the first-generation student. The Chronicle of Higher Education

Smith, A. A. (2015). Who’s in first (generation)? Inside Higher Ed.

Walpole, M. (2003). Socioeconomic status and college: how SES affects college experiences and outcomes. The Review of Higher Education 27(1), 45-73. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Whitford, E. (2018). Maximizing success for first-gen students. Inside Higher Ed.

Whitley, S. E., Benson, G., Wesaw, A. (2018). First-generation student success: a landscape analysis of programs and services at four-year institutions. Center For First-Generation Student Success, NASPA.