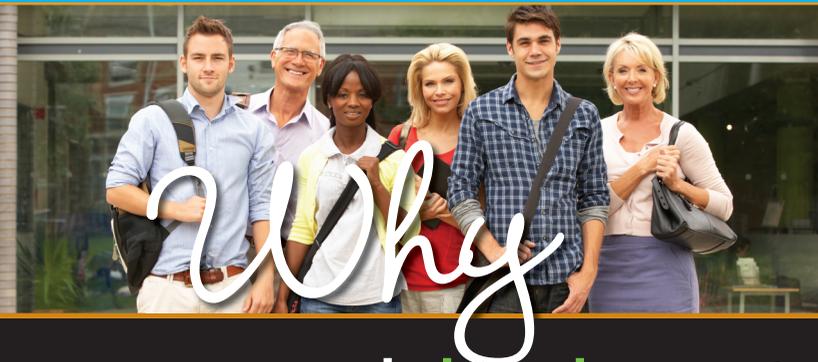


ACHIEVE

CORNERSTONES FOR
FIRST-GENERATION LEARNERS



ACHIEVE



read **this chapter?**

Because you'll learn...

- How to successfully transition into the college environment by using mentoring, tutoring, and advising programs
- How to deal with emotional challenges confronting first-generation college students
- How to overcome obstacles unique to students who are the first in their family to attend college

Because you'll be able to...

- Identify and seek resources that provide effective support
- Implement strategies for setting priorities
- Manage personal financial resources and understand financial aid

Scan and **QUESTION**

Take a few moments to scan this chapter. On page 27, write five questions that you think will be important to your mastery of this material. In addition to the two questions below, you will also find questions from your authors.

Examples:

- How would you define a first-generation learner? (from page 5)
- How can an academic success center assist you in adjusting to college? (from page 11)

How

COLLEGE CHANGED MY LIFE



Name: *Lenny Swinton*
Institution: *University of South Carolina*
Major: *Hospitality and Restaurant Management*

AS soon as I started interviewing Lenny Swinton, it was obvious that he is a special young man. Lenny speaks articulately and confidently, but as he says, this was not always true. Even though Lenny grew up in difficult circumstances with a single mom who has a disability, Lenny states, "There were certain things that I wanted, and I knew I would have to further my education to get those things." Because he was a good student in high school, his teachers pushed him to go to college. Neither his mother nor absentee father went to college, so they were not able to offer him advice that he needed. Lenny says, "College was not mentioned in my household per se, but I saw a special glow on my Mom's face when I told her I wanted to go to college. My dad is not in my life, but he always encouraged me to do better than he did."

Some of Lenny's peers, however, actually discouraged him from going to college. They told him it would be impossible. Obviously, they were envious and did not want him to be more successful than they were. This is something first-generation learners have to guard against—don't let people from your past pull you down. "I knew I

was going somewhere, and I was determined to be a role model for my little sister." Conversely, his best friend greatly encouraged him, and today they are both first-generation college students with bright futures ahead of them. Lenny says that he had to "turn loose" several so-called friends who were literally dragging him down. Some of these former friends told Lenny that he thought he was better than they were. Lenny closed his ears to this kind of talk and persevered toward his goal of going to college. "I had so much to learn, but I was fortunate to find a mentor who helped guide me, and I visit my college advisor every week to be sure I am staying on track," Lenny reports.

Lenny shared this advice: "I first attended a small, African-American majority school, and later transferred to the University of South Carolina. Both campuses provided many surprises to me because I was totally unprepared to be a college student. I was scared, alone, knew nothing about choosing a college or a major. The classes were so much larger than high school; I missed the one-on-one guidance that my teachers had always given me; I didn't know how to study or take effective notes. I was just lost until I met this girl who was as lost as I was. We formed a close-friend relationship, and together, we solved our problems. Right away I used the Campus Career Center, where I learned to study and take notes. We visited the Financial Aid Office and learned how to apply for scholarships, loans, and grants. One major tip I learned was to research scholarship criteria; they don't all require high



*An Interview Conducted and
Written by Patricia G. Moody,
Ph.D, Dean Emerita, University
of South Carolina*

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GPA. I also advise students to research student loans and to understand that this money has to be paid back. I highly recommend getting a job, preferably in your field, because it makes your resume look impressive and it helps pay the bills. I have my own apartment that is two blocks away from campus, as is my job, so I don't have to have a car." Lenny encourages students to develop a four-year plan—your game plan. He says to include goals and deadlines and write down all your wants and needs. He also recommends finding a buddy you can trust who can encourage you and share successes. Lenny says, "One of the best things I did was to get involved in the National

Society for Minorities in Hospitality. I learned to choose a suit, to tie a tie, to interview, and to speak in front of a group. Today I am the president of my association. In this position, I was able to attend the national convention in Orlando which was another eye-opening experience."

College has opened Lenny's eyes to all kinds of people and experiences. He now appreciates diversity and differences. Lenny shares, "I have completed an internship at Disney. I often look back and wonder what I would be doing if I had not gone to college—probably flipping burgers in Myrtle Beach. College made me who I am. I have a very bright future, and I am a different person."

THINK about it

1. Lenny had to "turn loose" some of his friends from high school. In your best interests, is there anyone whom you should turn loose?
2. Lenny discussed how much campus resources helped him adjust. Have you located and used campus resources to help you learn to study and take notes effectively? Have you visited your financial aid office and researched the different types of loans, grants, and scholarships?



Are you experiencing anxiety because your family doesn't understand the pressures you are under?

WHEN YOU ARE THE FIRST IN THE FAMILY TO ATTEND COLLEGE

First-Generation Learners

Exactly who is a first-generation learner? Students who are the first in their immediate families to attend college are first-generation learners. First-generation college students come in all sizes, ages, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds. These students may be Asian, Caucasian, African American, or any other racial or ethnic background. They may be attending college straight from high school, or perhaps they have been working and may continue to work or they might have been serving in a branch of the military. First-generation college students may be 18 or they may be 46 or any other age.

As a first-generation learner, going to college is a new experience for your entire family, and for you. You may feel anxiety and uncertainty as you begin your college experience. "While students whose parents have a college education tend to experience 'college as a continuation' of their academic and social experiences in high school, going to college often constitutes a 'disjunction' in the lives of first-generation students and their families. As a result, you may have to make much more complex academic, social, and cultural transitions to college life, especially during the crucial first year" (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Regardless of your background, attending college as the first in your family is likely to create fear of the unknown. Although almost all college students come to campus with a certain amount of anxiety and self-doubt, many have had the good fortune of

having family members who can provide guidance. There is no doubt that first-generation college students face unique hurdles and challenges. With the right guidance and support, a determined attitude, and a willingness to work hard, you will succeed. A college education is worth the personal efforts and sacrifices you may have to make because it will open many opportunities for you.

Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010) project that, through 2018, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of all new jobs will require more than a high school diploma. This fact alone should help you understand how important this decision to attend college is for your future.

The good news is that you have a wealth of resources and support to help you through the transition to college. You will have a successful academic and professional career if you take advantage of the resources available to you. While you may face unique challenges, you are resilient and determined and you have what's needed to become successful. You have already taken the most important first step—you have decided to go to college. Now, you have to learn how to succeed. As your authors, our goal is to provide you with valuable insights that can help you overcome hurdles and obstacles as you transition to college.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND CHALLENGES OF FIRST-GENERATION LEARNERS

It might be helpful to you to understand the demographics of other students who are the first in their families to attend college. American higher education institutions have experienced large changes in the demographics of college students. Today there are increasingly large numbers of women, African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are the first in their families to go to college.

Community colleges enroll about 47 percent of first-generation learners. Fifty-three percent of Hispanic college students are the first in their families to attend college; 52 percent of Native Americans and 45 percent of African-Americans are also first-generation college students. Other distinguishing characteristics of first-generation learners are:

- First-generation learners who are attending college directly from high school and are leaving home for the first time will most likely experience apprehension because they don't know what to expect.
- First-generation learners are likely to be older and many have families.
- First-generation learners may become frustrated at the bureaucracy and red tape they have to go through to obtain admission to college.
- "First-generation college students not only face barriers to their academic and social integration on campus, they also confront obstacles with respect to cultural adaptation" (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). You might experience cultural differences, and you may feel somewhat alienated in the beginning. If you persist and stay focused, you will overcome these feelings.



Are you facing all the challenges of being a first-generation student with optimism and anticipation?

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- Some students will feel guilty that they have this opportunity and their parents, siblings, or friends did not. You will have to work to overcome these emotions and take pride in the fact that you have earned this opportunity.
- A large number of first-generation college students have been out of school for awhile. This makes it difficult to get back into the groove of studying.
- Many are working part time or full time and attending classes at the same time. This type of schedule may be challenging and may place time and financial burdens on you that other students may not have.
- To compensate for limited time and financial resources, many will attend classes on a part-time basis.
- First-generation college students are more likely to have families, and thus the added responsibilities of managing work, family, and school.
- Many first-generation students face very difficult financial burdens and must assume responsibility for all their college expenses. Some first-generation students are leery about assuming debt and do not try to get loans. This results in some students having to drop out because they do not have tuition money.
- Many first-generation college students feel guilty about attending college because they feel that they are using financial resources for themselves that could be used for their children. If you fall in this category, you should realize that you are going to be able to better provide for your family, and you are setting an excellent example for your children.
- First-generation college students are more likely to live off campus and commute, which often restricts their involvement in on-campus activities.
- Due to time and financial constraints, many first-generation students choose an institution based on proximity and the ability to live at home and to continue their jobs if they are working.
- “Many first-generation college students appear to be concentrated in two-year colleges but are found at all levels of postsecondary education” (Thayer, 2000).
- In the beginning, first-generation learners may see little connection between earning a college degree and the world they have always known.
- First-generation learners are “less likely to persist to degree and are twice as likely to leave without earning a degree when compared to students whose parents were college educated” (Engle, 2007).
- As a first-generation student, you may be entering a cultural environment that is different from what you have experienced in the past, and you may have to work to learn and embrace a different set of rules and societal mores as you learn and grow. Some first-generation students may be embarrassed by their advanced age or socioeconomic status, which makes them feel different from their peers. At these times, you have to focus on your dreams and goals and realize that ultimately, people are going to admire you for overcoming obstacles and earning your degree. And, remember, you are *not* the only student at your school who is not 18 years old!

It may appear at first that you are up against more challenges than the so-called “traditional student” who has parents and siblings who have attended college. And perhaps you are. But many other first-generation learners have succeeded, and so can you. You need to overcome hurdles and grow stronger and more knowledgeable as you progress. The rewards for your efforts will be worth the challenges. One important point to remember is this: College is new for all first-year students—not just first-generation students. Everyone is adjusting to a new environment, new friends, and faster-paced classes. You can level the playing field by working hard during the first few months to adjust and learn everything you can about your new environment. Now that you understand some of the challenges you will face, take the First-Generation College Readiness Quiz in Figure 1 to identify areas in which you might need more preparation.