



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Career Development for First-Generation College Students

Centering the Student Experience

Suggested Citation: Roman, R., Vang, Z. & Jehangir, R. (2025). *Career development for first-gen college students*. University of Minnesota, First Gen Institute.

CREATED BY the First Gen Institute —
College of Education and Human Development



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This primer equips educators, career advisors, and institutional leaders with research-based insights and practical strategies to support first-generation ("first-gen") students in navigating career exploration, decision-making, and professional advancement. Career development is a critical but often overlooked dimension of first-gen student success.

Understanding First-Gen Students

First-generation (first-gen) college students are those whose parents have not earned a four-year degree; they represent a growing and diverse segment of the higher education population. They often showcase strengths such as resilience, adaptability, and deep community commitment.

However, their transition to college and the workforce can be shaped by unfamiliarity with institutional norms, limited access to social capital, and the challenge of balancing personal, academic, and family responsibilities (Stebbleton & Jehangir, 2020). Understanding the intersectional identities of first-gen students, including race, class, immigration status, and gender, is critical to developing inclusive career support systems that honor both their aspirations and lived experiences. First-gen students may also face increased pressures to prioritize financial stability over personal interest and internal pressures to uplift family and community (Gibbons et al., 2019; Wang, 2013).

Challenges in Career Development for First-Gen Students

- First-generation (first-gen) students are less likely to have family or community role models in professional occupations (Burt et al., 2019). This absence of informal mentorship can leave students unsure of how to navigate professional expectations, build resumes, or identify growth opportunities. They may also have limited early exposure to the range of career possibilities that match their interests and academic backgrounds.
- Many first-gen students are unfamiliar with terminology, timelines, and expectations for internships, graduate school, or industry-specific credentials (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). This unfamiliarity can lead to delayed engagement with career planning or missed application deadlines for applied learning opportunities. Even motivated students may not know what questions to ask or experience unexpected challenges in navigating career resources. In a national study, Stebleton and Jehangir (2020) found that first-gen students are significantly less likely to participate in internships, study abroad, or campus leadership roles due to systemic and cultural barriers.

- Unpaid or low-paid internships, study abroad, and graduate school may be inaccessible due to financial obligations. Many first-gen students work long hours, sometimes off campus, which limits their ability to pursue resume-building activities or attend networking events (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Financial stress can also shape career decisions, leading students to select “safe” or “practical” options over passion-driven pursuits.
- First-gen students often seek careers that honor family expectations, provide financial security, and enable them to give back to their communities. While these motivations are strengths, they can also generate inner conflict when students feel pulled between passion and obligation or when pursuing prestigious or competitive paths requires geographic or cultural distance from home. As Jehangir, Telles, and Deenanath (2019) demonstrated through their photovoice study, students often view their career goals through a collective lens of family and community well-being, rather than as purely individual aspirations.
- Students may doubt their qualifications for competitive opportunities or feel out of place in elite environments (Peteet et al., 2015). This psychological barrier can lead to avoidance of internships, fellowships, or graduate programs, even when students are well-qualified. First-gen students may struggle with self-advocacy, fear of failure, or feeling like “outsiders” in professional settings. As such, students may struggle to understand or articulate their strengths in various work environments.
- In internships or early career roles, first-gen students may encounter stereotypes, tokenism, or dismissive attitudes about their background. These experiences can reduce their sense of belonging and lead to disengagement from industries or professions where they do not see others like themselves.
- First-gen students may have had limited opportunities to observe professional behaviors, including dress codes, workplace communication styles, and networking practices. Without explicit guidance, they may unintentionally violate expectations that are rarely taught but widely assumed.

Best Practices for Supporting First-Gen Career Development

- Encourage career exploration as a developmental process, not a linear path. Jehangir et al. (2019) found that first-gen students benefit from open-ended reflection and advising that supports evolving identities and communal aspirations.
- Avoid assuming prior knowledge; instead, offer structured workshops and templates on resumes, networking, interviewing, and graduate school. Stebleton and Jehangir (2020) stress the importance of tailored skill-building for first-gen learners.

- Integrate career planning into first-year seminars, advising sessions, and classroom assignments to normalize early and sustained engagement (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012).
- Build mentorship programs and peer cohorts that highlight first-gen success stories and enable shared learning. Jehangir et al. (2019) emphasize the power of affinity-based spaces to support belonging and confidence.
- Advocate for paid internships and connect students to stipends, scholarships, and grants that make experiential learning possible.
- Invite alumni from nonprofit, creative, education, and public service sectors to share varied trajectories that reflect first-gen values and commitments.
- Provide mentorship toolkits and workshops to help campus professionals better understand and support the lived realities of first-gen interns and employees.
- Recognize the collective motivations behind career choices and co-create strategies that incorporate students' backgrounds, responsibilities, and long-term goals.
- Offer opportunities like micro-internships, on-campus jobs, and volunteering to build confidence and practice transferable skills in familiar environments.
- Track career outcomes of first-gen students and leverage the findings to inform program design, resource allocation, and advocacy efforts (Stebbleton & Jehangir, 2020).

Sample Career Advising Questions:

- What kind of impact do you hope to make through your work?
- What do you enjoy learning or doing outside of class?
- Who do you admire professionally? Why?
- What would make an internship or job feel accessible and supportive for you?

Career development for first-gen students is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. It requires culturally responsive advising, early and sustained engagement, and systemic attention to equity in opportunity. With proper support, first-gen students can translate their strengths and lived experiences into meaningful, impactful careers.

Further Reading:

- Palmer, R., & Gasman, M. (2008). It takes a village to raise a child: The role of social capital in promoting academic success for African American men at a Black college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(1), 52–70. DOI: <https://doi-org.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/10.1353/csd.2008.0002>.
- Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students*. Pell Institute. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED504448.pdf>.
- Gibbons, M. M., Rhinehart, A., & Hardin, E. (2016). How first-generation college students adjust to college. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 20(4), 488–510. DOI: <https://doi-org.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/10.1177/1521025116682035>.
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- Peteet, B. J., Montgomery, L., & Weekes, J. C. (2015). Predictors of imposter phenomenon among talented ethnic minority undergraduate students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 84(2), 175–186. DOI: <https://doi-org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.84.2.0175>
- Stebleton, M. J., & Soria, K. M. (2012). Breaking down barriers: Academic obstacles of first-generation students at research universities. *Learning Assistance Review*, 17(2), 7–20. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1002281.pdf>.