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To: ["TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU"](mailto:TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU)
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Helping First-Generation College Students Succeed
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Helping First-Generation College Students Succeed **by Kristi Lewis**

In a course I recently took entitled the American College Student, we explored a number of special student populations. One that struck a chord with me was first-generation college students (FGCS). As a FGCS myself, I can relate to the struggles that many encounter as they enter college and embark on a new learning and life experience.

FGCS are a rapidly growing demographic on college campuses. According to one study, FGCS comprise about 24% of all college students in the United States ([Castillo-Montoya, 2017](#)). There seems to be no consensus on how to define students as first-generation college students. Some identify students as first-generation if their parents did not attend college. Others are identified as first-generation if their parents did not complete a college degree. JMU identifies a student as a FGCS if the parent(s) with whom the student lives has some college or less. JMU began collecting data on first-generation students two years ago. Based on the definition, there are 540 sophomores and 632 first-year students designated as FGCS at JMU.

FGCS tend to be from lower socio-economic status families, historically underrepresented racial or ethnic minority groups, and often lack needed support from friends and family ([Darling and Smith, 2007](#)). Common academic attributes ([Chen & Carroll, 2005](#); [Pascarella et al., 2003](#); [Martinez et al., 2009](#)) of FGCS in comparison to non-FGCS include:

- Less prepared for college
- Lower GPA in college
- Fewer earned credits
- Less likely to engage in undergraduate research, internships, or study abroad
- Lower graduation rates

While the first year of college is a critical time for all students, FGCS face more difficulties in comparison to non-FGCS ([Wiggins, 2011](#)). Educators should focus on the whole student ([Wiggins, 2011](#)). An example of focusing on the whole student would involve an integrated approach such as a summer program prior to entering college, intense academic advising, and tutoring. According to [Dennis et al. \(2005\)](#), FGCS usually have unrealistic expectations regarding the college experience and lack knowledge of the university system. Families of first-generation college students often are not able to help their children navigate the system or provide assistance with the workload.

We will all have FGCS in our courses at some point. As instructors, we want to make sure that there is an appropriate balance between challenges and support. We can help FGCS become successful

JMU students and future graduates. According to [Eddy and Hogan \(2014\)](#), active learning strategies were seen to increase the achievement of FGCS. Some additional strategies are addressed in the [“Encouraging Student Participation in Large Classes” CFI Toolbox](#). Also, research shows that transparency in coursework benefits underserved students ([Winkelmes et al., 2016](#)). Like other universal design practices, the instructional strategies that benefit FGCS also benefit non-FGCS. When working with FGCS (and others), some helpful tips that may increase their likelihood for success include:

- Connect students’ prior knowledge or life experiences to course content
- Provide structured activities both in and out-of-class
- Encourage peer interaction
- Assist students with accessing resources (e.g., tutoring)
- Make course expectations clear

First-generation college students are a growing population on the JMU campus. They tend to be more ethnically and culturally diverse than non-FGCS. While they may face some unique challenges, they provide an enriching experience for all staff, faculty and students on campus. According to Lee Ward, author of [First Generation College Students: Improving the Experience from Recruitment to Commencement \(2012\)](#), FGCS are an invisible minority whose likelihood of success in college is increased when instructors and others intentionally engage them in meaningful ways, encourage them to invest in purposeful out-of-class experiences, and help them navigate cultural norms that may be foreign to them.

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