

Evidence Brief

Eight Best Practices to Support First-Generation and Low-Income Students in Post-Secondary School

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "first-generation," "low-income," "students," "best practices," "transition," "post-secondary," and "high school."

Summary of Evidence: Eight Best Practices

1. Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches.

First-generation students represent a diversity of backgrounds and needs. For instance, some might be familiar with the post-secondary education system because they have older siblings or extended family members who have attended college or university. The intersections of race, sex, class, and special needs education produce distinctly different academic outcomes for marginalized students (Robson, Brown & Anisef, 2016), while differences in parental education, income, and academic achievement can impact completion rates (Ishitani, 2006). Youth workers should be mindful of differences among first-generation students and avoid one-size-fits-all solutions.

2. Recruit mentors with similar backgrounds or experiences.

First-generation students often lack support networks that can raise aspirations and expectations about post-secondary education. Mentors with similar backgrounds can serve as role models, and even confidants, as students might feel more comfortable talking to them about their struggles (Maher & Bertin, 2013). Research shows that students who are exposed to stories about professors overcoming challenges during their undergraduate careers are more likely to achieve significantly higher grades (Perry & Penner, 1990). This kind of 'attributional retraining' can occur with mentors who have had similar experiences.

3. Consider students' multiple responsibilities.

Studies show that first-generation and low-income students tend to have heavier family and financial obligations than their peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Sánchez et al., 2010). Combined with their tendency to live off-campus and attend school on a part-time basis (Locker & Lowe, 2001),

“this constant balancing act often creates an added source of stress that ultimately affects their academic progress, relationships, and their mental well-being” (Sánchez et al., 2010, p. 879). Organizations should strive to create culturally-sensitive and flexible programming, keeping in mind that students might not be able to make intensive time commitments. Provide support and accommodations – such as child care, transportation vouchers, and meals.

4. Offer practical guidance to demystify post-secondary education.

Marginalized students often lack access to social networks that can provide information about post-secondary education, and might struggle with academic jargon when accessing existing resources. Evidence shows that students most in need of support are generally not aware of financial aid opportunities (Baum & Flores, 2011). Students who are not familiar with the post-secondary education system can benefit from practical guidance on the application process, academic expectations, and day-to-day post-secondary life. Organizations should counsel students about different sources of financial aid and help them make informed decisions, keeping in mind that some low-income students might be particularly debt-averse.

5. Focus on social and emotional skill development.

First-generation students report feeling more anxious, less confident, and more isolated than other students (Davis, 2010; Martinez et al., 2009). Many feel disconnected or misunderstood by their families and communities upon transitioning to post-secondary school (Davis, 2010). These students struggle with the dissonance between their parents’ life paths and their own (Somers, Woodhose & Cofer, 2004, p. 431).

Research suggests that emotional and social competencies are important in the successful transition from high school to university (Parker et al., 2004). Instead of focusing solely on academic abilities, organizations should strive to support resilience factors such as intrapersonal skills, adaptability, and stress management (Marcotte et al., 2014). Peer mentoring has been found to be especially effective for students with high anxiety (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003).

6. Make space for positive peer engagement.

Peer engagement is particularly beneficial for first-generation students, as they often rely on peers, rather than family members, when dealing with academic problems (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005). Researchers suggest that interactions with peers who have a better understanding of the education system might also provide first-generation students with the ‘cultural capital’ (specialized kinds of knowledge) that will help them succeed academically (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Despite deriving greater benefits from peer interaction, first-generation students have lower

rates of non-course peer engagement than their classmates. Organizations should consider facilitating positive peer interactions through peer-based tutoring programs and study groups. Strive to foster a sense of community, as first-generation students are more likely to feel alienated by prevailing university norms of independence (Stephens et al., 2012).

7. Engage parents/caregivers.

Family plays an important role in informing students' choices about post-secondary education (Pascarella et al., 2004). Research shows that low-income students and their parents/caregivers often overestimate the costs and underestimate the benefits of post-secondary education (Miner, 2011). First-generation students may be less prepared to make informed choices about the institutions and activities that can deliver the highest educational benefits.

Parental/caregiver involvement in education has been shown to improve students' educational aspirations and reduce the shock of transitioning to post-secondary education (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Organizations should consider engaging parents/caregivers of high school and post-secondary students through parent/caregiver education programs and student-parent/caregiver counselling sessions. Keep in mind that different levels of parental/caregiver support can create different kinds of pressure, and find out how to best support individual students in their decision-making.

8. Reach out early.

Marginalized youth are often challenged by 'the violence of low expectations': the tendency of stigma and stereotypes to produce low aspirations (Ramsaroop, 2015). All things being equal, first-generation students are more likely to attend less selective institutions than their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). Evidence shows that the main accessibility barrier for Ontario first-generation students exists prior to registration, since, once registered, they are as likely as other students to continue (Finnie, Childs & Wismer, 2010).

It is crucial to ensure that high school students have access to information about post-secondary education, as those with less information are less likely to apply and to be accepted (Looker and Lowe, 2001). Consider reaching out to high school students at a young age to offer a source of support and inspiration. Counsel students on how they can apply their skills and interests towards different majors and career paths.

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