2017 First Generation Freshmen Focus Group Report_FINAL.05.17.17

University Relations

Follow this and additional works at: https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/urem

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Research Repository @ WVU. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Relations/Enrollment Management by an authorized administrator of The Research Repository @ WVU. For more information, please contact ian.harmon@mail.wvu.edu.
West Virginia University
First Generation Freshmen
Focus Groups: April 2017
BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Background & Objective
Studies show that First Generation students often face unique struggles and thus, have a more difficult time successfully navigating through college and graduating on time. Given that, WVU’s Office of the Provost and Undergraduate Education intends to create an office for First Generation students – who defined by WVU as not having a parent who has earned a 4-year degree.

Methodology
In order to learn about these students’ particular experiences so WVU can develop programs and services that are tailored to their needs, qualitative research was conducted. Two focus groups were held with First-Generation students at the end of their freshmen year. The objectives were:

- To understand the struggles they experienced during the application process (e.g. financial issues)
- To explore how easy or difficult it was to adjust to college life (e.g. transitional issues)
- To identify the academic challenges they encountered (e.g. educational barriers)
- To understand the social pressures they face (e.g. family issues)
- To identify resources that were helpful to first generation students in dealing with the above-related issues
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
PARTICIPANTS
First-generation WVU students, excluding Student Support Services participants, McNair Scholars and Upward Bound students, were recruited via an email from key academic advisers in each college. Here are the participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Home Town</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Relatives with a 4-year degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Charleston, WV</td>
<td>Sport &amp; Exercise Physiology</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Charleston, WV</td>
<td>Pre-Nursing</td>
<td>Majority of family on mom’s side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Bunker Hill, WV</td>
<td>Aerospace/Mechanical</td>
<td>A few cousins have a degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
<td>Industrial Engineering</td>
<td>A few aunts have a degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Miami, FL</td>
<td>Women’s &amp; Gender Studies</td>
<td>Just a few in extended family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Morgantown, WV</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Aunt and uncle on father’s side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Versailles, IL</td>
<td>Forensic Science</td>
<td>Brother has a degree; sister is in the process of getting her bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
<td>International Marketing</td>
<td>No one has a degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Summersville, WV</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>A few cousins on the West Coast have a degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Edgewater, MD</td>
<td>Industrial Engineering</td>
<td>Two sisters are currently in college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hurricane, WV</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Both parents have a 2-year degree; one set of grandparents have a degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PARTICIPANTS

These students did well in high school, but some found high school did little to prepare them, academically or otherwise, for college.

“Classes are really hard. I don’t think my high school prepared me for it. Other than that, it’s kind of what I expected of college.” – Female, Industrial Engineering

“It’s pretty much what I expected, except the classes are much harder than I expected.” – Male, Aerospace/Mechanical Engineering

“When you are going through Orientation or even filling out your application, you should receive more information.” – Female, International Marketing

However, their social adjustment has been relatively smooth.

“I came from a class of 43 so I wasn’t sure how transitioning would be at such a big school. But with having all the activities and things to do, it’s been really easy to transition to college.” – Female, Forensic Science

“I love the environment because I came from a really small school. The school does a really good job of having things going on so you don’t get bored.” – Male, Pre-Nursing

“I love the freedom. For instance, if I want to eat now and wake up at 2:00 a.m. or eat at 2:00 a.m. and go to sleep now, I can. It’s the freedom on being able to do what you want on your own time but achieve your goals.” – Female, Industrial Engineering
FIRST GENERATION STATUS

Being a first-generation student was not top-of-mind among these students during their college application process or when they entered their freshman year. Whether they struggled to complete FAFSA forms prior to college or make friends once they got to campus, most saw themselves as part of the freshman class – all in the same boat – rather than alienated from their peers.

It can be considerably more difficult for first-generation students who are also minorities to adjust to WVU. The inability of freshmen to see the faces of others who look ethnically similar to themselves, combined with their uncertainly about college processes, can be demoralizing for these students. The mixed reception they get from friends who don’t attend college, when going back home, also heightens their feeling of not belonging.

Most acknowledge that despite their parents not having earned a four-year degree, they received encouragement and supported, particularly from their mothers, in their decision to attend college. Despite the unwavering support their parents pledged regardless of the outcome, these students have self-imposed pressure to be the first in their family to earn a four-year degree. Earning the degree can take on even greater meaning for minority students because a minority student’s success can be a symbolic success for the entire community.
FINANCIAL STABILITY

Before these first-generation students entered college, they were most concerned with being able to pay for it. Completing the FAFSA form was their greatest challenge, and they relied on a variety of resources to complete the form, including parents, parents’ accountants, high school counselors and friends who had already gone through the process.

Research shows it’s not uncommon for first generation students to work while in college, often to support their family, and their grades may suffer as a result. However, that was not true of these students. The minority who chose to work part-time, did so to earn spending money, not to support their family. Also, they recounted that their work has not interfered with their academic performance to date.

ACADEMICS

Parents are well-meaning, but because neither has earned a four-year degree, they are ill-equipped to advise or counsel their children on college-related matters. That said, academic advisers play a pivotal role in guiding first-generation freshmen students. However, based on the accounts these students provided, academic advisers’ degree of knowledge, communication skills and commitment to students varies greatly. Several first-generation students recounted advisers who were “helpful,” and “pretty great,” but many “felt rushed” and not in a position to questions their adviser’s rationale for suggesting certain courses they later regretted taking.
PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

While some students developed a relationship with their adviser and relied on them as a resource when they had difficulties with a class, the idea of discussing academic challenges with their advisers was a foreign concept to others. Instead, they turned to friends and family for support and advice.

Faculty interaction also appears to play a key role in first generation students’ academic success and gives them reason to believe they can succeed, despite experiencing occasional setbacks.

Often first generation students’ self-awareness of their status becomes rather obvious after they hear conversations between their peers who are continuing generation students and their parents. Conversations between parents and their first-generation students are typically confined to niceties (i.e. “How are you?”) while their peers who are not first generation seem to relish the opportunity to talk with their parents about all-things college (i.e. “How is college life?,” “How are your classes going,” etc.).

For some first-generation students, the difference is becoming more stark. Those who are seeking internships, coop opportunities, etc. are pursuing them without the support of their parents. Their parents simply do not understand how involvement outside of a classroom can benefit their child.
LIVING LEARNING COMMUNITY

Overall, students were receptive of the idea of a Living Learning community for first-generation freshmen, although they didn’t necessarily see a need for them personally. They believe this environment would help first-generation students understand that their perceptions and concerns are normal and many other students feel the same way. Such an environment would allow students who are relatively naïve about college to help each other figure it out together.

Others believe that residing in a Living Learning community for first-generation students would put them at a disadvantage. Segregating them in this manner would make them more aware that they are different and treated differently.

Whatever the vehicle, it’s clear these first-generation students crave more information prior to and when they initially get to college.
RECOMMENDATIONS

• Address first-generation student’s needs during some (optional) part of New Student Orientation.

• Ensure that first-generation students are assigned knowledgeable and supportive academic advisers.

• Form a support group for first-generation students that will help alleviate the internal pressure they place on themselves to succeed.

• Establish a mentorship program for first-generation students to be able to advise, mentor and share success stories with first-generation students in high school. Doing so will encourage them to attend college.

• Educate the parents of first-generation students about internships, coops etc. so they understand these options and the value they can add to their child’s education. This, in turn, will galvanize their support.

• Portray WVU’s Living Learning community for first-generation students as an environment that promotes shared experiences and mentoring, as well as a resource that helps students understand the campus culture, systems and academic requirements.

• Encourage them to join a student organization(s) so they can begin to form relationships with peers who have common interests. This will provide them with a sense of belonging and improved attitude about college.
DETAILED FINDINGS
THE DECISION TO ATTEND COLLEGE

These first-generation students provided a myriad of reasons as to why they chose to attend college. Some grew up knowing they were expected to attend college. Others elected to go to college to ensure they could obtain a better job and higher pay, as well as gain more knowledge, in general. In any case, their parents were very supportive of their decision.

“I was raised in an environment where I was told that I was going to go to college and get a four year degree. They sent me to a private school and that’s just the attitude my family has. My mom wanted me to do better than her.” - Male, Pre-Nursing

“It was my parents and my guidance counselor. During my senior meeting, they kind of encouraged me to stray away from being an automotive mechanic and go to college and maybe try engineering. I liked the idea.” - Male, Aerospace/Mechanical Engineering

Unlike typical first-generation students, many of these students’ parents have achieved success without having earned a college degree. Yet, they want their children to earn a degree so they will have more opportunities than they themselves did.

“My parents own a chain of Mexican restaurants but they have zero business degrees. They are doing well financially – I’m in college here – and they are paying for it.” – Female, Marketing

“I want to be able to give my children the life my father has been able to give me. My father doesn’t have a degree though. His father gave him the opportunity and he was able to work his way up to run Duquesne Light.” – Female, International Marketing

“I said ‘Mom, you’re just fine without having gone to college,’ and she told me she wants me to do better than her.” – Male, Pre-Nursing
THE DECISION TO ATTEND COLLEGE

While research has shown that many first-generation students attend college in order to help their families, that was not true of the students who participated in these focus groups. However, one Latino student acknowledged that she views her being able to obtain a college degree represents something much bigger than herself.

“I’m Latino, plus I come from an Afro-Latina background but also most of my family comes from Puerto Rico. So getting a college degree means a lot symbolically. We don’t really come from a place that regulates us to have higher education, especially in the current climate. My mom said you’re going to go to college and get a degree but also it’s something that is a little more selfless.” - Female, Women & Gender Studies

She represents students who face a double-whammy – being a first generation minority.

“This might sound really nerdy but I recently got really involved with my department, and I’ve been working on a lot of research that has come from my relationship to survival. I think that has helped me belong and find a better place for myself at the university... When I first got here, I tried so hard to find out if there were people ‘like me’ here. I was really disappointed because I was getting a lot of runaround. It was extremely hard to adjust to a campus where you walk around and there are not people that you are used to seeing. I’m currently in the process of talking with Corey Ferris and President Gee to resolve those issues because it does really hurt – I think especially first generation students of color – if they don’t have avenues or spaces that help them get through college. If students don’t have spaces for them they won’t come here...”

– Female, Women and Gender Studies
THE DECISION TO ATTEND COLLEGE

These students were excited about the prospect of attending college, but they were uneasy as well. Regarding the former, college represents a sense of freedom and the opportunity to study the things they care about.

“I was excited to come here and begin living on my own and not have my parents be around all the time.”
- Male, Aerospace/Mechanical Engineering

“I was excited to start the rest of my life. Seeing that I am older, took two years off and wasn’t really doing anything, I was excited to get my degree so I could learn what I could be doing the rest of my life.” – Female, International marketing

Two students feel earning a college degree will enable them to be an effective role model for their family or community.

“I’m most excited about being an example because I have little brothers and sisters.” – Female, Marketing

“Getting a college degree is just not something that helps me in my endeavors, but it would mean a lot to the family and community I am involved with.” – Female, Women and Gender Studies

It’s important to note that the Latino student who chose to attend WVU because she received a full scholarship from the Debate Team, was very disquieted about the environment in Morgantown because she noticed an under-representation of Hispanics at WVU.

“I was nervous about the environment, about coming from Miami, a predominantly very Latino community, to West Virginia, where that population is scarce. So when I first got here it was really hard for me to fit in and I made me say that I didn’t want to go here anymore. That was something that I was really scared of!” – Female, Women and Gender Studies
THE DECISION TO ATTEND COLLEGE

For most of these students, the ability to obtain funding was a critical factor in their ability to attend college. In fact, money was mentioned most often as a factor they considered when they decided to attend. In addition, many students were concerned about their ability to actually obtain a degree. That pressure to succeed in college is more self-imposed than dictated by family. It can cause a great deal of anguish.

“{My fear is} maybe not finishing and disappointing your family.” – Female, Industrial Engineering

“For me, not finishing is not a concern. My mom didn’t finish, and my dad didn’t finish. If I don’t finish, it’s not going to be awesome but I don’t feel like I’m going to let them down.” – Female, English

“You put so much pressure on yourself because you want to do so well. Being first generation and Latino is a double whammy. And you’re doing this in an institution that may or may not have the resources for me. In addition, coming from a first generation family, I ask myself what can I do to make sure I don’t fail and let down other people too. You put a lot of pressure on yourself, which is bad.” Female, Women and Gender Studies
THE DECISION TO ATTEND COLLEGE

Most named their mother as their greatest ally and all-around supporter, despite the fact she would be hard-pressed to relate to or understand situations students struggle with in college.

“My mom said you’re going to go to college and get a degree... I talk to my mom about everything. While she doesn’t have a degree, she tries to give me good advice. I also talked to the debate director and that helped a lot.” – Female, Women and Gender Studies

“My mom wanted me to do better than her...I had thoughts of dropping out and my mom told me I was going to stay. I had a lot of stressors in my head and told her she had done fine without having gone to college. She told me she wants me to do better than her.” – Male, Pre-Nursing
THE APPLICATION PROCESS

When asked what struggles, if any, they encountered during the college application process, they all named financial aid, specifically FAFSA, as the most daunting aspect. Some worked with parents to complete it, but others relied on their guidance counselor or friends who had already been through the process.

“I was hesitant and concerned because I had no clue what anything means and neither did my parents. I think what helped me a lot was being able to reach out to the debate team director who recruited me. She was able to walk me through the process.” – Female, Women and Gender Studies

“It took me 18 hours over the course of four days because I didn’t know anything.” – Female, Psychology

“If I had questions, I typically asked my mom if maybe she understood it. At times I thought maybe I was just staring at the screen for too long. I just sat down and did everything – about ten things at one time. If my mom couldn’t help me out because she didn’t go to school, I went to my friends.” – Female, English

A few had the benefit of being able to attend a financial workshop at their school.

“The most difficult thing I had to deal with was FAFSA. That was horrible. My private school had a workshop and my mom and I went to that. It was new to both of us. They had a representative from FAFSA at the workshop, too, so that really helped a lot.” – Male, Pre-Nursing

“The high school I went to had a college admissions advisor and you had to meet with her at least two times a quarter to ensure we were on track for college. Through that process, she also went over FAFSA and explained how it works, how it functions, how to fill it out and then she offered to review your FAFSA application. She also offered help to first generation students to fill out forms for graduate school.” – Female, Women and Gender Studies
ASSIMILATION

While they didn’t think of themselves as first-generation freshmen, in retrospect, some students acknowledged over time they were able to detect some difference between ongoing generation freshmen and themselves, especially when trying to navigate through college processes.

“I don’t think I realized how difficult it was until I was in the position to find out how difficult it was. I think that is especially true in the context of classes. I think a lot of it came from the fact that my roommates are not first generation students so they seemed to understand the college process better.” – Female, Women and Gender Studies

The difference is often not immediately apparent. For instance, some became aware of a disparity after listening to conversations between their roommates/friends, ongoing generation freshmen, and their parents.

“I was definitely aware that I was a first generation student. My roommate’s parents are psychologists and she’s going into psychology. Her mom asked her how college is going, how classes are, but my mom doesn’t know what to ask.” – Female, Forensic Science

“They had parents with degrees upon degrees talk about certain programs and ways to maneuver through certain majors. They always talk to their parents about how they are doing in college vs. my mom asking, ‘How is your day going?’ so you don’t really know the difficult position that you’re in until you’re in that position.” – Female, Women and Gender Studies

“I never thought about that. My friends’ parents also have degrees and they talk to their parents about college-related things. Like Cassandra said, my mom just says ‘how’s your day?’ I don’t think that’s a bad thing, though. It’s just different.” – Male, Pre-Nursing
ASSIMILATION

Most students did not believe it was important to be able to make friends with other first-generation students when they got here. However, the idea of future first-generation students being able to immediately meet other first-generation student had merit for some.

“I never really thought of myself as a first generation student to begin with so it never really crossed my mind.” – Male, Pre-Nursing

“It’s not really something you look for in a friend but if that works out, that’s good.” – Female, Industrial Engineering

“I think it would be great to be introduced to a group of first generation students. When I came here, I was so desperate to meet new people that I didn’t care who they were. I was looking everywhere...in class, through extra curricular activities. So if I could meet someone through the university who was not only new but also a first generation student, that would be terrific. To have someone talk to me and also be similar to me. That would have been amazing to have.” – Female, English

When they experience problems, some first generation students find it more beneficial to talk with ongoing generation freshmen. Others feel that sharing their issues with other first-generation students helps alleviate their worries.

“I learned so much from my roommate. When I have questions, she’ll say, ‘Talk to my mother.’” – Female, Women and Gender Studies

“I just talk to friends. They are a mix of students who are first generation and those who are not. Talking to other first generation students made me feel more comfortable.” – Female, Industrial Engineering
ASSIMILATION

When first-generation freshmen room with upper classmen, trying to become acclimated can be even more intimidating.

“I asked myself what I was doing here the first week. I was kind of scared. My roommate was a sophomore, a transfer from another college, so she knew what she was doing. Half the kids in my high school are already gone; they dropped out. We’re supposed to be the best and brightest in our area but we’re not. After first semester, I assured myself that I would be here all four years. I am set to do this. I told my parents that this person dropped out and this person got arrested. They said they understood what goes on up here but they said that they support me and wanted me to stay here. They said I seemed happy here.” – Female, Psychology

Those who are outgoing typically took a proactive approach to fitting in, but no one focused on meeting first-generation students.

“I joined things where people were like me. I joined the Marketing Club and Hispanic Club, the Helping Hands Club, and I volunteer.” – Female, Marketing

“I made myself fit in. I threw myself into everything.”
– Female, International Marketing
FINANCES

While research indicates that first-generation students typically work at least part-time while attending college in order to help support their parents, that is not true of these students. None of the students who work made any connection between supporting their family and having a job.

“I’m the Marketing Director for the Student Events board. Sometimes I struggle with work and school because my work can be sporadic. My working has nothing to do with being first generation, though. I just wanted to get involved and make some money.” – Female, Industrial Engineering

“I got financial aid which is the only I’m here, but I also need money to live. I’ve got to find a job where I can get more than eleven hours a week.” – Male, Pre-Nursing

“I work 7-11 Monday, Wednesday, Friday because I want to get some cash. It’s not bad; it doesn’t interfere with stuff, but sometimes I go to bed at 4:00 a.m. and get up at 6:00 a.m. I make it work, though” – Female, Industrial Engineering
ACADEMICS

Any issues these first-generation students had regarding academic advisers are similar to those freshmen students face, in general – inconsistency. Nearly all the students in one of the groups raved about how helpful and responsive their adviser has been. They were all also aware of WVU’s free tutoring resources.

“My advisers were pretty great at saying these are the classes you need to take. Let’s talk about what you want to do and let’s get you started on what you want to learn vs. what the university wants you to learn. The department that I’m in is really small so they worked with me. I said that I want to study things that are at the intersection of X,Y, and Z and they said let’s develop a schedule that fulfills the requirements while still making sure that you are learning what you want to learn in college.” – Female, Women and Gender Studies

“In the beginning I was taking Physics 111 and I was the only freshman in the class. I didn’t know anyone from my other classes either, so I panicked. I didn’t know anyone from my other classes either. I went to see my advisor to drop the class and he was really helpful in letting me drop it. He told me I was thinking the right things. Then he helped me get a new class so I could fill in my schedule.” – Female, Industrial Engineering

The second group of students had opposite experiences.

“I had no idea what I was doing or signing up for. It was a complete disaster. The person who helped me at Orientation didn’t want to help me. It would have been nice if the person I met with had asked me what I was looking into doing. I felt like I was in a do or die situation so I picked what looked fun to me.” – Female, International Marketing

“I would have liked to have seen the list of electives before I went to orientation. I remember they told me that I needed to take an elective. They showed me all the papers with all the courses and I had no idea what to choose. They recommended a philosophy class but if I took something else I could have been closer to having a minor, too. They didn’t explain that and I regret it.” – Male, Aerospace/Mechanical Engineering
ACADEMICS

Some students in the second group also complained that they did not initially have enough time with their advisers.

“It was super rushed. I didn’t understand the whole credit thing. I didn’t know how much each class was.” – Female, Industrial Engineering

“I just knew that I earned 15 credits at the end of first semester and just knew that I had to take 15 credits the second semester to be on track. I didn’t know why or what classes were going to give me those credits.” – Female, Marketing

Some of those students were also unaware that WVU offers tutoring.

“I didn’t know there was tutoring. I took EZT 101 this semester which was supposed to help you become a better student. But I didn’t realize part of what we needed to do was look into campus resources to help you become a better student. It would be more helpful if the TA would list the office hours and announce that there is tutoring for a course and information re how to contact them on the syllabus before we have problems.” – Female, International Marketing

When asked what they do if they are failing a class that does not offer tutoring, most acknowledged reaching out to friends for help.
PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT
While their parents lack the knowledge to help them navigate through college, they are able to provide emotional support. These students very much appreciate that.

“I have a really big family. Whenever I had an issue, I’d call my mom. Then the next day two of my aunts – who have a degree – would call. They’d say ‘It’s okay kid, you got it. I failed half of my classes freshman year so you’re doing much better than I did.’” – Female, Psychology

“Both of my parents are very supportive even though they don’t have any idea what is going on. I get pretty good grades, but sometimes I’ll get a C.” – Female, Marketing

“My dad doesn’t understand anything about college but he supports me financially. I’ve always been very close to my father, so he’s always there to give me the guidance I need and to tell me, ‘It’s okay; you’ll get through it.’”

However, some students who are becoming more engaged in the intricacies of college are beginning to feel a greater disconnect with their parents.

“When I try to talk to my parents about summer plans...internships, they don’t really understand. And when I mentioned a coop to them...taking off a semester in college and working for a company, they are fully against it. I would be making engineering wages. If my parents understood that a coop would support me in the future, they would definitely support it but now they just don’t understand.” – Male, Aerospace, Mechanical Engineering

“I applied for an internship and I got it so now I’m going to North Carolina. They don’t understand what’s up. They said, ‘It’s a job but it’s not a job.’ I told them it was going to look good on my resume but they don’t even know what a resume is.” – Female, Marketing
Another parental-related issue that arose was that parents of first-generation students do not have a good understanding of the constraints college puts on a student’s ability to travel home. In fact, students who live closer to campus appear to have the most difficult time explaining these nuances to their family.

“Just recently - at Easter time – when we didn’t have extra time off - my parents wanted me to come home. But they are divorced and my boyfriend’s parents are also divorced so that’s four houses we have to visit in one day. I would have just preferred to stay here but I did go home. But it is more work sometimes, and they think it’s easier than it is.” – Female, Industrial Engineering

“I actually don’t live at home for a number of reasons. Since they are both in Morgantown I do get to visit them more often that other people here. But it is really difficult because I’m only ten minutes away from them. Given that, it’s difficult for them to understand that I can’t just drop by to say hi or be home very single weekend or be home for dinner. I have homework and responsibilities. Because I am so close to home, I think that’s caused some issues. They always ask why I can’t come.” – Female, English

“My family wants me to come home more often. I don’t want to because of clubs I am in or weekend activities.” – Female, Marketing
Several students discussed the importance of having a relationship with faculty and staff in helping them maintain a positive attitude and a high level of self-esteem. To reiterate, they would like to rely on their family as they have through much of their lives, but often their parents cannot understand the issues they face.

“I talk to my mom about everything. While she doesn’t have a degree, she tries to give me good advice. I think that relationships between faculty and staff and advisors are really important. Not only do they know what the institution can provide and make you feel better about yourself because they realize the negative impact that can come with being a first generation student. As a first generation student, I don’t know how certain aspects of college work and what that means in the context of my racial identity. It’s really complicated.” – Female, Women and Gender Studies

“Teachers can be very encouraging. If I feel that my teacher doesn’t care, then I’m not going to care.” – Male, Pre-Nursing
PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

Many of these students concede they feel alienated from their peers when they return home, even after being gone just a few short months. While they feel a sense of disconnect, many of them find it difficult to articulate the change.

“I come from a community where there are not a lot of people who end up going to college. Some friends that I know are still working at their job from high school or they took a few classes at the community college. It puts you in a really weird mindset, especially when you come from a campus where everyone is so driven. You just get these weird vibes now and I don’t feel I fit with them when I go back home. You developed organic relationships with them but now there is a disconnect.” – Female, Women and Gender Studies

“Where I am from, there’s nothing to do. Some people go to college but a lot of them go to community college or they just stay home and work. So when you go back after 3-4 months, things are completely different.” – Female, Industrial Engineering
LIVING & LEARNING COMMUNITY

These students were presented with the concept of WVU having a Living Learning community for First-Generation students, and it elicited a mixed response. Some see it as helpful in alleviating concerns of those first generation students who struggle to fit in. On the other hand, others view such a community as a resource that would perpetuate the fact that they are different than other students.

Description

WVU is planning a Living Learning Community in a residence hall for first-generation students. It’s a smaller, more intimate environment that offers support to ease the transition from high school to college and provides engaging social activities to help students forge new friendships on campus.

Students in this community also take commonly-required classes together.

“It kind of prevents you from learning things from people not like you. I learned so much from my roommate. When I have any questions, she’ll say talk to my mother. I think first you have to talk to groups and explain that there isn’t anything wrong with being a first generation student; then they are more likely to ask for help from other non-first generation students.” – Female, Women’s and Gender Studies

“I personally don’t think it would have helped me because it’s almost like singling you out. Putting first generation together.” – Female, Industrial Engineering

“My friends from Summersville had parents who went here so everyone knew what the Rec was, the PRT, etc. but I didn’t know what I was doing. If I was with a group of people who didn’t know what was going on either we could help each other.” – Female, Marketing

“For some people it would be really helpful, but for me personally, probably not. It’s probably because of my family background. I was raised by my mom and grandparents. My grandfather is a lawyer and my grandmother is a nurse. But I can see how it would be really helpful for some people.” - Male, Pre-Nursing
LIVING & LEARNING COMMUNITY

Some students, while not necessarily an advocate of the first-generation Living Learning Community concept, embrace the idea of having a community of first-generation students.

“I think the LLC would have been helpful. Even if it just gave me the ability to meet with people on a regular basis – someone to touch base with. Someone to tell me that I’m not the only person having these struggles. But even if it’s not a Living Learning community but having a community available, open, and welcoming because I don’t feel we have a lot of that open door kind of thing here. I would have loved just to be able to touch base with someone. It would be a really good resource.” – Female, English

One student suggested that if the university wants to reach out to first-generation students, it should be done during the First Year Seminar class. They argue that it’s important for first-generation students to understand why they are at college and help them maximize their college experience.

“I know for me looking at the statistics between high school graduates and college graduates and the difference in the jobs you can get and the money you can make will change your life. I think it’s really beneficial to have that kind of information.” – Male, Pre-Nursing

“I agree that it should be a discussion about what to expect when you’re not expecting.” – Female, Women and Gender Studies
LIVING LEARNING COMMUNITY
One student was a zealous advocate of WVU reaching out to first-generation college students while they are still in high school. She explained that would have had a profound effect on her outlook about college and the university that took the time to speak with her.

“I never knew that WVU considered me a first generation student. I had a hunch and I was treating myself as one. Having them reach out to me in high school would have made me more interested in this university and more interested in going to college. I wish they had come to me and said ‘Hey, you’re one of these people and that’s super okay. You’re okay, you’re going be fine and we’re here for you.’ I wish they had recognized me and come to help me. I wish these doors were open sooner than they were. Even someone coming to my high school and saying, ‘Hey, let’s talk for five minutes, and this is what’s up’ would have been great. I just wish someone had come.” – Female, English