

First-Generation College Students

A Teaching Toolkit from the Center for Teaching Excellence and TRIO

First-generation college students make up about a third of all college students in the US at large and here at ETSU. They are more likely to come from minoritized and low-income populations. They enroll in and graduate at significantly lower rates than second & third generation peers.

First-generation students often face additional **academic, social, cultural, and financial barriers.**



Teachers: Consider how you may adapt some of these **instructional strategies** to help all students, including first-generation students succeed!



ETSU Resources: Learn and share these campus resources with students

SOCIAL BARRIERS

First-generation students:

- are more likely to live off campus
- are less likely to participate in on-campus organizations/events
- identify their closest friends as someone other than college students
- report higher rates of isolation and discrimination – Can't find their "place"
- perceive faculty as "distant" or unconcerned with them as individuals- intimidated



INVITE STUDENT COMMUNICATION

Sometimes students feel as though their communications with instructors are unwelcome intrusions. Reminding students, both directly and implicitly, that their questions and check-ins with you are valued can assure them that you take their success seriously and are open to communication with them. Besides oral or written encouragement to contact you with questions, you can reframe your "office hours" as "student hours" (which lets students know that time is set aside for them) and include updated student hour information in your email signature information.



GET TO KNOW STUDENTS

Students who feel "seen" by their instructors are more likely to be engaged in the class. Some common ways to do this are to learn student names and details about them. When we learn about our students and their expectations for our course, we can have a better understanding of where they are coming from and how to shape their expectations. Early in the semester, consider assessing students' course expectations. Follow-up responses to their input may include small activities that shape their valuation of your course and its content.

SHARE STORIES

Students are more likely to feel connected to one another if they get to know each other a bit better. Consider including more opportunities for students to share their own related experiences or stories with one another as a way to open a class (or an online Module) on a new topic. A specific activity could be to use or adapt the "I Am From..." poem activity (or others like it) for students to learn more about one another.

INCREASE STUDENT INTERACTIONS

Students will build community the more they are able to interact with one another. With this in mind, consider (further) increasing opportunities for student-to-student interactions in the class, using small group discussions/tasks or dyad discussions/tasks.

CREATE TEAM IDENTITY

If students will be working on a group or team project, they may work better together if they have a sense of belonging and team identity. One simple way to do this is to engage them in a few team-building activities, which can include as a follow-up having them create a team name, mascot, or coat of arms.

ACADEMIC BARRIERS

First-generation college students often:

- report lower educational aspirations
- enter college academically unprepared
- do not improve at as high a rate as peers with reading comprehension and critical thinking
- earn lower GPA's and take fewer hours
- avoid math, science and humanities majors
- have trouble identifying major, finding internships or building their resume



MASTERY LANGUAGE IN THE SYLLABUS

Students may be more motivated in a class if the purpose of what is learned is clear and the emphasis in class is on learning rather than performance (the grade). A good place to show students this is your focus is in the syllabus, which can be reframed as the "learning syllabus."

Throughout the syllabus, use warm and welcoming language, focused on the learning in your class, to make the syllabus more engaging, relevant, and inclusive.

DEMYSTIFY THE "UNWRITTEN RULES"

Many first-generation students lack social capital and are unaware of what is normal and expected in college. Instead of assuming that students understand something, make it a common practice to explain what you mean or expect.



GIVE CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS

Assignments can be better approached by students if they feel confident in understanding the instructions and don't feel overwhelmed by them. You might wish to review your instructions to students and see if there are places where you can use plain(er) language, explain ambiguous points, or further break down a complex requirement into smaller steps.

CREATE INCLUSIVE POLICIES

Think about the unseen and unmet needs of first-generation students. Build flexibility into your attendance and late work policies. Be willing to work with students and meet them where they are, while still maintaining strong expectations of them and their work. Take accommodations seriously by working with students who have physical or mental needs in the classroom.

SET EXPECTATIONS

Students sometimes have incorrect assumptions about the amount of challenge an assignment might pose. One way to help students have appropriate expectations for an activity is to provide an "anchor," or description of about how much time and effort an assignment or project will require. It is also useful to let students know that you have plenty of supports in place (such as instructions, checklists, and your availability for consultation), so that they also know that the activity is doable, and their efforts will pay off.

EXPLAIN ASSIGNMENTS' PURPOSE

When students understand the purpose of an assignment, they are more attentive to completing it well and succeeding. It could therefore be useful that, as each assignment is introduced (and on its explanation document), you begin by clearly stating the purpose of the assignment: Why are students doing it? What learning goals does it help them to meet?

PROVIDE A CHECKLIST

For larger projects, providing students with a guide that breaks the project down into smaller tasks could be a helpful way to keep them from feeling overwhelmed. Offering them this support can lead to a greater sense of feasibility for the project, which in turn increases students' sense that they can be successful.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

- **Center for Academic Achievement (CAA)**- Sherrod Library, First Floor
- **Information Technology Services Help Desk (ITS Help Desk)**- Sherrod Library
- **TRIO Student Support Services (TRIO-SSS)**- D.P. Culp Student Center, Room 318
- **University Advisement Center**- D.P. Culp Student Center, Second Floor, Suite 212
- **Testing Services**, Sherrod Library, First Floor



CULTURAL BARRIERS

First-generation students:

- are less likely to identify college as necessary to achieving goals.
- parents often lack “college knowledge”
- parents often do not support their decision to attend college
- “Live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted in neither.”
- often lack insight about WHY they are struggling
- worry that their experiences won't be validated or appreciated



SHARE MOTIVATION TIPS

“Motivation” is often cited as a struggle for students, particularly when it comes to settling down and reading, actively studying, or working on an assignment. Sharing resources with students who have this struggle can be useful to them (and sharing what you use might be a nice way to make a small contribution toward studentinstructor relationship).

LOW-STAKES CHANCES TO SUCCEED

Motivation depends a lot on whether students feel confident they can do what is required of them. To help increase this sense of competence, consider offering your students early, low-stakes ways of demonstrating their success in the course. For example, earlier tests may be for fewer points or may address a small segment of information to ensure successful demonstration of knowledge. Alternatively, students could complete smaller activities with clear instructions for part of their early grade, or could complete drafts for feedback before submitting for a final grade.



REFLECT ON STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Sometimes students need an opportunity to reflect on their behaviors as a student and plan how to address them. Near the start of the semester, consider including an activity where students reflect on their strengths and challenges as a student. Then ask them to concretely plan how they might address their challenges this semester (common challenges tend to include procrastination, overload, and mental health issues). It may help to have pre-written sets of resources ready to offer them in support of their goals and challenges, such as videos on time management, links to articles on organization, and links to mental health resources at ETSU. Also be ready to praise their identified strengths!

REQUEST FEEDBACK

Request student feedback on teaching at multiple times during the semester. This request increases communication between instructor and students and demonstrates the instructor's value of student input. Not all student suggestions must be followed; however, they should be addressed with a grateful and caring tone.

SUGGEST "TWO THINGS"

In regular messages to students consider including a “Two Things” section, where you give your students the 2 most value-added things they can be working on for the week/segment of time. Let them know there are more than these 2 to do, but this is where they can start if they are feeling overwhelmed and don't know where to begin.



SAFETY AND WELLNESS

- **Bucs Press 2**- Mental Health Help Line, Available 24/7- 423-439-4841, then press “2”
- **Safe Voyage**- Escorted walk or transport on campus, Monday-Friday, 8:00 PM-12:00 AM- 423-914-5940 (During Hours); 423-439-4480 (After Hours)
- **University Health Center**- Roy S. Nicks Hall, Suite 160, Monday-Friday, 8:00 AM-4:30 PM- 423-439-4225 (During Hours); 1-888-915-7298 (After Hours)
- **Dental Hygiene Clinic**- Lamb Hall, Room 70- 423-439-4497
- **Counseling Center**- D.P. Culp Student Center, Room 326- 423-439-3333

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

First-generation students often:

- are uninformed about financial aid and processes for FAFSA, loans, etc.
- are more likely to have additional financial obligations
- have fewer resources to pay for college
- need to allot more time to work than study
- are more likely to meet employment obligations than academic obligations



SHARE ORGANIZATIONAL TOOLS

Getting organized can be as much about mind management as “stuff” management. At the start of the term, or perhaps at a midpoint, when students are asked to pause and reflect, share with them suggestions for organizational tools they might wish to use to help them better keep track of all class assignments (for all classes!), back-planning, task lists, and other things that might otherwise fall out of their head.

HELP STUDENTS PLAN

Students are rarely given guidance about how to plan their time for a course. At the beginning of the semester, consider encouraging them to deliberately plan the time each week (days, times) that they will focus on your class. (They can also be encouraged to do this for their other classes!). It can help to communicate to them that a standard rule-of-thumb for undergraduate classes is to plan for 2-3 hours outside of class for every [credit] hour in the class; if your class is online, this time “in class” must also be factored into their planning. You can remind them that this includes time for reading, doing course activities, and studying notes.



PERSONAL RESOURCES

- **Little Bucs- Childcare**, 2102 Signal Drive- 423-439-7549
- **Bucky's Food Pantry**- D.P. Culp Student Center (next to the Passport Office)- 423-439-2825
- **Bucky's Career Closet**- D.P. Culp Student Center, Carrier Center, Second Floor- 423-439-4450
- **Office of Veterans Affairs**- Yoakley Hall, First Floor- 423-439-6819
- **Disability Services**- D.P. Culp Student Center, Room 352- 423-439-8346
- **Multicultural Center (MCC)**- D.P. Culp Student Center, Second Floor- 423-439-4844
- **Patricia E. Robertson PRIDE Center**- D.P. Culp Student Center, Second Floor- 423-439-8408
- **Undergraduate Student Success Specialist (USSS)**- Sherrod Library, Room 452- 423-439-8777

GIVE REMINDERS

Even the best of us have been grateful for the occasional reminder when we are busy or feeling overwhelmed. Consider setting up regular reminders for students before a due date comes up; you or your GA can preschedule these as “Intelligence Agents” email releases (if, for example, students haven't yet completed an activity in D2L) or in a group text notification app, such as GroupMe.

SHARE CAMPUS RESOURCES

Familiarize yourself with what is available on your campus. Attach a list of resources to your syllabus and D2L site. Consider resources that address mental and physical health, food insecurity, and academic needs. If a student asks you where they should go for something, help them find the answer.



CAMPUS OFFICES

- **Office of Financial Aid**- Burgin Dossett Hall, Room 105- 423-439-4300
- **Scholarship Office**- 423-439-7094
- **Dean of Students**- D.P. Culp Student Center, Room 391- 423-439-6454
- **Housing and Residence Life**- 423-439-4446
- **ID Services**- D.P. Culp Student Center, Second Floor- 423-439-8316
- **New Student and Family Programs**- D.P. Culp Student Center, Room 250- 423-439-8452
- **University Registrar**- Burgin Dossett Hall, First Floor- 423-439-6744



Center for
Teaching Excellence



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www.etsu.edu/teaching