

Examining the Navigation of Higher Education Among First-Generation, Low-Income College Students

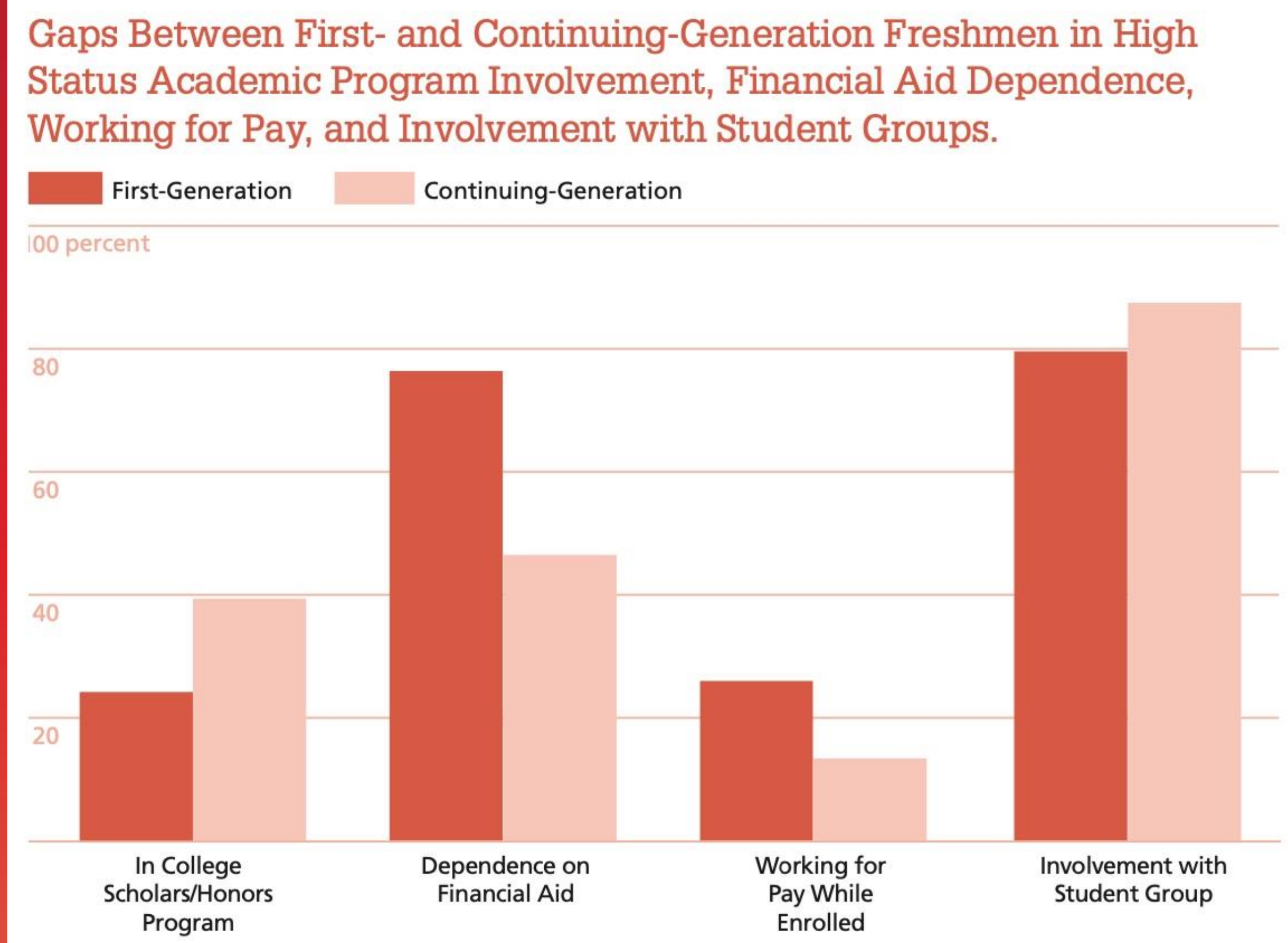
Research Questions

- How do first-generation, low-income (FGLI) college students navigate emerging adulthood while pursuing higher education?
- What institutional support systems do first-generation, low-income students rely on to succeed academically and personally, and how effective are these resources?
- How do first-generation, low-income students perceive the role of their campus community (including faculty, peers, and student organizations) in fostering a sense of belonging and support during their college experience?
- What systemic changes are necessary to foster a more inclusive and equitable higher education environment for first-generation, low-income students?

Significance

This research holds personal and community relevance. By examining these questions, I aim to:

- Shed light on systemic inequalities
- Contribute to efforts to address them, creating more inclusive and equitable educational environments
- Better support FGLI students holistically recognizing them not just as scholars, but as individuals with complex social and cultural needs.
- Land Grant institutions



(Mcdossi. 2022)

Abstract

This research explores the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood for first-generation, low-income college students, focusing on how they navigate identity and belonging while pursuing higher education. Many of these students face unique challenges, including limited access to resources, financial insecurity, and the pressure to succeed without familial guidance. This study examines the gap between societal expectations and the lived realities of these students, with particular attention to personal growth, identity formation, and institutional support. Using a qualitative research approach, I will conduct in-depth interviews with first-generation, low-income students to gain insight into their experiences. By analyzing their narratives, this research aims to identify common barriers they encounter, as well as the support systems that contribute to their success. Findings from this study could inform institutional policies, improve campus resources, and foster an environment where underrepresented students can thrive academically and personally. This project contributes to the broader discussion on educational equity by highlighting the often-overlooked struggles of first-generation students. By amplifying their voices, I hope to provide a deeper understanding of their journey and advocate for systemic changes that promote a more inclusive higher education experience. Ultimately, this research is driven by both scholarly inquiry and personal experience, with the goal of making a meaningful impact on students in similar situations.

Table 8. Number and percentage distribution of Student Support Services (SSS) participants by gender, race/ethnicity, age, eligibility status, and type of grantee: 2013-14

Participant characteristics	Four-year institutions		Two-year institutions	
	Number of participants	Percent	Number of participants	Percent
Total number of participants	103,691	100.0	101,065	100.0
Gender				
Female	67,403	65.0	68,148	67.5
Male	36,263	35.0	32,869	32.5
Race/ethnicity				
White	34,866	33.8	43,055	42.7
Black/African American	31,076	30.1	26,768	26.6
Hispanic	26,125	25.3	20,803	20.7
Asian	6,576	6.4	3,425	3.4
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	632	0.6	1,294	1.3
American Indian/Native Alaskan	1,760	1.7	3,485	3.5
More than one race	2,269	2.2	1,910	1.9
Age				
17-22 years old	76,724	74.3	50,300	50.0
23-30 years old	17,996	17.4	20,703	20.6
Over 30 years old	8,494	8.2	29,542	29.4
Eligibility status				
Low-income and first-generation	68,314	65.9	69,271	68.5
Low-income only	9,878	9.5	6,832	6.8
First-generation only	14,263	13.8	14,107	14.0
Disabled	5,370	5.2	4,141	4.1
Disabled and low-income	5,866	5.7	6,714	6.6

(U.S. Department of Education 2016)

Literature Review

Expanding the conversation from academic success to include how FGLI students navigate social structures, institutional systems, and cultural frameworks while developing a sense of belonging.

- Social Capital & Institutional Support**
FGLI students often lack the inherited social networks that ease college transitions (Walpole, 2003).
Mentorship, peer groups, and student support services can improve belonging and persistence (Valentine, 2011).
- Cultural Mismatch & Identity Tensions**
Many FGLI students experience a disconnect between home culture and university expectations (Stephens, 2012).
This mismatch can lead to feelings of imposter syndrome, isolation, and difficulty forming an academic identity (Wildhagen, 2015).
- Intersectionality & Institutional Recognition**
Race, class, and gender shape how FGLI students navigate belonging and self-concept (Means & Pyne, 2017).
Institutional policies often view FGLI students as an at-risk category rather than recognizing their resilience and diverse experiences (McDossi, 2022).

There is limited research on how FGLI students actively navigate these challenges to develop a sense of self and belonging and we need to go beyond just academic success.

Methods

Qualitative approach

- In-depth Interviews with 10-15 first-generation, low-income, college students.
- Purposive Sampling: Select undergraduate participants from low-income, first-generation backgrounds to capture the higher education navigation experiences.

Data Analysis:

- Labeling key ideas and categorizing data to identify recurring themes.

Ethical Considerations:

- Informed consent obtained.
- Confidentiality assured.

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