

Making Sure They Make It!

CIC/WALMART COLLEGE SUCCESS AWARDS REPORT



Best Practices for Ensuring the Academic Success of First-Generation College Students



THE COUNCIL OF
INDEPENDENT COLLEGES



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**Best Practices for Ensuring the Academic Success
of First-Generation College Students**

Kerry J. Strand



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About the Author

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A baccalaureate degree is essential to success in the contemporary United States. The degree offers improved economic security and the development of capabilities such as critical thinking, effective communication, quantitative reasoning, creativity, problem solving, personal and social responsibility, and social and cultural capital. An educated citizenry is critical to the maintenance of a robust democracy, a strong economy, and a competitive workforce in the 21st century. Failure to offer the best possible education to the greatest number of people counters the best interests of civic participation and our country's economic well-being.

Despite all this, the percentage of young people in the United States who start college but do not graduate is large and increasing. A sizable proportion of students who do not finish college are first-generation students—that is, they come from families where neither parent attended college. Recent data from the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles show that only 27.4 percent of first-generation students graduate in four years, while 42.1 percent of students whose parents have degrees do so.

WHO ARE FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS?

First-generation college students differ in some significant ways from their peers. They are more likely to come from low-income families. About two-fifths of first-generation students are students of color, mainly Hispanic and African American. First-generation students are far more likely to come from a home where English is a second language. They also are slightly more likely to come from rural communities and to attend college close to home.

Of greater significance is how first-generation students compare to their counterparts in terms of preparation for college. These students are not as well prepared academically as students whose parents attended college. They have lower expectations for success in college—related, no doubt, to their lower levels of confidence in their academic skills generally and particularly in mathematics and writing. Many first-generation students lack support from family members who are unfamiliar with the collegiate experience. They are less prepared to find and use financial information and other resources, sometimes resulting in less well informed decisions about the college application and selection processes as well as financial aid options prior to college attendance.

Once they are enrolled, first-generation students continue to differ in other meaningful ways from their non-first-generation peers. They are more likely to attend part-time, to take one or more remedial courses (owing to their weaker academic preparation), to work at paid jobs more hours per week, to live off-campus, to major in business or management, and to earn slightly lower first-year GPAs. They spend less time studying, interact less with faculty and their peers, and participate less in co-curricular activities, athletics, and volunteer work. And they are far more likely to drop out after the first year. Even those who persist into their second and third years are likely to complete fewer credit hours, have lower GPAs, and continue to live and to work, many of them full-time, off campus.

CIC/WALMART COLLEGE SUCCESS AWARDS

To address these issues, the Walmart Foundation awarded the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) two generous grants to support CIC member institutions' efforts to enhance the success of first-generation college students. In the first wave of the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards project, 20 institutions received \$100,000 grants. As a result of an additional grant in 2010, 30 more CIC member institutions were awarded funds aimed at enhancing programs that promote the success of first-generation students.

The Council of Independent Colleges—the major national service organization for small and mid-sized, independent, teaching-oriented liberal arts colleges and universities in the United States—is uniquely positioned to promote the success of first-generation students. Although students of color and those from low- and middle-income families (who are more likely than other students to be first-generation) enroll in similar proportions at private and at state colleges and universities, first-generation students at private institutions are much more likely to graduate in a timely fashion than those at public institutions. Seventy percent of first-generation students who received a bachelor's degree from an independent college or university were able to do so in six years or fewer, compared with only 57 percent at public four-year institutions. Fully one-third of independent college and university students are first-generation attendees, and a significant number of CIC's member institutions—including all those that participated in the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program—have a demonstrated commitment to, and success in, providing first-generation students with an excellent baccalaureate education. Indeed, the collective success of independent colleges and universities in enrolling, educating, and graduating first-generation and other at-risk students is unmatched by other sectors of American higher education.

CIC/WALMART COLLEGE SUCCESS AWARD RECIPIENTS

Adrian College (MI)	Emmanuel College (MA)	Notre Dame de Namur University (CA)
Alma College (MI)	Eureka College (IL)	Notre Dame of Maryland University
Alverno College (WI)	Florida Memorial University	Ripon College (WI)
Bay Path College (MA)	Franklin College (IN)	Rosemont College (PA)
Bellarmino University (KY)	Guilford College (NC)	Saint Augustine's University (NC)
Berea College (KY)	Heritage University (WA)	St. Edward's University (TX)
California Lutheran University	Illinois College	Stetson University (FL)
Cardinal Stritch University (WI)	Juniata College (PA)	Stevenson University (MD)
Carroll University (WI)	Kalamazoo College (MI)	The College of Idaho
Catawba College (NC)	Lesley University (MA)	The College of St. Scholastica (MN)
Chaminade University of Honolulu (HI)	Lynchburg College (VA)	Thomas College (ME)
Clark Atlanta University (GA)	Manchester University (IN)	University of St. Francis (IL)
College of Mount Saint Vincent (NY)	Mars Hill University (NC)	Wabash College (IN)
College of Saint Benedict (MN)	McKendree University (IL)	Wartburg College (IA)
Defiance College (OH)	Mercyhurst University (PA)	Wiley College (TX)
DePaul University (IL)	Mills College (CA)	Woodbury University (CA)
Elizabethtown College (PA)	North Central College (IL)	

WHAT THE COLLEGES DID AND WHAT WORKED

The colleges and universities chosen to participate in the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program all shared and demonstrated a commitment to the recruitment, retention, and academic success of first-generation students. Nonetheless, the programs and policies already in place on their campuses, as well as the new initiatives funded by the awards, vary a great deal—which is to be expected given the wide-ranging differences in the size and characteristics of the populations they serve. Although the initiatives themselves vary, all are informed by an understanding of the distinctive challenges faced by first-generation students and are targeted toward what research shows these students most need for academic success. In their simplest form, these challenges are:

- **Connection:** The need to feel that they are a part of the campus community—that is, to enjoy enduring relationships, have a satisfying social life, engage in fulfilling activities outside of the classroom, and feel a sense of belongingness on the campus;
- **Preparation:** The need for basic academic skills (reading, writing, taking notes, studying, and quantitative literacy) as well as knowledge about how to succeed in, and after, college—for example, registering for classes, choosing a major, taking advantage of campus resources, thinking about a career, dressing professionally, managing time and stress, interviewing, and dealing with family pressures; and
- **Money:** The need for financial support not only for basic expenses (tuition, room and board), but to buy books, travel home, participate in social life with other students, and pursue summer and weekend activities, such as extra coursework or unpaid internships in lieu of a paid job.

BEST PRACTICES

1. Identify, actively recruit, and continually track first-generation students

First-generation information is not typically captured in traditional application or registration forms, so colleges and universities must depend on students' self-identification as first-generation students or use proxy indicators, such as eligibility for Pell grants. Some first-generation students are initially reluctant to identify or label themselves as such. Once first-generation students realize they are not alone, their comfort level increases substantially as they participate in meetings with advisors and group activities. But identifying first-generation students is just the first step. Colleges and universities that participated in the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program came to realize that recruiting these students may require more than the usual welcoming efforts.

2. Bring them to campus early

The distinctive challenges facing first-generation students present themselves long before they arrive on campus in the fall. They may well need special encouragement, early on, to follow through on their plans to attend college. But even more important is to acknowledge and address ways that they are likely to be unprepared for the college experience, both academically and in other, less tangible, ways. Many colleges do this by means of pre-semester summer programs, often referred to as “summer bridge” programs. Bridge programs also may address needs that may be less obvious: how to find one's way around campus, how to use the library, how to interact with faculty and staff, the language of the academy, the expectations of professors, the significance of college traditions, and the wide range of services offered at the typical college or university. They also give students a chance to bond with one another, to experience some of the fun and informal aspects of college life, and to meet faculty and staff members with whom they will be working through their college years.

3. Focus on the distinctive features of first-generation students

On many campuses, by design or by chance, first-generation students share one or more additional characteristics that set them apart from the rest of the student population. Initiatives to bolster the success of these students are enhanced by paying particular attention to how and what needs of these students might be better met in order to enhance the chances for their academic success.

4. Develop a variety of programs that meet students' ongoing needs

Although bridge programs give first-generation students an academic head start, they require ongoing support to help ensure their success as college students. The 50 colleges and universities that received CIC/Walmart College Success Awards boast an impressive array of programs offered throughout the academic year that are aimed at ensuring the success of first-generation students. While most programs focus in some way on support for academic achievement, others also help prepare students for successful lives after college. The most common areas of need include academic support, life skills and emotional support, career preparation, and celebration and recognition of achievements on campus.

5. Use mentors

One of the most popular means of reaching and working with first-generation students, and one whose effectiveness is demonstrated time and time again by colleges and universities committed to their success, is to forge ongoing, meaningful, one-on-one connections between those students and others on campus. The experiences of the many colleges and universities that build mentoring into their programming for first-generation students yield three important bits of wisdom: first, that peer mentors—people who are, or have been, first-generation college students themselves, and especially current students—are, in important respects, the most effective mentors; second, that effective mentoring requires ongoing contact and communication; and, third, that mentors need training, clear guidelines, ongoing support, and (ideally) some financial incentive to work effectively with, and stay committed to, their first-generation mentees.

6. Institutionalize a commitment to first-generation students

Although most independent college and university student populations include a more or less sizable number of first-generation students, campuses are not equally attuned to their presence nor to their distinctive characteristics and needs. And while any sort of programming targeted to these students is likely to produce positive outcomes, the best results tend to be found at colleges and universities that offer first-generation students the most supportive and welcoming environments. Those environments tend to be where a commitment to first-generation students is part and parcel of the work of the institution and where the entire campus is aware of their presence and actively coordinates efforts to bolster their success.

7. Build community, promote engagement, and make it fun

Retention of students depends not only on academic performance, but also on having an enjoyable experience at the college or university they attend. Students need the chance to develop meaningful relationships, engage in activities that they like, relax, and have fun. Building a sense of community among first-generation students themselves makes them more inclined to attend workshops and other activities designed for them, gives them a sense of “home” from the beginning, and makes them feel less like outsiders on the campus. This means programming activities for first-generation students that have no goal other than providing a chance for students to experience some fun and to bond with one another.

8. Involve family (but keep expectations realistic)

First-generation students are more likely than their peers to live at home or to attend college near their family's home. Parents may be accustomed to depending on their college-age son or daughter for a variety of responsibilities, and when their son or daughter is still living nearby, they may simply continue that dependency without understanding that the demands of college must take priority in their son's or daughter's life. While some parents are delighted to have their children be the first in the family to pursue higher education, others may be ambivalent or even unsupportive in ways that create barriers to

students' success. Because of these challenges, many colleges and universities include families in their first-generation student programming, make special efforts to provide information to families, and in some cases work to make communication with families a priority throughout the students' time in college.

9. Acknowledge, and ease when possible, financial pressures

A major source of stress reported by most first-generation college students is finances, and most successful programs take this into account. Institutions vary considerably in what they are able to offer students in the way of financial support and also, to some extent, in how they choose to award it. Pell grants, scholarships, and other forms of financial aid are, of course, vital, and most colleges and universities receiving CIC/Walmart Awards provide financial aid information to students and families in one form or another. Another important (but often overlooked) need of many first-generation students is financial support for participating in activities that require a commitment of time that the student would otherwise use earning money at an outside job.

10. Keep track of your successes and failures: What works and what doesn't?

Ongoing assessment of first-generation programming is essential. CIC/Walmart College Success Award recipients look at a variety of outcomes, including student and faculty satisfaction, levels of participation, and academic preparedness. They also use many different methods of data collection: college records, surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and, in some cases, nationally-recognized instruments that measure students' attitudes and experiences. In every case, colleges and universities use their assessment results in a formative way—that is, to make small and large improvements in their programs for first-generation students.

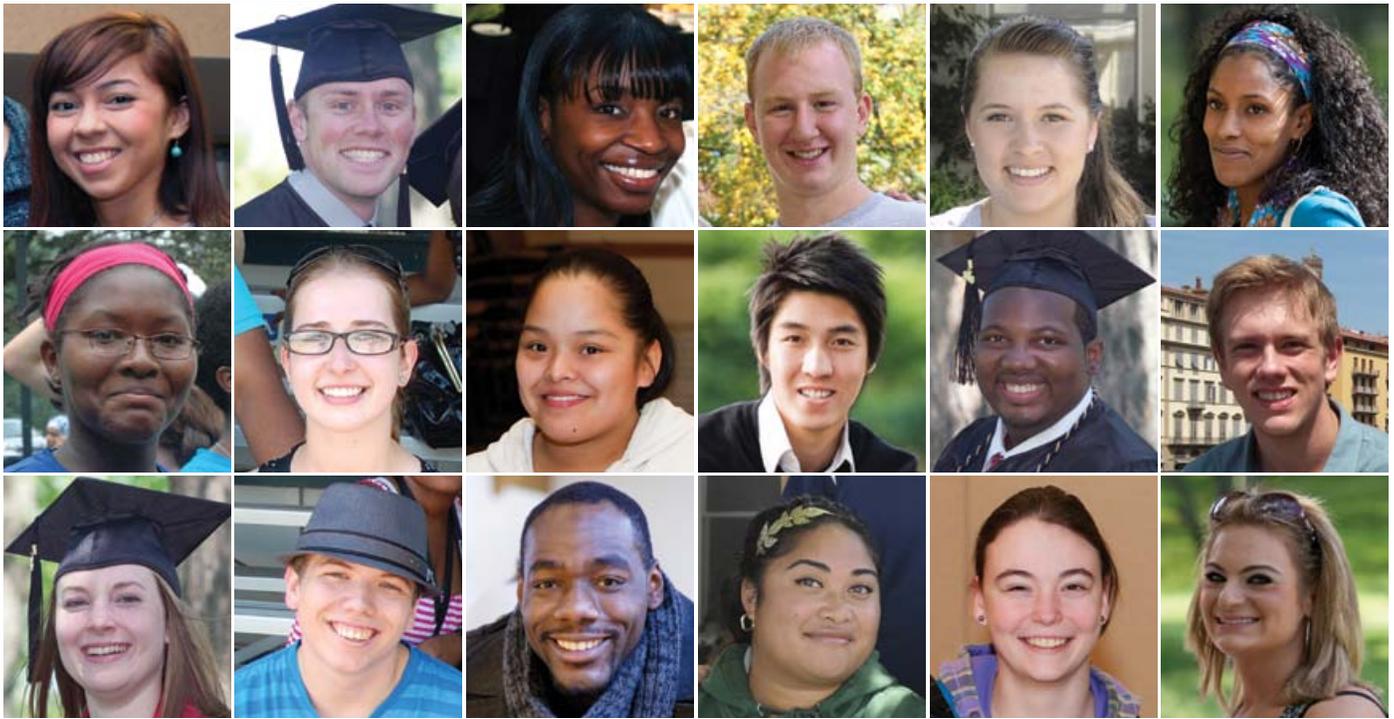
A FINAL WORD

What works on any given campus is, of course, influenced by any number of different factors: demographic and other characteristics of the students, the campus culture, the college or university mission, resources, and so on. The common characteristics of experiences that influence student learning are those that:

1. Include encounters with challenging ideas and people;
2. Require active engagement with those challenges;
3. Occur in a supportive environment;
4. Emphasize meaningful, real-world activities; and
5. Involve relational, interpersonal activities.

These are the kinds of experiences that are offered, in multiple ways, to first-generation students enrolled at the 50 colleges and universities that participated in the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program. There may be no “silver bullet” when it comes to enhancing the academic success of this next generation of college students, many of whom will continue to be first-generation college students. But the many and multifaceted successes of the CIC/Walmart Award recipients speak to the value of these ongoing efforts. ●

INTRODUCTION



Making Sure They Make It!

Best Practices for Ensuring the Academic Success of First-Generation College Students

Few would question that a baccalaureate degree is essential to economic success in the contemporary United States. In 2012, the typical full-time worker with a bachelor's degree earned 79 percent more than a similar full-time worker with no more than a high school diploma. Compounded over a lifetime, individuals with a bachelor's degree earn on average \$1 million more than workers who did not finish college and nearly twice as much as those with only a high school diploma. People without a college degree also are more vulnerable to economic downturns, during which they are far more likely than their counterparts with degrees to suffer unemployment or a decrease in wages. Recent data show that the unemployment rate for college graduates is just a bit more than half that of those who did not finish college. In short, a degree from a college or university provides greater economic security and access to a better life—meaningful employment with a sufficient income and health and retirement benefits, a house of one's own, discretionary income, and the ability to support a family and send one's own children to college. A college or university education is the ticket to the middle-class in the United States.

But higher education offers more than just economic security. Richard Morrill, former president of the Teagle Foundation, notes that a college or university education develops a wide range of capabilities that help people become independent thinkers and “agents of their own lives”—capabilities such as critical thinking, effective communication, quantitative reasoning, creativity,

problem solving, and personal and social responsibility. An education in the arts and sciences, he maintains, opens “cognitive and personal doors into the social and natural worlds in which we live.” As such, the college experience enriches lives far beyond time spent working for a living. It also equips graduates with the social and cultural capital that they, in turn, pass on to their own children.

Finally, providing wide access to a baccalaureate education brings with it key benefits to American society. An educated citizenry is critical to the maintenance of a robust democracy, a strong economy, and a competitive workforce in the 21st century. More than 60 percent of current labor market jobs require some post-high school education, and according to estimates, over the next decade two-thirds of the roughly 31 million job openings will require some formal training beyond high school. Failure to offer the best possible education to the greatest number of people counters the best interests of civic participation and our country’s economic well-being.

Despite all this, the percentage of young people in the United States who start college but do not graduate is large and increasing. Although college enrollment is at an all-time high, barely over half of those who embark on a bachelor’s degree program finish in six years, and the United States lags far behind many other countries in college completion rates. A sizable proportion of students who do not finish college are first-generation students—that is, they come from families where neither parent attended college. Recent data from the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles show that only 27.4 percent of first-generation students graduate in four years, while 42.1 percent of students whose parents have degrees do so.

WHO ARE FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS?

First-generation college students differ in some significant ways from their peers. They are more likely to come from low-income families—about half of them, compared to only about one-third of students whose parents went to college. About two-fifths of first-generation students are students of color, mainly Hispanic and African American. First-generation students are far more likely to come from a home where English is a second language. They also are slightly more likely to come from rural communities and to attend college close to home.

Of greater significance is how first-generation students compare to their counterparts in terms of preparation for college. Unsurprisingly, these students are not as well prepared academically as students whose parents attended college; they typically had less rigorous high school curricula, lower high school grade point averages (GPA), lower scores on SAT/ACT tests, poorer abilities in mathematics, and lower scores on tests of important skills such as critical thinking. They are less likely to have taken advanced placement classes and tests as well as college admissions tests and have lower expectations for success in college—related, no doubt, to lower levels of confidence in their academic skills generally and particularly in mathematics and writing. Many first-generation students lack support from family members, who are unfamiliar with the collegiate experience. As a result, these students are less prepared to find and use financial information and other resources, sometimes resulting in less well informed decisions



about the college application and selection processes as well as financial aid options prior to college attendance.

Once they are enrolled, first-generation students continue to differ in other meaningful ways from their non-first-generation peers. They are more likely to attend part-time, take one or more remedial courses (owing to their weaker academic preparation), work more hours per week at paid jobs, live off-campus, major in business vocational fields, and earn slightly lower first-year GPAs. They spend less time studying, interacting with faculty and their peers, and participating in co-curricular activities, athletics, and volunteer work.

They also are far more likely to drop out after the first year. Even those who persist into their second and third years are likely to complete fewer credit hours, have lower GPAs, and continue to live and to work (many of them full-time) off campus.

To address these issues, the Walmart Foundation awarded the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) two generous grants to support CIC member institutions' efforts to enhance the success of first-generation college students. In the first wave of the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards project, 20 institutions received \$100,000 grants. As a result of an additional grant in 2010, 30 more CIC member institutions were awarded funds—20 with \$100,000 grants and 10 with \$50,000 grants—aimed at enhancing programs that promote the success of first-generation students. *(For the list of institutions, see page 45.)*

The Council of Independent Colleges—the major national service organization for small and mid-sized, independent, teaching-oriented liberal arts colleges and universities in the United States—is uniquely positioned to promote the success of first-generation students. Although the proportion of students of color and those from low- and middle-income families (who are more likely than other students to be first-generation) enroll in similar proportions at private and at state colleges and universities, first-generation students at private institutions are much more likely to graduate in a timely fashion than those at public institutions. Seventy percent of first-generation students who received a bachelor's degree from an independent college or university were able to do so in six years or fewer, compared with only 57 percent at public four-year institutions. Fully one-third of independent college and university students are first-generation attendees, and a significant number of CIC member institutions—including all those that participated in the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program—have a demonstrated commitment to, and success in, providing first-generation students with an excellent baccalaureate education. Indeed, the collective success of independent colleges and universities in enrolling, educating, and graduating first-generation and other at-risk students is unmatched by other sectors of American higher education.

WHAT THE COLLEGES DID AND WHAT WORKED

The colleges and universities chosen to participate in the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program all shared and demonstrated a commitment to the recruitment, retention, and academic success of first-generation students. Nonetheless, the programs and policies already in place on their campuses, as well as the new initiatives funded by the awards, vary a great deal—which is to be expected given the wide-ranging differences in the size and characteristics of the populations they serve. For example, some colleges focus on Latino students; another targets African-American males; a university in Hawaii offers programs for Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders; and other colleges target populations such as transfer students, commuter students, students pursuing careers in education or business, students in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields,



FACTS: Graduate in Six Years or Fewer

70% of first-generation students receive a bachelor's degree from an independent college or university

57% of first-generation students receive a bachelor's degree from a public four-year institution

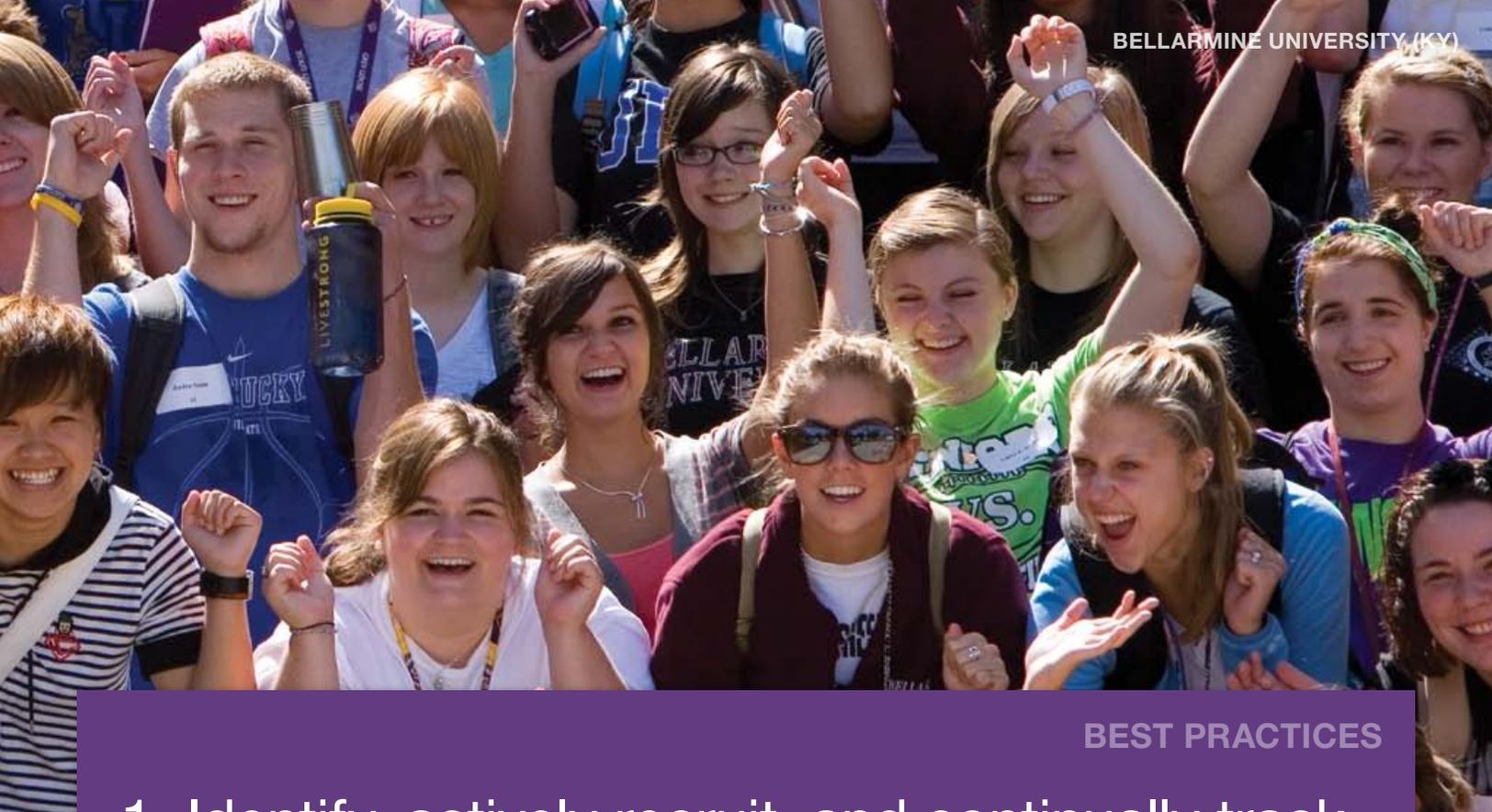
(Source: NAICU, 2011)

students of color from the local area, non-native English speakers, adults, children of migrant workers, and students from distressed Appalachian communities.

Other factors influence institutional efforts on behalf of first-generation students. For example, a college with a faculty mentoring program already in place used the grant monies to extend that program to recruit and train peer mentors. Another supplemented its successful peer mentoring program with a summer bridge program to give first-generation students an early introduction to different aspects of college life. Some colleges had as a goal greater campus-wide awareness of the special needs of first-generation students among faculty and staff—a strategy not prioritized by institutions whose campus culture already supported programming aimed at the needs of first-generation students. Other features of the 50 colleges and universities—such as size, financial resources, and location—also influenced decisions about how best to serve first-generation students on their respective campuses.

Although the initiatives themselves vary, all are informed by an understanding of the distinctive challenges faced by first-generation students and are targeted toward what research shows these students most need for academic success. In their simplest form, these challenges are:

- **Connection:** The need to feel that they are a part of the campus community—that is, to enjoy enduring relationships, have a satisfying social life, engage in fulfilling activities outside of the classroom, and feel a sense of belongingness on the campus;
- **Preparation:** The need for basic academic skills (reading, writing, note taking, studying, and quantitative literacy) as well as knowledge about how to succeed in, and after, college—for example, registering for classes, choosing a major, taking advantage of campus resources, thinking about a career, dressing professionally, managing time and stress, interviewing, and dealing with family pressures; and
- **Money:** The need for financial support not only for basic expenses (tuition, room and board), but to buy books, travel home, participate in social activities with other students, and pursue summer and weekend activities such as extra coursework or unpaid internships, in lieu of a paid job. ●



BEST PRACTICES

1. Identify, actively recruit, and continually track first-generation students

A first but fundamental challenge lies in identifying first-generation students. First-generation information is not typically captured in traditional application or registration forms, so colleges and universities—particularly those that use the standard application—must depend on students' self-identification as first-generation students or use proxy indicators, such as eligibility for Pell grants.

Identifying first-generation students is just the first step. Colleges and universities that participated in the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program came to realize that recruiting these students may require more than the usual welcoming efforts. The **University of St. Francis**, a Catholic, Franciscan university located south of Chicago in Joliet, Illinois, that serves

more than 3,300 students, writes to students early in the summer to let them know that they—and the programming available to them—are special on their campus. Their welcoming letter opens with this message:

“You are on your way to fulfilling a dream. You chose college as your path. This fresh journey will be filled with new friends, new ideas, and new challenges.

As a first-generation college student this will be an important achievement. First-generation university students are students whose parents have not obtained a college degree. These students may have limited knowledge about college expectations, processes, jargon, or traditions. No matter how bright and accomplished, you might feel a bit more nervous about the first steps into

“You are on your way to fulfilling a dream. You chose college as your path. This fresh journey will be filled with new friends, new ideas, and new challenges....No matter how bright and accomplished, you might feel a bit more nervous about the first steps into the university. We know; many of us were first-generation too.... You should know you are not alone. Last year, 59 percent of the freshman class was first-generation students. Support, guidance, and friends await you.”

—Excerpt from a welcome letter to first-generation students, **University of St. Francis (IL)**

the university. We know; many of us were first-generation too.... You should know you are not alone. Last year, 59 percent of the freshman class was first-generation students. Support, guidance, and friends await you.”

This letter is accompanied by a brochure describing the special services and assistance provided to first-generation students, emphasizing that all are available free of charge.

After first-generation students are identified, recruited, and welcomed to campus, they are more likely to thrive in a system that continues to track their academic progress. Although most colleges and universities (especially smaller ones) have such systems in place for all students, they are particularly important to ensure the success of first-generation students. **Wabash College**, a residential liberal arts colleges for men that enrolls 850 students on its Crawfordsville, Indiana, campus, has had success with its Early Alert System. The pilot program targeting all first-year students who might be having difficulty adjusting to college life, provides tracking that is particularly beneficial for first-generation students, whose adjustment difficulties range

from the academic to the behavioral to the social. The Early Alert System is an online reporting and tracking system that faculty and staff members use to report student issues in a systematic way. The goal is to identify students who are struggling within the first two or three weeks of classes, as they have found that in most cases, a mid-semester contact proves to be too late for amelioration, while early intervention can prevent some of the poor grades and late withdrawals correlated with lower retention and graduation rates. One important feature of the Early Alert System is that it allows the student who is not engaged with the college’s support resources and with other students, faculty, or staff to receive help from a team of people. The team is unique to each student and may consist of the student’s advisor, coach, other faculty, or staff members who have a relationship with the student. Wabash’s system seems to work. The retention rate for first-generation students in their first cohort was 94 percent, comparing well with the 95 percent rate for all first-year students. And at the end of the year, the mean cumulative GPA for first-generation students was 2.82—almost identical to the 2.78 reported for all first-year students at Wabash College.

For some colleges and universities, tracking first-generation students may just be a matter of coordinating data. **Juniata College**, located in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, enrolls nearly 1,600 students and boasts a graduation rate of over 70 percent. Juniata offers Next Generation Scholars financial support to attend its summer InBound First program, and in the past used Pell-eligibility to identify new first-generation students. Subsequently, staff obtained more reliable information about the number of first-generation students on campus from the self-reported survey of first-year students, but they were unable to track the persistence and academic progress of those students until they transferred that information into their internal database.

At **Florida Memorial University**, the only historically black university in southern Florida and where first-generation programming targets black and Hispanic males, each entering student completes a detailed application that provides information relative to household income, size, parents’ educational level, and so on—information that is then shared with and confirmed by the Office of Enrollment Management and the Office of Institutional Research at the

university. Each year staff members update any changes to the data collected initially on the application and input all the information into the university's database, which allows them to track all students each semester to ensure that they are attending classes, along with other information such as grades, withdrawals, and course selection.

At **Berea College**—a “work college” that was the first interracial and coeducational college in the South, charges no tuition, and admits promising students primarily from Appalachia who have limited economic resources—first-generation students are identified and tracked using a new form of software. The college purchased the software to provide a more efficient way to track and communicate with students from their acceptance through graduation. The college uses a similar system to manage communications and information during the admissions process. Once students are on campus, the software is used to identify and track students who are at risk of failing or need intervention and assistance. In the fourth week of classes, staff members conduct an “Early Alert” check of students to provide a mechanism for instructors, labor supervisors, and residence life staff to communicate any concerns that they might have about a student. These alerts are then forwarded to the student's advisor and to a Response Team, of which the first-generation specialist is a member, to plan the most appropriate interaction with the student. The Response Team consists of faculty, staff, and administrators from across all sections of campus; it meets on a weekly basis to review the status and progress of students who have been identified as having difficulties and to develop strategies and assignments to follow-up with the students.

Finally, a legitimate concern noted by some colleges is that some first-generation students are reluctant to identify or label themselves as such. Most report that, despite their initial reservations, first-generation students in a program seemed to welcome that label, particularly as it provided them the opportunity to connect with others who face similar challenges in their first year of college. For example, at **Notre Dame of Maryland University**, which offers programs through its flagship women's college, college of graduate studies, and college of adult undergraduate studies, the students' initial desire not to be identified as first-generation gave way, eventually, to pride in being part of this distinctive cohort. This pride led students to collaborate on the design of periwinkle T-shirts, complete with a Ralph Waldo Emerson quote, and they became a “visible force on campus,” proudly identifying themselves as successful first-generation students. Their commitment also manifested itself in their academic achievements. “Trailblazers” (as they are called) who are active in the program consistently perform at higher academic levels than their first-generation peers and,

in some cases, than all students; and the retention rates for students in the Trailblazer Scholars Program is higher than those of first-generation students who are not in the program. In fact, the retention rate for the second cohort was 84 percent—higher than the retention rate for the fall 2011 entering class overall (71 percent).

Another example is at **Stevenson University**, which offers a career-focused liberal arts education in Maryland to approximately 4,000 undergraduate and graduate students. At Stevenson, Gen1 students—participants in the university's first-generation program—held a Gen1 Pride Day during which students sat in the lobby of the Student Union and handed out cupcakes, homemade buttons, drawstring bags, and bookmarks with information about what it means to be a first-generation student. University officials report that many non-cohort students became enlightened, and others expressed interest in joining the program.

Wartburg College, a four-year liberal arts college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America enrolling 1,800 undergraduates in Waverly, Iowa, was



Some of **Juniata College's** InBound Retreats for incoming students focus on community service and connecting students to the community-based organizations that provide those services. Pictured is the Inbound Retreat connecting first-year students to Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Huntingdon County.

one of a handful of institutions where staff detected a bit of initial reluctance among students to acknowledge their first-generation status for fear of being stigmatized. Faculty and staff members came to realize that many of these students were unfamiliar with the term “first generation” and thus did not immediately respond to this descriptor. As reported by the program liaison:

“While they knew they felt out of place and different at times, they did not immediately make the connection to the advantage of having college-educated parents and the knowledge that brings. They began to use the term to describe themselves, a story was written in the college paper, and we believe the term helped reduce the discomfort they may have experienced being in college by having a way to describe their difficulty that was not suggestive of failure, i.e., high risk.”

Wartburg officials also report that their Generation Orange Project:

“...illuminated the potential for strong identification of first-generation students with one another: Many felt out of place and disadvantaged versus those who had college-educated parents. The Project students made friends across racial and ethnic differences, some sharing problems with timidity in seeking help due to unfamiliarity with the college environment, and many with financial issues. They formed study groups and became a support system to one another. The feedback from the students has been positive. They appreciated the opportunity to meet others with a similar background, have a point of contact to address some of their concerns, and many just liked having someone to talk to who understood and acknowledged their challenges.”

At Wartburg College, once first-generation students realized they were

not alone, their comfort level increased substantially as they participated in meetings with the coordinator and group activities.

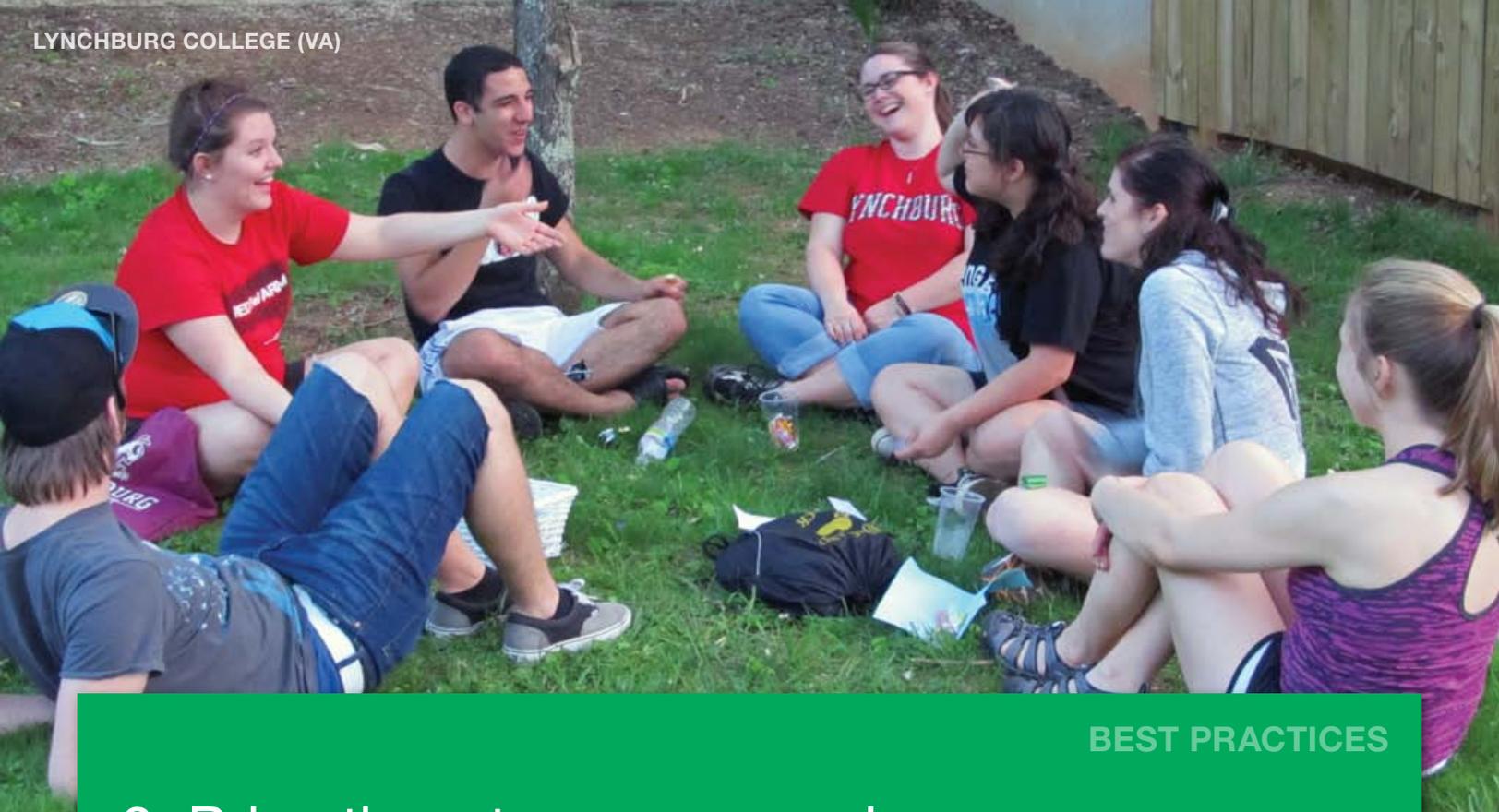
Alma College, founded in Michigan in 1886 by Presbyterians, is a residential liberal arts college devoted to the teaching and education of 1,500 undergraduate students. Alma College staff members also describe their success at achieving their second-year goal of getting students to acknowledge and be proud of their first-generation identity and to embrace the idea that asking for help is a strength. They write:

“Throughout the year, different people spoke with pride when telling their first-generation stories and helped the students realize that being a first-generation student has its challenges, but with support, their goals can be achieved. As the year progressed, we began to witness FGC [First-

Generation Connection] students being asked about the group and why they were in it. Without hesitating, and with a strong sense of pride in their voice, FGC students responded, ‘I’m a first-generation student and this program helps us understand college.’ Other first-generation students not in the program began to ask if they too could join. At our last event of the year, a student worker in the café stated in front of a long line of students waiting to be served, ‘I heard you led this group. I am first-generation and I want to be involved.’ By the end of the year, the program had begun to change the campus culture. For many students they were no longer embarrassed to admit they were first-generation; it became a sense of pride as they acknowledged the effort they were putting forth to reach their goal of achieving a college education.” ●

“Throughout the year, different people spoke with pride when telling their first-generation stories and helped the students realize that being a first-generation student has its challenges, but with support, their goals can be achieved.... By the end of the year, the program had begun to change the campus culture. For many students they were no longer embarrassed to admit they were first-generation; it became a sense of pride as they acknowledged the effort they were putting forth to reach their goal of achieving a college education.”

—Alma College (MI)



BEST PRACTICES

2. Bring them to campus early

The distinctive challenges facing first-generation students present themselves long before they arrive on campus in the fall. These students may well need special encouragement, early on, to follow through on their plans to attend college. But even more important is to acknowledge and address ways that they are likely to be unprepared for the college experience, both academically and in other, less tangible, ways. Many colleges do this by means of pre-semester, summer programs, often referred to as “summer bridge” programs. While most bridge programs include some academic preparation, many also address needs that may be less obvious: for example, how to find one’s way around campus, how to interact with faculty and staff, the language of the academy (curriculum, syllabus, academic probation), the expectations of professors (“I didn’t know this had to be turned in yesterday!”), using the library, the significance of college traditions, and the wide range of services offered at the typical college or university, such as the career center, psychological counseling, fitness center, and faculty advising. They also give students a chance to bond with one another, to experience some of the fun and informal aspects of college life, and to meet faculty and staff members with whom they will be working during their college years.



Once they arrive on the campus at the start of the semester, first-generation students, like all students, will be a bit overwhelmed with the demands of the first few weeks of classes. Summer bridge programs, which range from a few days to two or more weeks prior to the semester, give students a head start on every aspect of the college experience. The support for first-generation students at **Illinois College**, a residential liberal arts college in Jacksonville with 1,000 undergraduates, is provided by the Yates Fellowship Program, which begins with a two-week summer program that offers an intensive academic and social orientation. The program aims to introduce selected first-generation students to college math and writing, college study habits, and college culture. As the college describes it, the summer bridge program serves as a “crash course in the determination and hard work required for success” as it also helps students gain familiarity with college vocabulary, patterns of behavior that will help students succeed, and college traditions that peers might have learned from their parents. Illinois College’s program also is designed to generate a social network for the participating students, giving them a head start on developing supportive relationships with each other, as well as with a number of faculty and staff members.

First-generation students attend one of the intensive summer classes at **Thomas College**’s EDGE program, which features an intensive course in quantitative analysis, workshops, and academic coaching that is required for participating students.

At **Thomas College**, a career-oriented college in Maine that prepares its undergraduates for careers in business, technology, and education and guarantees employment in a student’s chosen field of study through a Guaranteed Job Program, first-generation students who score low on the math SAT are recruited to participate in the EDGE program, which features an intensive three-credit course in quantitative analysis that is required for graduation. During the one-week program in late August, students also participate in workshops, receive academic coaching, and, for a change of pace, participate in a one-day service project in local elementary schools. Academic coaches are professional staff members who work one-on-one with students to build on their strengths and help students develop productive learning practices, and they continue to meet with students, as needed, through the academic year. This individualized support has significantly increased retention of at-risk, first-generation students; the first-year retention rate of first-generation students was 72 percent, compared with 64 percent for all students. As a result, Thomas College recently has piloted a reading-

intensive course to add to its EDGE program. Like some other colleges and universities, Thomas College has found that academically-oriented bridge programs are most effective when the course material is connected with the coursework that students will take during the regular academic semester.

Summer bridge programs also serve purposes beyond academic preparation. The three-day summer residential orientation program at **Emmanuel College**, a residential Catholic liberal arts and sciences college with more than 2,500 undergraduate and graduate students representing 35 countries and 33 states and territories, emphasizes the development of a strong sense of community and cultural awareness along with academic preparation and career planning. This multifaceted approach is producing positive results. Although the GPA for the first year cohort of first-generation ecPULSE students was slightly lower than (but close to) that of the entire class, by the end of the second year, improvements in the Walmart-supported programming yielded more impressive results: a GPA that was slightly higher than the average of the

class of 2015 and a projected retention rate of 85 percent, six percentage points higher than the average retention rate for first-year students at the college.

Rosemont College in Pennsylvania is operated by the Society of the Holy Child Jesus and enrolls just under 1,000 undergraduates. About 40 percent of its incoming class participated in the college's summer bridge program, which took place the week before other students came to campus. Students praised the program for preparing them well for the year ahead: "Bridge taught me more than just how to get good marks. It made me believe I could get good marks. My GPA last semester was 3.14. Thank you!"

St. Edward's University is a Catholic university enrolling 5,400 graduate and undergraduate students in Austin, Texas, and is well-known for its international programs and significant enrollment of Hispanic students. Its "Bridge to College Success," a four-week program focused primarily on academic preparation, also offers participants a variety of evening and weekend enrichment activities including soccer games, trips to nearby parks, sessions at the university's fitness center, and a service project.

The same is true at **Franklin College**. Associated with the American Baptist Churches USA, Franklin College is a four-year undergraduate liberal arts college near Indianapolis, Indiana, that enrolls about 1,000 undergraduate students. Its three-day "First Summer Experience" introduces Franklin First Scholars and their families to every facet of college life and features films, informal time with faculty and staff who were themselves first-generation students, a campus tour, a service project, and other events that promote students' bonding with one another and with their instructors prior to the start of the academic year. As their first

"Bridge taught me more than just how to get good marks. It made me believe I could get good marks. My GPA last semester was 3.14. Thank you!"

—A student at **Rosemont College (PA)**

year began, Franklin College students who participated in the bridge program reported greater feelings of confidence and security than the non-participants, and they showed greater resilience than other first-generation students in the face of the academic and social challenges that many first-year students encounter.

As a result, too, their academic performance and retention were noticeably improved. The fall-to-spring retention of the first cohort of Franklin First Scholars was 96 percent, better than the 90.3 percent retention rate for all first-year students. Although the average cumulative GPA for Franklin First Scholars was a bit lower than that of the entire first year cohort—2.62 as opposed to 2.91—this gap narrowed significantly during the spring semester, to 2.72 versus 2.78.

In every case, the college surpassed its goals for first-generation students. During both years, Franklin First Scholars scored significantly better than control groups on important indicators of student well-being: coping and adaptation, self-efficacy, positive growth and change, social adjustment, autonomy, feelings of self-worth, and behaviors related to alcohol and drug use. College officials concluded that the bonding that took place among the Franklin First Scholars, especially during the summer experience, was the single most important causative factor in their positive results. (Second in importance was the level of support from faculty and staff). ●



FACTS: Franklin College

Improving Fall-to-Spring Retention Rates

96% First cohort of Franklin First Scholars

90% All first-year students

Narrowing the Cumulative GPA Gap

1st Semester

2.62 First cohort of Franklin First Scholars

2.91 All first-year students

2nd Semester

2.72 First cohort of Franklin First Scholars

2.78 All first-year students



BEST PRACTICES

3. Focus on the distinctive features of the institution's first-generation students

On many campuses, by design or by chance, first-generation students share one or more additional characteristics that set them apart from the rest of the student population. For example, research shows that first-generation students across the country are increasingly likely to be Latino, many of whom come from families where English is not the first language—or, in some cases, is not spoken at all. Owing to persistent economic inequalities of other ethnic groups—African Americans, Native Americans, and various immigrant groups—students of color tend to be overrepresented among first-generation college students. At other colleges and universities—again, intentionally or not—first-generation students share other characteristics, such as being disproportionately transfer students or coming largely from particular areas that are economically depressed. Here, again, initiatives to bolster the success of these students are enhanced by paying particular attention to how and what needs of these students might be better met in order to enhance the chances for their academic success.

Examples of successful initiatives aimed at students with distinctive shared characteristics abound. **Mills College**, an undergraduate college in Oakland, California, for about 900 women that also offers coeducational graduate programs, has a significant number of first-generation students who are multilingual. Mills offers specialized courses, training, and support for peer tutors and writing center staff to work with those students and has trained some faculty members to advise the students and to “tune” some courses to meet their needs. Although not every institution has this option, Mills College also employs a coordinator of multilingual pedagogy, a position that the institution was able to increase from part- to full-time with the help of the CIC/Walmart Award. This person developed and teaches a specialized course aimed at the needs of multilingual learners, and she also oversees the program of workshops for faculty and staff and advises faculty members on curricular changes.



The College of Idaho sought to help their Latino students feel pride in their heritage and to promote open dialogue across the college community by bringing prominent Latino speakers to campus. (Left and above) NASA astronaut Jose Hernandez speaks at the college’s Reach for the Stars event. Students and Latino schoolchildren from the region were invited to meet Hernandez and participate in a variety of activities.

At the **College of Idaho**, a residential liberal arts college of just over 1,000 students that offers an innovative, individualized curriculum in liberal arts and professional studies, a commitment to support and educate first-generation Latino students has meant a number of new initiatives. Such initiatives include identifying and purchasing ESL and Spanish-language software to support students’ language-learning needs, researching new means of assessing the progress and learning outcomes of native Spanish speakers, using Latino students as tutors for non-Spanish speaking students learning Spanish, adding more sections of ESL, hiring Spanish majors for the Writing Center, and bringing Latino student leaders together to hear prominent speakers from the community

and work together on leadership development. But another important aim of this program is worth noting: that is, to enhance the cultural pride of Latino students. Staff members accomplish this through cultural enrichment activities and experiences, which, because they involve non-Latino students as well, help Latino students feel pride in their heritage and as an integral and welcomed part of the college community. These activities also open dialogue and promote connection among all students on campus. By the end of their sophomore year, the first cohort of first-generation Latino students at the College of Idaho had earned an average cumulative GPA of 3.0, only slightly lower than the 3.09 GPA of all sophomores that year. Although the

retention rate from first to second year of the first cohort of students was only 68.8 percent—compared to 88.5 percent for all students that year—eight of the ten students who did not return graduated with a baccalaureate degree. Overall, the College of Idaho describes its CIC/Walmart-funded efforts on behalf of first-generation Latino students as an “overwhelming success.”

Chaminade University of Honolulu, a private Catholic Marianist college in Honolulu, Hawai’i, that enrolls 1,300 undergraduates, focuses on first-generation students who are of Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and Asian descent, many of whom come from families where English is not spoken by other family members. In addition



In an effort to reach first-generation students who are of Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and Asian descent, **Chaminade University of Honolulu** developed a series of informational videos for prospective students and their families, many of whom do not speak English and are unable to visit the university due to geographical distance. By posting the videos on YouTube and on Chaminade's website, families "know" the campus by seeing their sons and daughters dancing their cultural dances in school, sharing their islands' myths and legends as part of the curriculum, and speaking in front of the camera—in a language that they, the parents, can understand.

to translating written materials, such as student handbooks and admissions brochures, into the various native languages used by students and their families, their most successful (and creative) initiative has been the development of videos. The first of these, in Samoan and developed with the help of the communications department and Samoan students, gives parents and others a visual tour of the campus and captures the sights and sounds of university life. Families back home see their sons and daughters dancing their cultural dances in school, sharing their islands' myths and legends as part of the curriculum, and speaking in front of the camera—in a language that they, the parents, can understand.

Another video, this one developed with the input of students from Micronesia, encompasses the Micronesian languages of Marshallese, Pohnpeian, Kosraean, and Chuukese. The completed videos are posted on the university's website and on YouTube, making them readily accessible to a wide audience that includes students' families, many of whom would otherwise be unable to "know" the campus—not only because of the language barrier, but also because of their geographical distance from the university.

In addition to receiving positive feedback from the island communities and students, the Chaminade University community benefitted in multiple ways from the production of these videos. Officials note that through the taping of the videos and heightened communication with the students and their families, staff received in-depth acculturation lessons on island protocols, hierarchies, and appropriate use of language as well as valuable lessons about the backgrounds of their students—including the subtle ways that island cultures differ from one

another. All of the students said they had never been asked to be in a video and speak in their own languages before, an empowering experience to be sure. Even though the process of translation and editing was arduous and time consuming, students report that they were honored to participate in the project and were able to see, via classroom settings and cultural events, how their cultures were appreciated. One student said:

"In my communication class at Chaminade, my teacher asked me questions about Chuukese cultures and traditions. During my presentation he asked me to talk about the Chuukese approach to love. A lot of students were so interested in the subject matter. They asked me a number of questions pertaining to Chuukese cultures and traditions."

At Chaminade, the retention rate of students in the CIC/Walmart Awards program was better than the retention rate of other first-generation students who were conditionally admitted into the university—although in the second year of the program, retention was lower than had been anticipated. Staff members note, however, that in many cases, students did not abandon their college goals. Rather, some enrolled at Hawaii's public institutions, which are significantly more affordable for families with financial challenges. And, they note, those who were able to remain enrolled at Chaminade represent some of their greatest first-generation "success stories."

Other less common characteristics of some first-generation students shape initiatives on a few campuses. **St. Edward's University** gives first preference for its first-generation programming to students who enter through the university's College

Assistance Migrant Program (“CAMP”), serving the sons and daughters of seasonal farm workers in the close-by South Texas Valley region. In addition to sharing a mainly Hispanic

heritage and significant economic disadvantage, these students are uniformly poorly prepared by the public secondary schools from which they come—suffering what one instructor

calls “academic neglect, if not outright academic abuse.” Their awareness of the poor preparation of these students informs their efforts to prepare them for academic coursework at St. Edward’s.



NO COINCIDENCES

An excerpt from the Fall 2009/Spring 2010 Issue of *New Horizon*, the CAMP student newsletter, St. Edward’s University
By Carolina Molina, CAMP ’09

Every CAMPer has a story.... One person in particular not only brought life to the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) family, but he also provided me with the opportunity to see life from a different perspective. He is Noe Carrillo from Elgin, Texas, a fellow CAMPer and beloved friend.

When I first saw Noe near the end of my first day at St. Edward’s University, I remember thinking, “Where did this guy come from?” He had been a last minute addition to the CAMP class. He began to tell me about himself.

Noe is the son of Lourdes and Frank Carrillo, who are originally from Guerrero, Mexico. Growing up, he always looked to his mother for advice. It was not until his sophomore year in high school that he took her words to heart.

Throughout his high school career, Noe was a star soccer player. Scoring a total of 32 goals with the varsity team only in his sophomore season, he was named Most Valuable Player and All Team District at Elgin High School. His talent garnered him the attention of professional teams who soon began to recruit him. Noe was thrilled; after all, playing soccer at the professional level had always been his dream. Unfortunately, he was seriously injured with a torn anterior cruciate ligament or ACL weeks after the offer to play professionally. His chances with the professional team were now gone....

Ms. Vanessa Fox, Noe’s high school migrant education advocate, suggested he consider college and recommended St. Edward’s University in Austin, Texas. As the son of migrant farm workers, he would qualify for the CAMP scholarship. Noe put in twice as much effort into his studies than before, and for the first time he was enthusiastic about being the first in his family to pursue a higher education. I remember him telling me, “I stood by the mailbox every day, waiting for that letter from admissions.” When he finally received a letter from St. Edward’s, it was another rejection to his dreams. He found out he had been waitlisted.

With his dreams stalled, his dad encouraged him by telling him, “Mijito, you have always played soccer with determination, discipline, and dedication. Put that same effort into getting into college. It’s the only way you’re going to have a secure future. A hurt knee can take you out of the soccer field, but if you get an education, no one can take that knowledge from you.” With this new encouragement, Noe renewed his efforts to attend St. Edward’s. He called daily and talked to Rosie Rangel, our CAMP admission counselor, about his standing. “You’re still on the waiting list Noe, but keep trying,” and that’s what he did....

On the morning of CAMP orientation, I remember walking into the Ragsdale Center with my parents and meeting all of my fellow CAMP students. It was not until one of our last sessions, close to the end of the day, that I spotted a new CAMPer standing quietly in the back. Noe had been notified, only a couple of hours before, that an already admitted CAMP student was unable to make it; Noe’s name was next on the waiting list. When the call came his only question was, “When do I have to be there?”

Now that his first year at St. Edward’s is finished, Noe has realized that all of his experiences have shaped him into the strong leader that he is today. He is a dedicated student who has proven through his efforts that he wants to be at St. Edward’s. You would never imagine that behind his great humor, unbreakable spirit, and contagious smile there is a story filled with disappointment. Noe has taken full advantage of his opportunity to attend St. Edward’s. Despite his previous injuries, he recently joined the Club Soccer Team and hopes to play for the St. Edward’s Soccer Team next year. His dreams are now becoming a reality. He now understands his mother’s words and constantly reminds me of how things happen for a reason. Noe’s story has made me realize that we should never give up on our dreams no matter how many walls we run into. There is always something in store for us at the end of each path we travel. In life there are no coincidences, and it is no coincidence that Noe is currently part of the CAMP program at St. Edward’s. It is an honor to have met Noe Carrillo, and I am convinced that it was no coincidence.

Berea College emphasizes the needs of students from the Appalachian Regional Commission’s designated “distressed counties.” Berea hired a first-generation specialist to lead project activities that required, among other things, building bridges with other departments and offices on campus such as the Black Cultural Center and the Appalachian Center, whose purpose is to provide services to, and stimulate interest in, the students’ region of origin. Berea’s initiatives include holding a focus group session of first-generation students from distressed Appalachian counties, who provided suggestions about how the students might more easily transition into the college environment and how the college might better communicate with them prior to arrival.

Guided by a strong Quaker heritage of community, equality, integrity, peace, and simplicity, **Guilford College** in North Carolina enrolls approximately 2,500 students, nearly equal numbers of traditional-aged and adult students and about 100 early college students. Guilford College’s Center for Continuing Education developed the Gateways to Success Program to foster the academic success of adult first-generation students, a population that has increased significantly but also shows disturbingly low rates of academic success, including graduation rates. The Gateways Program fosters students’ success by forming links between the students and existing campus and community resources and by establishing new services and programs that are effective and appropriate for this population, which tends to face special challenges that include the stress of balancing home, work, family, and school responsibilities; health and job issues; and some resistance, because they are adults, to the suggestion that



First-generation students at **Berea College** participated in an outing to the Kentucky horse park where they spoke with veterinarians and other professionals in the horse industry and learned how the anatomy and physiology of horses has changed over time.

they need extra support. In addition to more conventional first-generation programming—skills workshops, peer mentors, and various community-building events—Guilford has had success in providing short-term personal counseling for adult students that focuses specifically on the distinctive challenges they face. Guilford staff members also make a special effort to stay in contact with adult students who must withdraw because of health or job issues to encourage and facilitate their eventual return to the campus.

Transfer students are the focus of **California Lutheran University’s** newest programming for first-generation students, because faculty and staff members recognize that transfer students are particularly underserved and in need of specialized attention to maximize their success. California Lutheran is a diverse community of 2,800 undergraduates and 1,400 graduate students that is rooted in the Lutheran tradition and emphasizes excellence in the liberal arts and

professional studies. After identifying obstacles that first-generation students frequently encounter—such as being new to upper-division coursework, not understanding major requirements, being unfamiliar with the campus culture, facing difficulties of being commuter students on a mainly residential campus, and starting career or graduate school plans—departments from across campus collaborated to implement new initiatives, adding to their already-successful, long-term programming aimed at first-generation students.

New initiatives included hiring a transfer student leader and a transfer graduate assistant—former first-generation transfer students themselves—who hold drop-in office hours, serve as mentors, develop a newsletter, organize graduate school visits, lead a summer bridge program, offer a leadership institute specifically for first-generation transfer students, sponsor workshops on topics such as how to get involved on campus, distribute an array of specially written materials,



During Summer 2009, California Lutheran University's first group of nine transfer students participated in Student Support Services' six-day summer bridge program called "SOAR-Summer Orientation to Academic Resources."

and reach out to develop a personal relationship with each student.

The university staff also developed articulation agreements with the three local community colleges that serve as the main "feeder" institutions for the university; the agreements mitigated the frustration and misinformation that transfer students had long experienced. Despite what staff note are the many challenges in meeting the needs of such students, their efforts have been remarkably successful, as indicated by student feedback and impressive rates of retention and graduation: In 2009, 90 percent of entering transfer students were retained the following year or graduated, and in 2010, 85 percent of this population did the same.

Other colleges and universities have designed programs according to their own distinctive student populations or, in some cases, their decision to focus on a select group of students. **Mercyhurst University**, a Catholic liberal arts institution in Erie, Pennsylvania, founded by the Sisters of Mercy, enrolls

more than 3,000 undergraduate and graduate students. With both a two-year and a four-year college, Mercyhurst focuses on recruiting, retaining, and graduating first-generation students transferring from Mercyhurst's two-year campus to its four-year one.

Saint Augustine's University, a historically black institution located in Raleigh, North Carolina, and enrolling 1,500 undergraduates, works with students of color to help them develop the knowledge and skills to enter postgraduate careers in areas where minorities are underrepresented at the management and professional level: real estate, health care administration, education, and hospitality, for example.

Founded in 1884 as Woodbury's Business College, **Woodbury University** moved to a campus in Burbank, California, in 1985. Its first-generation program works solely with first-generation students who are business majors to make connections between their academic learning and career goals and to help them develop the skills they will need to secure post-college



Saint Augustine's University's CIC/Walmart Award program prepares minority students for management and professional careers.

jobs. Woodbury administrators found that first-generation students in their enriched introductory management course gained increased motivation to pursue career goals, greater knowledge about careers and the job search, and a clearer sense of their career goals.

North Central College, an independent, comprehensive college of the liberal arts and sciences that enrolls 2,700 undergraduate and 300 graduate students, focuses its program on preparing students for careers in education.

Clark Atlanta University, a United Methodist Church-related research university enrolling nearly 3,000 undergraduate and 800 graduate students, developed its First-Year College Success Program for first-generation students studying business and the natural sciences. Business students participated in the CEO Academy, which involves exchanges with corporate representatives; and natural science students participated in "Paws to Claws," which facilitated networking with alumni in scientific careers. ●



BEST PRACTICES

4. Develop a variety of programs that meet students' ongoing needs

Although bridge programs give first-generation students an academic head-start, they need ongoing support to help ensure their success as college students. The 50 colleges and universities that received CIC/Walmart College Success Awards boast an impressive array of programs offered throughout the academic year that are aimed at ensuring the success of first-generation students. While most focus in some way or another on support for academic achievement, others also help prepare students for successful lives after college.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT. Perhaps the most important goal of ongoing programming for first-generation students is to help them succeed in their academic work. To this end, the CIC/Walmart Award winners have developed or enhanced a wide variety of programs and activities to meet students' needs. On most

campuses, a first and essential step is to make sure that first-generation students are fully aware of the existing resources—what they do, where they are located, and how and when they can be useful to the students. As first-generation students may be more averse to seeking help than their non-first-

generation counterparts, some colleges and universities emphasize early on that seeking help with their schoolwork (as well as personal challenges they might face), is not a sign of weakness, but rather an indication of their personal strength, determination, and good sense. Making students aware of academic

support services starts in the summer bridge program for some colleges and universities. Others make special efforts to keep students connected throughout the year.

Academic support comes in many different forms. At **Elizabethtown College**, founded by members of the Church of the Brethren in central Pennsylvania to educate students for lives of service, each first-generation student in the Momentum Program is introduced during orientation to the long list of academic support resources that are available to them throughout the academic year: a first-year seminar faculty advisor for discipline-specific advising; a peer mentor for developmental advising; a librarian specifically assigned to their First Year Seminar for ongoing research assistance; a writing tutor from Learning Services specifically assigned to the student's First Year Seminar; a faculty writing fellow; more than 200 peer tutors to help with more than 200 courses through Learning Services; specially trained peer academic advisors; and the Momentum advisor/mentor for advising specifically about the needs of first-generation students. Indeed, most colleges and universities in the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program found that individualized strategies, particularly tutoring and academic advising, are most effective at providing academic support.

As one of the nation's larger Catholic women's colleges, enrolling 2,605 students, and widely known for its pioneering work with the assessment of student learning, **Alverno College** puts advising at the center of the Promise Scholars Program. Students are assigned a Promise Scholars advisor, with whom they develop and sign an academic and behavior agreement form—called Graduation Review and Development (GRAD)—which includes student and



Promise Scholars at **Alverno College** are honored at the annual dinner recognizing seniors who have participated in the “Promise,” a contract that provides the complete graduation plans toward which students and the Promise Scholar advisor work each semester.

advisor responsibilities. The student agrees to participate academically by attending all classes, engaging in all class assignments, completing homework and projects, and notifying teachers about absences or late assignments. Students also commit to attending at least one small group session each semester. Complete graduation plans are required for all Promise Scholars who have declared their major and support areas. The “Promise” represented by the contract provides the plan with which students and the Promise Scholar advisor monitor their progress throughout each semester. At Alverno, the 166 students who elected to participate in the Promise Scholars Program had an overall retention rate that was 8.4 percent higher than that of the comparison group, which had similar demographic and other characteristics. Retention among second-to-third-year participants, a particular challenge at this institution, was 12 percent higher for Promise Scholars, and all indications are that graduation rates for participants will show similarly impressive improvements.

Tutoring is another common and effective form of academic support.

While it is often accessed by first-generation students through the existing academic services/academic support office on campus, some colleges and universities have developed tutoring programs specifically aimed at their first-generation students.

In addition to these important forms of individualized support, most colleges and universities offer structured group events during the year, such as writing workshops and workshops focused on academic skills such as note-taking, library research, study skills, successful test-taking, and time management. A particular kind of academic support is provided by means of credit-bearing classes—such as first-year seminars, living/learning communities, and linked courses—designed especially for first-generation students.

Wiley College, founded in 1873, is a historically black, baccalaureate degree-granting institution affiliated with the United Methodist Church located in Marshall, Texas. Wiley has an open admission policy, so almost half of each incoming class consists of first-generation students who also need remedial work to prepare them to take on college-level work. Wiley developed



ResearchFIRST at **Mars Hill University** funded student-initiated, faculty-mentored research opportunities for first-generation students. (Left) Ebony Simpson, an art major, and her mentor Carol Boggess, professor of English, sit outside the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. Simpson's research project involved visiting art museums, especially the National Gallery, to research the work of Jacob Lawrence. (Right) Seated downstream from the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, Italy, Brett Pardue used funding from a CIC/Walmart grant to study 19th-century lyric opera at the Bel Canto Institute.

“linked courses” in which students take a remedial course in English or reading at the same time that they enroll in a regular college course. For example, a student might enroll in Developmental Reading at the same time she or he takes United States History I. The teacher of the developmental course, called a teacher-coach, also attends the regular class and has special weekly sessions with the students needing the extra guidance. The student must pass both courses and earns credit for each; the instructor of the regular class does not know which students are developmentally delayed. Wiley reports impressive results, with a significant percentage of students passing both classes.

Lesley University, an urban institution in Cambridge that enrolls nearly 2,500 undergraduates and 6,000 graduate students, used CIC/Walmart support to help students in area middle schools and high schools prepare for college. A First-to-Lesley Fellows (F2LF) program was established for first-generation students at Lesley who

receive stipends to assist with outreach events for first-generation students currently attending local community colleges. In addition, the CIC/Walmart College Success Award has made it possible for the university to expand the reach of its Urban and Community College Scholarship program. First-generation graduates from all Massachusetts community colleges also became eligible and receive a significant scholarship.

Similarly, **Manchester University**, which describes itself as a community of higher education rooted in the liberal arts and the traditions of the Church of the Brethren, offers the Manchester University Achievement Program for junior and senior high school students in Indiana, preparing prospective first-generation college students to enter college.

Guilford College offers a one-credit Gateways to Student Success course to help acclimate first-generation adult students to college. The course introduces students to the history and core values of Guilford College; educates

them about documents, staff, college policies, procedures, and resources that are essential for academic success; and helps students learn and practice skills and study techniques needed for other courses.

Mars Hill University, which is a private, four-year liberal arts institution located in the mountains of western North Carolina and founded by Baptist families in the region, serves approximately 1,200 undergraduates and 200 working adults in several locations. Mars Hill University's Research FIRST program for first-generation students aims to expand undergraduate research programming by increasing the number of first-generation students who participate in faculty-mentored research. To support this effort, and like a number of other colleges and universities, Mars Hill developed a special section of its first-year seminar just for first-generation students. Before the CIC/Walmart College Success Award, the retention rate of first-generation, first-year students at Mars Hill was 40 percent. The CIC/Walmart Award helped the

college increase that retention rate 13 points, to 53 percent.

Illinois College enhanced its Yates Fellowship Program by establishing a living-learning community of the fellows in Mundinger Hall, as part of a whole network of academic connections to support students in its program. All Yates Fellows room with another Fellow, live on two floors (men's and women's) of this residential hall, and are concurrently enrolled in the same first-year seminar course and fundamentals of speech course, which are taught by Yates Fellowship faculty members. Because all Yates Fellows enter two courses together in the fall, they are able to begin working on the same writing assignment during the summer bridge program. Students also meet with Yates faculty members several times each week to help the students navigate issues throughout the semester. Finally, their first-year seminar professor also serves as their academic advisor. Fellows attend once-monthly study tables and study breaks in preparation for final exams, which are supervised by Yates faculty members. In addition to providing many kinds of academic support, these varied activities help students in the Yates Fellowship Program form deep and lasting relationships with one another. One student reported, "The activities really brought all of us together, taught us to how to deal with college, and created a support system throughout the semester." As a result, 86.4 percent of Yates Fellows, compared to 81.0 percent of all first-generation students, returned to Illinois College their second year.

LIFE SKILLS AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS.

Colleges and universities attuned to the needs of first-generation students recognize that to persist and graduate, they need more than just academic

"The SAWS program has launched the professional careers of so many first-generation students at Saint Augustine's University.... Their mere exposure built relationships with the career center and the confidence to apply for competitive positions."

—Nichole Lewis, Director of the Belk Professional Development Center, Saint Augustine's University (NC)

skills. CIC/Walmart Award recipients invariably include in their programming workshops, small group sessions, campus resources, and one-on-one relationships that focus on life skills and emotional needs of first-generation students. Although many traditional-age college students also would benefit from some of what these campuses offer, many first-generation students share some distinctive characteristics—beyond poor academic preparation—that stand in the way of their college success: lack of confidence, family pressures, financial stresses, and competing work demands, for example. And because these students often lack what is sometimes called the "cultural capital" to position themselves well in the work world beyond college, life skills also include those related to interpersonal interaction, "presentation of self," and professional and workplace norms.

Alverno College offers regular small group sessions that give first-generation students a sense of belonging to a group much like a student club; discussion topics include time management, family issues, and developing stress resilience. Students who attend these sessions report feeling more relaxed and better equipped to handle their everyday stress.

Carroll University, rooted in

the Presbyterian and liberal arts heritage, enrolls approximately 3,200 undergraduate and 340 graduate students and was the first four-year institution in Wisconsin. Carroll sponsors College Success Exercises, in which students and advisors work together on a series of exercises designed to help students adjust to college life. Exercises include topics such as, "What are you taking with you?" to help students overcome first-generation hurdles that typically exist during the first semester of college, and "Who stands behind you?" to help students identify friends and family members who support them. These activities are designed to connect students to the Carroll campus and with their friends and family at home as they adjust to campus life.

The goal of **Saint Augustine's University's** Walmart Success (SAWS) program is to prepare minority students for management and professional careers. To this end, the university requires workshops that focus on a wide range of topics including how to dress professionally, communicate appropriately through email, use public transportation, recognize and avoid sexual harassment in the workplace, choose appropriate language, introduce

oneself and greet others, manage money, write a resume, network with people from different backgrounds, and speak in front of groups. Students also attend theatrical performances and classical music concerts to build their cultural competencies. One student shared that she learned, “You not only have to be at the right place at the right time, but say the right thing to the right people.” Another student noted that, before participating in the SAWS program, “I didn’t really know the little things that need to be done to not only stay in college, but to excel on all levels.”

CAREER PREPARATION. With an eye toward students’ work after college, some institutions make career preparation one component of programming.

Founded in 1851, **Ripon College** is a four-year, private, residential, traditional liberal arts and sciences college that enrolls just under 1,000 undergraduates. Ripon College offers what it concludes is a highly effective career shadowing program. Faculty members secured various placements for mainly second-

and third-year students at sites such as the local zoo (for a student interested in animal behavior), a medical center (physical therapy), college health services (nursing), the local YMCA (sports management), a bank (finance), a local school (school psychology), and a water treatment plant (environmental research). Participating students receive a stipend and make a public presentation about their experiences, in part to inform and encourage other prospective, qualifying first-generation students. This, along with other components of their multifaceted program for first-generation students, has resulted in impressive first-to-second-year retention rates: 85.6 percent for the first cohort and 84.7 for the second, both of which are higher than for first-year students overall.

Staff at **Bay Path College**, after hearing about Ripon’s program success at a summer conference of CIC/Walmart Success Awards institutions, were prompted to replicate Ripon’s program. Like Ripon, Bay Path focused on second-year students and made sure that participating students

received a stipend—important, they note, because students took time away from paid positions to participate. Experiencing a job shadow in their area of interest gives students a first-hand look at the type of work they could be doing upon graduation and helps them choose a major. Bay Path’s mission, offering a career-focused curriculum for undergraduate women and an accelerated online degree program for adult women and graduate programs for men and women, differs from Ripon’s traditional liberal arts curriculum but also reports excellent rates of student success.

North Central College’s Teach First program is aimed at recruiting, retaining, and launching first-generation students into careers as teachers. Students engage in a three-week, hands-on teaching and learning internship at local elementary and secondary schools, where they lead one-on-one tutoring sessions with children, meet with small groups to improve literacy, and assist students with special projects. Many students continue their work in the local schools as they prepare for their

North Central College’s Teach First program was started when I was going into my junior year. Immediately I felt the impact of this new opportunity. To begin with, I was now involved with a group of students who understood the challenges of being a first-generation college student. In addition, not only were we all first-generation college students together, but we also had the same eventual goal of becoming educators. Throughout the next two years, Teach First offered invaluable opportunities to attend professional conferences, network with educational professionals, and bond with my classmates. Often overlooked, the Teach First support network continued to follow me as I graduated and began my teaching career. There are constantly opportunities to collaborate and learn with fellow educators, help mentor aspiring educators, and stay connected with the North Central College Teach First family. I am tremendously thankful to have been and still be a part of this great organization as I begin my fourth year of teaching at Eric Solorio Academy High School in Chicago.

—Daniel J. Buys, Class of 2010, **North Central College (IL)**,
and Teach First Alumni Mentor (2011–present)



Daniel Buys '10 and Emilio Saraga '13

“In the lab I learned various techniques such as cell culturing, how to perform a Griess and protein assay, use a chemiluminescence machine, and use Excel. The experience also taught me a lot about having a career in research and helped me realize it is what I want to do with my life. It is an experience that I am very grateful for and hope to have more of.”

—A first-generation student who participated in a CIC/Walmart grant-funded internship, **Cardinal Stritch University (WI)**

chosen careers by participating in a variety of activities: attending job fairs and education-related conferences, learning to develop stand-out resumes, conducting mock interviews, collecting food and toy donations for children at high-need schools, participating as tutors and mentors at a summer camp, and networking with alumni who are themselves successful teachers.

Other programs prepare students for careers after college by offering workshops on resume development, job interview techniques, business writing, and workplace behavior. For some institutions, internships are central. **DePaul University** claims to be the only one of the top ten largest private universities in the country whose faculty priority is teaching. Located in Chicago, the nation’s largest Catholic university enrolls 25,000 students. DePaul’s Internship Plu\$ Program enables first-generation students with financial need to undertake unpaid internships related to their academic majors and intended careers by providing a financial award to each student who completes the program. Staff members report that the most successful aspect of the program is the combination of the internship with a four-credit experiential learning course that integrates classroom learning with

the work students do at the internship sites. Typical of student comments about the Plu\$ experience is this one:

“The Internship Plu\$ Program assisted my progress toward graduation in several ways. It helped me financially and provided useful information in and around school. In addition, it helped me take advantage of workshops at school that I learned so much from. Lastly, I feel that without the program I wouldn’t have been in this position that I’m currently in. I’m focused and prepared toward my career goals.”

At DePaul, the retention rate for first-generation students from the first to second year is typically about 76 percent, about ten points lower than that for all first-year students. But in its first year, 100 percent of the students who participated in the Internship Plu\$ Program returned the following year; for the second cohort of students, the rate was a still-impressive 95 percent. Students who participated also maintained a GPA of 3.2, which officials describe as very good for first-generation students.

Cardinal Stritch University, with a focus on first-generation students intending to major in science, funds a handful of paid summer research internships each year. Selected students

are paid \$2,500 to work for five weeks in a research setting, such as the Medical College of Wisconsin and independent research laboratories. One student wrote:

“In the lab I learned various techniques such as cell culturing and how to perform a Griess and protein assay, use a chemiluminescence machine, and use Excel. The experience also taught me a lot about having a career in research and helped me realize it is what I want to do with my life. It is an experience that I am very grateful for and hope to have more of.”

CELEBRATION AND RECOGNITION.

Finally, most of the CIC/Walmart College Success Award recipients sponsor one or more annual events—typically dinners, luncheons, or receptions—whose purpose is to bring together all the students in their programs (and sometimes families, faculty, and staff members) as well as to acknowledge and celebrate student achievements. Oftentimes these events are held at the end of the year or semester and may feature a speaker, frequently an administrator, faculty member, or alumna or alumnus who was, him or herself, a first-generation college student. ●



BEST PRACTICES

5. Use mentors

One of the most popular means of reaching and working with first-generation students, and one whose effectiveness is demonstrated time and time again by colleges and universities committed to their success, is to forge ongoing, meaningful, one-on-one connections between those students and others on campus. And one of the most effective ways to do that is to use mentors. In supporting first-generation college students, mentors may be students, faculty members, staff, alumni, or even people from the wider community. They provide ongoing guidance about personal, family, social, and academic concerns of their mentees, first-generation students. In addition to the widespread agreement that mentoring is an effective strategy in working with first-generation students, the experiences of the many colleges and universities that build mentoring into their programming for first-generation students yield three important bits of wisdom: first, that peer mentors—people who are, or have been, first-generation college students themselves, and especially current students—are, in important respects, the most effective mentors; second, that effective mentoring requires ongoing contact and communication; and, third, that mentors need training, clear guidelines, ongoing support, and (ideally) some financial incentive to work effectively with, and stay committed to, their first-generation mentees.



Have you ever wondered how first-generation students feel going to college? The fear and excitement running through their blood? The loneliness they must feel because they are the first in their families to go? I do; I understand and relate. I am a first-generation college student and thanks to Momentum, I do not feel like one anymore.

I imagined many times before what Momentum would be like. Would it break me and make me want to go home, or inspire me to become a better scholar? The program has had a strong influence on me. I wish to be able to affect others just as I was impacted. Momentum helps first-year students become familiar with the campus and professors. At first I imagined a pile of homework for each class the program offered. I was excited but nervous at the same time. I did not want to be overwhelmed by the work, but I had a sense it would be hard. Everyone says college work is so much harder than high school work. So I imagined myself struggling with the assignments. For some reason, I was overwhelming myself with my thoughts.

Thinking back on my experience, a lot of classes inspired me—from morning meditation to the book club at the end of the day. Meeting some professors inspired me to go to all my classes every day. I feel inspired as a Latina to finish college and to set a path for my fellow Latinos following my steps. I learned how to look for help when I need it and I am inspired to do so.

Momentum strongly impacted me with everything it offers. All the classes, professors, and activities have encouraged my desire to affect others. I want to be a mentor so I can have an impact on the new Momentum students. I also want to give back to the campus. Because of the Momentum program, I have imagined myself not struggling very much in my classes. I will acquire the resources to help me. I am inspired to try my hardest and finish college so that those following me in pursuing a career can have a path to follow. I would like to give back to the people and community who have helped me so much. I want to set an example for those who follow.

—Katherine Maldonado, student and Momentum program participant (pictured above),
Elizabethtown College (PA)

“Power of the peer” is a phrase used at **Berea College** to emphasize what they see as the value of peer mentoring for first-generation students. Berea notes that peer mentors “not only benefit from being close in age to the other students and therefore being more likely to be ‘heard’ in given situations, but they are also not far removed from their own experience of transition,” which makes them less likely to make assumptions about the needs or knowledge of the students whom they mentor. Campuses that use student-peer mentors typically draw on their first-identified cohort of first-generation students to be second- (and third- and fourth-) year peer mentors; that is, the mentees become the mentors for the next class of students.

At **Adrian College**, for example, in the second year of the Adrian College Educational Success (ACES) project, the sophomore first-generation students continue to work with their own student mentors as they also become mentors themselves for the incoming first-year ACES students. In addition, Adrian has former mentees assist, in their sophomore year, in presenting materials at workshops for the incoming students.

Elizabethtown College calls its program for first-generation students Momentum because, they explain, students get a “running start” on the college experience and build on the established momentum to carry them through the four years. In addition to meeting regularly with an assigned Momentum advisor or mentor—who supplements the regular academic advising by faculty—all Momentum students also meet regularly through their first year with an upper class peer advisor, a group referred to as Kinesis—the “energy behind a momentum.” All three institutions report impressive, and steadily improving, retention rates for first-generation students in their

programs—almost 80 percent for the most recent cohort of students at Berea College, and close to 90 percent retention of program participants at both Elizabethtown and Adrian Colleges.

Some colleges and universities involve faculty and staff mentors as well, and they are often people who were themselves first-generation students.

Alma College's First-Generation Connection (FGC) program assigns each student both a faculty and a peer (student) mentor—the faculty mentor from an academic discipline that most closely aligns with the student's interests, and the peer mentor also chosen based on shared academic, career, or personal interests. At different events, students hear peer, faculty, and staff stories regarding their experience as first-generation college students. At the end of the second year, they report, students said that it was these role models that helped them believe, “if they can do it, so can I.” Retention and GPA data also provide evidence of the success of Alma College's efforts. By the second year of the CIC/Walmart-supported FGC program, participants showed a retention rate of 81 percent—the same as for all students that year. Similarly, after the program began, the GPAs of program participants were strikingly similar to those for all students in their cohort—a 2.94 end-of-year GPA for participants, compared to 2.96 for all students.

The **College of Saint Benedict** is another institution that draws on experiences of former first-generation college students. The College of Saint Benedict, the only Benedictine college for women in the country and partner of Saint John's University in Minnesota, holds an annual first-generation faculty, staff, and student dinner. At a recent



Student mentors meet with first-generation adult students as part of **Guilford College's** Gateways to Success program. Mentors meet monthly with their mentees and keep in regular contact through email, telephone calls, and other means of communication throughout the school year.

dinner, the president of the college shared with the students her own experiences as a first-generation student. Also in attendance were 23 first-generation faculty and staff members who are involved in the program as mentors.

At **North Central College**, where the Teach First program prepares first-generation students for careers as educators, an annual mentor dinner and discussion is held with members of the Teach First Advisory Board, which is comprised of first-generation North Central alumni currently working in education. The board includes an elementary school principal in Plainfield School District, a curriculum director at Chicago Public Schools, and six other successful teachers. At the mentor dinners, alumni share their experiences about being the first college graduate in their family and talk about how they achieved their career goals.

Many colleges and universities stress the importance of training mentors and

clarifying expectations—for example, confirming how often mentors should meet with their mentees and the kinds of interactions that might be most helpful to the student. **Guilford College's** Gateways to Success student mentors, who work with first-generation adult students, must apply to become mentors: All are required to have a GPA of 2.0 or higher, submit faculty references, attend a training program, and read the Mentor Training Manual that has been developed for the program. Based on their first-year experience, Guilford began offering additional training sessions and updates for mentors and added the theme of “Building Solid Relationships, Making the Program Stronger” to emphasize the importance of communication and relationship-building to mentor/mentee success. Guilford also developed a more formalized communication plan that requires, among other things, mentors to attend training sessions and some other gatherings, meet monthly with their mentees, and keep regular contact through email, telephone calls, and

other means of communication. In addition, mentors are now required to complete paperwork documenting mentee meetings and evaluations.

The results for Guilford have been mixed. On the positive side, the GPA of Gateway students—disproportionately African American women—was consistently higher than for all new adult students: 3.23 compared to 2.78 for all adult students admitted in the fall, and 2.98 versus 2.81 in the spring. These data suggest that the Gateways program helps newly admitted students achieve higher GPAs during their first year, despite being a disadvantaged group. Retention rates and GPAs, however, tended to decline over semesters, even as the persistence rates, GPAs, and graduation rates of their mentors stayed strong or improved over time. This suggests that Guilford’s Friend-to-Friend peer mentoring program has clear benefits—though perhaps more for the mentors than for the mentees.

Heritage University, a non-denominational independent institution located on the Yakima Indian

Reservation in Toppenish, Washington, with three regional sites in Tri-Cities, South Seattle, and Moses Lake, developed the Heritage Stars Mentoring Program. The program’s stated purpose is laid out clearly in written materials provided to mentor candidates:

“...to foster relationships between first-generation college students at Heritage University and faculty, staff, alumni, or community-member mentors, with the goal to help students feel a sense of belonging in college, develop a sense of purpose and a vision for their lives, distinguish themselves academically, graduate with their bachelor’s degrees, and move on to rewarding graduate studies or professions.”

Prospective mentors meet with the mentoring coordinator, complete a questionnaire, and attend a three-hour mentor orientation before meeting their mentee and establishing goals and plans for their time together. Like many institutions, Heritage administers an evaluation questionnaire at the end of each semester and makes changes in their program based on the results. Compared to other students in their

cohort—non-first-generation students—the student participants in the Stars mentoring program seem to have benefited significantly. First-time, full-time first-generation students entering in fall 2011 reenrolled the following year at a rate of 87 percent, as compared to a retention rate of 62 percent for all non-participating students in their cohort, and compared to rates of 69 percent for all first-generation students in that cohort. Moreover, participants held a mean cumulative GPA of 3.25—impressive as compared to a mean cumulative GPA of 2.94 for non-participating students.

Finally, many colleges and universities that rely on mentors note the challenges of keeping mentors—who are busy with life and work-related demands—involved in the program. Some give stipends to mentors—particularly students, but also sometimes to faculty and staff—which provide both an incentive to stay involved and some acknowledgement of their important contribution to the program for first-generation students. ●

“...To foster relationships between first-generation college students at Heritage University and faculty, staff, alumni, or community-member mentors, with the goal to help students feel a sense of belonging in college, develop a sense of purpose and a vision for their lives, distinguish themselves academically, graduate with their bachelor’s degrees, and move on to rewarding graduate studies or professions.”

—Stated purpose of Heritage Stars Mentoring Program, **Heritage University (WA)**



BEST PRACTICES

6. Institutionalize a commitment to first-generation students

Although most independent college and university student populations include a more or less sizable number of first-generation students, campuses are not equally attuned to their presence, nor to their distinctive characteristics and needs. And while any sort of programming targeted to these students is likely to produce positive outcomes, the best results tend to be found at colleges and universities that offer first-generation students the most supportive and welcoming environments. Those environments tend to be where a commitment to first-generation students is part and parcel of the work of the institution and where the entire campus is aware of their presence and actively coordinates efforts to bolster their success.

A first step in institutionalizing a commitment to first-generation students is to involve the entire campus community. This requires, first, coordination of (and cooperation from)

many different units and constituencies and, second, good communication. At the **College of Saint Benedict**, one of the first tasks taken on by the new first-generation program coordinator was to

meet with various campus departments to network with key individuals and to promote the program. Meetings were held with financial aid, residential life, academic advising, internship, career

“Coming to college is kind of like entering a whole new culture. It’s a new atmosphere. There’s a new language. The reason [first-generation students] quit or fail is because they don’t know how to navigate the system or they feel like imposters. They feel as though they don’t belong here.... The glitch is that students don’t even know that they own a toolbox or perhaps they’re thinking of those tools in terms of high school. For example, sometimes when students hear the word ‘tutoring,’ they think that means it’s for students who are behind or are not bright. At the college level, virtually every student is tutored—especially in a liberal arts college where you’re expected to study different disciplines.”

—Lisa Brennan, English instructor and coordinator of the First-Generation Student Success program, **McKendree University (IL)**

services, student activities, intercultural center, admissions, upward bound, writing center, and math skills center professional and student staff members. The new coordinator also created a one-page summary of the first-generation program for the academic departments, added links to the first-generation program on the admissions and student development websites, and saw to it that an article about the program appeared on the front page of the campus-wide newsletter.

Although student affairs, academic support, and other staff are critical to the success of first-generation students, faculty members also are a vital component of these students’ college experience. Even those instructors who were, themselves, first-generation college students tend to forget what it was like to come into a classroom intimidated by the professor (and perhaps by other students), unfamiliar with expectations (“How do I get on Blackboard? Do I

have to type my papers?”), confused by the jargon (syllabus, office hours, cumulative final exam, rubric, academic probation), and laden with doubts about their own abilities to succeed and whether they even belong there—feelings that may be exacerbated by racial and cultural differences.

First-generation students, in particular, may not be able to take time off from work to go on a field trip; may miss class due to a family responsibility that the professor considers a poor excuse; or may not be able to register on time for the next semester, buy the books until the grant money comes through, or drive themselves (for lack of a car) to a required community-service project, internship, or off-campus cultural event. The most successful programs for first-generation students, then, also include faculty members in some way—as mentors, speakers, participants in social events, academic advisors, and instructors of courses designed for first-generation students.

The primary goal at **McKendree University**—a multi-campus university in Illinois with a historic relationship with the United Methodist Church—has been to expand its academic support services to those first-generation students who are located off their main campus in Lebanon, Illinois. The university has done this by using technology to meet student needs—that is, by creating a “holistic” support system that includes online tutoring, increased access to the Writing Center and Academic Support Center, and sharing of information to off-campus students and instructors about scholarships and other opportunities. The institution has found, among other things, that faculty support and involvement have been critical components of success. First-generation faculty members have shared their experiences in brown bag sessions for students, staff, and other faculty members; many faculty members have posted “First-Generation Student Success” signs on their office doors;



Students participated in a multiple-day training program to prepare them to be peer mentors of first-generation students at Stetson University. The three-part program assists first-generation students in the weeks leading up to the fall semester, during the first year, and in the transition into the sophomore, junior, and senior years.

and faculty members refer students to the Academic Services Center and the Writing Center with greater frequency and request presentations from these offices to their classes, in both face-to-face and online formats.

At McKendree, as at other institutions, the long-term commitment of the university is central to the success of their efforts on behalf of first-generation students. Officials note that collaboration among campus offices has played a pivotal role in meeting this goal; indeed, their program for first-generation students—the McKendree Firsts program—will continue in the future largely because it has become so deeply embedded in the university community. Since the program’s inception, admissions offices at all McKendree campuses began routinely to track first-generation students. The Financial Aid Office now refers students and families to the Office of First-Generation Student Success for more extensive guidance in scholarship searches and finding funds for educational costs. Faculty meetings at all locations now include a presentation on

first-generation programs at least once annually, and some faculty advisors are implementing “Assertive Advising” to guide first-generation students through the registration process.

While some institutions refer to the “institutionalization” of a first-generation focus, others talk of creating a campus “culture” of inclusion, acknowledgement, and commitment to the success of first-generation students. Either way, this sort of infusion across the campus and its various units seems to be essential to their success—and the McKendree approach seems to be especially effective. University administrators report that although the collective GPA of first-generation students was lower than that of non-first-generation students at the beginning of the academic year, by the completion of the year, first-generation students made even stronger gains than non-first-generation students. Students admitted in fall 2010 had a GPA of 2.8 at the end of their first semester, but by the end of their second year, their GPA had increased to 2.88.

Another step toward institutionalizing a commitment to first-generation students for many colleges and universities is to formalize that commitment by means of establishing positions and even units dedicated to this distinctive cohort of students. Many CIC/Walmart College Success Award recipients have used their funds to do just that.

For example, **Carroll University** hired a new director of student success whose job it is to oversee the Student Success Program (SSP): selecting SSP participants and advisors, developing SSP programming, and providing ongoing advising to SSP participants.

Stetson University expanded programming for first-generation students through the establishment of a new Office of Student Advocacy and Student Success, which will oversee a three-part plan to assist first-generation students in the weeks leading up to the fall semester, during the first year, and in the transition into the sophomore, junior, and senior years. This careful institutionalization of programming is effective, as evidenced by retention rates reported for the first two cohorts of first-generation students in Stetson’s Walmart-supported program. Retention rates for first-generation students in each year, 2009 through 2011, were at most two or three points below that for all students. Similarly, GPAs for first-generation students were strikingly close to those for all students: 2.78 versus 2.83 the first year, 2.82 versus 2.71 the second, and 2.88 versus 2.73 the third.

Alverno College, too, whose focus is on advising first-generation students, hired an advising specialist to help students prevent and address academic and personal issues that threaten their college progress and to lead all activities of Alverno’s Promise Scholars program. ●



BEST PRACTICES

7. Build community, promote engagement, and make it fun

Although it seems almost too obvious to mention, retention of students depends not only on academic performance, but also on having an enjoyable experience at the college or university they attend. Much of the attention to the needs of first-generation students focuses, understandably, on ensuring their academic success. But students also need the chance to develop meaningful relationships, engage in activities that they like, relax, and have fun. Indeed, students' engagement with groups and activities on campus is a well-documented predictor of retention. Also, building a sense of community among first-generation students themselves—that is, helping them bond and identify with one another—makes them more inclined to attend workshops and other activities designed for them, gives them a sense of “home” from the beginning, and makes them feel less like outsiders on the campus. This means that, in addition to providing programs for first-generation students that are focused on academic prowess and life skills, institutions also should provide programming activities that offer a respite and a chance for students to experience some fun and to bond with one another.

Social events for first-generation students are an integral feature of programming for every institution that participated in the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program, and the variety of activities is almost limitless: picnics, talent shows, trips to concerts and theaters, movie nights (complete with popcorn), visits to local events such as city fairs and flea markets, bowling, hikes, local harbor cruises, late-night snacks, snow tubing, pizza parties, ice cream socials, welcome back receptions, sports events, and game nights. Many hold “welcome back” receptions as well as end-of-semester or end-of-year dinners, where they celebrate students’ achievements, oftentimes with faculty and staff present. **Bellarmino University**, which describes itself as an independent Catholic university in the spirit of Thomas Merton and enrolls 2,700 undergraduates, holds an annual Halloween Bash.

Emmanuel College held a Trivial Pursuit night; the college’s first-generation students also played laser tag and took a Boston Harbor Cruise. A few colleges hold weekly “interaction sessions” for first-generation students, which might include lunch (as food is almost always a draw for college students).

Many events are designed, at least in part, for cultural or personal enrichment. Many first-generation students have not had the same opportunities as their more affluent counterparts to attend plays and concerts or visit museums, much less spend days or a weekend staying in a hotel and experiencing the rich history, or simply seeing the sites, in places such as Washington, DC. This is where **Catawba College**, an undergraduate liberal arts institution with 1,300 students and a small master’s



Because many first-generation students have not had the same opportunities as their more affluent counterparts to attend plays and concerts or visit museums, much less spend days or a weekend staying in a hotel and seeing the sites, **Catawba College** takes a small group of students to Washington, DC, each year as part of their CIC/Walmart grant-funded programming.

program in education in Salisbury, North Carolina, takes a small group of first-generation students each year. They tour the Holocaust Museum and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, attend a play at the Kennedy Center, see a Wizards game (NBA), meet their senator, and have time on their own to become acquainted with this dynamic metropolitan area. The Washington trip is a highlight of Catawba’s program and, judging from the response, of the students’ college experience. As a result of the college’s focus on developing first-generation students’ social and cultural capital, students’ academic achievement was noticeably improved.

Although the first cohort of first-generation students who entered Catawba in fall 2010 had, by the end of their first year, a slightly lower GPA than all first-time students (first generation = 2.619, all first year = 2.736), the first-generation students in the NextGen First Year Seminar were

retained at a higher rate in the fall of their second year (first generation = 82.4 percent, all first year = 71.04 percent).

Other off-campus activities offered to first-generation students include team-building retreats, attendance at conferences (such as the National Student Leadership Conference), and service projects in the community, including fundraising or disaster restoration. All these more ambitious off-campus events tend to be more difficult for students to attend—and may require financial support—but they can be rich experiences and a powerful means of creating a sense of community for first-generation students.

Despite all their efforts, many colleges and universities report that getting first-generation students to attend events and participate in activities is a challenge. This is especially true after the first or second semester, when students have



First-generation students begin a hike as part of Lynchburg College's experiential learning Expand Your Horizons program.

become more integrated into the larger college community and have developed ties with groups other than their first-generation cohort.

At the **College of Saint Benedict**, where attendance of first-generation students at various events dropped off dramatically after the first semester or two, staff members suggest that this is not necessarily a negative effect. Although Saint Benedict's first-generation students say that they want to continue to attend events and programs planned for them, those students also are athletes, resident advisors, officers of student organizations, volunteers, and working 10 to 15 hours a week. With so many other demands on their time, these students already had other things scheduled. This confirms that first-generation students are actively engaged in the campus culture, one of the goals of the program; indeed, 89 percent of first-generation students who entered the College of Saint Benedict

in 2009 returned for their sophomore year, and their GPAs were very similar to those of non-first-generation students that year. Nonetheless, poor attendance presents an ongoing challenge to those responsible for developing activities for first-generation students.

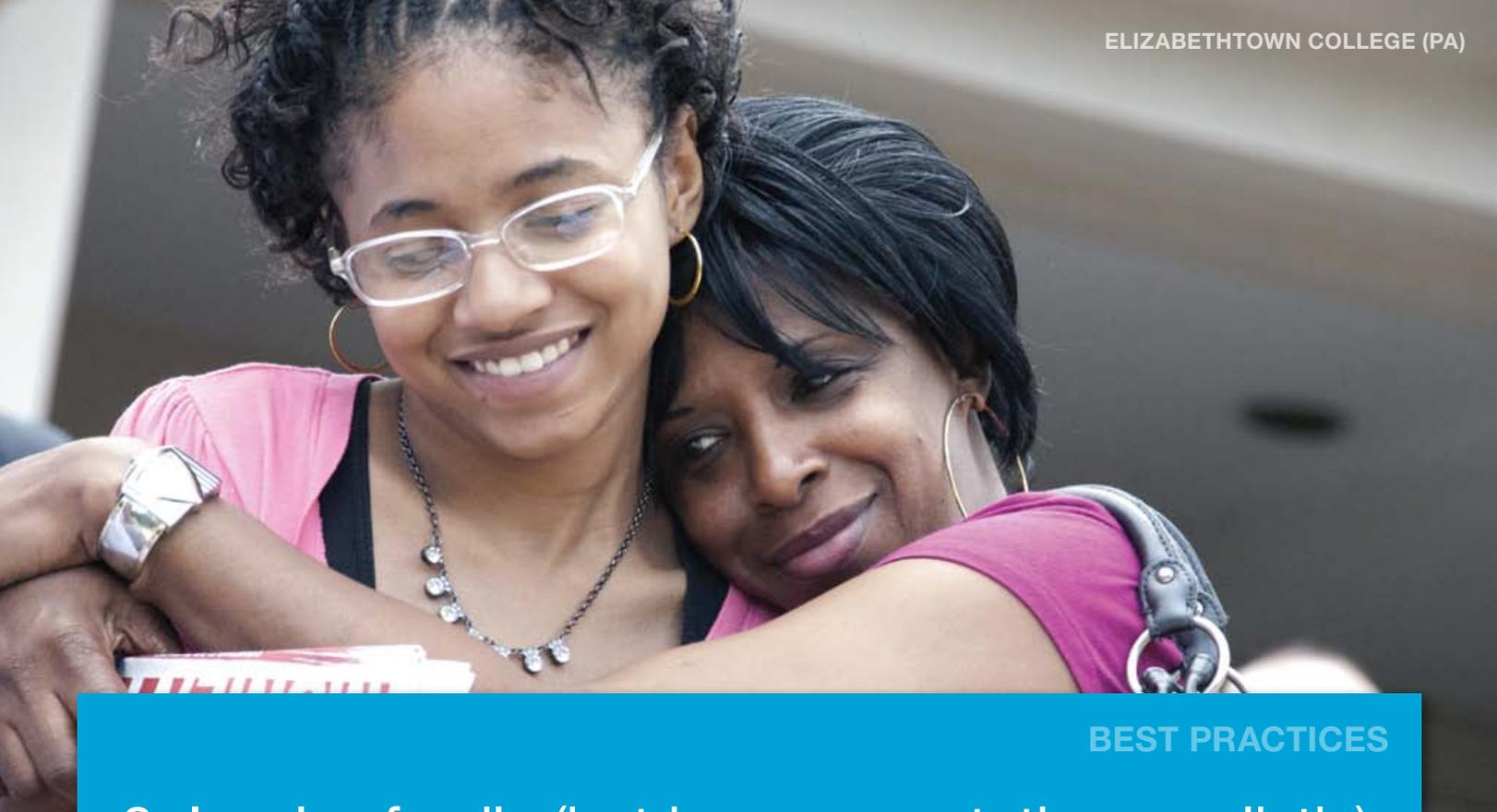
The College of St. Scholastica—a Benedictine college whose main campus is in Duluth, Minnesota, with other campuses in St. Paul, St. Cloud, Brainerd, and Rochester—serves nearly 3,000 undergraduates. St. Scholastica modified programming as the campus became increasingly sensitized to the outside work demands of their largely low-income first-generation students that took a toll on their ability to be involved in extracurricular activities. Staff there also came to appreciate that, particularly by sophomore year, athletes in the program found a sense of belongingness with their teams—and hence had less need for the first-generation community connections.

Another challenge is to keep programs and events fresh and appealing to students. At **Alma College**, the problem of low student turnout at events planned by faculty mentors was solved by having the students themselves decide what events they want. The students tend to choose activities that are fun and low-key (holiday cookie decorating or a movie night), as well as some activities to broaden their knowledge of resources, such as an experiential learning dinner. They also choose to invite faculty to some of their purely social events in order to forge those important relationships. Finally, some colleges and universities overtly encourage campus engagement outside of the first-generation cohort.

Florida Memorial University

requires that all of the students—in this case, black and Hispanic first-generation males—participate in some sort of campus-wide activity, such as a fraternity, athletic team, club, or student government. Staff report that 85 percent of their first-generation participants are involved in at least one campus activity—the sort of involvement that is widely recognized as a correlate of retention.

An internationally oriented four-year college of arts and sciences, **Kalamazoo College** in Michigan managed to increase first-generation college students' participation over a two-year period in various activities, including bi-weekly advising sessions and internship and externship opportunities. Participation was increased by scheduling activities during a common hour (an hour during which classes and extracurricular activities are not scheduled), using student feedback to shape the types of programming offered, and sharpening communication with the students. ●



BEST PRACTICES

8. Involve family (but keep expectations realistic)

Most traditional-age college students deal, to one extent or another, with challenges related to family: separation difficulties, competing family demands, lack of support (or too much of it), lack of parental contact, and issues exercising independence as they slowly grow into adulthood. These challenges can be particularly difficult for students whose parents did not attend college. First-generation students are more likely than their peers to live at home or to attend college near their family's home. Parents may be accustomed to depending on their college-age son or daughter for a variety of responsibilities—contributing to family income, providing rides to work and doctors' appointments, babysitting younger siblings, helping to care for older family members, attending family functions, or just providing emotional support and company. And when their son or daughter is still living nearby, they may simply continue that dependency without understanding that the demands of college, such as attending classes and completing assignments, must take priority in their son's or daughter's life. Cultural differences also may come into play, such as in cases where parents are simply uncomfortable giving their formerly protected offspring the autonomy that they need to succeed in college. While some parents are delighted to have their children be the first in the family to pursue higher education, others may be ambivalent or even unsupportive in ways that create barriers to students' success. Some of their lack of support is simply a result of

their own lack of experience with the myriad aspects of college life: choosing a college, securing financial aid, deciding on a major, choosing courses, applying for scholarships, and so on. Because of these challenges, many colleges and universities include families in their first-generation student programming, make special efforts to provide information to families, and in some cases work to make communication with families a priority throughout the students' time in college.

Involving families often begins with inviting them to campus to participate in summer bridge programs. At the **College of St. Scholastica**, a two-day “Summer Launch” program includes a family luncheon with first-generation faculty and staff speakers; a break-out session for students and parents on adjustment to college life; and packets of information listing resources for first-generation students and their families regarding preparing for exams, the faculty mentor programs, and financial aid and scholarship search tips. The college also provides individual assistance to families in dealing with the transition to college, since many of the families that attend struggle with separation issues. Staff members report being able to “normalize” feelings of sadness and change within the family; they then follow those efforts up with telephone calls and fall family events, including a family reception during Homecoming/Family Weekend. These efforts have, so far, yielded impressive results. To this point, retention for participants in the college’s Walmart Initiative for Success in Education program is 83 percent—a rate that is significantly higher than for the student body as a whole.

Some colleges and universities invite parents of first-generation students to events throughout the year. As part of their programming to encourage first-generation students to pursue the liberal arts, **Eureka College**—founded by abolitionists from Kentucky and the first college in Illinois and third in the

This “Save the Date” postcard was sent to all incoming first-year, first-generation students at **Eureka College**. In addition to details about the program and contact information for the program director, the first event was the Fall First-Generation Dinner to which their parents were invited.

nation to admit men and women on an equal basis—hosts an orientation session for parents during Welcome Week and then invites them to events throughout the year, including the fall and spring dinners.

At the **College of Mount Saint Vincent**, a Catholic liberal arts college in the Bronx, New York, that serves 1,800 undergraduate and graduate students, the Parent Support Initiative is an integral part of first-generation student programming. The initiative’s goal is



to educate and support parents so that they can gain a better understanding of the rigors and expectations of college life. Mount Saint Vincent, too, offers a summer orientation program just for parents and includes parents at two dinners. Most recently, 80 students and 40 parents attended the spring dinner, during which awards were presented to students. The success of Mount Saint Vincent’s efforts on behalf of first-generation commuter students is indicated by first-to-second year

“The sole expectation my family had for me was to graduate from high school and have more options than they did as immigrant migrant workers. As a high school student, it was difficult to fathom where my life would lead me. I’m glad it has led me here, where I can continue giving back to the farm-working community that gave me so much.”

—Rocio Rangel, CAMP Admission Counselor and former CAMP participant, **St. Edward’s University (TX)**

retention rates: 80.6 percent for the first cohort—higher than for first-generation resident students.

At the **College of Idaho**, the summer orientation for parents of the college’s targeted Latino first-generation students was conducted in Spanish and English.

Catawba College developed a Family Orientation Manual that it now provides to the families of all new students and sponsors a tailgate party for first-generation students and their families each year during Homecoming or Family Weekend. In some cases, colleges and universities opt to communicate with parents via regular newsletters. A few offer webinars and websites for families; one promoted a social networking site through which parents might communicate with one another; and yet another established a Parents Advisory Board.

Despite all these efforts, many colleges and universities that try to involve families report disappointingly low involvement in their first-generation programming efforts. The staff at the

College of Mount Saint Vincent noted, after the fact, that their three-day parent orientation made “unrealistic time demands” on parents, most of whom are working full-time (or at more than one job) and who can ill afford to take days off to travel for a child’s college program. They reduced the number of days of their orientation, thus increasing parent participation somewhat. Some parents also are intimidated or may not be fluent English speakers. Travel money also may be an issue.

Rosemont College successfully involved most first-generation students’ parents in an orientation to the summer bridge program but were unable to lure parents back to campus for late afternoon activities. Because only one parent indicated her ability to participate in an on-campus update on the program and the students’ success thus far, the staff substituted regular phone calls with parents.

The **College of Idaho**, anticipating the burden of travel costs on participating parents, many of whom are low-income, reimbursed families for those costs

to encourage their attendance at the summer orientation. Nonetheless, almost every college or university that attempted to involve parents in their programming for first-generation students expressed some disappointment in the low response and lack of participation. ●



An incoming first-generation student and her parents enjoy a picnic as part of **Elizabethtown College’s** Momentum program. This opening event allows families to meet the faculty, staff, and upper-class student mentors leading the program.



BEST PRACTICES

9. Acknowledge, and ease when possible, financial pressures

A major source of stress reported by most first-generation college students is finances, and most successful programs take this into account. Institutions vary considerably in what they are able to offer students in the way of financial support and also, to some extent, in how they choose to award it. Pell grants, scholarships, and other forms of financial aid are, of course, vital. Most colleges and universities receiving CIC/Walmart Awards provide financial aid information to students and/or families in one form or another—during summer bridge programs, at workshops, or in newsletters to parents.

Some institutions are able to offer additional financial aid to first-generation students who participate in their programs. **Juniata College**, for example, offers incoming first-generation students the opportunity to receive the Next Generation Scholarship; to receive the scholarship, students have

to participate in a one-week, pre-orientation immersion experience called InBound Retreats. For qualified students who choose to participate in InBound, the award supports the costs of their registration fee, \$300 toward tuition to make up for lost wages during the week of the program, and an allocation

of funds for fall semester books and academic fees (up to \$400). This and other components of the InBound Program seem highly effective; in the second year of the CIC/Walmart Award program, 92 percent of the Next Generation scholars (those who received the scholarships and InBound



Michael Stevenson (left) studied abroad in Tanzania as part of **Wartburg College's** Generation Orange program for first-generation students.

also greatly exceeded their enrollment projections for first-generation students. Although the college anticipated 40 students for fall 2010 and 2011, in fact 65 first-generation students participated the first year, and 86 enrolled the second year.

At **Wartburg College**, Generation Orange students who finish the first year are awarded \$1,000 for each of the following three years that they remain successfully enrolled. This incentive, along with an intensive mentoring program, resulted in retention of these students at a significantly higher rate than a matched cohort of students with similar test scores, GPA, and other factors—77 percent retention, compared to only 57 percent for a matched control group.



programming in their first year) returned for their second year, well outpacing the persistence rates of all first-generation students (77 percent retention) and all students in the same class (84.8 percent retention).

Notre Dame de Namur University, a highly diverse coeducational Catholic university located in the San Francisco Bay Area, enrolls approximately 1,200 undergraduate and 800 graduate students. Students who successfully complete the Gen 1 program at Notre Dame de Namur—that is, earn at least a 2.5 GPA during the first year, pass their Learning Strategies course, and attend Gen 1 events—receive a \$1,500 scholarship toward sophomore year tuition. The Gen 1 program, too, yielded an impressive persistence rate: For the fall 2010 cohort, the retention rate for Gen 1 students was 85 percent compared to 77 percent for all first-year students; and the following year, retention was 84 percent for Gen 1 students versus 81 percent for all first-year students. The College of Notre Dame de Namur

A number of colleges and universities provide financial support for students to pay for college costs that are in addition to room, board, and tuition. Some colleges and universities, such as **Defiance College**, a coeducational college associated with the United Church of Christ and enrolling 1,100 graduate and undergraduate students, give book vouchers.

Mars Hill University—a small liberal arts college that emphasizes research for all its students, including first-generation ones—gives first-generation students in their program \$500–700 to support student research projects, often carried out in conjunction with faculty members.

The **College of Saint Benedict** has funded a variety of out-of-class activities for their first-generation students, including alternative break experiences, a choral trip, a sustainability retreat, study abroad, a women's dog sledding expedition, a service trip to Trinidad and Tobago, and a canoeing and camping adventure.

FACTS: Juniata College

Improved Retention Rates from First to Second Year

92% of CIC/Walmart-funded Next Generation Scholars...

77% of all first-generation students...

85% of all first-year students...

...returned for their second year.

“Two participants in our ‘Expand Your Horizons’ initiative are now president and vice president of our student government association. The program inspired them to ‘expand their horizons’ and reach for higher goals; now they are two of our strongest campus leaders.... It really has made a difference in the lives of these students.”

—Mari Normyle, Associate Dean, Student Engagement and Success, **Lynchburg College (VA)**

Ripon College gives meal vouchers to program students who elect to stay on campus during breaks as well as travel vouchers to students who travel to the campus from distant states.

Lynchburg College, an independent, residential liberal arts college in Virginia with about 2,600 undergraduate and graduate students and two doctoral programs, grants \$750 to each student in its program to support an experiential learning opportunity, such as travel abroad or conference attendance.

And students in **Alverno College’s** Promise Scholars program are eligible to receive “emergency funds”—money that is set aside as financial aid grants for students who, for one reason or another, are in danger of having to leave the college for financial reasons. Providing these funds has been, for Alverno College, an effective retention strategy.

To encourage first-generation students to engage in program activities, **Clark Atlanta University** provided financial incentive awards each semester to help meet financial needs of students who could document participation in program activities. Typical of the responses received by program administrators: “I stopped by your office the other day because I would like to thank you for the Walmart Scholarship for this fall semester. I have been struggling. . . and that scholarship has

brought me one step closer to paying off my balance. I have been stressed about the possibility of taking out another loan. I am truly grateful for the CIC/Walmart College Success Award.”

Another important (but often overlooked) need of many first-generation students is financial support for participating in activities that require a commitment of time that the student would otherwise use earning money at an outside job. **DePaul University’s** Internship Plu\$ Program has as its goal enabling first-generation students to undertake unpaid internships; to this end, they provide \$1,300 to each student who completes the program.

St. Edward’s University supports students’ participation in its four-week summer bridge program by providing room and board, academic supplies, a small personal living allowance, a travel stipend, and \$500 to offset lost wages. This has proven to be money well spent, as significant numbers of first-generation students who participated in the summer bridge program—well over half and, in some cases, 90 percent or more—were prepared to enroll in college-level mathematics and writing courses.

Some first-generation students have financial needs that are far less obvious and sometimes even unrecognized.

Florida Memorial University, a historically black institution in a state particularly hard hit by the recent recession and housing market crisis, has experienced the challenge of students whose parents have lost their jobs and are confronted with foreclosures and other issues related to unemployment. Officials there describe a situation that has placed a tremendous burden on some students who feel they are at fault or obligated to find a job to help out; some students talk about dropping out of school to help their family. In response, the university has worked with the Career Planning and Placement Office to provide individual counseling to help the students and their parents cope.

Another major difficulty the university notes, and one which no doubt faces every institution that serves first-generation students, is helping some students with basic necessities, such as funds to wash clothes, pay bus fares, and other personal needs that are not being met by parents or guardians due to limited resources. This form of support has paid off in dramatically improved retention rates. At Florida Memorial, students who participated in the first year of the CIC/Walmart-funded program were retained at a rate of 90 percent compared to 70 percent for all first-generation students, and the second-year cohort showed similar results. ●



BEST PRACTICES

10. Keep track of your successes and failures: What works and what doesn't?

Ongoing assessment of first-generation programming is essential. The CIC/Walmart College Success Award recipients use a variety of methods to measure the success of their efforts on behavior of students. While indicators of academic success—GPA and retention—are the most commonly used outcomes, CIC/Walmart College Success Award recipients look at other outcomes as well, including student and faculty satisfaction, levels of participation, and academic preparedness. They also use many different methods of data collection: college records, surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and, in some cases, nationally-recognized instruments that measure students' attitudes and experiences. In every case, colleges and universities use their assessment results in a formative way—that is, to make small and large improvements in their programs for first-generation students.

At **Illinois College**, Yates Fellows are selected because they are the most academically at-risk among the college's first-year, first-generation students;

officials there note that the main indicators of success in the college's program are the academic success and satisfaction of those students.

Although student retention and grade point averages are the outcomes that officials believe most readily speak to the success of the Yates Program, they

“Professor Nick Capo, on one of the first days of the program, asked us to write on a piece of paper ‘I will finish,’ and underneath those words sign and date it. That memory still moves me because he was saying, ‘Yes, the Yates Program will give you resources, relationships, and funds, if that is what you want, but you must be accountable to you. Finish for yourself, as a strong first-generation student who is motivated to succeed in college and in life.’ I still hold myself accountable to succeed in what I set out to do, with no excuses.”

—Carmen Kremitzki, Yates Fellowship Program (Class of 2013), Illinois College

(pictured in the photo, page 40, second from right)

also survey students to gauge their experiences and to solicit their advice and recommendations for improving the program. The survey includes detailed questions about each of the program’s activities and solicits comments from students about how they might be improved. As additional measures of the long-term success of the Yates Program, the college plans to use the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Collegiate Learning Assessment instruments. In response to the assessment results, a number of changes were made in the Yates Program: Illinois College added a study skills component to the summer bridge program, developed a more comprehensive continuing orientation program for the academic year after the conclusion of summer activities, and established a living-learning community specifically for Yates Fellows.

The college’s experience working with first-generation students had wider implications on the campus as well. The Yates Fellowship Program revealed that the college needed to provide more support and guidance for minority and underrepresented

students. Consequently, the college established a new Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs to assist actively in building a campus culture that embraces individuals from a plethora of identifiers, including race, gender, ethnicity, age, religion, and sexual preference. The director of this office provides leadership in developing and implementing student support for the transition and integration of minority and underrepresented students into the college community, with the ultimate goal of retaining students through graduation.

At **St. Edward’s University**, in addition to grade point average, academic progress is indicated by the number of credit hours taken and, in the long-term, graduation rates. Because St. Edward’s University’s first-generation students come to college with extreme deficiencies in academic preparedness, short-term evaluation of the Bridge to College Success (BTCS) program includes pre-tests that identify students’ specific remediation needs and post-tests that assess gains. BTCS faculty developed these pre- and post-tests for math, reading comprehension, and

writing, and the university also uses the Nelson-Denny reading comprehension assessment. Before fall semester classes begin, students are assessed again by means of a university-administered placement test to determine if developmental coursework is required.

Bay Path College collects assessment data from students by means of an online survey questionnaire and focus groups. Students are asked to describe their impressions of each of the ten programs funded by their award and asked about the impact these programs have had on their college experience. Other questions focus on the challenges students face and their ability to persist. In order to improve the quality of their assessment efforts, Bay Path hired a consultant—an expert in educational research—to design the survey questionnaire, administer the focus groups, and analyze the data. In addition to overall retention rates for first-generation students that were similar to the retention rates for all first- and second-year students during the two-year grant period, Bay Path found that students who participated in some of the central



During spring break, more than 40 Bay Path College students—many who have never left the United States—join Bay Path President Carol Leary on the annual Capitals of the World trip as they explore a different capital each year in an intensive experience that prepares them to be global citizens.

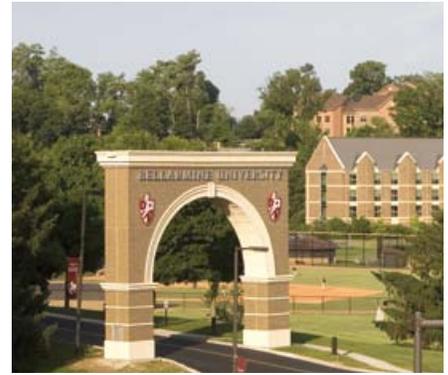
activities of their program—including a trip to Washington, DC, a job shadow program, and First Year Leadership Institutes—were particularly likely to return to the college the following years, with retention rates of those students ranging from the high 80s to 100 percent.

The college learned much about its program’s impact from the online survey questionnaires. Bay Path reports:

“From our online surveys, 82 percent from the 2008 cohort, and 84 percent of the 2009 cohort, responded that the Walmart initiatives improved their academic performance. Students cited the orientation program and ropes course for helping them transition to college and creating greater self-confidence. They credited tutoring support and the First Year Leadership Institute for developing their academic and leadership skills. Students recognized a greater connection with

faculty and staff through the research and project assistant positions and through travel programs.”

Like most colleges and universities, **Bellarmine University** uses GPA and retention data as the major indicators of the success of their Pioneer Program. Bellarmine, however, compares data for four categories of first-generation students: active Pioneer members for fall, first-generation students not involved in the program, active members for the full year, and active members for the fall only. In this way the university can ascertain whether its programming is what influences outcomes. Thus far the university has been pleased to find that although the backgrounds of all the groups (high school GPA, ACT/SAT) were similar, the retention and college GPA at the end of spring of those involved in the program was much better than for those students who did



FACTS: Bellarmine University

Improved Retention Rates from First to Second Year

91% of CIC/Walmart-funded Next Generation Scholars...

78% of all first-generation students...

83% of all first-year students...

...returned for their second year.

not actively participate: 82.6 percent retention rate for all first-year students, 78.2 percent for all first-year, first-generation students, and 91.5 percent for the Pioneer Scholars who participated in the program for the full year.

Many colleges and universities solicit input from groups other than first-generation students. **Berea College**, for example, conducts year-end focus groups with faculty members as well as students; and most of the colleges and universities that use mentors also collect information from them about the effectiveness of the mentoring as well as suggestions about how to improve that aspect of their programs. ●

CONCLUSION



A Final Word on Making Sure They Make It

In an important sense, there are, in fact, no “best practices” for promoting the success of first-generation college students. Patrick Terenzini, Distinguished Professor of Higher Education and Senior Scientist (Emeritus) in the Department of Education Policy Studies and the Center of the Study of Higher Education at the Pennsylvania State University, argues that trying to identify best practices can actually be debilitating if it leads educators to “focus on the parts” rather than on the larger goal. What works on any given campus is, of course, influenced by any number of different factors: demographic and other characteristics of the students, the campus culture, the college or university mission, resources, and so on. But Terenzini makes a larger point: that “*what* an institution does is less important to student success and development than that *whatever* it does has one or more of the characteristics of effective educational experiences.” And the experiences that influence student learning are those that:

1. Include encounters with challenging ideas and people;
2. Require active engagement with those challenges;
3. Occur in a supportive environment;
4. Emphasize meaningful, real-world activities; and
5. Involve relational, interpersonal activities.

These are the kinds of experiences that are offered, in multiple ways, to first-generation students enrolled at the 50 colleges and universities that participated in the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program. There may be no “silver bullet” when it comes to enhancing the academic success of this next generation of college students, many of whom will continue to be first-generation college students. But the many and multifaceted successes of the CIC/Walmart College Success Award recipients speak to the value of these ongoing efforts. ●

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CIC/WALMART COLLEGE SUCCESS AWARDS WEBSITE



CIC has published a comprehensive public website to guide institutions and organizations interested in initiating a new or strengthening an existing program to help first-generation students earn their baccalaureate degrees. For more detailed profiles of the programs at the 50 participating institutions, visit www.cic.edu/CollegeSuccess.

LIST OF PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

FIRST COHORT \$100,000 Awards

Adrian College (MI)
Bay Path College (MA)
Bellarmine University (KY)
California Lutheran University
Carroll University (WI)
College of Mount Saint Vincent (NY)
College of Saint Benedict (MN)
Florida Memorial University
Illinois College
Juniata College (PA)
Kalamazoo College (MI)
Lesley University (MA)
Manchester University (IN)
North Central College (IL)
Ripon College (WI)
St. Edward's University (TX)
The College of Idaho
The College of St. Scholastica (MN)
Wartburg College (IA)
Wiley College (TX)

SECOND COHORT \$100,000 Awards

Alma College (MI)
Alverno College (WI)
Berea College (KY)
Catawba College (NC)
Clark Atlanta University (GA)
DePaul University (IL)
Elizabethtown College (PA)
Franklin College (IN)
Guilford College (NC)
Lynchburg College (VA)
Mars Hill University (NC)
Mercyhurst University (PA)
Mills College (CA)
Notre Dame of Maryland University
Notre Dame de Namur University (CA)
Rosemont College (PA)
Stetson University (FL)
Stevenson University (MD)
Thomas College (ME)
University of St. Francis (IL)

SECOND COHORT \$50,000 Awards

Cardinal Stritch University (WI)
Chaminade University of Honolulu (HI)
Defiance College (OH)
Emmanuel College (MA)
Eureka College (IL)
Heritage University (WA)
McKendree University (IL)
Saint Augustine's University (NC)
Wabash College (IN)
Woodbury University (CA)

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CIC would like to thank all institutions that contributed photos,
brochures, and many other materials for this project.

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