

## First Generation Resource Center at Indiana University

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### Abstract

Nearly thirty percent of Indiana University students are first-generation, yet a resource center has not been devoted to first-generation students (First-Generation, n.d.). First-generation students are defined, in our study, as any individual whose parents have yet to obtain a credential degree from a 4-year institution (Ives & Castillo, 2020). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, first-generation students comprise one-third of undergraduates in a bachelor's degree program in 2016 (Nam, 2023). This study aims to conduct a qualitative survey with the goal of gathering input from Indiana University first-generation students regarding the creation of the First-Generation Student Resource Center.

### Keywords

First-generation, resource center, minoritized students, student needs

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## First Generation Resource Center at Indiana University

### Background and Rationale

Nearly thirty percent of Indiana University students are first-generation, yet the resource center has not been devoted to the first-generation students (First-Generation, n.d.). First generation students are defined, in our study, as any individual whose parents have yet to obtain a credential degree from a 4-year institution (Ives & Castillo, 2020). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, first-generation students comprise one-third of undergraduates in a bachelor's degree program in 2016 (Nam, 2023). This study aims to conduct a qualitative survey with the goal of gathering input from Indiana University first-generation students regarding the creation of the First-Generation Student Resource Center.

### Defining a First-Generation Resource Center

We will define a first-generation resource center as a supportive community of first-generation students, faculty, staff, alumni, and professionals who support students in their transition to college. The mission is to empower first-generation students to successfully navigate their college experience and persist to graduation through providing mentorship, supportive services, and leadership opportunities (Notre Dame College FirstGen Center, n.d.). Some institutions may have a physical space or office for students to visit while others do not but still offer the same services. For the purposes of our research, we hope that a first-generation resource center at IU will offer specialized services for student support and a physical space where students can visit.

### Purpose

Despite first-generation students comprising a significant portion of Indiana University's student body, there exists a resource deficiency that conflicts with IU's 2030 mission and strategic plan emphasizing diversity, equity, and inclusion. The purpose of this study is to identify students' perceptions of potential resources and programs and what motivates their choices, which can be utilized in the implementation of the first-generation resource center. Such a resource center aims to enhance access to vital academic and support resources while fostering a robust support network to assist first-generation students in successfully navigating their college experience (Rivera et al, 2023). This study will explore the rationale, strategies, and potential benefits associated with the establishment of a specialized resource center tailored to the unique needs of first-generation college students here at Indiana University.

**RQ1:** What resources or programs would IU first-generation college students find most beneficial?

**RQ2:** What resources or programs would IU first-generation college students find least beneficial?

**RQ3:** Why do IU first-generation college students prioritize specific resources or programs?

## Literature Review

### First Generation History and Background

A first-generation college student is someone whose parents or guardians do not hold a college degree and who is pursuing a higher education degree (Peralta & Klonowsk, 2017). Historically, academic retention and success are critical concerns for first-generation college students. First-generation college students often come from lower socioeconomic households and/or racial/ethnic minoritized backgrounds (López et al., 2023). They typically juggle increased work hours while taking full loads of coursework, study less, and have limited access to supportive resources compared to their peers (Schelbe et al., 2019). Furthermore, these students are put at a disadvantage as they lack the social support, academic expectations, preparation, and resource accessibility that their peers have

(Schelbe et al., 2019). Overall, these students encounter a multitude of cultural and financial obstacles, which ultimately can result in lower retention and academic performance. Moreover, when compared to peers with college educated parents, first-generation students may also feel greater social alienation and marginalized in college. These students also tend to rate their sense of satisfaction and belonging less favorably possible due to these experiences (McCallen & Johnson, 2019).

### **Individual Resources/Services**

There are a variety of resources/services offered to first-generation students that have proven to be effective in supporting them as they navigate higher education. Briefly mentioned Learning Communities, and summer bridge programs are examples of these resources/services.

These resources and services play a critical role in the academic and personal growth of first-generation college students as well as in overcoming challenges and fostering engagement, retention, and success in higher education (McCallen & Johnson, 2019). Havlik et al. (2017) highlight the critical role of mentoring for first-generation college students, who may often find themselves navigating unfamiliar college environments and campus culture. Havlik's study reveals that many of these students heavily depend on mentors who provide not only academic and emotional support but also guidance for successfully navigating the college experience. Furthermore, these mentors serve as sources of motivation by exemplifying academic and career success, which, in turn, inspires students to strive for similar achievements. The significance of mentorship is further supported by Schelbe et al. (2019), who discuss the development of meaningful connections between students and their mentors, reaffirming the positive impact of such relationships on students' academic and personal growth. In line with this theme, McCallen and Johnson (2019) specifically highlight the importance of student-faculty interactions and their direct link to positive outcomes for first-generation students. McCallen and Johnson stress that college faculty and academic advisors play pivotal roles in providing various forms of support, including the transmission of aspirational, intellectual, emotional, and navigational capital, which collectively contribute to the overall success of first-generation college students. The common thread across McCallen and Johnson's works underscores the crucial significance of mentorship in facilitating the academic and personal development of first-generation college students. Moreover, McCallen and Johnson emphasize the critical roles played by mentors, faculty, and advisors in their college journey.

Academic and career advising were also found to be significant sources of support for first-generation students. Schelbe et al. (2019) hint at the use of proactive advising approaches in their implications, "Students noted that the personalized attention they received helped them feel like part of a family, but to provide such focus programs must have sufficient staff to attend to student's needs and also track students who do not proactively seek support" (p. 72). Van Jura and Prieto (2021) argue that proactive advising is an effective strategy/practice for supporting first-generation students. This approach emphasizes trust and communication to help students assume responsibility for their academic success. Practices include initiating contact before they ask for help, building rapport, asking questions that reveal underlying concerns/needs students have, and empowering them to take responsibility for their academic success. Building off academic advising, Schelbe et al. (2019) discuss the importance of meeting students' needs later in their studies which includes career planning and professional development. Moreover, Havlik et al. (2017) findings suggest that providing first-generation students with robust career planning and advising resources is essential to support their academic and professional development in college.

Living Learning Communities (LLCs) and summer bridge programs can serve as potential sources and programs to foster student engagement. Programs like LLC and Summer bridge are successful when institutions structure their "courses and programs to foster students' engagement in formal and informal exchanges with faculty, advisors, peers, mentors, and other sources of social and cultural capitals on campuses" (McCallen & Johnson, 2019, p.13). LLCs help foster a sense of community,

support, and belonging as well as provide a safe space for first-generation students to develop relationships with peers and mentors. Moreover, this can occur by creating a culture of ecological validation for first-generation students that provides support through holistic, proactive, strengths-oriented, and collaborative program structures and processes. LLCs can give students the tools they need to succeed and therefore help close the equity gaps in completion rates. Summer bridge programs practice early engagement and can be a potential tool of support in the transition of first-generation students to college life (Havlik et al., 2017). Schelbe's et al.'s (2019) research on academic retention programs proved summer bridge programs to be beneficial to these students in terms of personal growth, academic preparation, and skill development. Summer bridge programs can be an effective strategy for supporting and fostering the retention of first-generation students by providing them with foundational knowledge and skills to successfully navigate college.

Financial issues have been identified as major sources of stress for first-generation students which may prevent them from fully engaging in academic and social activities. Therefore, it is important that programs address and provide resources to alleviate concerns about financial constraints/issues. Examples of these resources will be discussed in the following section. López et al.'s (2023) work suggests that programs targeting first-generation students and their retention are often those that offer financial support. Furthermore, the study reveals that there is a positive correlation between first-generation student retention and financial support services. All in all, these resources and services, including mentorship, advising, LLCs, summer programs, and financial support, play a crucial role in addressing challenges faced by first-generation college students. The research highlights the significance of mentorship, faculty interactions, and proactive advising, along with the positive impact of LLCs, summer programs, and financial support, in fostering academic and personal development and enhancing student engagement, retention, and success in higher education.

### **Modeling after Established Programs at Institutions**

Institutions such as the University of Michigan offer students a physical space for first-generation students to meet with staff, faculty, and other students (*First-Gen Gateway - First Generation Students: University of Michigan*, 2023). Similarly, Ohio University has 123 physical offices in the Academic Achievement Center where they offer similar services but in addition, they offer supplemental academic advising (*First-Generation Student success program*, n.d.). At Northern Michigan University (NMU) the Dean of Students Office houses the staff and programs that support first-generation students on campus. NMU also offers students other resources/programs such as a first-generation student organization. Another initiative being practiced at several institutions is summer bridge programs. At Florida State University there is a "seven-week intensive experience followed by continued support through completion of the bachelor's degree at FSU" (Summer bridge program, n.d.). In this program, students take courses for credit, regularly connect with an assigned peer mentor, attend program-wide engagement programming, and have continuous financial support as they progress through college. Notre Dame College also offers a summer bridge program with similar outcomes however it is a two-week summer orientation experience for first-generation students (Notre Dame College, 2020). Other institutions such as the University of Iowa and Virginia Tech, offer support through Living Learning Communities (LLCs). These LLCs provide students with a community to connect with first-generation peers as well as take a required academic course with them. All in all, these resources/programs from institutions across the country are instrumental in providing essential support for first-generation students and serving as exemplary models.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To better understand the need for resource centers for first-generation students, several theories will be explored in the study. Theories include community cultural wealth, ecological system

theory, and validation theory. Theories will then be used as frameworks to further guide the study's aid in interpretation of the result as well as inform the methodology of the study (Holliday & Anderson, 2021). Looking into ecological system theory, community cultural wealth, and validation theory in the lens of first-generation allows better understanding of challenges and support among first-generation students.

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) focuses on the environment's context in relation to the individual's role in it. This theory has been widely used in developmental psychology as well as public health field to better understand individuals in context (Neal & Neal, 2013). Traditionally, there were four systems—the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem—that centered around the focal individual. Microsystems refer to the close knitted influence in the environment, like friends and family. In Mesosystem, the individual interacts with more than one interrelation “among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates” (Neal & Neal, 2013, p. 25). Though the individual does not have a relation within the exosystem, the individual is impacted by the effect of setting, which included policy. The final system is the overall view of society that can alter the perception of individuals. Though this is a very individualistic approach, it is crucial to see how the context of higher education shapes the experience of first-generation students. Individuals in the study will be assessed on their usage of resources on campus and the structure of the campus, whether it would be helpful to have a centralized support center to make it easier for them. Using EST as a framework, students will be assessed on the ways they utilized campus resources based on the university's one-size fits all approach. Students' assessments from the survey (included at the appendix) form will indicate whether there is a need for first-generation specific resources on campus and if the students will be more likely to seek resources if they are catered to them. Moreover, the EST framework allows for better evaluation of what is available within the context of predominantly white institutions and how institutions are supporting student needs.

### **Community Cultural Wealth**

Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) was developed to challenge the traditional interpretation of cultural capital; instead, it shifted the deficit view of communities of color by focusing the cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities they bring with them (Yosso, 2006). CCW recognizes six forms of capitals: aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic. With these capitals, it allows researchers and decision makers to recognize the strengths of students. Many of the first-generation students are students of color, this theory can be used in retention and access for the student population, which resource center can cater for their needs. Using CCW as a framework, this study explores better understanding of the first-generation student population and further suggests the need for support from institutional staff. First-generation students are often socially disconnected from campus resources. Moreover, most resources tend to be available but not made accessible due to the location of the resources, which CCW framework can better inform staff, faculty and advisors of a better understanding of what is needed among first-generation students.

### **Validation Theory**

Validation theory focuses on the delivery of resources rather than the availability of resources. Based on validation theory, there is much emphasis on student-staff interactions. These interactions allowed staff to build personal relationships while putting reasonability on staff to provide support and affirmation to empower students (Rivera et al, 2023). As we work toward promoting resources, our objective is to provide networking, professional and personal development opportunities through student-staff interactions. We recognize that building relationships among staff and students requires

mutual understanding of students' needs and the availability of resources. We are currently surveying first-generation students to get input on the type of resources they would like to see at the resources center. Moreover, we are hoping to get a better idea of what resources are beneficial to first-generation students. Assessing these needs is a part of the validation method, which guides us to proactively gather input and voices to guide the type of resource center it could potentially develop into. First-generation students, among other categories such as minoritized students, are often misrepresented through deficit language usage. Often are referred to as “disadvantaged,” “at risk” or “vulnerable” which perpetuated the notion that first-generation students are lacking (White, 2016). In looking at Yosso’s Community Wealth model, first-generation students are more than capable in achieving academic success. Many of the first-generation students have a multitude of capitals (cultural, language, skills, etc.) that sets them apart, yet they are critical in navigating higher education. However, the environment in which most first-generation occupied is not conducive for them to realize their full potential. Higher education environment encompasses policy and culture which shape the perception that is not conducive for first generation students to fully realize their potential (Neal & Neal, 2013). If the environment continues to perpetuate deficit view on first-generation, it will have dire impact on first generation students’ ability to perform in that context, which is supported by ecological system theory which support that environment does impact individual’s perceptions and their ability. Thus, it is critical for administrative and higher education, in general, to approach first generation students with an asset approach while promoting an asset-based mindset. Furthermore, it calls for a proactive approach guided by validation theory where staff, faculty, administrators and advisor are tasked with responsibility to proactively focus on the delivery of resources as opposed to availability of resources (Rivera et al, 2023). Thus, higher education plays a vital role in breaking away from language deficit and promoting assets-based approach to encapsulate the wholeness of first-generation students.

## Methods

### Study Design

The study used a qualitative research design with a data collection survey. The survey began by explaining the definition of a first-generation college student to be used and then asking students to respond if they fit this definition to continue the survey. Participants were provided with information regarding the survey and confidentiality. Then, they were asked to rank programs and services of first-generation college student resource centers from a list provided. These rankings were not quantitatively analyzed but were summarized and are available in the appendices for reference as they are not the primary objective of the survey. Ranking these was designed to give participants a general idea of what is most important to them and why and options that exist which could be implemented at IU’s First-Generation Resource Center. The next part of the survey asked them to explain why they made the choices they made and why they ranked choices as important or not important in open-ended answers. These open-ended answers were the qualitative data that was used to analyze the needs and wants of first-generation students at IU to provide insight into resources best suited for the First-Generation Resource Center. To view the complete survey questions, visit the survey instrument section of the appendices.

### Participants

The target population group was IU students who identify as first-generation students, recruited through email, flyers and tabling. The survey was sent out to all Student Organization leaders through BeInvolved and researchers requested the survey be promoted by the administrators of several campus newsletters including each of IU’s culture centers, the Groups Scholars Program, the Office of Scholarships, and Residential Life Announcements. The survey received 63 responses, with one respondent being excluded from completing the survey for being under the age of 18, 40 respondents

being excluded from completing the survey for not identifying as first-generation students, and 2 respondents being stricken from the results after completion due to lack of detailed responses which prevented them from being able to be coded. This resulted in 21 total respondents after data cleaning was performed. For a breakdown of final participant demographics, see the tables in Appendix C. Participants were a mix of self-reported race/ethnicity, a diverse spread of student classifications, and primarily identified as female for gender classification.

### Data Analysis

When the target number of quality responses was reached, the researchers completed an initial read of responses to eliminate any survey responses which needed to be stricken and form initial codes. Careless responding by students taking online surveys can affect data quality, and if these are detected they may be removed by researchers before data analysis is conducted (Roberts & Allen, 2015). Because of this, two participants were removed from the data analyzed for the study. Then, the researchers reviewed all responses and formed initial code categories independently before meeting as a group to compare individual code categories and form final group code categories. While this could have been done with less than all researchers present, the researchers recognized and valued the different opinions of the entire team and they also found it important to have enough voices in the room to make note of biases that could arise on behalf of the researchers, so they were able to be checked through being noted, challenged, and discussed.

### Results

Referring to research question 1 and 2 (RQ1 & RQ2), which sought to assess what resources IU first-generation college students found most and least beneficial, refer to the tables in Appendix D summarizing the results of the survey question which required ranking of 10 different resources found at other first-generation resource centers. Some notable high rankings include: the number one ranked item was Scholarships & Financial Support, with 12 of 21 participants ranking this as their number one most preferred option; 5 of the 21 choices for preferred option #1 were for Mentorship Program; Career Advising/Support and Professional Development had the most choices for the preferred option #2, with 6 out of 21. For low rankings, highlights include: 8 out of 21 participants ranked Podcast as their lowest choice; National Honor Society had 5 out of 21 choices for the lowest preferred option. RQ3, which sought to assess why IU first-generation college students prioritize certain resources or programs, was addressed through thematic qualitative analysis which yielded ten themes regarding students' experiences, expectations, and concerns: financial need, community/connection, safe space, accessibility, engagement, mentorship, career readiness/professional development, capital, support, and stigma. These themes will hopefully allow staff to understand why students prioritize aspects of resources or programs to make an efficient choice of resource and funding allocation.

### Discussion

Examining first-generation students and their academic experiences is vital for grasping the dynamics of higher education and establishing inclusive learning environments. Our extensive study delves into the distinct challenges, achievements, and perspectives that shape their educational journeys. By investigating the interplay between socio-economic background and academic success, our research not only highlights crucial issues but also lays the foundation for conversations about policy implications, institutional support, and broader considerations for educational equity. We advocate for a meaningful discourse that goes beyond statistical analysis, aiming to deepen understanding of the intricate factors influencing the educational experiences of first-generation students. This study serves as the justification for the creation of a First-Generation Resource Center, offering insights and strategies to enhance first generation students' journey through higher education.

### Financial Need

The voices of our participants highlight the profound impact of financial resources on their educational journey. Student 1 articulates a common struggle faced by many first-generation students, emphasizing the significant challenge of self-funding education: "Scholarships and financial support are a large issue with being a first-generation college student. I am paying for all of my school myself, but with FAFSA, my parents make too much money for me to receive financial aid, so first-generation scholarships that I apply for tend to be my best friends when it comes to helping my financial situation." This same notion has been identified as a major issue among first-generation students, specifically causing stress and lack of engagement as highlighted in our literature review.

Student 6 delves into the competitive nature of scholarship applications and the limitations of financial aid, particularly for Black families. Their perspective sheds light on the stark reality that financial aid, while essential, may not always adequately address the multifaceted needs of first-generation students: "As a first-generation student applying for scholarships is a competitive process, so if I don't get it based on my resume, financial aid comes at a cost. And financial aid does not serve Black families post college, it prohibits their ability to thrive. So how does having more of either-or help? When even when I get to school, I am barely surviving and need funds for basic things like food, books, a coat? Black students are not offered research opportunities in the same way their white counterparts are being offered. Often this issue is the professor, and often the students aren't equipped with the ability to be successful based on their background.

These firsthand accounts emphasize the urgency of addressing financial barriers for first generation students, shedding light on the need for comprehensive support systems that extend beyond scholarships and financial aid to foster an environment where all students, regardless of background, can thrive.

### Community/Connections

Over half of the participants expressed the significance of establishing connections and fostering a sense of community within the campus environment. Whether facilitated through student organizations or other campus networks, the act of cultivating community and forming connections with like-minded peers proved advantageous for first-generation students. When asked about their potential utilization of a resource center, one student articulated, "I would utilize a first-generation resource center. That would give me more ways to meet other first-generation students and build connections and networks." Another student remarked, "Less stress, faster graduation, less financial issues, more connections and networking, safe spaces to open up about experiences personal to being first-generation" highlighting the perceived benefits of such a resource center. The findings indicate that first-generation students place significance on establishing connections and building a sense of community. Moreover, these results imply an expectation among students that a first-generation resource center at IU would play a pivotal role in facilitating the establishment of connections and nurturing a sense of community.

### Safe Space

Multiple students alluded to prioritizing resources the center would offer or appreciating the center itself for its ability to provide a safe space for them and/or to alleviate stress or anxiety associated with being a first-generation college student. Connecting what students said about the stigma of being first-generation, having a space where that is understood and not exclusive can be important for these students. Therefore, it is important the center focuses on providing "safe spaces to open up about experiences personal to being first-generation" (Student 20) and "a safe space to ask questions and connect with other students" (Student 1). The existence of the center itself "would be less

stressful to know we have a designated building or place to go to ... get all of the resources and questions answered" (Student 20).

### Accessibility

Students emphasized the significance of accessibility in the establishment of a first-generation resource center at IU. The first aspect of accessibility under consideration pertains to the location and how easily students can access the center. For instance, placing the first-generation resource center within the IMU, a central hub for campus events and student interactions, or in a less frequented building. Students expressed that accessibility in terms of location is a foreseeable challenge to students when accessing the first-generation resource center. One student stated, "Where it is, how to ask questions or how helpful it is" while another stated, "Finding it, possibly not getting the answers they are looking for, maybe not getting the resource they particularly need."

The second aspect of accessibility to be addressed involves the ease with which students would be able to access their resources as well as the diversity of resources being offered. As highlighted in the literature review, the employment commitments of many first-generation students can limit their ability to visit the resource center during conventional business hours, necessitating consideration of this factor. Additionally, students expressed concern about the possibility of staff not being able to help them or be adequately trained/educated to help them. One student stated, "What if the resource center doesn't understand what the student needs? With everyone having a different background and experiences, it might be a bit harder to find solutions for everyone." In terms of the diversity of resources being offered a student stated, "Accessibility and uniqueness. It could sound and have the same information as other resources so there would need to be a high emphasis to make it "different"." The results highlighted the crucial importance of accessibility, both in terms of the resource center's location and the ease with which students can access diverse resources.

### Engagement

Engagement rose as a theme from the participant responses because students described multiple factors that affect their engagement in resources or activities. Some students recognized the usefulness of a first-generation student center in the specificity or the resources as a reason to engage, while others found the specificity unnecessary and would rather utilize resources through channels with which they were already connected (getting career services through the career center (Student 15), having their academic advisor refer them to resources (Student 21)). This could indicate that familiarizing students with the first-generation center early and creating a sense of familiarity could make students more open to engagement. Students also determined their willingness to engage in resources or activities based on their perceived usefulness to them – if they determined resources mentioned in the study as not useful to them, they cited this for being less likely to use the center, and if the determined resources as useful or attractive to them then they referenced this as a reason they would be more likely to use the center. Therefore, keeping up to date on what resources students use and appreciate will be important in the engagement of students with the center.

For virtual resources, some respondents appreciated the convenience of virtual options (Students 5 & 15) but some reacted negatively to virtual options (Students 4,5, 11) in a manner which suggested digital fatigue might be a factor for their lack of desire to engage with these resources. Digital fatigue was noted in university students engaging in e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Romero-Rodríguez, et al., 2023), so it is possible that students are reluctant to engage in virtual resources because of either continued digital fatigue or a concern of reliving digital fatigue if over-engaging in virtual resources. Students also reported familiarity with resources or activities as a reasoning for deciding engagement as they valued experiences they had engaged with and found value in (Student 22) and were reluctant to engage in experiences they were unfamiliar with (Student 23). Respondents also

cited stigma, motivation, and time commitment as struggles to engaging. Stigma will be further detailed in the stigma section but affects student motivation. In the words of Student 1 regarding motivation, "With the resource center, I can imagine it not being used very often, but I feel like that is a large issue with a lot of the resources on college campuses. It is difficult for students to reach out and ask for help." The time commitment can be difficult for students as well as they may still be learning to plan their schedules (Student 18) or may simply not have the time amongst their other commitments (Student 23).

### **Mentorship**

A considerable number of students identified mentorship or advising as their preferred services/resources, emphasizing the role of these relationships in enhancing their academic success. One student explained, "The reason why I put mentorship at the very top is because I believe that it is very beneficial as it allows one to be personally connected with someone with more experience in a one-to-one setting." Another student stated, "My mentor also allowed me the chance to apply for college, since I was first generation and had little to no clue on what to do. In college, life is still as robust, if not more, and the same dedication to support and motivation is necessary, especially for students wishing to further their education beyond." These findings align with insights from the literature review, emphasizing that mentorship fosters meaningful connections and serves as a crucial source of motivation for first-generation students. Additionally, mentorship offers valuable guidance for navigating the complexities of college life and extends to providing career advice and insights into post-graduation pathways.

### **Career Readiness/Professional Development**

The implications of our first-generation student study extend beyond academic success, shedding light on the intricate challenges first-generation students face in terms of career readiness. Student 15 underscores the diverse array of industries and professional standards that first-generation students navigate, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support to fulfill their full scope of professional development needs: "Fulfilling the full scope of their professional development needs because there are such a wide variety of industries and professional standards that a first-gen student might be involved with."

Student 7 provides a poignant reflection on the persistent challenges even as a graduate student: "Once again, now that I'm in grad school, I still would need help applying to jobs in the future. Career planning isn't something that is taught during my program, so I have to seek resources elsewhere." This quote highlights the enduring need for career guidance beyond the undergraduate level, indicating that the gap in career planning education persists into advanced academic stages.

The overarching implication from these students suggests that first-generation students often encounter a lack of tailored career support within academic programs. As they navigate the complexities of diverse industries and professional standards, there is a pressing need for institutions to proactively address this gap by providing targeted resources and guidance for career planning and development. By doing so, institutions can empower first-generation students to navigate the professional landscape successfully and bridge the gap in career readiness that may otherwise hinder their post-graduation success.

### **Capital**

When asked to reflect on their [students] top and bottom two resources provided on the list, overwhelming students indicated financial aid as their most needed resource. Student10 indicated their job as a blockage to expanding their social and cultural capitals. "If they struggle with part-time jobs to cover their tuition and living expenditures, they are not likely to get to build their cultural/social capital that can build during college time." Furthermore, Student 10 did not associate academic set-back with

capital lack-of, rather, “First-gen students are not necessarily behind in academics. It's more likely that they do not know how to navigate the resources available to them.” Thus, this finding reflected the model presented in Yosso’s community cultural wealth, whereas first-gen students does bring different forms of capital in navigating the collegiate environment.

### Support

The majority of the students voiced their interest in utilizing the resource center and seeking assistance should it become available. Furthermore, many hope for the resource center to act as a hub that hosts a myriad of resources and provides first-generation-specific needs. Students in many stages can benefit from the resources center, which Student 7 mentioned that “As a first gen college student, I constantly had to be resourceful. Applying to grad programs and jobs was a terrifying thing for me since I felt like I was doing it all alone. Student 7 further emphasized the need for resource centers by mentioning that “Having those extra resources would’ve been very helpful” implying that it would have greatly assisted toward their job search or graduate application. Students voiced similar input of hoping for a more robust support from the resource center as “It would give first-generation students a place where they can find help from their struggles”. Also, clarifying that though “a lot of us [first gen] are independent, it would've been nice to have a space where we can get help for things, we are unsure of.”

The First-Generation Resource Center will provide a space and hub for the different ways first-generation students can be supported. When asked how likely they (students) are to use it, most participants indicated it. Support and guidance are critical in assisting first-generation students succeed academically and socially. It is no wonder many of the participants indicated their interest in first-generation specific resources on campus.

### Stigma

Two students directly voiced their concerns about being perceived as “weak” for utilizing the resource center. Thus, suggesting the resource center to be intentional about advocating for resources while knowing how to mitigate biases. First-generation students are often labeled with deficit language usage such as “at-risk” and “disadvantaged” (White, 2016). Students found it critical for the resources center to have staff support that understands the experience of first-generation students. Student 23 input a concern about “Someone not truly understanding the student,” fearing that the staff may not be able to fully understand the challenges to support their need.

### Implications

This study has many implications for practitioners such as faculty, student affairs professionals, advisors, and higher education institutions. Support has been the reoccurring theme throughout the study, which implicates the need for support focus from advisor, faculty and other agent that works with first-generation students within institutions. First, advisors played an important role in supporting and assisting first-generation students, and often are the first in line to help prepare students for college environments. This is especially important within the first year of college as most first-generation students have limited knowledge to prepare them for college experience (Hicks, 2002). Thus, advisors have become an important resource for guidance and a source of connection to campus resources (Swecker et al, 2013). Moreover, effective advisership has proven to help with student’s retention rates (Young-Jones et al, 2013). First-generation students are among the top students with high dropout rates, about 33% nationwide according to National Student Clearinghouse (n.d.). With that in mind, it is critical for advisors to utilize high-involvement strategies, an approach that is aligned with validation theory, to proactively engage with students. Students may often refrain from seeking or may be unaware of useful resources, which advisors play a key role in initiating conversations and engaging with first-generation students.

Second, first-generation students' college success and retention rate starts with educating college faculty and university personnel (Wiggins, 2011). It is a known fact that first-generation students often have high aspirations and familial support coming into the college environment. However, familiar support can only reach so far as it does not extend beyond classroom curriculum or faculty relationship. Thus, help and understanding from faculty and higher education personnel are critical in validating their experience. One of which they can support is by mitigating biases and using a deficit view on first-generation students. This can be done by reviewing syllabus and curriculums that may perpetuate deficit views on the students. Another is for faculty and higher education personnels to enhance their interactions with students through cultural strengths-based approaches that rethink the traditional way of engagement, assignments and assessments (Gutierrez et al, 2022). Finally, there is a need for higher education to focus more scholarship into first-generation, in general, and investing more toward staffing advisors, faculty and other practitioners that can relate and understand the experience of first-generation students (Wiggins, 2011). The gap in scholarship toward first-generation students' support and success has factored in on the outcomes and finding in this study—that many students are seeking a space where resources are added into one resource center. With the increase in the attendance of first-generation students, the need for specific focus on support and success is required for future studies (Pascarella et al.). Moreover, there is a need for resources centers for first-generation, undergraduate and graduate students, to ensure adequate support and resources can be distributed across campus.

### **Recommendations**

The insights derived from our first-generation study lay the foundation for informed recommendations to address the challenges encountered by first-generation students at Indiana University. Primarily, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive support system that goes beyond traditional avenues, specifically targeting financial hurdles. We recommend the establishment of a robust first-generation resource center, strategically located and equipped with diverse resources to enhance accessibility. This center should not only prioritize financial aid but also offer tailored mentorship programs to guide students through academic and professional landscapes. Emphasizing the importance of cultivating a sense of community, our recommendations underscore the potential of the resource center as a game-changer, providing avenues for networking and support. Furthermore, efforts should be made to mitigate the stigma associated with utilizing the resource center, with intentional advocacy and staff training to foster a more understanding environment. These recommendations collectively serve as a roadmap for the development of a resource center tailored to the unique needs of Indiana University's first-generation student community, aiming to foster academic and social success while making a meaningful impact on campus.

### **Limitations**

Limitations on the study included a limited window of time to collect data due to the assignment constraints, limited knowledge and time of the researchers conducting the study due to their status as students, and accessibility of first-generation student data. As the researchers were not university staff, not all university databases were available for them to understand the target population at IU or reach the wider range of audience available to those with access to IU distribution lists. Instead, the researchers spent many hours locating staff and student emails. Not all newsletters or staff were reached out to were heard back from or were able to share the study in time for the data collection period's closure. With given time, there is hope that more responses will be documented. The study is also limited in its generalizability because it did not receive the ideal volume of responses and responses were not approximately evenly distributed. Particularly, more diverse gender demographics would improve generalization of the study as it received majority female respondents. Also, researchers could not offer incentives to receive a higher volume of responses, which may have helped with

generalization. Also, as the sample selected for this study is specifically IU students that identify as first generation, many participants were struck out and excluded from the results and the objective of

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, our research on the establishment of a first-generation resource center stands as a compelling call to action. By diving into the challenges faced by first-generation students at our Indiana University-Bloomington, we've not only identified critical areas for improvement but have also outlined a comprehensive roadmap for the development of a resource center tailored to their specific needs. This center, strategically positioned and equipped with diverse resources, can be a transformative force, fostering academic success, cultivating a sense of community, and mitigating the stigma associated with seeking support. As we collectively work towards the realization of this vision, let us embrace the opportunity to create a lasting impact on the academic journeys and overall well-being of our first-generation students at Indiana University in accordance with the Indiana University 2030 strategic plan.

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## Appendix A

## Survey Form

First-Generation Resource Center 

The primary purpose of this study is to propose the implementation of a dedicated resource center for first-generation students. This resource center aims to enhance access to vital academic and support resources while fostering a robust support network to assist first-generation students in successfully navigating their college experience. This study will explore the rationale, strategies, and potential benefits associated with the establishment of a specialized resource center tailored to the unique needs of first-generation college students here at Indiana University Bloomington.

In the context of this research, a first-generation college student is defined as an individual who is pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians have not attained a college degree.

All research is voluntary. You can choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to participate, you can change your mind later and leave the study at any time. You will not be penalized or lose any benefits if you decide not to participate or choose to leave the study later. The survey is estimated to be 10-20 minutes long. Your input is greatly appreciated!

**Confidentiality:**

We will protect your information and make every effort to keep your personal information confidential, but we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. No information that could identify you will be shared in publications about this study. Your personal information may be shared outside the research study if required by law. We also may need to share your research records with other groups for quality assurance or data analysis. These groups include the Indiana University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and state or federal agencies who may need to access the research records (as allowed by law).

Section 1

1/1

## Demographic

1. This research is intended for individuals 18 years of age or older. If you are under the age of 18, do not complete the survey. Are you 18 years of age or older? \*

- Yes  
 No

2. Do you identify as a first-generation college student, as defined above? \*

- Yes  
 No

3. Race/ethnicity \*

Enter your answer

4. Gender Identity \*

Enter your answer

5. What is your class standing? \*

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate Student

6. Please check if you are a part of any of the listed group (check all that applies to you) \*

- Group Scholar
- 21st Century Scholar
- Hudson and Holland Scholar
- None of the above
- Other

Section 2

Ranking Resource Centers

You will evaluate a range of resources available at first-generation resource centers across various U.S. college campuses, and subsequently, compile a list of your top 5 preferred options and your least preferred 3 options. Following this evaluation, you will answer some reflection questions about your rankings.

Section 3

Please take a couple seconds to read the following summary of each resource.

**Mentorship Program:** The purpose of the mentorship program is to provide holistic support for first-gen students navigating their professional, academic, and personal lives at UCLA. The areas of support are in: academic success, career readiness, financial wellness, personal development, and institutional navigation.

**Supplemental Academic Advising:** This personalized academic advising is offered to help first-gen students leverage their academic assets, connect students to academic success resources, and assist in navigating academic challenges students may encounter. This student-centered support is designed to encourage active participation in an inclusive community of support that facilitates persistence to graduation.

**Student Organization:** First-Gen United (FGU) is GW's only student organization comprised of and for first-generation college students. Being a first-gen student is something to celebrate, and this student organization seeks to help them soar to success. FGU assists first-generation college students in three areas: acclimation, advocacy, and academics.

**Living Learning Community:** In this community, you will have the opportunity to develop close relationships with your peers who also identify as first-generation, connect with faculty and staff who are personally invested in your success and learn about resources and programs designed specifically for you. This Living Learning Community requires students to take an academic course connected to the community.

**Summer Bridge Program:** The Summer Bridge Program (SBP) is designed to provide a comprehensive orientation and transition experience for first-generation college students who are also from limited-income families (eligible for Pell-Grants). SBP is a seven-week intensive experience followed by continued support through completion of the bachelor's degree at FSU.

**Virtual Space and Directory:** This website serves as a shared virtual space to support First-Gen student success. You can find information about various campus resources, events, and even a First-Gen campus directory! The directory is aimed at creating a centralized place online where the First-Gen community can locate mentors who also identify as First-Generation.

**Podcast:** The First-Gen+ Center at George Mason University introduces its latest podcast series, and the hosts share experiences as first-generation college students and first-gen professionals!

**National Honor Society:** The Purdue Chapter of Alpha Alpha Alpha, a national honor society for first-generation college stu-

**National Honor Society:** "The Purdue Chapter of Alpha Alpha Alpha, a national honor society for first-generation college students, was founded in 2021. There are more than 150 chapters at colleges across the U.S."

**Scholarships & Financial Support:** "The University of Alabama has First Generation Scholarship Programs that offer support and scholarship awards to first generation students. Our First Generation Scholarship Programs are highly competitive, and a limited number of scholarships awards are available each year."

**Career Advising/Support and Professional Development:** "Welcome to the First Generation Student Career Community, created to bring together students and community members who are first generation college students and acting as a place for share career resources, advice, or opportunities for others of similar backgrounds."

7. Please rank in order from top to bottom of your most preferred resources. Drag and drop items to the order of your most preferred resources. The top is most preferred whereas the bottom is least preferred. +

Mentorship Program
Supplemental Academic Advising
Student Organization
Living Learning Community
Summer Bridge Program
Virtual Space and Directory
Podcast
National Honor Society
Career Advising/Support and Professional Development
Scholarships & Financial Support

8. Explain at least 2 out of 5 of your top choices in at least 50 words. +

Enter your answer

9. Explain at least 2 out of 5 of your bottom choices in at least 50 words. +

Enter your answer

#### Section 4

### Resource Center

The following questions will be catered toward the resource center and its benefits as well as its potential drawbacks. We request that you answer all of the questions as honestly as you can with a detailed description of your input.

Resource center refers to a physical building on campus that will act as a hub for resources, workshops, events, career fairs, professional networking opportunities, and a student advising center for first-generation.

10. How likely would you be to use the resource center if IU had a First-generation Resource Center? \*

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Neither likely nor unlikely
- Somewhat unlikely
- Very unlikely

11. Please explain your reasoning in at least 50 words for the input you indicated above \*

Enter your answer

12. What do you think are the benefits of having a resource center designated for first-generation students? \*

Enter your answer

13. What challenges would you expect a student to anticipate with the resource center? \*

Enter your answer

Section 5

...

### Thank You for Your Response

The study is being conducted by David Eron, Mikala Leath, Jasmin Perez and Ring Te representing the Higher Education and Student Affairs Master's Program at Indiana University. If you have questions about the study or encounter a problem with the research, contact the researcher, Dr. Maurice Shirley, at [maushir@indiana.edu](mailto:maushir@indiana.edu).

+ Add new

## Appendix B

### INDIANA UNIVERSITY STUDY INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH

**Qualitative Study of the Ideal Resource Center for First-Generation Students You are being asked to participate in a research study.** Scientists do research to answer important questions that might help change or improve the way we do things in the future. This document will give you information about the study to help you decide whether you want to participate. Please read this form, and ask any questions you have, before agreeing to be in the study.

**All research is voluntary.** You can choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to participate, you can change your mind later and leave the study at any time. You will not be penalized or lose any benefits if you decide not to participate or choose to leave the study later. **This research is intended for individuals 18 years of age or older. If you are under the age of 18, do not complete the survey.**

**The purpose of this study** is to understand the challenges faced by first-generation students on the Indiana University campus and help envision the ideal resource center for first-generation students at Indiana University.

We are asking you if you want to be in this study because you meet the qualifications of being a first-generation student who attends Indiana University. A first-generation student is defined, in our study, as any individual whose parents have yet to obtain a credential degree from 4-year institutions (Ives & Castillo, 2020). The study is being conducted by Author A, Author B, Author C, and Author D representing the Higher Education and Student Affairs Master's Program at Indiana University.

**If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things. You will be sent an online 20-30 minute survey about your experience as a first-generation student here at Indiana University. You will be a participant in this study for a total of 1 semester (October-December 2023). Before agreeing to participate, please consider the risks and potential benefits of taking part in this study.**

**Participating in a study can offer both risks and potential benefits. Here are some of the key considerations:**

#### **Risks:**

- 1. Privacy Concerns:** Providing personal information or engaging in certain study activities may risk the confidentiality of your data.
- 2. Emotional or Psychological Distress:** Certain research topics or questions may evoke emotional or psychological distress.
- 3. Time and Effort:** Participating in a study may require a significant time commitment, which can be burdensome.
- 4. Inconvenience:** Study activities might be inconvenient or disrupt your daily routine.

#### **Potential Benefits:**

- 1. Contributing to Knowledge:** Your participation can contribute to scientific or societal understanding of various issues pertaining to being a first-generation student.
  - 2. Personal Growth:** The Opportunities for personal reflection and self-awareness on your experience here at Indiana University
  - 3. Access to Resources:** You may gain access to resources, services, or interventions that could be beneficial to your experience as both a first-generation student as well as an Indiana University Student.
- Here's an example of a risk statement that might be included in a research consent form:

#### **Risk Statement:**

Participating in this study involves certain risks that you should be aware of before agreeing to take part. These risks include:

- 1. Privacy and Confidentiality:** While we will take all reasonable precautions to protect your personal information, it is possible that unauthorized individuals may gain access to the data collected during the study. We will use encryption and secure storage methods, but complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

**2. Emotional Discomfort:** The questions and topics discussed during the study may be of a sensitive nature and have the potential to cause emotional discomfort or distress.

**3. No Guaranteed Personal Benefit:** While the study aims to contribute to knowledge in our field, there may be no direct personal benefit to you as a participant. Any potential benefits are primarily for the advancement of student affairs practice.

Please carefully consider these risks before providing your informed consent to participate in this research study. If you have any questions or concerns about these risks, feel free to ask the research team for clarification before proceeding. Your decision to participate is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. We don't think you will have any personal benefits from taking part in this study, but we hope to learn things that will help researchers in the future.

**You will not be paid for participating in this study. There is no cost to participate in the study.**

**We will protect your information** and make every effort to keep your personal information confidential, but we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. No information which could identify you will be shared in publications about this study.

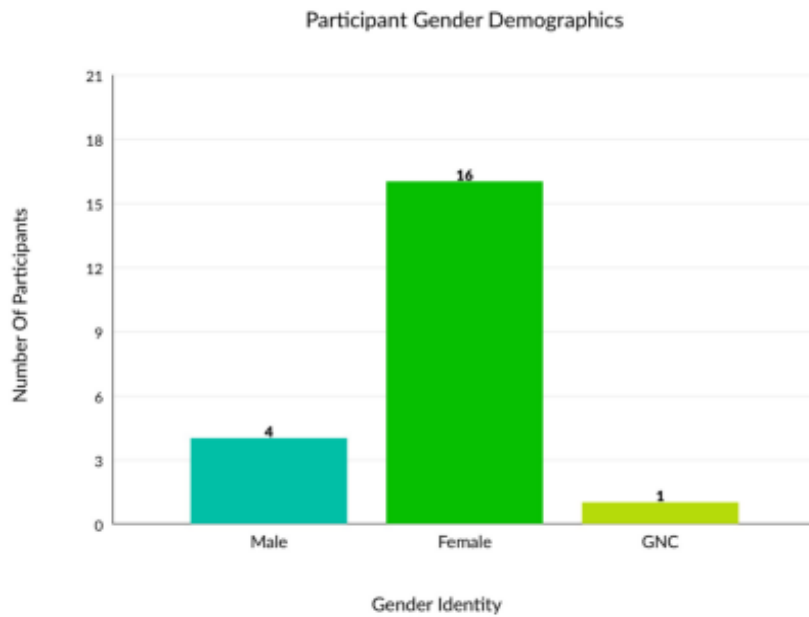
Your personal information may be shared outside the research study if required by law. We also may need to share your research records with other groups for quality assurance or data analysis. These groups include the Indiana University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and state or federal agencies who may need to access the research records (as allowed by law).

**If you have questions about the study or encounter a problem with the research**, contact the researcher, Dr. Maurice Shirley, at [maushirl@indiana.edu](mailto:maushirl@indiana.edu).

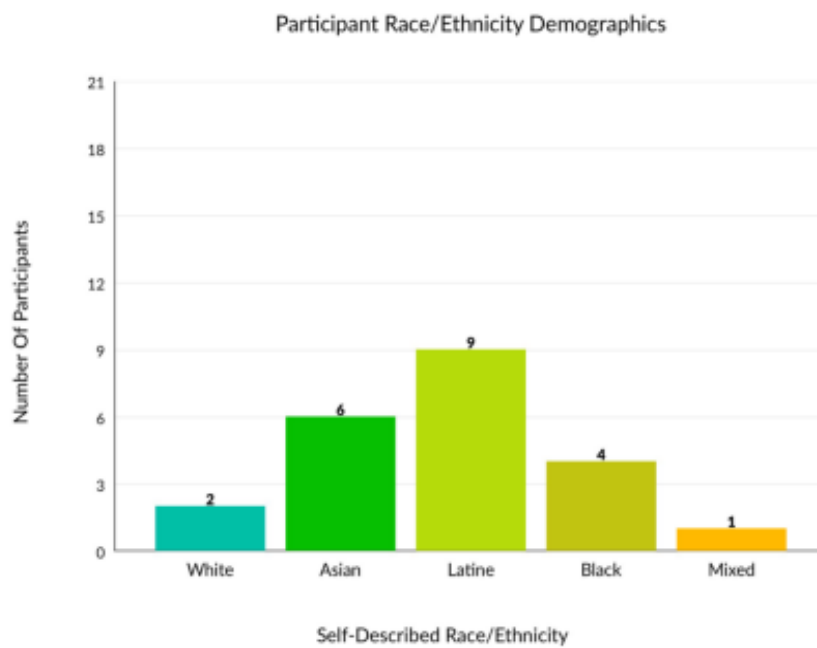
## Appendix C

**Table 1**  
***Participant Gender Demographics***

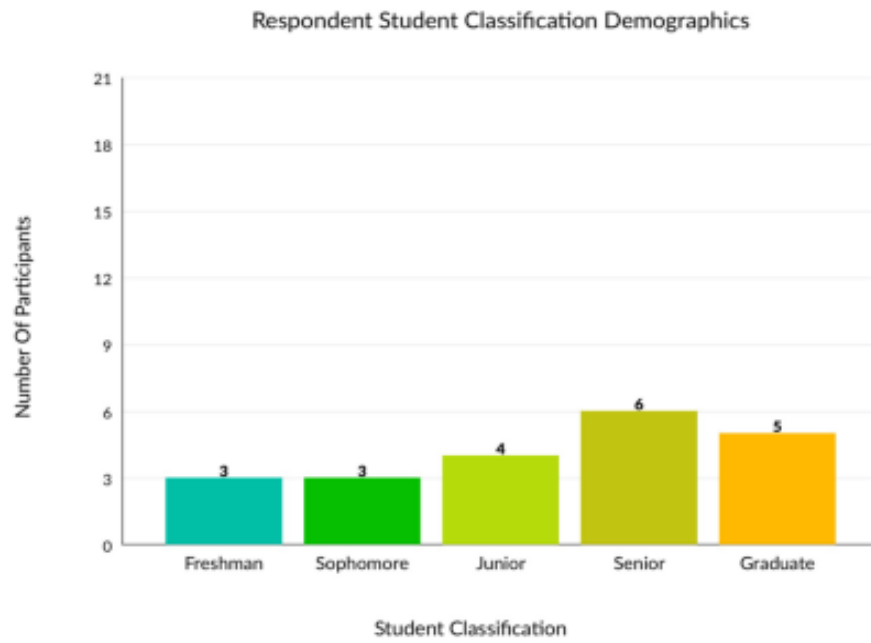
\*GNC = Gender Non-Conforming



**Table 2**  
***Participant Race/Ethnicity Demographics (Self-Reported)***



**Table 3**  
*Participant Student Classification Demographics*



Appendix D

Results Table

Participant Preferred Resources/Programs

Participant ID	C1 (Most Preferred)	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10 (Least Preferred)
1	Scholarships & Financial Support	Student Organization	Supplemental Academic Advising	National Honor Society	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Podcast	Virtual Space and Directory	Mentorship Program	Living Learning Community	Summer Bridge Program
2	Scholarships & Financial Support	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Student Organization	Living Learning Community	Mentorship Program	National Honor Society	Supplemental Academic Advising	Summer Bridge Program	Virtual Space and Directory	Podcast
3	Mentorship Program	Scholarships & Financial Support	Podcast	Supplemental Academic Advising	Student Organization	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Virtual Space and Directory	Living Learning Community	National Honor Society	Summer Bridge Program
4	Scholarships & Financial Support	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Mentorship Program	Supplemental Academic Advising	Summer Bridge Program	Living Learning Community	Student Organization	National Honor Society	Podcast	Virtual Space and Directory
5	Scholarships & Financial Support	Supplemental Academic Advising	Mentorship Program	Student Organization	National Honor Society	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Living Learning Community	Summer Bridge Program	Virtual Space and Directory	Podcast
6	Mentorship Program	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Living Learning Community	Summer Bridge Program	Scholarships & Financial Support	Supplemental Academic Advising	Virtual Space and Directory	National Honor Society	Podcast	Student Organization
7	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Mentorship Program	Scholarships & Financial Support	Supplemental Academic Advising	Student Organization	Virtual Space and Directory	Living Learning Community	Podcast	Summer Bridge Program	National Honor Society
8	Scholarships & Financial Support	Mentorship Program	Living Learning Community	Student Organization	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Supplemental Academic Advising	National Honor Society	Virtual Space and Directory	Summer Bridge Program	Podcast
9	Scholarships & Financial Support	Student Organization	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Mentorship Program	Supplemental Academic Advising	Summer Bridge Program	Podcast	Living Learning Community	Virtual Space and Directory	National Honor Society
10	Scholarships & Financial Support	Living Learning Community	Mentorship Program	Summer Bridge Program	National Honor Society	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Virtual Space and Directory	Student Organization	Supplemental Academic Advising	Podcast
11	Scholarships & Financial Support	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Summer Bridge Program	Supplemental Academic Advising	Living Learning Community	Mentorship Program	Student Organization	National Honor Society	Virtual Space and Directory	Podcast
13	Mentorship Program	Scholarships & Financial Support	Supplemental Academic Advising	Student Organization	Summer Bridge Program	National Honor Society	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Virtual Space and Directory	Podcast	Living Learning Community
14	Mentorship Program	Summer Bridge Program	Scholarships & Financial Support	Living Learning Community	Virtual Space and Directory	Supplemental Academic Advising	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Student Organization	National Honor Society	Podcast
15	Living Learning Community	Virtual Space and Directory	Scholarships & Financial Support	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Mentorship Program	Student Organization	Supplemental Academic Advising	Summer Bridge Program	National Honor Society	Podcast
16	Student Organization	Scholarships & Financial Support	Mentorship Program	Living Learning Community	Supplemental Academic Advising	Podcast	National Honor Society	Summer Bridge Program	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Virtual Space and Directory
17	Scholarships & Financial Support	Mentorship Program	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Podcast	Student Organization	National Honor Society	Living Learning Community	Summer Bridge Program	Virtual Space and Directory	Supplemental Academic Advising
18	Scholarships & Financial Support	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Summer Bridge Program	Living Learning Community	Student Organization	National Honor Society	Supplemental Academic Advising	Mentorship Program	Virtual Space and Directory	Podcast
20	Supplemental Academic Advising	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Scholarships & Financial Support	Virtual Space and Directory	Podcast	Student Organization	Summer Bridge Program	Living Learning Community	Mentorship Program	National Honor Society
21	Scholarships & Financial Support	Supplemental Academic Advising	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Mentorship Program	Summer Bridge Program	Podcast	Student Organization	Living Learning Community	Virtual Space and Directory	National Honor Society
22	Mentorship Program	Scholarships & Financial Support	Supplemental Academic Advising	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development	Living Learning Community	Podcast	Student Organization	Summer Bridge Program	Virtual Space and Directory	National Honor Society
23	Scholarships & Financial Support	Supplemental Academic Advising	Student Organization	Mentorship Program	Podcast	National Honor Society	Living Learning Community	Virtual Space and Directory	Summer Bridge Program	Career Advising/Support and Professional Development

\*The letter C designates "choice" along with the number which designates its priority (C1 = choice number one, C2 = choice number two, etc.)

\*\*Participants 12 & 19 were removed from the data as detailed in the Methods section.