

Employment Trends for First-Generation College Students: A Review of the Literature

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Literature Review

Research on first-generation students has grown over the past decade and has begun exploring students' intersectional identities and experiences. Unfortunately, the topic of first-generation students and campus employment or career services is sadly under-researched. However, the extant literature is very informative and may be useful for campus practitioners looking to better serve and support their first-generation students. This resource is intended to help campus employment professionals better understand the institutional and environmental challenges first-generation students encounter while pursuing employment during and after college.

Experiences for first-generation students (i.e., those students who are the first in their families to attend college) often differ significantly from continuing generation students, that is, those students with at least one parent who has completed college (two-year or four-year). First-generation students attend less selective four-year institutions than their continuing generation peers (Fry, 2021). They are also more likely to attend public institutions, both two- and four-year, as well as private, for-profit institutions (Fry, 2021). First-generation students are *less likely* to major in arts and humanities and *more likely* to major in business than continuing generation students (Manzoni & Streib, 2019). This finding reinforces what many practitioners and scholars already know to be true: first-generation students often pursue "practical" or "vocational" majors to improve the likelihood of employment after graduation. Practitioners should be aware of students' motivations for choosing their major and how that drives their post-graduation plans.

There is variation among career-focused majors, however, which may stem from the difficulty - perceived or actual - of certain disciplines. A report from the National Association of Colleges and Employers found there were twice as many continuing generation engineering majors as there were first-generation students enrolled in the major (9.9% vs 4.7%) (Eismann, 2016). This could be attributed to the difficulty of early "weed out" courses for which first-generation students have not had sufficient academic preparation or, simply, students' lack of familiarity with engineering career fields if they have not had exposure in the past. Additionally, one study found there were more first-generation students enrolled in social/behavioral majors than continuing generation students (19.8% vs. 15%) (Eismann, 2016). This finding is important as many students in social/behavioral majors discover their chosen career field often requires graduate degree beyond the bachelor's degree. By definition, first-generation students will likely have little personal/family guidance about

graduate school opportunities which necessitates stronger support and guidance from campus employment professionals.

While in college, many first-generation students experience stressors that are less likely to affect continuing generation students. Toyokawa and DeWald, (2020) found first-generation students reported greater challenges related to lack of social support and lack of time and financial resources compared to their continuing generation peers. Additionally, the researchers found a perceived lack of skills led to lower level of career decidedness for first-generation students (Toyokawa & DeWald, 2020). Levine and Aley (2021) examined career barriers for first-generation students and identified similar barriers to career preparation: lack of finances, lack of connections (i.e., social capital), and not knowing which career to pursue. This means first-generation students struggle to stay on track more than their peers when it comes to career preparation and decisions about their future.

It is also important to understand the differences of experiences within the first-generation population. Interestingly, some researchers have found differences within groups of first-generation students in relation to parental support. Roque-Bogdan & Lucas (2016) found that first-generation students and continuing generation students have similar levels of career-related parental support. However, they also found first-generation students from working class backgrounds reported lower levels of parental support than middle- and upper-class first-generation students (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). Socioeconomic status and family income can significantly affect a student's experiences, so it is important for practitioners to understand their students' identities, backgrounds, and needs so they can provide as much individualized support as possible.

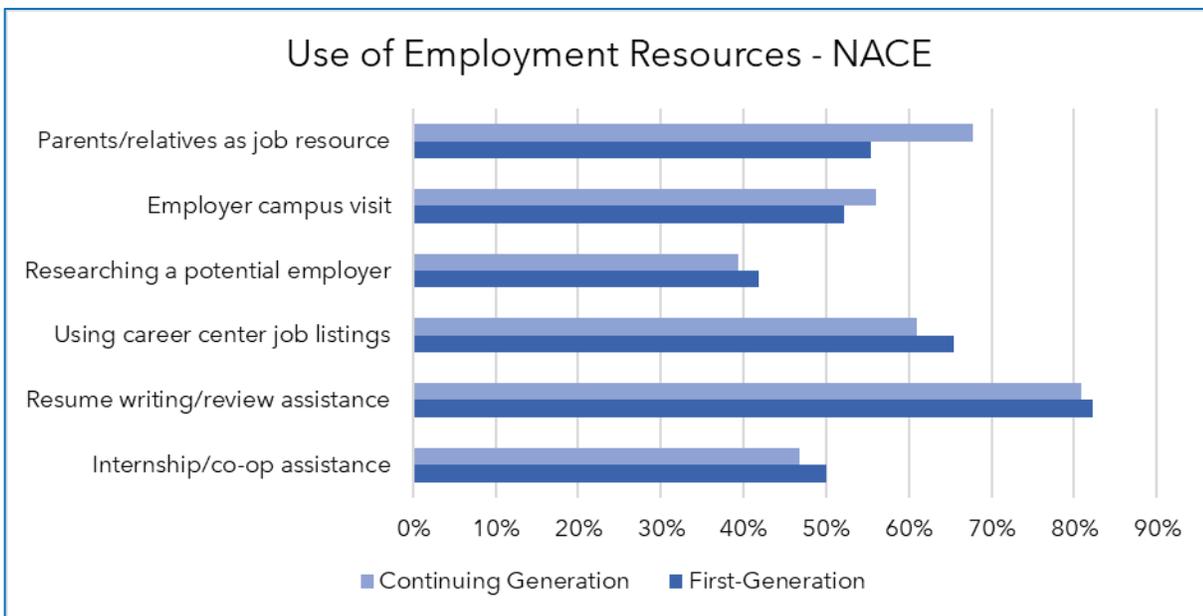
Working while in college also has disparate impacts on first-generation students. In a study from Martinez, et al. (2012), the authors found first-generation students who worked on-campus, work-study jobs had significantly lower levels of self-reported resilience compared to peers working off-campus part-time or off-campus work-study jobs. The authors suggest this may show students working off-campus are able to "bounce back" and navigate challenges more effectively than their peers working on-campus only. This type of resilience was found to exist for first-generation students more broadly in a study by Tate, et al. (2015) which identified persistence and motivation, appreciativeness, and adaptability as strengths of first-generation students who were preparing to begin their careers.

These inequities persist as first-generation students graduate and pursue their careers. In one study, first-generation professionals identified several barriers that appeared when entering a "white collar" career field. These include a lack of established networks and networking skills; lack of mentors or career guidance; and a lack of professional preparation (i.e., unpaid internships, study abroad) before entering their profession (Terry & Clark Fobia, 2019). This likely has a large impact on first-generation students' salaries directly after graduation. In fact, Eismann (2016) discovered the median salaries for first-generation students for their first job after college were significantly lower compared to continuing generation students (\$43,320 vs \$49,245). A 2021 report from the Pew Research Center found stark differences in income for first-generation and continuing generation students. According to the report, annual median household income for households headed by a first-generation graduate is \$99,600 compared to annual median income of \$135,800 for households headed by a continuing generation graduate (Fry, 2021). These studies indicate that disparities persist for first-generation students long after they graduate from college.

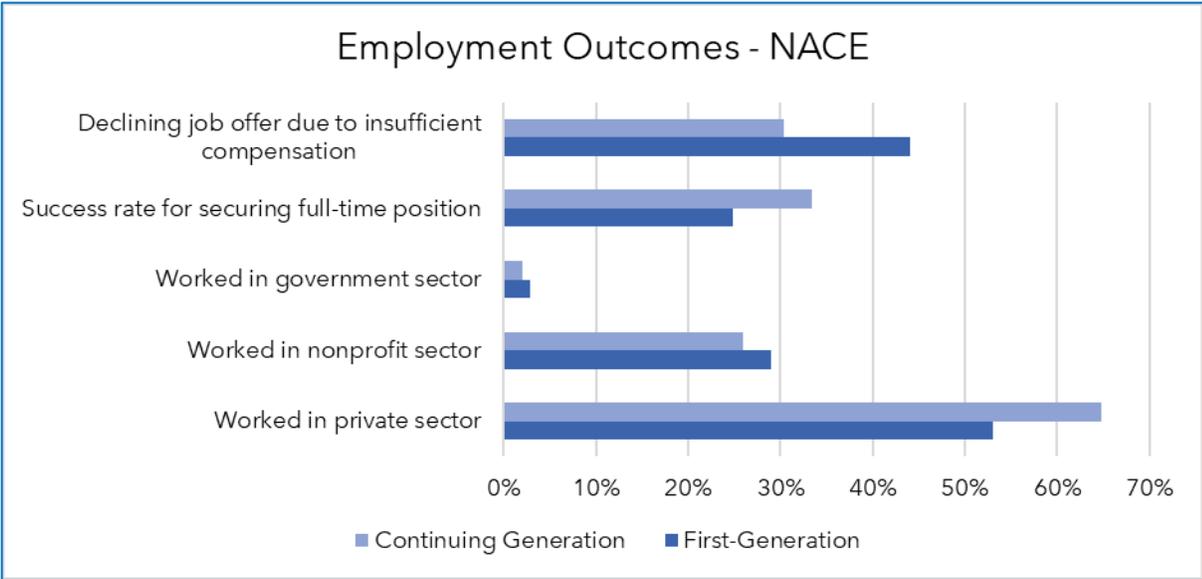
NACE & NASPA Research on First-Generation Students

The following charts reflect data collected via two in-depth research projects: the National Association of Colleges and Employers' (NACE) *Class of 2016 Student Survey* and NASPA's Center for First-generation Student Success' *National Data Fact Sheets*. Please see the References section for full citations.

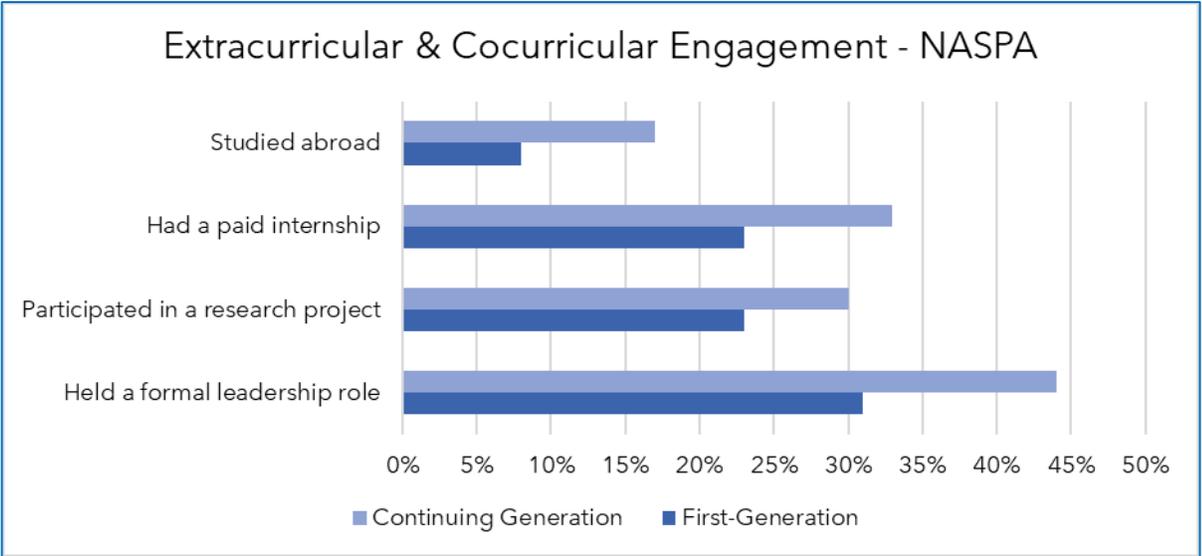
Both studies investigated which campus services and activities first-generation students engage with, as well as employment outcomes for first-generation graduates. Practitioners should consider this data as they revise or expand their first-generation student services. For example, both studies found first-generation students were much more likely to work in the government and nonprofit sector, both of which pay, on average, lower salaries than the private/for-profit sector. As a result, first-generation students are likely to earn a smaller salary than their continuing generation peers even if they have similar academic credentials. By helping first-generation students build their knowledge about careers and career planning, practitioners can increase students' social and cultural capital which can increase their post-college success.



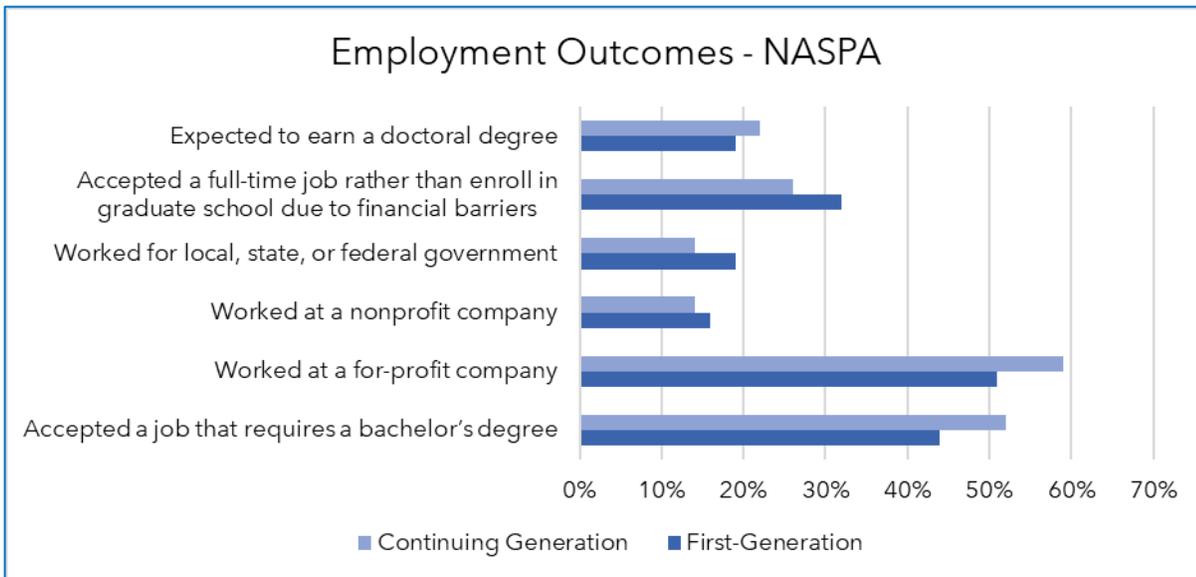
Data collected from NACE Class of 2016 Student Survey. For full report, please visit <https://www.nacweb.org/career-readiness/student-attitudes/class-of-2016-believes-it-is-career-ready-but-is-it/>.



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Data collected from NASPA's Center for First-generation Student Success National Data Fact Sheets. For full reports, please visit <https://firstgen.naspa.org/journal-and-research/national-data-fact-sheets-on-first-generation-college-graduates/national-data-fact-sheets>



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Recommendations for Practice

Below are several recommendations for campus employment professionals to consider. The recommendations are based on the above research, as well as interviews conducted with NSEA members in May/June 2020.

- 1. Develop “capital-building” opportunities.** First-generation students often lag behind their peers in building social and cultural capital that can improve their employment opportunities during and after college. Find ways to create programs/training which help first-generation students understand 1) what social and cultural capital means and 2) how it affects their employment opportunities, both as a student and in the professional world. If possible, include alumni or professionals who can speak to the skills or networks needed in specific career fields, with the goal of equalizing any hidden knowledge that may not be available to first-generation graduates.
- 2. Recruit faculty allies to deliver and reinforce messaging.** Faculty are among the most powerful voices on campus and, as such, have a large platform from which to reach students. Partner with your registrar and academic affairs colleagues – as well as the faculty senate or council – to identify which courses enroll the largest populations of first-generation students and find ways to incorporate career/employment planning into the syllabus and/or coursework. This would not require significant changes to most courses; the goal would only be to get students thinking about how their academic and extracurricular experiences can increase their employability. Ask faculty and instructors to begin incorporating “career language” in their courses. For example, in discussions about managing coursework, a faculty member could remind students that strong time management skills are seen as necessary for most part- and full-time jobs. Faculty could also share about their career trajectory and/or examples of how their networks expanded their employment opportunities.

3. Develop first-gen training for supervisors and managers. Because first-generation students are more likely to work part-time during college than continuing generation students, it is important that campus supervisors and managers have an understanding of the needs of their first-generation employees. Practitioners should develop training and resource guides - such as this one - for anyone supervising students to educate them about how to best manage first-generation students. This could include:

- Understanding students' "why" for working while in college. They may be working to pay for tuition or living expenses; to help support their family back home; to explore a career field; or a combination of all of these. This could encourage supervisors to incorporate professional development opportunities, if needed, for their first-generation students. It will also help them empathize with students who are struggling because of their other academic commitments.
- Identifying the "hidden curriculum" of work. Ask supervisors to consider what, if any, language, technical terminology, procedures, or expectations are never expressly explained or defined. First-generation students may struggle to admit they aren't familiar with jargon or procedures if it's implied that they should already know. By normalizing asking questions, supervisors can improve their students' work performance.
- Incorporating regular and standardized feedback to students. First-generation students are intelligent, resilient, hard-working, and caring, but their full potential can't be reached if they aren't given honest and constructive feedback about their performance. This should include not just how to be more effective or efficient in their current position, but also general best practices or habits that will make them successful in any part- or full-time position. As noted above, it is critical to help first-generation students expand their social and cultural capital which can lead to more equal employment outcomes.

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