

VPAL 11.10.20 All Asked Questions for Next Gen Initiative

Responses provided by Next Gen Curriculum Development Team

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1. What kind of additional funds have been allocated to support the unexpected costs/needs for next gen students? thinking of the flight home for a sick/ill parent, travel/study abroad, books, professional clothing for interviews, etc.?

This is a great question. From what our team has been able to find, there's some local (school-specific) efforts to specifically address First-Gen/Next Gen student financial gaps this term. These are typically handled on a case-by-case basis by financial aid and student employment offices. Undergrads at the College have support through the [Harvard First Generation Program](#), which is a hybrid department that works across financial aid and admissions, for example. They list financial resources like the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative that helps support college students with special programs for additional costs related to participating in campus life, study abroad, etc. For Next Gen graduate students, this type of tailored support varies from school to school.

2. I've always lived below the poverty threshold but have never known that I could use "first-gen" services because I have a parent with a degree.... Do you think there is a wide understanding that "low-income" is included?

Thank you for sharing this information. This resonates with a lot of what we hear from students (especially lower-income, first-generation graduate students). Further definition of services for lower-income, first-generation students as well as clarifying who has "access" are somethings that Harvard can certainly improve upon. This is part of the reason why our initiative is thinking about institutional supports and resources under the broader umbrella term of "Next Gen," as it is a bit more inclusive (less of a barrier to non-first-gen, lower-income students) and intersectional in structure. Still, the onus should be on the institution to do the work of explaining the terminology (including the label "Next Gen") in ways that define in rather than define out. We have a lot of identities and part of inclusive excellence at Harvard will mean building resources and supports that recognize and support complex identities and needs.

3. On the Harvard "Life at Harvard/Diversity & Inclusion" page," the link to "Low-Income and First Generation Students" Undergraduate Advising Resources and Support page is behind a firewall. "Access Denied." Why would that be? It's painfully ironic, and is the only link on that page with that result.

<https://advising.college.harvard.edu/first-generation-resources>

Thanks for highlighting this barrier! I (Amanda S.) will be reaching out to the College's Advising Programs Office to see if this is a technological glitch or if it is designed to only be accessed by current students. As a pilot initiative, we're creating an inventory of all these pathways (and sometimes walls) to then share with our campus partners and learn more about the intention and design of these pathways, including how we can support the improvement or expansion of resources. In any case, you're absolutely right. Clear technological pathways and unfettered access to resources are needed to ensure Next Gen student success. One of our initiative's goals is to consolidate and align this type of information from the College and every graduate and professional school on one platform (a One-Stop Shop) for all members of the Next Gen community. By doing so, it becomes easier for us to ensure information is current, correct, and links are working properly. [Our website](#) is in progress and it's our hope that we get to continue this work with designated staff support once we move out of pilot phase.

4. What 1-2 actions can individual instructors take ****in the context of academic courses**** to level the playing field for first-gen students?

We outline three steps we recommend instructors take to level the playing field in their classes in our Teaching for NextGen Success digital handout - check it out [here!](#) Additional resources on inclusive teaching are available [here](#).

5. Just a quick question - why do "pre set office hours - not appointment only, work so well for the next gen purposes?

Research indicates that Next Gen students are more likely to arrive at college believing that asking for help is a sign of weakness and that they should go talk to professors only as a last resort (Jack, 2019; Bassett, forthcoming). They are also more likely to approach authority figures with deference and experience feelings of imposter syndrome in elite college environments (Do I belong here? I don't feel as confident or prepared as these other students sound...). Opt-in office hours often exacerbate the internal dilemma that NextGen students feel about whether their problem or question is "big enough to bother" their professors with and can heighten their concerns that asking for help will "expose" them as not being as smart as their peers. Pre-set office hours (when explained clearly by the professor) help normalize help-seeking, especially when students go to office hours together or see other students there. They are also easier to plan around for students who submit their work schedules several weeks in advance to supervisors. Professors who require students to attend at least one session of office hours each semester normalize help-seeking even further and help students realize that attending office hours is often crucial to succeeding in any college course.

6. What is the #1 problem confronting First Gen students, what are its causes and proposed solutions, and what each of us do to help address it?

The #1 problem confronting first-generation students will vary significantly based on the

specific college they attend, their home/community environments, and the forms of structural oppression they face. For example, a DACAmented first-generation student's most pressing problem will differ from that of a first-generation student who has recently exited foster care. However, what links all first-generation students is that they are the first in their families to navigate a social environment that is highly complex, not well explained, financially risky, and steeped in elitism. Further, as the first to embark on this journey, they often feel intense pressure to succeed but may not be able to rely on their familiar support system for advice and targeted support. To mitigate these challenges, faculty, staff and administrators should: 1) Be as transparent and explicit as possible about how to succeed and thrive in college (from "how and why to study abroad" to "how to find assignments on Canvas"); 2) Celebrate and validate a diverse array of student identities and experiences - not just those students who arrive at college with traditional markers of academic prestige; and 3) Embed relationship building and mentorship in orientation programming, academic classes, extracurricular opportunities, residence halls (for both first years and transfer students).

7. One of my mentees is reporting occasional trouble getting an appointment for office hours during this time of pandemic. Are there any suggestions for navigating this problem at this time?

The pandemic is presenting challenges for many people, particularly professors as they transition to a new fully virtual mode of teaching. We suggest that your mentee begins with the syllabus, as traditionally professors will post their office hours and/or their mode of scheduling office hours in there. Our second suggestion would be for your mentee to send a brief professional email to their professor in which they introduce themselves and communicate the topic and urgency of the office hour request. If your mentee has not heard back in 24-48 hours, we recommend they reach out to a TA in the course (if there is one) or check to see if their professor has a faculty assistant who manages their calendar. Emailing that person directly can expedite the meeting request or provide other avenues for scheduling a meeting (For ex. through Calendly).

8. A faculty member of color recently told me he feels compelled to treat all students equally so as to not be perceived as playing favorites, even if some students clearly could benefit from more scaffolding than others. How would you advise him to navigate this?

Thank you for sharing this important question. We first would commend your colleague for recognizing that some students in his classroom require more scaffolding and encourage him to not equate providing additional scaffolding with playing favorites. It is very important to recognize that people arrive at college with different past experiences and varying levels of abilities, knowledge, and resources and treating everyone equally, while well-intentioned, can in fact help perpetuate hidden inequalities that exist. It might be helpful to have a conversation with your colleague about the difference between equality and equity and how one promotes inequalities in the classroom and another can

help disrupt it. This video breaks down the difference between equity and equality more clearly: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCS7Rus4_-Y . If your colleague is still concerned about the way that individualized scaffolding might be perceived, we would recommend providing that scaffolding to everyone in the classroom or by creating “recommended” support sessions that students who need less support can opt out of.

9. Definition question: I recall a colleague noting that he was told he was not first-gen because his older brother had attended college before him.

This confusion is understandable as many universities, researchers, and policymakers define “first-generation” differently! However, most commonly, students are considered to be first-generation if neither parent or guardian has earned a bachelor’s degree in the United States. This means that students whose siblings have gone to college and even students who have parents who attended some college are still considered first-generation and are eligible for all related services and supports. We find the following blog on defining first-generation helpful if you are interested in exploring the topic further: <https://firstgen.naspa.org/blog/defining-first-generation>.

10. How are “you” currently identifying first-gen students? Is it only by self-identification?

Yes, for the purposes of the Next Gen Initiative, students can self-identify as a member of the Next Gen community. There are no vetting barriers to their engagement with any of the Next Gen programs and supportive resources. Research in this area has also largely relied on student and/or parental self-reports of family education levels, whether provided directly to the study or obtained by way of school, institutional, or FAFSA data.

11. As a Harvard staff member and a First Gen student myself, how can I use my privilege, position and role at Harvard to better support current First Gen/Next Gen students?

One important way to use your privilege is to champion inclusive practices and perspectives among your peers in your department or program. Where you feel comfortable, it can also be helpful to share your own story of navigating college as a first-gen student or anonymized stories of other first-gen students. This is one way to demonstrate how academic terms related to first-generation students (e.g., inclusive teaching, microaggressions) are embodied and experienced for real people. Additionally, as you collaborate with peers across your program, we suggest you look for ways in which particular structures and cultures may marginalize or inhibit Next Gen student success. For example, participation policies often rely on a narrow assumption of how students can or will demonstrate “classroom engagement”, and courses designed to be more discussion-based may rely on an assumption that all students will recognize “acceptable” forms of engagement with peers and faculty. Faculty and staff may not realize that these unspoken norms can reproduce social inequality between students, so even having open conversations about the policies, practices, and cultures (with your colleagues and with students) in your department can provide an important reminder that

not all students come to college knowing the “rules of the game.” Finally, we suggest you keep an eye out for programs, policies and practices that promote inclusion and equity, and highlight that work and encourage others to think about how they could adopt similar programs, policies, and practices.

Of course, there are also ways to use your privilege to support students “directly”. First, consider what you can do within the scope of your current staff role. If your department or program does not have a team or subcommittee tasked with equity, inclusion and belonging for all students yet, consider reaching out to the EDI and Next Gen Initiative to learn about opportunities for you to get involved given your bandwidth. If your program has a team that supports Next Gen students and equity and inclusion, we would urge you to:

- *consider joining it and/or making sure that those team members are listed by name and easy to find.*
- *consider who else should be on that team. Does the team include staff and faculty from the breadth of the program or department? If not, who might be invited to join?*
- *consider how students find your team and the fruits of your work. Are the team members (and the team’s existence) listed on the program website and reiterated in program communications? If not, can you create a short announcement to be included in future program communications?*
- *consider what work you do as a team or individual to promote the success of our First Gen students. Start by reflecting on your own first gen experience. What was really helpful or challenging for you during your student years? Do you see any of those within your program or your work?*

This attention on increased visibility for and breadth of perspectives on the team can help reduce the barriers and additional work Next Gen students have to do simply to determine which resources are available as they need them. Put quite simply, this may mean that students can find you to ask you questions when they need it.

12. *Given the importance of social integration to student success, the exclusion of nontraditional students from house life seems particularly detrimental... even in the recent language change that removed the “House” title for Dudley undergrads and renamed it Dudley Community. How might Harvard better position their housing policies and/or campus climate to actively include nontraditional students?*

We appreciate you asking this question, as housing and college success are intertwined and often inequitable. First, it is important to investigate Harvard’s organizational approach to supporting nontraditional students (e.g., can nontraditional students find the array of resources available to their needs easily or is that spread across disparate departments or, worse yet, only displayed in our admissions materials). We also believe there is an opportunity to create stronger partnerships across the residential communities that codify expectations and provide additional opportunities for blending all

undergraduate students in co-curricular activities. When it comes to campus climate more broadly, Harvard can consider language revisions (e.g., what exactly is a “nontraditional” student if the majority of college-goers in the U.S. fall into this category); centralizing oversight of residential and academic equity and inclusion efforts that currently are operationalized through a highly decentralized framework and, as such, lead to highly scattershot efforts and variable results; and investing in additional resources (eg., full-time employees, part-time and adjunct staff, paid student workers) to move this work from the unpaid, voluntary category to the strategically-focused and critically important work that it truly is.

13. How do I recover from being at Harvard as a first gen immigrant student from Africa who had none of this knowledge (you are telling me this now?) and suffered woefully as a result. Still not sure how going to Harvard helped; very alienating experience, very traumatic-no contacts from my time there. This is how important this presentation is-to those who can still gain from it.

Thank you for sharing your experience. Research suggests that various coping strategies can help folks process and, to some extent maybe, “recover” from the experience of marginalization. In the moment of marginalization, it can be positive for young folks to confront the source of their marginalization head-on (e.g., naming an experience as discriminatory, refuting marginalizing narratives associated with their social identities). But longer-term, other strategies that may similarly be helpful for coping with these experiences include identifying ways to actively get engaged in the movement for social justice related to your identity or group membership. Thus, that may mean championing new practices within higher education but also may mean stepping forward to serve as a mentor to other first-gen students from Africa about issues of student life or career search, or getting involved with alumni organizations like Harvard First Generation Alumni to bring resources to current students and alumni alike. This is a mutually beneficial realization from the literature that speaks to the lived experiences we sometimes hear as well: helping others can help us too.

14. Does Harvard do any recruitment from community colleges?

This may be a great question to bring to Harvard offices that play a role in student, faculty and staff recruiting efforts on-campus, including the Office of Diversity Inclusion and Belonging (ODIBS) and Admissions.