



2021

## Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color: The Importance of Academic, Transitional Adjustment, and Mental Health Supports

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### Recommended Citation

Schuyler, Sophie W.; Childs, Jonique R.; and Poynton, Timothy A. (2021) "Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color: The Importance of Academic, Transitional Adjustment, and Mental Health Supports," *Journal of College Access*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol6/iss1/4>

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# Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color: The Importance of Academic, Transitional Adjustment, and Mental Health Supports



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## ABSTRACT

Nearly 1 in 3 college students (30%) are first-generation students of color (FGSOC), possessing the intersectional identity of being both a first-generation college student and a racial minority. FGSOC face increased psychological and social difficulties in college when compared to students in other groups, resulting from cultural differences, lack of academic preparedness, stigma surrounding socioeconomic status, racial discrimination, and marginalization. This article summarizes peer-reviewed literature related to three types of supports that can improve the college experience and promote the academic success of FGSOC: academic supports, transitional adjustment supports, and mental health supports. The reviewed literature is framed by a social justice perspective. Implications for future research, policy, and practice by educators, administrators, and staff working with this population of students are discussed.

**Keywords:** first-generation college students, students of color, academic success, mental health, supports

Approximately 56% of all college students are from families with parents or guardians who have not earned a Bachelor's or higher degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), commonly referred to as first-generation college students (Higher Education Act of 1965). First-generation college students are more likely to come from families with lower socioeconomic status (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Further, among all first-generation college students, 54% are racial/

ethnic minorities (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), with Black and Latinx racial identities being the most represented (Fischer, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008). In other words, nearly 1 in 3 college students (30%) are both first-generation college students and racial minorities, possessing the intersectional identity of first-generation student(s) of color (FGSOC).

The theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) asserts that individuals experience life events and are perceived by others through the intersection of the different identities they hold (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation). Thus, individuals and groups who possess multiple privileged identities will experience greater advantages in society, while those who possess multiple marginalized identities will experience greater disadvantages (Crenshaw, 1991). FGSOC are academically, socially, and psychologically at-risk (Gray, 2013) due to their multiple marginalized identities (low SES, person of color, first-generation college student), highlighting the need for an increased understanding of the unique challenges they face.

The influence of college-going generation status or racial identity on measures of college



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enrollment, persistence, and academic performance) is relatively well described. For example, previous research demonstrates that compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation college students have lower college GPAs (e.g., Chen, 2005), are more likely to withdraw from or repeat college courses (e.g., Martinez et al., 2009), and are less likely to earn a college degree (e.g., Cataldi et al., 2018). Black and Latinx students also have lower college GPAs and lower college graduation rates (e.g., Bowan & Bok, 1998; Fischer, 2007; Slaughter, 2009).

Attention to the intersection between racial identity and college-going generation status on college success metrics is less voluminous, although a few studies do specifically address the experiences of FGSOC (McCoy, 2014; Tello & Lonn, 2017; Havlik et al., 2020; Dennis et al., 2005; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008; Ellis et al., 2019). Given the significance of the barriers to success experienced by first-generation college students, and the percentage of first-generation college students who are in racial minority groups, the focus of the current article is to review empirical, peer reviewed research regarding three types of supports that influence FGSOC college success: academic supports, transitional adjustment supports, and mental health supports. Building on literature regarding first-generation college students, college students of color, and FGSOC, we discuss the experiences and importance of engaging with these supports to promote success in college.

This literature review is informed and organized by the domains of social justice advocacy as outlined by the American Counseling Association: empowerment, collaboration, and action (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). Using a social justice framework involves actively addressing the dynamics of power, oppression, and privilege, recognizing that people have been socially stratified and marginalized based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and other identities throughout societal history (Toporek & Daniels, 2018; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003). Further, a social justice framework involves advocating on behalf of marginalized populations to challenge the way services are provided in order to meet their unique needs (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). As such, the implications for research, policy, and practice included in this review focus on actions that institutions can take to improve the college experiences and academic outcomes of FGSOC.

### Challenges Faced by FGSOC

Research focused on the first-generation aspect of the FGSOC identity indicates that first-generation college students tend to face increased psychological and social difficulties that impact academic outcomes. These challenges include having lower academic and career related goals and standards for themselves, possessing decreased critical thinking skills, and receiving less social and intellectual support (McCarron & Inkelas,

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2006), which can negatively impact their academic preparation (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005), persistence to degree completion (Burgette & Magun-Jackson, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008), and performance in their college courses (Stephens et al., 2012). The individualistic culture of U.S. universities tends to discount first-generation college students' academic achievement, as these students struggle to integrate their own cultural values with the environment of their institution (Stephens et al., 2014).

First-generation college students of lower socioeconomic status face additional barriers to success, including stigma, marginalization, and hardship that is related to their social class identities (Stephens et al., 2012). For example, first-generation college students report higher levels of classism on campus from peers, professors, and the institution as a whole than continuing generation students (Allan et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2017). Some FGSOC report feeling invalidated and embarrassed due to stereotyping and misinterpretations by instructors or peers that are linked to their socioeconomic realities (Havlik et al., 2020). Due to having limited financial resources, many FGSOC work full-time while earning their degrees and rely disproportionately on financial aid (House et al., 2019; Page & Clayton, 2016; Pratt et al., 2019). In addition, FGSOC are less likely than students from economically advantaged backgrounds to possess traditional forms of cultural capital, including the education, knowledge, and academic skills typically

associated with high achievement and social status (Bourdieu, 1986; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Richards, 2020). As a result of these factors, FGSOC are less likely to participate in activities that lead to academic and social success, such as studying in groups, using campus support services, and interacting with faculty (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Focusing on the racial aspects of the FGSOC identity, research demonstrates that college students of color face additional barriers, including racial discrimination and racial-ethnic microaggressions (Ellis, et al., 2019; Bui, 2002; Davidson et al., 2004; Cataldi et al., 2018; Solorzano et al., 2000). These experiences can create feelings of alienation, isolation, and invisibility, and contribute to increased mental health difficulties (Cerezo et al., 2013; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2010; Pieterse et al., 2010). They may also contribute to the lower college matriculation rates and prolonged degree completion times observed in students of color (Fischer, 2007; Museus et al., 2008; Slaughter, 2009). Discrimination and marginalization are even more pronounced for FGSOC who attend Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), resulting in a college experience that is challenging and highly stressful (McCoy, 2014; Havlik, 2020).

### Supporting FGSOC

The next section of this article reviews literature that focuses on academic supports, transitional adjustment supports, and mental

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health supports for FGSOC on college campuses. We focus on these three areas as they are places institutions can tangibly intervene to impact the success of FGSOC within a social justice framework. For example, college self-efficacy (the level of confidence in one's ability to effectively complete tasks related to college success; Solberg et al., 1993) has been positively linked to academic progress, college outcome expectations, the ability to cope with college related barriers, and career aspirations (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). FGSOC have lower academic self-efficacy than white first-generation students (Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008), but when colleges provide adequate academic, transitional adjustment, and mental health supports for FGSOC their self-efficacy is likely to improve (McCoy, 2014). The provision of such supports is an example of an equity-driven and socially just endeavor aimed at increasing a sense of empowerment among FGSOC.

### Academic Supports

Starting in K-12 education, FGSOC are at an academic disadvantage due to systemic inequities, such as higher rates of poverty and lower quality classroom instruction (Bui, 2002; Ward et al., 2012). These disparities later result in lower college entrance exam scores and decreased academic preparedness for college (Bui, 2002). In addition, many FGSOC receive very little support from parents/guardians during the college application process (Pascarella et al., 2004), resulting in a challenging and frustrating experience

(McCoy, 2014). School counselors are therefore a crucial source of college and career information for first-generation and low-income students during the high school years (Owen et al., 2020). Once enrolled in college, FGSOC remain at a disadvantage by not being able to benefit from parental knowledge and guidance related to the college experience, such as advice related to study skills and assignments, time management, and the importance of utilizing campus resources (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Davis, 2010; Ward et al., 2012). As the number of meetings with an academic advisor increases, however, academic retention and performance improve for first-generation college students (Swecker et al., 2013). Therefore, consistent and specialized academic support from school counselors, advisors and mentors may lead to greater academic success for FGSOC.

In addition, providing information to first-generation college students about how their unique backgrounds may inform their college experiences increases their utilization of college resources (e.g., meeting with professors) and improves their academic performance (Stephens et al., 2014). Further, employing creative pedagogical approaches that emphasize multiculturalism, such as collaborative learning groups, team-based learning, and peer-instruction, can lead to more positive educational experiences for FGSOC (Jehangir, 2010; Roberson & Kleynhaus, 2020). These pedagogical approaches illustrate and emphasize the social justice advocacy principles of



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collaboration, empowerment, and action (Toporek & Daniels, 2018), which may promote identity development and a sense of belonging for FGSOC.

Another source of potential support for FGSOC includes attending Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), which include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs). These institutions, which are often located in urban areas of the South, Midwest, and East, provide access to postsecondary education for millions of students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students (Espinosa et al., 2017). The majority of PBIs have student bodies that are 50 to 75 percent Black, while White and Latino/a/x students are the second largest racial groups enrolled. National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data shows that these institutions can positively impact persistence and performance in college, as the overall graduation rate for students of color at MSIs is much higher than the federal graduate rate, particularly at public universities (51.5 percent vs. 16.6 percent; Espinosa et al., 2017). The success experienced by students who attend MSIs can be attributed to the creation of safe and empowering environments that recognize individual and collective achievement in numerous ways (Conrad & Gasman, 2015). Not only are faculty and administrators familiar with the unique backgrounds and academic support needs of non-traditional students, they embrace and celebrate students' diverse cultural and racial identities

(Conrad & Gasman, 2015).

### Transitional Adjustment Supports

The transition to college, marked by academic and social integration into the college environment during the first year of study, plays a crucial role in the retention and achievement of all college students (Tinto, 1993). Such integration is often evidenced by living away from home, dedicating substantial amounts of time and effort to college related activities, building close relationships with college peers, fulfilling academic responsibilities, and returning to college the following year (Inkelas et al., 2007). Receiving transitional adjustment support from one's parents/guardians (i.e., encouragement and advice), college peers (i.e., affirmation and solidarity), and institutions (i.e., campus resources and programs), is an important factor in determining a successful transition to college (Ward et al., 2012), particularly for first-generation college students (Pascarella et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2012) and college students of color (Hinton, 2008; Locks et al., 2008).

Compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation college students tend to feel less supported by parents, peers, and faculty members in their college transition (Garriott et al., 2017). Further, FGSOC report lower perceived support during their college transition than white first-generation college students (McCoy, 2014; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). Due to a lack of transitional

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adjustment supports, FGSOC often experience difficulty adapting to the college environment and feel disconnected from their institutions (Covarrubias et al., 2020; Terenzini et al., 1994). As a result, they are less likely to socialize with college peers or to participate in extracurricular activities on campus (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1994) and more likely to experience low GPAs during their first semester of college (Dennis et al., 2005). Greater support from parents/guardians or peers during the transition to college can lead to improved academic self-efficacy, greater academic satisfaction, higher college outcome expectations, and increased retention for FGSOC (Havlik et al., 2020).

Institutional supports, such as academic and social programs that provide specialized guidance and mentorship from college faculty and staff, also improve the transition to college for FGSOC (McCoy, 2014; Tello & Lonn, 2017). For example, McCoy (2014) found that FGSOC who enrolled in a summer bridge program felt much better prepared to start college. This program provided an opportunity for FGSOC to gain familiarity with the campus, connect with other students and faculty of color, and increase their confidence before the school year began. Another study discovered that FGSOC who participated in a living-learning program—a unique residential community for students with similar academic goals or shared interests—felt more integrated into their college campus than FGSOC who lived in a traditional dormitory (Inkelas et al., 2007). These findings suggest that FGSOC who

receive instrumental support from family members, peers, and institutions during the college transition feel more empowered, have greater opportunities for collaborative learning, and experience improved academic performance and adjustment to college life as a result.

### Mental Health Supports

Access to emotional support is important for the well-being of college students, as the transitional nature of college and young adulthood can contribute to increased psychological difficulties, including depression, anxiety, and stress (Beiter et al., 2015; Stallman, 2010). College students of color are particularly vulnerable to the stressors of being a minority within a majority culture and the acculturation process that accompanies this experience (Mayorga et al., 2018; Sanchez et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2010). Acculturation, or “...the internal negotiation over the degree to which a student’s personal attitudes and behaviors conform to both the norms of the dominant culture and their culture of origin” (Mayorga et al., 2018, p. 247), can negatively impact the mental health and well-being of FGSOC. For example, FGSOC have lower self-esteem and life satisfaction and higher levels of stress than white first-generation college students (Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). Further, stress related to acculturation has been found to increase symptoms of depression and anxiety in students of color, as well as decrease the ability to cope with these symptoms (Mayorga et al., 2018).

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FGSOC may also experience racial-ethnic microaggressions, or “subtle statements and behaviors that unconsciously communicate denigrating messages to people of color” (Nadal, 2011, p. 470), which have been linked with greater psychological distress among both Latinx and Asian college students (Sanchez et al., 2018). It may feel difficult for FGSOC to speak about their experiences of discrimination or their feelings of distress and isolation (Banks, 2018; McCoy, 2014; Havlik et al., 2020). However, McCoy (2014) found that the multicultural student center on one campus was perceived as a safe space by FGSOC to be their authentic selves, voice their challenges, and build community.

Despite their potential for increased mental health issues, FGSOC are unlikely to seek psychological support through counseling centers on campus (Stebleton et al., 2014; Banks, 2018). Further, all first-generation college students are more likely than continuing-generation students to view themselves negatively if they do seek professional mental health services (Garriott et al., 2017). When counseling services are utilized by students of color experiencing race-based stressors, however, they tend to view the mental health support positively (Banks, 2018; Hook et al., 2016) and to experience

decreased psychological distress (Sanchez et al., 2018). In addition, college students who receive the amount of emotional support that they perceive themselves to need are more likely to experience a decrease in depressive symptoms than those who receive more or less support than they perceive themselves to need (Rankin et al., 2018). These findings suggest that mental health support is important for the well-being of FGSOC and that it is crucial to carefully assess the amount of support that is needed before intervening.



**“Educators, researchers, school and college counselors, and mental health clinicians working in college counseling centers have an important role to play in identifying and advancing efforts to decrease racism and other forms of marginalization and oppression to improve the college experiences and outcomes for FGSOC.”**

### **Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice**

The purpose of this literature review was to examine three types of supports that influence the college success of FGSOC: academic supports, transitional adjustment supports, and mental health supports. When considering these supports from a social justice

perspective, it is imperative to recognize that success in college is not solely the individual student’s responsibility, but a collective social responsibility that is shared by educational institutions themselves. Educators, researchers, school and college counselors, and mental health clinicians working in college counseling centers have an important role to play in identifying and advancing efforts to decrease racism and other forms of marginalization and oppression to improve



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the college experiences and outcomes for FGSOC. Thus, promoting success for FGSOC entails creating a smoother transition into college, increasing engagement in both academic and social activities on campus, encouraging holistic growth and development, and preparing students for a meaningful life and career after graduation (Ward et al., 2012). As noted by the research studies reviewed in this article and by Ward et al. (2012), it is important for colleges to examine their recruitment and orientation programs, learning environments, interactions between students and faculty, and their beliefs and biases about students to help FGSOC succeed on campus.

### Research

Based on the research currently available and reviewed in this article, it is unclear whether or not the majority of difficulties faced by FGSOC are related to their ethnic minority identity, lower socioeconomic status, college-going generation status, or interactions among these variables. Therefore, additional research that examines how first-generation status, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status as separate and interrelated variables may impact the mental health and academic performance of FGSOC is needed. More research that examines various aspects of the college experience for FGSOC is also needed to better understand their experience on college campuses, identify strategies to reduce the occurrence of racial-ethnic microaggressions, and increase their college

self-efficacy.

Further, there is a scarcity of research that focuses on first-generation students who do graduate from college and go on to start careers (Ward et al., 2012). It is therefore recommended that future research explores the impact of services and collaborative learning environments on the career development of FGSOC, with the goal of gaining a better understanding of the factors that contribute to their preparation for and experiences of post-graduation success. For example, it would be helpful to know more about the experiences of FGSOC in graduate and professional schools, as well as the steps taken by FGSOC who become faculty members. The lack of research related to FGSOC translates into a lack of guidance for institutions to follow. It would be relatively easy to remedy this lack of guidance if researchers included the FGSOC identity as another demographic variable in their analyses. By identifying effective, evidence-based interventions and policies designed to support FGSOC, opportunities to achieve socially just college and career success and to promote inclusiveness will be enhanced.

### Policy and Practice

Consistent with a social justice framework, the recommendations for policy and practice included in this review focus on ways that institutions can address systemic inequities that contribute to inadequate academic, transitional adjustment, and mental health

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supports for FGSOC. Supporting and empowering FGSOC early and often, beginning in the high school years, is likely to improve their transition to college. Increasing focused advising and mentorship for FGSOC during the first year of college may also be particularly important. It is essential that institutions, specifically PWIs, hire more faculty and staff of color and require white and nonminority faculty and staff to attend training related to cultural sensitivity, such as seminars aimed at reducing the occurrence of racial-ethnic microaggressions. Further, given the financial hardship faced by FGSOC, strategies to reduce this burden, such as tuition caps and special scholarships or grants, are needed.

Addressing mental health issues and improving overall well-being are important for all college students. For FGSOC, it is crucial for higher education institutions to not only ensure that adequate social and psychological supports are available, but to increase access to and engagement with these supports. For example, psychotherapists working on college campuses should have a presence beyond the counseling center, such as helping to develop and facilitate initiatives directed toward the psychosocial needs of FGSOC (Tello & Lonn, 2017). An example of such an initiative would be designing and testing a new support program that focuses on academic achievement and social interaction within the context of being a FGSOC (Ward et al., 2012). In addition, instructors, staff, and administrators are

encouraged to promote help-seeking to FGSOC as a form of cultural capital (Richards, 2020).

Cross-divisional collaboration is another practice that could improve the experiences of FGSOC, as the infrastructure of an institution can greatly impact student success, retention, and well-being (Ward et al., 2012). College campuses are often organized in ways that create separation between student affairs and academic affairs and between staff and faculty of different disciplines, which can inhibit the teamwork, interdisciplinary learning, support, and development of all students, and FGSOC in particular. It is crucial for institutions to better integrate campus offices and departments and to implement approaches to serving FGSOC that place equal value on intellectual and psychosocial development (Swecker, 2013). Such actions would result in increased academic and social support for FGSOC.


Further, intentional and collaborative effort by campus departments and organizations to acknowledge, embrace, and empower the different cultural traditions, values, and assets of students could lead to improved learning environments for FGSOC. Along with using collaborative learning groups, it is recommended that institutions host events and programs on campus that aim to expand our understanding of cultural capital by promoting acceptance and celebration of students' diverse identities, knowledge, skills, and achievements. Such programs could facilitate an increased sense of belonging and

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social connectedness among FGSOC, aid in shifting the inequalities and injustices that have contributed to their challenges and advance their social mobility.

### Conclusion

FGSOC represent a unique population that deserves specialized attention.

Acknowledging and addressing the specific barriers to college success that FGSOC experience is needed in order to meet their distinct support needs, given that those barriers are more numerous due to their intersecting identities. The research reviewed in this article indicates that changes in higher education practices and policies can lead to improvements in academic, transitional adjustment, and mental health supports for FGSOC. Such changes require awareness among postsecondary institutions about policies, programs, and related activities that inhibit and promote the success of FGSOC as well as a commitment to the domains of empowerment, collaboration, and action (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). Using a social justice perspective to inform the provision of programs and policies on college campuses may improve the academic persistence and overall college experience of FGSOC. 

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