



Turning Aspirations Into Actions: First-Generation Students & College

Guidance

As a soon-to-be first-generation college student, you may experience distinct challenges on your journey to apply to and enroll at college. You may even be the first in your family to figure out how to assemble all the required application materials, take the standardized tests and fill out financial aid forms. Paying for college might be a big concern and possibly the defining feature of your ultimate decision.



Actions

Learn everything you can about the process.

Get support from mentors, teachers, school counselors, community based organizations.

Believe in yourself—even when you feel overwhelmed.

Ask your guidance counselor to connect you and your parents with resources and services. Parents can also bounce questions about college off of neighbors and co-workers.

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It takes all kinds to make a campus. Many first-generation college students have personal qualities like grit, persistence, and resilience that make them desirable additions to college campuses. They might have impressive skill sets from working jobs and handling tasks at home. All of that has value because it builds competence. Demographics play a role in college admissions, too. Many schools want a well-rounded class that reflects our diverse society and offer scholarship programs for first-generation students.



Actions

When it comes to writing your college essays, share your true, authentic story. Don't hold back. Be yourself. Be honest about the challenges you have faced, and what it means to you and your family for you to attend college.

If you have worked part-time and summer jobs, recognize them as significant, like extra-curricular activities. List them on your applications and explain about them in your essays, especially if these experiences have been meaningful to you.

Toot your own horn when it comes to your life skills and accomplishments. You might find yourself in the position of cultural translator for your parents, especially if your parents are immigrants. All of that has value and is part of your story.

Guidance/Actions

Guidance

Think about what you might want to study. Family might be steering you toward something pre-professional or practical. There can be tension between what you want to study and what your family wants you to study. There can also be a difference of opinion about what type of school to attend (close to home vs farther away) and full-time vs. part-time. It is common for students to feel a range of emotions about this big life opportunity, and sometimes even a sense of guilt along with excitement and anticipation.



Actions

Talk with your family about your interests and any professional goals. Your range of emotions is normal, as many first-generation college students report wanting to continue to help their families at home, and also make them proud, while feeling guilty about this new identity they are forging. You aren't losing your family or abandoning your identity. Instead, you are gaining an education and opening new paths of opportunity.

Just as you have done in high school, continue to seek support from mentors and other first-generation students. Remember that you aren't expected to figure everything out on your own.

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It's not just about getting in -- it's also about staying in. And incoming students can benefit from thinking ahead of time about what specifically they can do to be successful once they arrive on campus. Community with other first-generation students can be an important source of support, and an antidote to "imposter syndrome" and feeling out-of-place. And colleges offer a variety of resources that often go unused by first-generation students.



Actions

Join a first-gen group on campus. You are not alone. You may be able to participate in special orientation events either during the summer before your freshman year or shortly after you arrive.

Research ahead of time what your college has to offer in terms of support for students (academic, emotional, financial), and plug into campus resources. They are there for you! Prepare in advance, learn the lingo, reach out to others, tap into the community.

Our goal is to empower you with the right resources at the right time. College Guidance Network has carefully curated this list for you:



UPCOMING COLLEGE GUIDANCE NETWORK PROGRAMS:

“Navigating the New Normal of Optional Testing”
Wednesday,
Nov. 18, 7–8 PM

“Inside Admissions: How an Application is Reviewed”
Wednesday,
Dec. 02, 7–8 PM

“Ask me Anything about College Admissions”
Wednesday,
Dec. 18, 7–8 PM

[How to College: First Gen.](#)

You will hear from high-schoolers exploring the college admissions process, college students tackling the challenges of being among the first in their families to get to college, graduates that are opening the doors to opportunities a college degree can provide, and parents of first gens that may be worried about what this all means.

[Why College Is Worth It](#)

A college education lets you choose a field that truly interests you and earn a living doing something you love.

[INROADS College Links](#)

A pre-college program that gives students from low-resourced communities access to career immersion activities and goal planning, while improving educational outcomes for those interested in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) and business careers.

[UNCF College Readiness Toolkit](#)

[The Posse Foundation](#)

Posse is one of the most comprehensive and renowned college access and youth leadership development programs in the United States.

[Historically Black Colleges & Universities](#)

Find a list of HBCUs on the U.S. Department of Education website. HBCUs are accredited universities that provide an education to students of all races but with specific history and programs that benefit African-Americans.

[Upward Bound](#)

This U.S. Department of Education’s program takes high school students from low-income families or with parents who do not have a bachelor’s degree and helps them prepare for their higher education pursuits.

[Questbridge](#)

College recruitment and free application platform, connecting the nation’s most exceptional students from low-income backgrounds with leading institutions of higher education. QuestBridge finalists generally come from households earning less than \$65,000 a year for a family of four. Through the “National College Match” on Questbridge, students can apply to and be selected for admission to partner colleges with full, four-year scholarships.

American Student Assistance (ASA)

is dedicated to helping students and parents make smart decisions about education and career pathways. This includes guidance on college planning and financing and career exploration.

With more than 60 years of experience, ASA is well-positioned to offer free advising and support to students and families across the United States.

Call 855-469-2724 (toll free)

An ASA counselor can offer free assistance with:

- Planning and paying for college
- Navigating the admissions process
- Guidance on applying for financial aid and understanding award letters
- Scholarship resources



Bachelor’s degree:

A four-year degree, usually either a Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Science (BS). A bachelor’s degree is the end result of a college education.

Cost of Attendance:

Represents every educational expense, including tuition, room, board, and other fees. All schools that receive federal funds must list the cost of attendance.

Expected Family Contribution: (EFC):

A number used by your school to calculate the amount of federal student aid you are **eligible** to receive. Your EFC is **not** the amount of money your family will have to pay for college, and it is not the amount of federal student aid you will receive. Instead, it is a measure of your family’s financial strength and is calculated according to a formula established by law. Your family’s taxed and untaxed income, assets, and benefits (such as Unemployment or Social Security) are all factored into the formula. Also considered is your family size and the number of family members who will attend college during the year.

FAFSA: Free Application for Federal Student Aid:

This is a form completed by current and prospective college students in the United States to determine their eligibility for student financial aid. To request a free copy of *Funding Your Education: The Guide to Federal Student Aid*, call the Federal Student Aid Information Center at 1-800-4-FED-AID (1-800-433-3243).

To be a successful college applicant,
it helps to know the lingo.

Financial Aid:

Money to pay for college. In order to qualify for financial aid, a student must submit a financial aid application and each school has its own deadlines and procedures. There are many types of financial aid, including scholarships, work-study programs, federal grants, and private loans.

First-generation:

A student who is the first in their family to attend college. Generally speaking, neither parent nor guardian have earned a four-year degree.

HBCU:

An acronym for an historically Black college or university. An HBCU is an accredited institution of higher education, either public or private, established before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with a principal mission of educating Black Americans. There are 101 HBCUs in the U.S., with Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, established in 1837, as the nation’s first. HBCUs enroll a significant population of first-generation, low-income students. HBCUs are accredited universities that provide an education to students of all races.

HSI:

An acronym for an Hispanic-serving institution; designated by the Department of Education as an accredited, degree-granting institution of higher education with at least 25% Hispanic undergraduate enrollment. HSIs can be public or private and welcome students from all backgrounds. HSIs in Massachusetts include: Northern Essex Community College, Springfield Technical Community College, and Urban College of Boston.

In-State Student:

Describes the status of a student who has established residence in the same state as the public college he or she is attending. In-state students are admitted in greater numbers and pay lower tuition than out-of-state students.

Imposter syndrome:

A sentiment that is characterized by feelings of inadequacy and self doubt. Some college students with imposter syndrome might question if their admission was a mistake or wonder if they fully deserve to be a part of the campus community. If left unchecked, imposter syndrome can diminish a student’s college experience and is linked to mental health issues, academic burnout, and social isolation.

Liberal arts:

Refers to academic programs focusing on humanities, social and natural sciences. Liberal arts programs emphasize critical and creative thinking and communication and are non-technical and non-vocational.

Major:

In order to earn a four-year degree a student must formally declare a major. There are many academic disciplines from which to choose, such as: political science, chemistry, art, philosophy, or civil engineering. A student’s major is their primary focus of study, though they are typically also able to take some courses outside of their major.

Out-of-State Student:

A student who is not a resident of the state of the public university they attend. Tuition for out-of-state students at public universities is higher than for in-state students. Residency requirements can vary from state to state, so be sure to research the rules.

Private University/College:

Indicates a university that does not receive state funding, such as Tufts University. State residency is less relevant at private universities so the student body may have greater geographic diversity. Class sizes are likely smaller and there may be fewer choices for majors, while tuition is probably higher compared to a public university.

Public University/College:

Indicates a university that receives state funding, often from taxpayers and the state legislature. Tuition is lower for students who are residents of that state than for out-of-state students. Public universities tend to be large and offer many choices for majors and academic programs. UMass is a public university.

Semester:

The length of an academic year is usually divided into two parts, with a fall semester and a spring semester. Each semester represents a half a year of college. Most college courses are one semester long typically lasting fifteen to eighteen weeks..

STEM:

An abbreviation for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. STEM is used to refer to this general field of study.

STEAM:

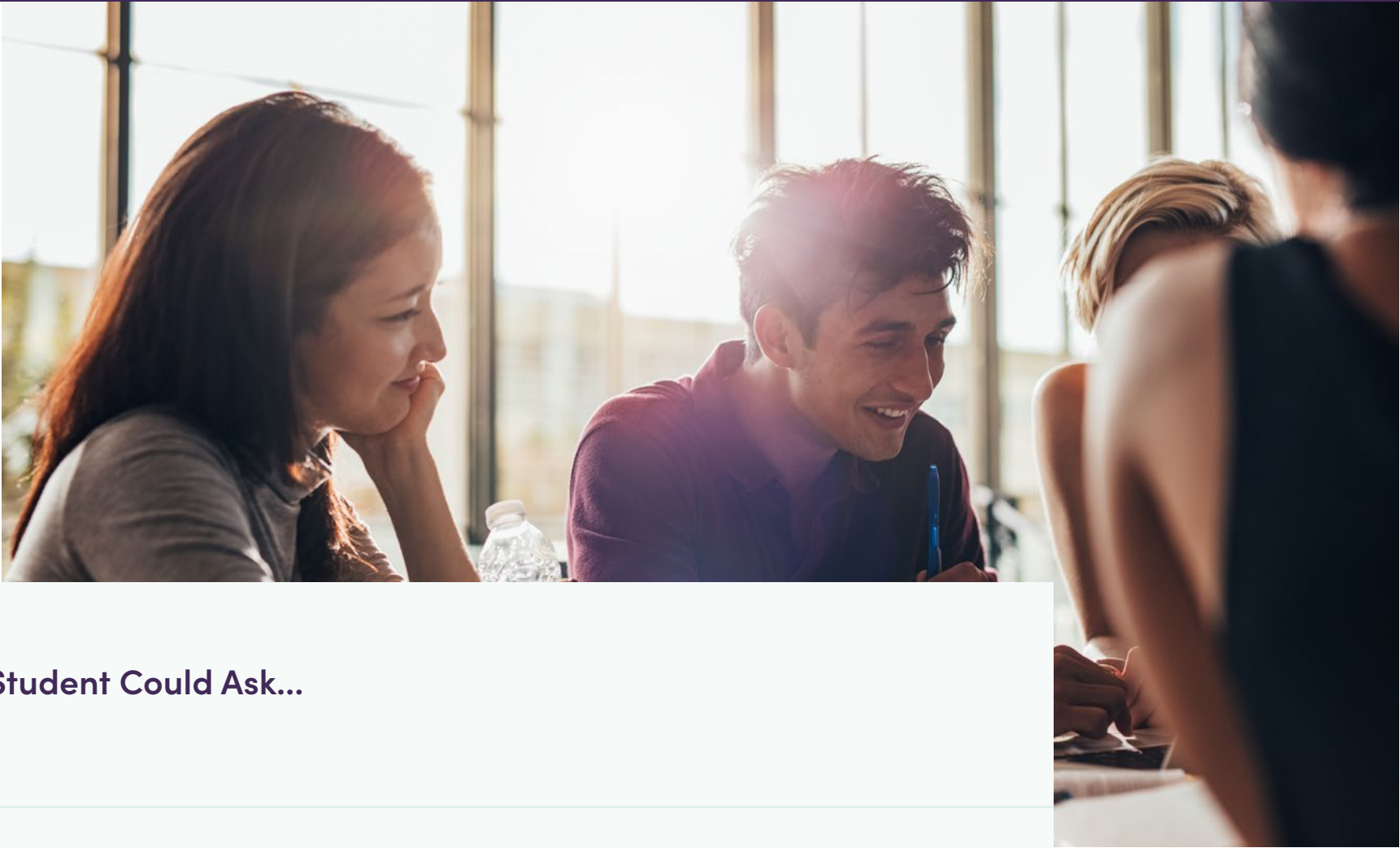
An abbreviation for Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics. STEAM is used to refer to this general field of study. Undergraduate A current student who is pursuing but has not yet earned a four-year bachelor’s degree.



The college admissions process can be complex, especially if it is your first time going through it.

The table below offers suggestions for how to broach the important topics in a family-friendly way – both for parents and students. Scan, pick and choose to get the conversation started – **and keep it going.**

Topic	Parent Could Ask...	Student Could Ask...
The Opportunity–and Pressure–of Being First	• I am so proud and inspired by how much work you have done to figure out everything that’s required to find and apply to college. And even though you are the first in our family to do this, I want to help you however I can. What can I/we do to help you find out all the information you need to apply to college? • Even though you may be the first in our family, you know that doesn’t mean that you don’t deserve to go to whatever college you feel is best for you. You just have to believe that! How about we come up with 2–3 words that you can say to yourself whenever you begin to doubt your belief in yourself? For example: “I can do this!” • Even though I’m your biggest cheerleader, I’m sure there are other adults who can also give you great support in ways that I can’t. Let’s come up with a list and talk about when/how you can reach out to them? • I know that colleges have lots of info available for kids applying for the first time (and even after you go there). Can I help you find that information?	• I am figuring this out and really want to do this. But there are some things I could use your help with. Would that be ok? For instance...: • This is really hard because I feel like it’s all on me to figure out. It would help me alot if you did more of this [fill in the blank] and less of this [fill in the blank] • Doing all this can be pretty overwhelming. I know you’ve got a lot on your mind, so let’s agree on who’s doing what in terms of me applying to college, ok? • I know that you really want me to study [fill in the blank], but I am really interested in [fill in the blank]. I really need you to trust me that I am figuring this all out – and am going to be ok. Can you do that?
Paying for It	• We are really struggling to help you pay for college, so we want you to know the things we care about. Even though this is your decision, can we tell you what’s important to us? • There are so many ways and places for you to find money to help pay for college. What can I do to help you figure out those ways? • I wish I could be more help to you in terms of money for college, but one thing I can do is learn more myself. Is there a particular thing you would really like me to focus on? • I noticed on the CGN website, they list a lot of different resources, can we look at some of those together to see what might be most helpful?	• The money stuff is really confusing for me – but I’m trying to figure it out. Here is what I’ll need from you: • I think I’ve figured out which colleges I like and might be able to get money for. How much information about them do you want me to share – and when? • College is so expensive and even if I get in and get money, I’m not sure I can afford to go. Can we talk about what that might look like?
Why Are You Desirable to Colleges?	• I may not have gone to college, but I know enough to know that there are many colleges looking for students just like you! You know why I know that? Because I know what makes people good at their jobs. And that’s what colleges are all about: educating people to find good jobs and be good at them. Can I tell you all the things I think you’re good at? • Colleges – like the world – are changing. They are looking for students of diverse identities, backgrounds, skills and talents. Things that make them stand out and be special. What are some ways you think you stand out and are special?	• Can you help me think about some things that I’m really good at? • I will need some letters of recommendation for my college applications. I have a few people in mind, but I wondered whether you think of anyone who might know me in a different way? • Can you help me remember stories or moments in my life which show my character and strengths, like a time when I persevered?



Continued...

Topic	Parent Could Ask...	Student Could Ask...
Finding the Right College for Your Goals and Interests	• How can I help you find the right college for you? • There are so many different colleges out there – and I bet there are a lot where you could be happy. Would it be helpful for me to ask you some questions that might help you narrow down the best ones for you. For instance: big vs. small? In a city or not? Near home or further away? • Would it help to make a list of the things you want most from the college you go to? And then you can try to match those to the colleges you’re looking at.	• I don’t really know what I want in a college. How do you make decisions when you’re not sure what you want? • I’m really nervous that I’ll get into a college that I really want to go to and not be able to pay for it. What should I do then? • I know my interests are not maybe what you want them to be. But can I explain to you why they are important to me? (And then I promise to listen to your concerns.)
Once Accepted/Attending, What’s Important to Keep in Mind?	• The thing I am most sure of about you going to [name college] is how much you deserve to be going there! You earned this through your hard work and perseverance. What are you most sure of? • You may be the first in our family to go to college, but you are not alone in this! Let’s talk about all the ways you can find support. • What can I do to help you figure out all the ways to find help and support there?	• I have so many questions now that I know where I’m going. Here’s what I need your help figuring out: [fill in the blank] • I’m scared about things like not fitting in or not being able to do the work. What have you done in these situations? • What if I don’t get my financial aid renewed next year? What would we do?