What do we know?

While access to higher education has expanded dramatically in recent years, first generation students remain at a distinct disadvantage.

Less than half (47%) of students whose parents did not go to college enrolled in any postsecondary institution the year after graduating from high school compared to 85% of students whose parents had college degrees.

(U.S. Department of Education’s National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS: 88))
High-scoring college students are more likely to graduate if they’re from well-off families – and the gap is even greater for lower-scoring students.

New York Times article: “Who Gets to Graduate” by Paul Tough
What do you do to support college access?
Access Programs at Colorado State University

- TRIO Pre-Collegiate Programs (Upward Bound, Talent Search, Educational Opportunity Center)
- Alliance
- Bridge Scholars
- Dream Project
- Reach Out
Factors that Impact Access

- Lower levels of academic preparation
- Lower educational aspirations
- Less encouragement and support to attend college, particularly from parents
- Less knowledge about the college application process
- Fewer resources to pay for college
Summer Melt

• The phenomenon of college-intending students who fail to enroll in college at all in the fall immediately following high school graduation

• Disproportionately affects first generation college-going and low-income students

• College-intending: Students who apply to college and submit a FAFSA

Phenomenon of the Summer Melt

About 10 to 20% of college eligible students melt away, most of which are low-income minority students planning to enroll in community college.

- Difficulty interpreting award letters and tuition bills
- Unanticipated costs (e.g. health insurance) that affect students’ college-going decisions
- Difficulty completing paperwork
- Lack of access to professional guidance

(Arnold et al, 2009)
The magnitude of the summer melt problem

Percentages indicate the share of college-intending students that do not enroll anywhere in the fall following high school graduation.
Strategies for Reducing Summer Melt

- Proactive personal outreach to college-intending seniors (advisor / peer mentor outreach model)
- Digital outreach to college-intending seniors
- Combination of personal and digital outreach
A Reminder...

The tasks that college-intending students must complete during the summer after graduation are numerous. Even seemingly simple tasks can become significant barriers to timely college enrollment. Common summer tasks include:

- Attending orientation
- Completing financial aid and other paperwork
- Paying for tuition, room and board, and student fees (including health insurance)
- Taking placement exams
- Selecting classes
What is the Transition Process like for First Generation Students?
The only reason why I cried was because I felt dumb and that I shouldn’t be here.
I don’t want them to think, “Well maybe she’s not right for this class.”
I was really upset because no matter how hard I tried, I wasn’t doing enough.
The confusion and fear: that’s there to remind you that somewhere out there is something better and that is worth fighting for.
Characteristics (Entering College)

- Tend to be from low-income families
- Tend to be from ethnic minority groups (particularly African American and Hispanic)
- More likely to be female
- Tend to have low college entrance exam scores
- Tend to be less academically prepared
- Tend to lack academic role models

*Are at a disadvantage even before starting college*
Characteristics (During College)

- Tend to enroll in 2-year institutions
- Tend to experience difficulty with transition
- Perform lower academically than non-first generation students in their first semester (lower GPA)
- Tend to attend school part-time and work full-time
- Are likely to leave after first year of college
- Tend to leave before earning a degree

*Are at a greater risk for failure in postsecondary programs as the result of their experiences they have during college*
What Transition Challenges Do You Anticipate First Generation Students Will Have?
Unique Challenges

Academic, social, financial, and family issues often make the initial transition to college difficult for them.
“High school doesn’t prepare you for college. We were in shock our freshman year. It’s totally different. It’s like in high school you don’t really have to study. It’s just hard in college because you have to study and I’m not used to it. But if you don’t, you’re not passing. And you have to go to class. In college, if you don’t go to class, that’s you. Your professor doesn’t care really if you pass or fail. That’s all on you.”
“You definitely feel conflicted when you stand out in a group, and you’re going through different experiences. You feel a little discouraged. But if you already stand out, you might as well shine…I’ve come all this way…I want to feel I have achieved something.”
Cultural Mismatch

“I was so nervous going in there, because all these white people were dressed nice and I could tell they had money, they probably went to really good schools, and I knew it. I was like, ‘Wow,’ these people are really smart and here I am coming from North High School. So I was intimidated, I felt like I wasn’t going to do good. But I decided to stick it out, just go against the odds.”
“When one of my parents would get laid off and couldn’t afford to support me, that made it even harder to stay in school. There was one point where I was working at a work-study job and my dad was unemployed and I had to find a way to pay as much bills as I could, plus trying to pitch in for some food, and I was going to school full time. I makes me think I just want to get a full-time job and live on my own, so my parents won’t have to worry about how they’re going to feed me.”
Family Challenges

“There’s less to talk about, because my life revolves around school. And some of the things that I am learning, they just don’t understand. My parents couldn’t tell you what sociology was about, they were never exposed to anything like that. I can’t get into anything really in depth, like politics and religion. My family would be sitting there going, “Huh?”
Our Role and Responsibilities to Students

- Focus on their assets and support them in reframing their narrative (Self-authorship, resilience, societal contribution)
- Encourage self-affirmations
- Emphasize high standards with assurances of capability
- Support them in accessing appropriate resources
Value of the “Hand-Off”

United in Our Efforts

Research shows that there is a positive effect on the persistence of students from underrepresented backgrounds when institutions have a strong student support services program AND provide more financial grant aid to students.
Community for Excellence and Resources at Colorado State University

- C4E Scholar Contacts
- Key Learning Communities
- TRIO SSS Academic Advancement Center
- Support services programs (TILT, CASA, Health Network, Student Case Management, etc.)
- Student Diversity Programs and Services (SDPS)
- First Generation Faculty Initiative
Putting it into Practice

As you reflect on the presentation, pick one research insight that stood out for you. How will it influence you and your professional work with your students?
My mind tells me to give up, but my heart won’t let me.
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