

MENTORSHIP FOR FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: BRIDGING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP

PAHULPREET SINGH, CLIENT RELATIONSHIP MANAGER

ABSTRACT

First-generation college students often face significant academic, social, and emotional challenges during their transition to higher education, contributing to lower retention and success rates compared to their peers. This study explores the critical role of mentoring—both formal and informal—in supporting first-generation students' self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and academic outcomes. Drawing from multiple longitudinal and institutional studies, the literature highlights how diverse mentoring networks, peer support programs, and culturally responsive practices contribute positively to student resilience and college integration. The discussion emphasizes the need for scalable, inclusive, and holistic mentoring strategies that account for generational, cultural, and identity-based factors. This paper concludes that structured mentoring programs, when tailored to the unique needs of first-generation students, are essential in promoting equity, persistence, and overall student success in higher education.

KEYWORDS - First-generation college students, Mentorship, Higher education, Academic success, Peer mentoring, Resilience, College transition, Underrepresented students, Student retention, Ethic of care, Network orientation, Identity development, Cross-cultural mentoring, Student support programs, Educational equity

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has long been heralded as a vehicle for upward mobility, personal development, and societal contribution. However, for first-generation college students (FGCS) those whose parents have not attained a college degree the pathway to academic and professional success is often strewn with unique and formidable challenges. These individuals frequently navigate unfamiliar institutional cultures, limited familial academic guidance, and systemic barriers that place them at a distinct disadvantage compared to their continuing-generation peers. Amid these complexities, mentorship emerges not just as a supportive structure but as a transformative mechanism capable of bridging the opportunity gap and fostering equity within higher education.

The term "opportunity gap" refers to the disparities in access to quality education, academic resources, networks, and support systems that affect student outcomes. For FGCS, this gap often begins before college and continues throughout their educational journey. They are more likely to come from low-income households, attend under-resourced schools, and lack the social capital that is often crucial for thriving in college environments. This results in lower retention rates, reduced academic performance, and a diminished sense of belonging. Yet, mentorship when thoughtfully designed and effectively implemented has the potential to significantly alter this trajectory. It can provide the academic guidance, emotional support, and professional orientation that many FGCS lack.

Mentorship is not a novel concept in education. Throughout history, mentorship has played a pivotal role in shaping intellectual growth and career advancement. From the Socratic dialogues of ancient Greece to the apprenticeship models of the Middle Ages, mentorship has been central to knowledge transfer. However, in the context of modern higher education and particularly with respect to FGCS, the significance of mentorship takes on a more nuanced and strategic form. It becomes a means of institutional intervention that not only enhances student outcomes but also promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion within academic settings.

Several studies have highlighted the tangible benefits of mentorship for FGCS. Academic mentorship, for instance, helps students navigate course selection, understand academic expectations, and develop effective study habits. Career mentorship opens doors to internships, job opportunities, and professional networks that students might not otherwise access. Social and emotional mentorship, meanwhile, fosters confidence, belonging, and resilience qualities that are especially critical for FGCS who may experience imposter syndrome or feel alienated in predominantly privileged academic environments. These mentorship dimensions, when integrated into a structured program, can bridge the multiple facets of the opportunity gap. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that mentorship is not a panacea. The efficacy of mentorship programs depends heavily on their structure, the commitment of mentors, institutional support, and the degree to which they are tailored to the specific needs of FGCS. Tokenistic or under-resourced programs can do more harm than good, leading to disillusionment and disengagement. Therefore, it is imperative to approach mentorship as a deliberate, research-informed practice rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. Effective mentorship programs for FGCS must be culturally competent, contextually relevant, and continuously evaluated for impact.

In this context, the role of faculty, peer mentors, alumni, and community members become paramount. Faculty mentors, with their academic expertise, can demystify the expectations of higher education while providing encouragement and advocacy. Peer mentors offer relatable guidance and camaraderie, often helping FGCS acclimate to campus life. Alumni mentors can bridge the gap between college and career by sharing real-world experiences and providing networking opportunities. Each of these mentoring relationships contributes uniquely to the holistic development of FGCS and, when combined, can create a robust support ecosystem.

Institutional commitment is another critical factor in the success of mentorship programs. Universities and colleges must recognize mentorship not as an optional add-on but as a core component of student success strategies. This includes allocating resources, training mentors, integrating mentorship into academic advising structures, and embedding it within the institutional culture. Furthermore, mentorship should be

inclusive, accounting for the diverse backgrounds, aspirations, and challenges of FGCS, including those related to race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Technology also offers new possibilities for expanding and enhancing mentorship for FGCS. Virtual mentoring platforms can connect students with mentors beyond their immediate geographic or institutional boundaries. AI-driven tools can assist in matching mentors and mentees based on shared interests, goals, and backgrounds. Social media and online communities can facilitate peer-to-peer support and knowledge sharing. These technological innovations can help scale mentorship initiatives and make them more accessible and responsive to student needs.

Despite these opportunities, significant gaps remain in our understanding and implementation of mentorship for FGCS. Much of the existing research tends to be localized, lacking longitudinal data and comprehensive assessments of mentorship models. There is also a need for greater exploration into the mentor's perspective how they perceive their roles, the challenges they face, and the support they require. Additionally, questions persist around how mentorship intersects with other institutional supports such as academic advising, counselling, and financial aid. Addressing these gaps requires a multidisciplinary approach that brings together insights from education, psychology, sociology, and public policy.

This research paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on mentorship for first-generation college students by examining its role in bridging the opportunity gap. Through a review of existing literature, case studies of successful mentorship models, and an analysis of institutional practices, the paper aims to identify best practices, challenges, and future directions. The central argument is that mentorship, when implemented thoughtfully and equitably, can serve as a powerful lever for social mobility and educational justice.

In doing so, the paper also acknowledges the lived experiences of FGCS their aspirations, struggles, and triumphs. These students are not passive recipients of support but active agents in their educational journeys. Mentorship should thus be a partnership grounded in mutual respect, shared learning, and empowerment. As

higher education institutions grapple with issues of access and equity, investing in mentorship is not just beneficial it is essential.

In conclusion, mentorship represents more than a support mechanism for first-generation college students; it is a bridge that connects potential to opportunity, aspiration to achievement, and challenge to triumph. It addresses not only the academic and professional needs of FGCS but also their sense of belonging and self-efficacy. As such, a robust and responsive mentorship framework holds immense promise for transforming the higher education landscape and advancing equity for all.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Thandayuthapani and P. Thirumoorthi (2025). Existing literature underscores that mentorship and technology-driven interventions such as mobile apps and virtual support tools play a critical role in enhancing academic performance, social integration, and retention among first-generation college students.
2. Matthew A. Hagler et, al. (2024). They found that mentorship especially when technology-enhanced and diverse in form plays a crucial role in improving college access, self-efficacy, and social integration among first-generation students. Hybrid and longitudinal mentoring models have been shown to increase retention, support post-secondary transitions, and foster a stronger sense of belonging through sustained, multifaceted support networks.
3. Morales and Victoria Elizabeth (2024). They observed that federal programs like TRIO and institutional outreach initiatives have proven to support first-generation and underrepresented students, improving retention and time to degree completion. The cultural and social capital gained through these programs helps mitigate barriers to academic success.
4. Leah E. Glass et, al. (2023). Their studies show that hybrid school-based mentoring significantly improves college enrolment and high school graduation rates among first-generation students by bridging informational and social support gaps during the post-secondary transition.
5. Bianca Natalie Ramos (2019). He identified that despite increased enrolment, first-generation students of colour face significant academic and social challenges that hinder retention. A holistic mentorship approach, grounded in care and resilience-building, is proposed as essential in supporting these students' successful transition to college.

6. Chelsea Craig (2018). He researched that mentoring programs, especially those designed for first-generation students, significantly enhance self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceptions of support. Studies show that such programs, like the "First-Gen Owls" Learning Community, foster meaningful connections, though academic self-efficacy may decline over time without continuous engagement.
7. Veronica Fruiht and Thomas Chan (2018). They both researched that mentorship from community members, relatives, and educators plays a crucial role in supporting first-generation students' educational outcomes. However, first-generation students receive less support for identity development compared to continuing-generation students, highlighting the need for tailored mentorship programs to improve college attendance and success.
8. Merriweather et, al. (2013). They highlighted that cross-cultural and inter-generational mentoring relationships are increasingly common in higher education. Studies highlight challenges such as communication barriers, respect, and power dynamics, which can impact the effectiveness of mentoring, especially when generational cultural differences exist.
9. Victoria Danielle Rivera et, al. (2013). They stated that peer mentoring programs, like the "Bridging the Gap for First-Generation Students" initiative, support first-generation students by addressing academic, social, and personal challenges. Occupational therapy frameworks have proven effective in training mentors to guide students in areas like time management, stress, and college finances, improving their overall college transition.
10. Stebleton et, al. (2012). They documented that first-generation students face unique academic challenges compared to their peers, including job and family responsibilities, weaker academic skills,

and higher levels of depression. These obstacles significantly hinder their academic success, highlighting the need for targeted support from learning assistance professionals.

DISCUSSION

The findings across the reviewed literature underscore the critical role of mentorship in addressing the educational disparities faced by first-generation college students. Despite increased access to higher education, these students continue to face significant challenges due to a lack of familial guidance, limited social capital, and inadequate academic preparedness. Mentorship particularly when integrated within structured programs or naturally occurring through community and institutional support emerges as a powerful intervention for easing the transition to college and improving outcomes such as self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and college retention.

Mentoring programs, whether peer-based, faculty-led, or hybrid models, help fill informational and emotional gaps for first-generation students. Several studies indicate that students who maintained strong mentoring relationships especially those initiated before college and continued during their first-year experienced improved self-confidence and a stronger sense of institutional connection. These factors are closely tied to academic performance and overall college persistence. However, it is also noted that mentoring must be culturally responsive and considerate of intergenerational and cross-cultural dynamics to be effective.

Importantly, while formal support programs like TRIO and university-led initiatives do show positive impacts, they are not always scalable to reach all students in need. This limitation points to the broader implication: fostering informal, community-based mentoring networks could be a more practical and sustainable approach. Furthermore, attention must be given to training mentors in areas such as communication, emotional intelligence, and respect for diverse cultural and generational backgrounds to enhance the efficacy of these relationships.

IMPLICATIONS

1. **Policy & Institutional Change:** Colleges and universities should invest in mentoring frameworks tailored for first-generation students and prioritize training for mentors in diversity, equity, and inclusion.
2. **Scalable Mentoring Solutions:** Expanding mentoring beyond institutional boundaries through alumni networks, local organizations, and digital platforms can help reach more students and supplement formal programs.
3. **Holistic Support Models:** Mentorship should not only focus on academics but also encompass emotional well-being, identity development, and social integration, areas where first-generation students often lack support.
4. **Further Research:** Longitudinal and mixed-method studies are needed to examine the long-term impact of mentoring on graduation rates and post-college success, particularly in diverse student populations.

CONCLUSION

Mentorship plays a vital role in bridging the gap between first-generation college students and their academic success. The literature consistently demonstrates that supportive mentor-mentee relationships enhance students' sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and resilience, which are crucial for navigating the unique challenges these students face. While institutional programs like TRIO provide valuable resources, they often lack the scalability needed to reach all students. Therefore, expanding both formal and informal mentoring opportunities grounded in cultural awareness and holistic support can significantly improve retention, academic performance, and emotional well-being among first-generation students. Moving forward, institutions must recognize mentorship not as an optional support system but as a fundamental component of inclusive student success strategies.

REFERENCES

1. Craig, C. (2018). The relationship of mentoring on sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and student perception of mentorship in first-generation college students.
2. Fruiht, V., & Chan, T. (2018). Naturally occurring mentorship in a national sample of first-generation college goers: A promising portal for academic and developmental success. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 61(3-4), 386-397.
3. Glass, L. E. (2023). Social capital and first-generation college students: Examining the relationship between mentoring and college enrolment. *Education and Urban Society*, 55(2), 143-174.
4. Hagler, M. A., Christensen, K. M., & Rhodes, J. E. (2024). A longitudinal investigation of first-generation college students' mentoring relationships during their transition to higher education. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 25(4), 791-819.
5. Merriweather, L. R., & Morgan, A. J. (2013). Two cultures collide: Bridging the generation gap in a non-traditional mentorship. *Qualitative Report*, 18, 12.
6. Morales, V. E. (2024). *Bridging the Gap: a Mixed-methods Analysis of Support Programs and First-generation College Student Outcomes* (Doctoral dissertation).
7. Ramos, B. N. (2019). Moving from access to success: How first-generation students of color can build resilience in higher education through mentorship. *The Vermont Connection*, 40(1), 9.
8. Rivera, V. D., Sarte, M. D. C., & Wiggam, A. J. (2013). Bridging the Gap for First Generation Students (BG4FGS): An Occupation-Based Peer Mentoring Program at Dominican University of California.

9. Stebleton, M. J., & Soria, K. M. (2012). Breaking down barriers: academic obstacles of first-generation students at research universities. *Learning Assistance Review*, 17(2), 7-20.

10. Thandayuthapani, S., & Thirumoorthi, P. (2025). Leveraging Technology and Mentorship Programs to Bridge the Academic and Social Gap for First-Generation Learners in Higher Education. In *Mitigating Learner Disadvantages in Teaching and Learning* (pp. 267-300). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.