

First Generation Student Focus Groups

The Division of Student Affairs collaborated with Institutional Effectiveness to conduct focus groups to learn more about their experiences and needs. Currently, almost 12% of our currently enrolled students identify as first-generation students. The themes that arise from these conversations will be used to inform needed interventions and supports. This qualitative assessment builds on previous quantitative analysis conducted by the Office of Student Academic Affairs that illuminates a GPA achievement gap for first generation students at Skidmore over the past 5 years.

During the fall of 2023, a small working group was created to plan and conduct focus groups with Skidmore first generation identified students. Members include:

- Christina Montville, Assistant Vice President for the Residential Experience
- Lorri Riggs, Assistant Dean of Student Affairs for Student Success
- Zachary VanGalder, Associate Director of Inclusive Career Exploration
- Amy Tweedy, Institutional Effectiveness

Methodology

Three focus groups were held during the 2023-2024 academic year. The working group initially decided to conduct two focus groups dividing first year and second year students separately from juniors and seniors. After consultation with the Director of the Opportunity Program, the decision was made to conduct a separate focus group with these students due to additional wrap around services and programming available to this population. The following thematic areas were identified as broad areas of inquiry.

- Experiences of belonging and connection
- Identified Barriers
- Needs for beginning college career and preparing for post-graduation
- Advice for new students
- Evaluation of their experience at liberal art college

Focus Group 1: Held in November 2023 as part of the National First-Generation Student Day programming and was comprised of 6 juniors and seniors.

Focus Group 2: Held in February 2024 and was comprised of 5 first year and sophomores.

Focus Group 3: Held in February 2024 and was comprised of 3 Opportunity Program Students of various years.

Institutional research provided the list of first-generation students from the student information system. Note that Skidmore's SIS first generation status field is populated from a common application question. At time, we discovered students who were invited to participate who did not identify as first-generation students due to one parent or more completing a bachelor's degree.

Environmental Scan

In addition to conducting focus groups, Lorri Riggs conducted an environmental scan of services, structures and supports of New York Six Liberal Arts Consortium as available on their respective websites. In summary, most institutions incorporate a designated web page, specific program, and office or point of contact. Although programs varied, they aim to provide robust support systems for first-generation college students while recognizing the unique challenges they may face in navigating higher education. Programs include a combination of academic support, mentorship opportunities, and community-building initiatives to help foster success and retention among first-generation students.

Themes and Recommended Action Items

Students had varying experiences in identifying as first-generation college students. Some became aware during high school, while others realized it only upon entering college. One of the unintended outcomes is we have connected with multiple students who we are now regularly meeting with and providing service such as informal mentoring, participation in events, and support to access services. Below is a summary of the themes that emerged across our conversations.

Transitions and Adjustments:

1. The term "first-gen" holds varied significance for individuals, encompassing pressure to validate their journey, pride in achievements, or acknowledgment of their unique lived experiences, while students in secondary designated first-generation programs reported greater comfort transitioning to college.
2. Students faced challenges in transitioning to college life, including navigating academic schedules, adapting to new environments, experiencing pressure to succeed, learning academic culture, and feeling homesickness.
3. The adjustment process was facilitated by support systems such as peer mentors, academic advisors, and summer programs like OP, which helped ease the transition into college life.
4. OP Students reported having a staged transition that assisted in their transition due to the summer institute to develop friends.

Academic Experience:

- Students generally found their academic experiences positive, appreciating small class sizes, access to high impact experiences, and opportunities for one-on-one interaction with professors. Further research needed to determine if this happens later in their academic career.
- Utilization of academic resources varied, with some students making frequent use of office hours and writing centers, while others felt less inclined to seek academic assistance or were unaware of resources available.
- Students reported struggle to access classes they needed for their major.
- Students reported varying experiences with the peer academic coaches.

- Students in OP expressed the value of having an ongoing mentor regarding learning academic culture.
- Emerging research question: The research team noted students reported varying levels of academic success. One potential difference may be related to being in a specific college preparation program and/or attending private school. Further research needed.

Access to Resources and Support

1. The students reported the intersection of being a first-generation student, a high financial need student, and a student of color informed their experience.
2. Financial concerns were significant barriers for many first-gen students who were also high financial need, including the costs of attending college, applying for financial aid, travel expenses, and accessing resources specific to first generation students.
3. Students reported challenges of balancing work-study obligations with academic responsibilities.
4. Practical challenges such as navigating paperwork, obtaining work permits, and dealing with family expectations added additional stress to the college experience, particularly for non-OP students.
5. The team noted that the majority of the students had not previously participated in a campus visit.
6. Students emphasized the importance of readily accessible resources and support systems, such as clearer information on available services, mentoring programs, and streamlined access to financial aid and academic assistance.

Sense of Belonging and Community Engagement:

1. Many students expressed feelings of isolation and alienation, particularly when they didn't see themselves reflected in the campus community and "expected" student experience (ie. eating out, spring break trips, access to off campus, access to high impact experiences).
2. Building a sense of community and/or find support networks early, whether through cultural clubs, peer groups, or roommates, was crucial for many students' sense of belonging.
3. Students questioned their belonging, particularly when they hit a barrier they believed others weren't experiencing or were concerned their issue was trivial.
4. Structures in place such as summer programming as being part of an OP cohort increased sense of belonging and built confidence that they belonged more quickly.
5. No College sponsored hub for first generation identity, branding, and information. (Note the group conducted an environmental scan for NY6 resources- see Appendix).

Future Planning and Career Goals:

1. Students demonstrated uncertainty about timeline for planning post-graduate paths, including internships, graduate school, or career opportunities.
2. Students understood it was important to build and sustain advantageous relationships such as with faculty and potential employers, but didn't always know how to develop them.

Recommended Action Steps

Support parents of first-generation students in parent orientation
Create pre-orientation for first-generation students
Create orientation affinity group
Dedicate Affinity spaces to be dedicated for first generation students
Designate staff member to serve as intentional support for first generation students
Target communication to first generation students to invite/inform regarding campus services and programming
Create a first-generation landing page
Develop First-generation toolbox programs
Develop First generation passport for success program
Repeat first generation appreciation day
Create affinity ambassador program through Career Development Center
Define a first-generation student- Sense of belonging, transitions
Develop process to confirm with students that they are coded correctly in student information system
Develop branding to promote pride for the first-generation students
Develop student mentoring program for first-generation students
Develop faculty/staff mentoring program for first-generation students

Recommended Action Steps Mapped to Themes

Recommended Action Step	Transitions & Adjustments	Academic Experience	Access to Resources & Support	Sense of Belonging & Community Engagement	Future Planning & Career Goals
Support parents of first-generation students in parent orientation	P				
Create pre-orientation for first-generation students	P		S	S	
Create orientation affinity group				P	
Dedicate Affinity spaces to be dedicated for first generation students				P	
Designate staff member to serve as intentional support for first generation students	P	P	P	P	P
Target communication to first generation students to invite/inform regarding campus services and programming			P	S	
Create a first-generation landing page			P	S	
Develop First-generation toolbox programs		S	P		S
Develop First generation passport for success program	P	S	S		
Repeat first generation appreciation day				P	
Create affinity ambassador program through Career Development Center				S	P
Define a first-generation student- Sense of belonging	P				
Develop process to confirm with students that they are coded correctly in student information system	P				
Develop branding to promote pride for the first-generation students	S			P	

Develop student mentoring program for first-generation students	P		S		
Develop faculty/staff mentoring program for first-generation students		P	P		P

P= Primary S= Secondary