Igniting Excellence: Supporting First-Generation Graduate Students

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First-generation graduate students (FGGS) are historically underrepresented in higher education. Many universities do not track the number of FGGS on their campuses, unlike undergraduate first-generation students, which are tracked. Despite 54% of U.S. undergraduates identifying as first generation students, only 27% of doctoral recipients identify as such (RTI International, 2023, Mitic, 2022). The lack of representation, and perceived lack of care from universities, in these student populations can lead FGGS to feel isolated and as though their first-generation identity no longer applies to them—but it still does. It manifests in the ways that these students must navigate newfound challenges related to this identity. Imposter syndrome, financial literacy, and mental health are challenges that follow the transition from undergraduate to graduate studies, often compounded by the unique pressures of advanced academic environments and the absence of tailored support systems.

The unique challenges and preconceived notions of what it takes to succeed in college are drastically different for first-generation individuals compared to their continuing-generation counterparts. More privileged students are set up for success from their well-resourced secondary schools and financial support from college-educated parents, enabling them to more easily achieve college attainment, success, and persistence (Pew Research Center, 2021). While there is extensive literature on the undergraduate first-generation experience, a rare area of focus is first-generation graduate students and the challenges they encounter while interacting with this intersectional identity.

The challenges these students face during their undergraduate years often persist or intensify if they choose to continue their education at a graduate level. Consequently, there is a

pressing need for additional opportunities and resources tailored to first generation students and graduate school. Common hurdles encountered by first generation graduate students include imposter syndrome, self-doubt, and feelings of isolation and uncertainty. If left under-resourced, graduate students will have less support to navigate their personal and professional development; challenges which will negatively impact them.

To center this dialogue, we ground our definition of first-generation according to the Center for First-Generation Student Success through the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). First-generation college students are commonly defined as the first in their families to attend a four-year college or university (The Center for First Generation Student Success, 2017). However, that definition has become more nuanced as more institutions of higher education (IHEs) encourage students to self-identify as first generation based on their experience and the context of their family (e.g., if their parent/guardian earned a degree abroad), especially for graduate students. Furthermore, many universities have different definitions of first generation. This variability highlights the complexity of categorizing first-generation students.

Recognizing and understanding the influential factors of the “hidden curriculum” that exists in higher education is only the tip of the iceberg. First-generation and other underserved student populations must navigate these unpublished rules, often alone, in addition to trying to gain the social capital necessary for an advantage in the college process. Some examples of these implicit norms are having financial literacy related to student loans, knowing how to seek mentorship opportunities, and/or presenting and attending scholarship sessions at conferences. These challenges can also affect the student’s social life, as they may struggle with the "hidden curriculum" and feel disadvantaged or embarrassed in academic settings (Alsubaie, 2015, p.

125). To address this inequity, my team, who primarily works with graduate students, designed a one-day "Igniting Excellence: A First-Generation Graduate Student Summit" for this population at New York University, featuring three workshops from campus partners.

This paper aims to contribute to the literature about FGGS and their experiences by documenting how we are actively creating innovative support systems for them. One of the main goals of documenting this effort is to disrupt any stereotypes that surround this specific population of students and to dispel the belief that first-generation students do not experience struggles after their undergraduate years. In fact, FGGS frequently encounter greater stress, stigmatization, and uncertainty about belonging, often influenced by the expectations, perceptions, and support (or lack thereof) from family, faculty, and institutional leaders. (Ardoin & Erb, 2022). To better understand these dynamics, we employed a mixed-method analysis to document and identify patterns of success of summit participants at our institution.

Background and Context

The term "first-generation" has no specific definition in the world of higher education. Its definition varies from institution to institution which can have significant impacts on financial considerations for qualifying students. However, a common thread in these definitions is rooted in parental education history. According to Toutkoushian et al. (2018), "Understanding how best to define first-generation college status is important because there are numerous programs throughout the United States aimed at helping FGCS matriculate and succeed in postsecondary education," which is critical to the discourse of student support for this population. Understanding the nuances of these definitions and their implications is essential for ensuring equitable access and support for first-generation students as they navigate their educational journeys.

First-generation students that persist through postsecondary education make up some of the most diverse populations across higher education in this country. A bachelor's degree alone is becoming less sufficient for staying competitive in the job market, as 38% of employers actively avoid hiring recent college graduates (Intelligent, 2023). Commonly held perceptions by first-generation students around expectations of how much more formal education they expect to gain post-graduating are dismal compared to their counterparts. First-generation students tend to have more negative or lower expectations about pursuing graduate education than continuing-generation students (RTI International, 2021). One of the biggest challenges facing access and success is the obstacle presented by the hidden curriculum.

Recognizing and understanding the influential factors of the hidden curriculum in higher education is only the tip of the iceberg. First-generation and underserved student populations often have to navigate the unspoken rules of the hidden curriculum on their own while building the social capital needed to succeed in college. These challenges can also affect the student's social life, as they may struggle with the hidden curriculum and feel disadvantaged or embarrassed in academic settings (Alsubaie, 2015, p. 125). Dismantling barriers and challenging the discourse surrounding the FGGS experience is imperative to the success and persistence of this dynamic population. This population has been historically misrepresented as they are often viewed from a deficit-based perspective instead of an asset-based lens. By documenting the successful pathways of first-generation students in accessing and completing graduate education, this can serve as a roadmap for aspiring first-generation students to identify their strengths and highlight the resilience of those who have successfully navigated the graduate school experience.

Theoretical Frameworks

Drawing on Bourdieu's (2000) and Yosso's (2005) conceptual frameworks, the one-day

summit was developed with the objective of helping students gain types of capital and leveraging the experiences of this population to support their unique experiences while in a graduate program. To dissect one of the most critical factors of first-generation student identity, Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Social Reproduction provides a breakdown of how economic, cultural, and social capital influence their identity (Patton et al., 2016). The ways students gain and utilize these forms of capital are central to the student's pathway. Economic capital, which refers to access to money and wealth, plays a significant role in shaping a student's pathway as it often dictates access to other forms of capital, such as cultural and social capital (Patton et al., 2016, p. 308). Cultural capital encompasses knowledge, skills, education, and other cultural assets that can promote social mobility, while social capital refers to the networks and relationships that provide support and opportunities. Together, these forms of capital contribute to shaping a student's habitus—a set of dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors shaped by one's background and experiences.

Bourdieu (2000) explains that the hierarchy of socioeconomic statuses influences how education legitimizes, distributes, and disenfranchises those of lower status, thereby perpetuating inequality. For instance, economic capital allows privileged students to access resources that enhance their cultural and social capital, reinforcing their advantage within the educational system. Meanwhile, habitus—or one's ingrained understanding of and ability to navigate the "rules of the game"—affects how individuals interpret and respond to these dynamics. These "rules of the game" often include unwritten social norms and expectations, which disproportionately benefit those with greater familiarity and alignment with the hidden curriculum—the implicit lessons and values taught within educational settings. By doing so, the hidden curriculum tends to advantage privileged populations while further marginalizing others.

Those who self-identify as first-generation are often from lower socioeconomic statuses and have higher amounts of financial stress. With the rising cost of education, first-generation students are more disadvantaged than ever as their economic capital achievement lags behind their more affluent and privileged peers. Furthermore, a student's cultural background can also be more or less valued depending on how much value society places on one's cultural experience. Cultural capital is influenced by one's habitus and cultural community prescribing meaning to particular materials of importance (e.g., art, books, titles). Lastly, understanding the importance of "who you know" can greatly shape relationship building and access to critical networks to elevate one's status. In addition, Patton et al. explains, "Social capital is determined by one's level of connection— whether 'material or symbolic'—with others and the amount of resources that can be accrued through the relationship (2016, p. 310)." Higher education stakeholders must be aware of these phenomena as they approach underserved populations since "colleges and universities tend to give preference to the kind of cultural capital that is more readily available to middle-class and affluent groups rather than what is readily available to poor or working-class groups (Patton et al., 2016 p. 311)." These three forms of capital– economic, social, and cultural—can be "strategically deployed" to increase one's status and mobility (Patton et al., 2016, p. 309).

With the growing demand for advanced or professional degrees in today's competitive job market, more first-generation students are aspiring to pursue graduate education. The job market landscape has evolved to the point where individuals with master's degrees are entering entry level positions, making it increasingly challenging for those with only bachelor's degrees to distinguish themselves (Intelligent, 2023). The challenges these students face during their undergraduate years often persist if they choose to continue their education at a graduate level. If

left under-resourced, these challenges will negatively impact the personal and professional development of graduate students. Additionally, the definition of first-generation students is becoming more nuanced as more IHE's encourage students to self-identify as first generation based on their experience and the context of their family (e.g., if their parent/guardian earned a degree abroad), especially for graduate students. Above all, one of the biggest challenges these students face is often their lack of social capital and navigating the hidden curriculum that exists within the world of academia. By examining these specific challenges, our practical application is guided by the main pillars of financial wellness, career navigation, mentorship, and celebration.

Application

The "Igniting Excellence: First-Generation Graduate Student Summit" was envisioned as a collaborative and forward-thinking platform designed to cater to first-generation graduate students at a private university in a metropolitan area. In line with NASPA's definition, first generation students were identified as individuals for whom neither parent has attained a bachelor's degree or higher. However, recognizing this term has a nuanced definition for this sub-population of students, the organizers of the event encouraged students to self-identify. At the time of inception, the university had a graduate student population of approximately 27,575. Furthermore, 22% of the student population identified as first-generation (*NYU*, n.d.). The summit offered FGGS invaluable resources, tools, and networking opportunities essential for thriving in a graduate school environment. Approximately 53 students took part in three workshops. The event's primary aim was to foster connections among first-generation graduate students, and equip them with the skills and support they need. We identified key campus partners who also work with first-generation specific populations to provide workshops aligning

with our core student affairs strategic priorities: Student and Professional Development; Navigation and Access; and Global Inclusion, Diversity, Belonging, Equity, and Accessibility (New York University, Strategic Priorities, n.d.).

The workshops focused on three key areas of financial wellness, career navigation, and mentorship to equip attendees with different spheres of capital. To begin the day, we invited our Executive Director of the Center for Student Life to deliver a keynote address reinforcing the department's commitment to the success of FGGS. It is important to have key leadership engage directly with students to reinforce support available and to decrease the feeling of hierarchy. This in and of itself is a strategy for increasing a student's social capital, by making them aware of and comfortable connecting with university administrators at that level.

Following the keynote, the workshop "Unveiling the Hidden Curriculum" addressed imposter syndrome and cultural capital. The session featured speakers from NYU's career center who, in "The First-Gen Identity in the Job Search," detailed how to use an asset-based approach to cultural capital to enhance their career journeys. Next, "Increasing Your Financial Knowledge," presented by the NYU Office of Financial Education, taught attendees the basics of financial literacy, helping them navigate the complexities of economic mobility, a topic not often explicitly covered in higher education. Attendees participated in group activities and critical discussions during these sessions, which are essential for developing social capital through networking and collaboration with peers, while also providing opportunities to reflect, process, and make meaning of what they are learning to enhance understanding and retention.

To conclude the day, attendees participated in an activity called "Writing to the Next-Gen," where they wrote letters of support to current first-generation NYU undergraduates, promoting a sense of community and giving back. The day ended with a celebration, which we

believe is not done enough for our FGGS. This recognition is important because it not only boosts the confidence and motivation of first-generation students, but also raises awareness of the barriers they face, helping to drive systemic changes for greater inclusivity. Celebrating these students affirms the value of diverse backgrounds and experiences in academic spaces and encourages others to pursue higher education, knowing that their stories and successes are valued. Each attendee received a commemorative champagne flute, encouraging them to "toast" to their first-generation identity.

With this summit, NYU took a pioneering step in enriching, supporting, and empowering these students. After the event, we conducted a survey to evaluate its impact on fostering a sense of belonging, the effectiveness of the student and professional development opportunities, and to gather any additional feedback from participants.

Methods

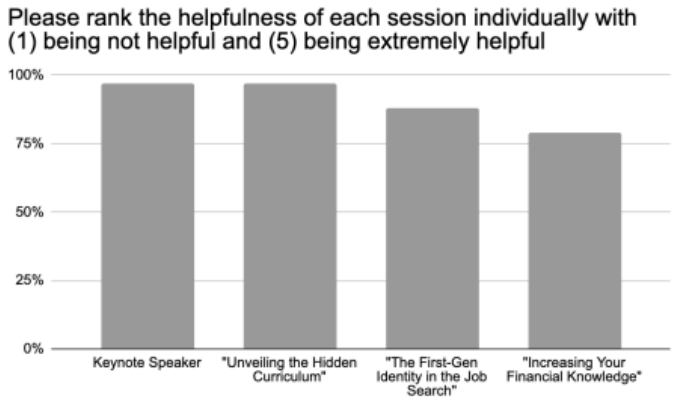
Students who participated in the summit assessment were given the chance to anonymously enter their name(s) for a chance to win a prize as an incentive for student participation. Two winners were randomly selected. The population for this assessment were all participants from the summit. The survey was sent to the 53 attendees. In total, 34 students completed the survey. Students were asked six closed questions about their experience at the first-generation graduate student summit and three open questions about describing their experience during the event and suggestions for topics to be covered at future summits.

Results

The summit was a resounding success, with 97% of respondents stating it met or exceeded their expectations. In Figure 1, our findings revealed how the attendees ranked the overall helpfulness to their personal and professional development. Standout sessions included

the "Keynote Speaker" and "Unveiling the Hidden Curriculum" workshops, with both receiving a 97% helpfulness rating. The "First-Gen Identity in the Job Search" session also resonated well with respondents, with 88% finding it helpful. The "Increasing Your Financial Knowledge" workshop, while still beneficial to many, garnered a 79% helpfulness rating.

Figure 1: *Figure showing the percentage of each session ranked by attendees.*



In Figure 2, we analyzed attendee preferences across the keynote speaker session. The subsequent breakout sessions revealed nuanced insights into how respondents connected key NYU divisional strategic priorities to the sessions they attended. We rephrased how the strategic priorities were labeled to ensure clarity amongst respondents. The original priorities—Communities & Connections, Student & Professional Development, Global Inclusion, Diversity, Belonging, and Access, Navigation & Access, and Wellbeing & Flourishing—were rephrased to be more conversational and student-focused: Meet New People, Professional Development, Belonging as a Graduate Student, Navigating NYU Resources, and Prioritize Wellbeing. This shift simplifies formal language into actionable and relatable terms, making the goals clearer, more approachable, and directly relevant to students' experiences.

First, "Professional Development" emerged as a top priority across sessions, with an average rating of 56%. Notably, professional development was prioritized at 61% in the

"Unveiling the Hidden Curriculum" session and 73% in "The First-Gen Identity in the Job Search."

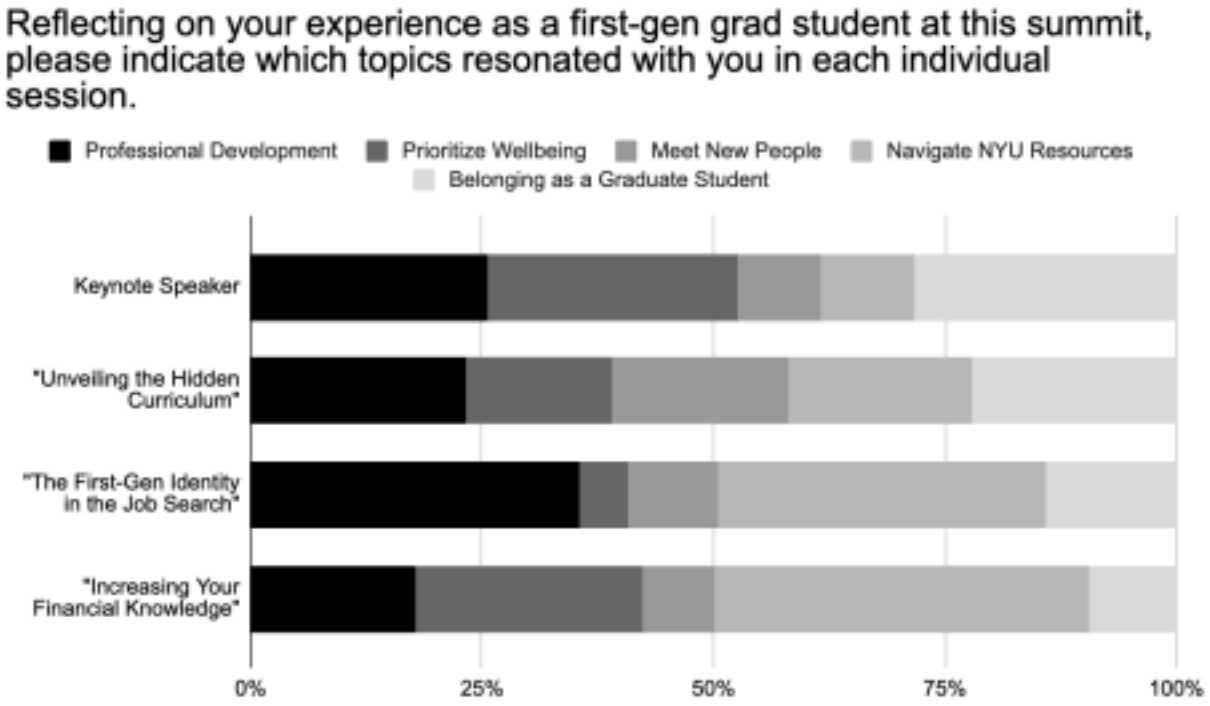
Second, "Prioritizing Wellbeing" emerged as a significant priority across sessions, with an average rating of 39.25%. Particularly, in the "Unveiling the Hidden Curriculum" session, wellbeing was prioritized at 41%.

Third, "Meeting New People" received varying levels of attention, with an average rating of 26%. While networking opportunities were not consistently prioritized across sessions, they were moderately emphasized in the "The First-Gen Identity in the Job Search" session.

Fourth, "Navigating NYU Resources" garnered significant attention across sessions, with an average rating of 55%. Attendees demonstrated a keen interest in learning about and utilizing the various resources available to them within the university context, particularly in relation to their academic and professional endeavors.

Finally, "Belonging as a Graduate Student" received varying levels of feedback, with an average rating of 42%. Attendees generally recognized the importance of feeling connected and supported within the graduate student community.

Figure 2: *Figure showing how attendees connected the NYU strategic priorities to each session*



In summary, attendees across the sessions demonstrated a strong interest in professional development and navigating university resources, indicating their desire for career related learning and support. Prioritizing wellbeing and fostering a sense of belonging as graduate students were also important. Networking opportunities were moderately emphasized in some contexts, highlighting attendees' interest in social interaction and community building.

Discussion

The "Igniting Excellence: First-Generation Graduate Student Summit" was highly successful, with 97% of respondents stating it met or exceeded their expectations, indicating the event effectively catered to their needs and interests. Many participants expressed interest in further engagement with services like the career center and Office of Financial Education, demonstrating a clear demand for ongoing support beyond the summit. Attendee preferences highlighted a strong focus on professional development and navigating university resources, with wellbeing and a sense of belonging also being important factors. Networking opportunities were

moderately emphasized. The summit received positive feedback, with attendees describing it as "insightful," "empowering," and "well-executed," appreciating the relevant topics and the supportive community. Suggestions for future summits included exploring alumni resources, fostering cross-school collaboration, addressing personal relationships in graduate school, building community, connecting with first-gen leaders, and enhancing financial literacy for first generation students.

Our qualitative findings revealed that the event was a resounding success in fostering a sense of confidence and community. Participants consistently expressed how the event empowered and uplifted them, with one attendee stating, "It encouraged me to be confident being a first generation undergrad and grad. Knowing there are many first generations [FGGS] in the community is really helpful." This sense of solidarity was echoed by another participant who reported “feeling seen” through the relevant topics discussed, describing the experience as "empowering and uplifting." The event's turnout and well-organized setup were particularly impressive, as highlighted by a participant who noted, "I was impressed and really glad I was able to experience it. The speakers provided a lot of guidance, and I was able to develop more confidence in my current grad experience (Personal Communication)."

Overall, the event ignited a newfound appreciation and pride among attendees for their unique position as first-generation students, as one participant shared, "To be honest, all this while studying at NYU, I never saw myself appreciating that I am the first generation from my family to study in a graduate program (Personal Communication)." This sense of empowerment and solidarity directly contributed to participants' increased self-confidence, as they gained a deeper appreciation for their unique identity as first-generation students and felt more assured in their academic journeys.

Conclusion

The first-generation student experience is not a monolith especially for graduate students; however, higher education stakeholders can glean particular insights into best practices for supporting this population. With nearly one in two of college students identifying as first generation, the need to dismantle barriers in the pursuit of equity is as important as ever (RTI International, 2023). Drawing on Bourdieu's Theory of Social Reproduction (2005) and Yosso's Theory of Community Cultural Wealth Model (2006), we must examine the intersecting influences of this population to equip them with the capital necessary to succeed in higher education. To address this disparity, it is imperative for IHE's and scholar-practitioners to prioritize understanding and meeting the diverse needs of this population, as access to and success in graduate education for first generation students is one of the most significant priorities and challenges in higher education today.

Student affairs practitioners can significantly improve their support for first-generation graduate students by implementing a variety of strategic initiatives. First, enhancing workshops is crucial, practitioners should review content for relevance and engagement, invite diverse speakers, and incorporate interactive elements to make these sessions more impactful. Based on the results of this assessment, we have developed tangible suggestions that higher education stakeholders can all implement in their work. Expanding support services is also essential. Strengthening partnerships for ongoing support, offering follow-up workshops, and developing online resources can provide continuous assistance. Additionally, diversifying networking opportunities is important. Practitioners can introduce structured networking sessions, explore virtual options, and encourage alumni participation to broaden students' professional connections. Lastly, promoting community engagement can foster a sense of belonging.

Organizing regular meetups, highlighting the achievements of first-generation graduates, and creating an inclusive environment can help these students feel more connected.

Furthermore, practitioners should advocate for identifying first-generation graduate students within their universities and validating their unique experiences. By lobbying for better data collection and recognition of this population, practitioners can ensure that these students' needs are adequately addressed. Validating their experiences through tailored programming and visible institutional support will help first-generation graduate students feel acknowledged and supported. Overall, aligning programming with the specific needs of first-generation graduate students is essential for their success and well-being. Focusing on the highest need populations allows the scope of efforts to expand and serve a broader range of students. This summit can be used as a stepping stone for professionals to start identifying the needs of their first-generation graduate student population.

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