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Beyond the Definition: The Institutional Invisibility of Hidden First-Generation Students at Four-Year Colleges and Universities

Item Type	article
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Download date	2026-06-16 21:54:46
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14849/9981

Beyond the Definition: The Institutional Invisibility of Hidden First-Generation Students at Four-Year Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

Even though there have been improvements in support for first-generation college students, four-year colleges and universities still use narrow definitions that overlook the nuanced realities of students whose backgrounds do not fit traditional categories. Hidden first-generation students, whose family, cultural, or international backgrounds do not align with standard definitions, commonly face the same challenges in accessing college, finding a sense of belonging, and succeeding. Yet they are left out of many policies and programs. This paper examines how strict definitions, deficit-focused narratives, and institutional structures keep these students invisible and perpetuate inequality in bachelor's-degree-granting institutions. Drawing on theories of cultural capital, belonging, and social reproduction, the paper argues that colleges need to rethink what it means to be first-generation to create truly inclusive practices. The paper concludes with practical suggestions for student affairs professionals to foster encouraging environments that recognize and value all students' diverse experiences

Keywords: first-generation students, hidden first-generation, belonging, higher education equity, institutional support, student affairs

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formative years, enhance their academic success and experience, foster a sense of belonging, and help them build life skills that will serve them beyond the campus. Aminat is an active member of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and continues to find ways to contribute to her community and support educational opportunities that prioritize growth and promote equity.

Introduction

The term first-generation college student is now central to equity and access programs in American higher education. However, its meaning is frequently debated and often fails to capture the complex realities of many students. Most colleges define first-generation status as having parents who did not finish a bachelor's degree (Jehangir, 2021). While this simple definition helps schools design support programs, it overlooks a much more complicated reality. This paper argues that narrow institutional definitions of first-generation status systematically render certain students invisible and excluded from the support systems, resources, and sense of belonging that shape students' success in higher education.

Consider students whose parents attended some college but cannot help them navigate university bureaucracy. Or international students whose parents hold degrees that provide no insight into the American academic system. Or students from transnational families whose educational histories resist binary categorization. These hidden first-generation students face navigational challenges as the first in their families to pursue higher education in the United States yet are excluded from institutional recognition due to rigid policy definitions. They may succeed academically and participate in campus life yet remain invisible when institutions determine eligibility for support programs.

This paper examines undergraduate students at four-year colleges and universities, including elite research universities such as Stanford and Cornell, as well as regional public universities such as Western Illinois University. While these schools have developed support programs for first-generation students, they still rely on simple definitions. Hidden first-generation students face different challenges depending on the type of institution: at elite schools, they may lack certain cultural knowledge, while at less-resourced schools, they may face fewer resources. No matter the school's prestige or resources, the main issue is the same: strict definitions leave out students whose experiences do not fit standard categories.

This paper argues that hidden first-generation students are overlooked because of strict definitions, deficit-focused narratives that highlight what students lack rather than what they offer (Yosso, 2005; Harper, 2012), and policies that prioritize simplicity over accuracy. Student affairs professionals, researchers, and decision-makers need to rethink how first-generation identity is defined

and supported, adopting flexible definitions that focus on students' lived experiences rather than their parents' education. By examining belonging, cultural capital, and institutional responsibility, this analysis demonstrates that current equity efforts fail to meet students' actual needs. The paper calls for a new approach so that all students, in all their complexity, can truly belong.

Defining Hidden First-Generation Status

Hidden first-generation students do not fit neatly into either the first-generation or continuing-generation categories, and that is the main issue. Building on Jehangir's (2010) critique that higher education regularly favors dominant cultural narratives, the experiences of hidden first-generation students reveal how institutions still marginalize those whose identities do not align with simplistic notions of access and success. Covarrubias, Vallejo, and Kohli (2022) point out that these definitions are primarily made for administrative purposes rather than to reflect actual identities. Often, they do not take into account global educational differences, socioeconomic backgrounds, or overlapping identities such as race, gender, and immigration status.

For example, an international student whose parents have degrees from Ghana or India might not be considered first-generation on paper. In practice, however, they may be just as unfamiliar with American college life as students whose parents never attended college. Consider also a student whose parents started college but did not finish, or who finished but cannot help with coursework or understand why their child is stressed about office hours. These students are often overlooked by the system, which means current definitions value some experiences while dismissing others.

As a result, hidden first-generation students are stuck in an in-between space. They might have heard about college while growing up, but they lack the practical knowledge that helps other students navigate college more easily. Research on belonging indicates that being in this ambiguous position can harm student success (Strayhorn, 2019). Understanding who these students are and how they are defined sets the stage for the Methods section, which describes how this conceptual analysis examines the institutional policies and patterns that exclude them.

Methods

This paper takes a conceptual approach to explore how institutional definitions of first-generation status result in systematic exclusion. A conceptual approach is appropriate here because the patterns of interest in how definitions function as gatekeeping mechanisms are embedded in policy structures rather than in data that surveys or interviews could directly capture. The goal is not to generate new empirical findings, but to identify structural patterns by synthesizing existing research, institutional policy documents, and published program frameworks. It draws on research on cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and belonging (Strayhorn, 2019),

as well as an analysis of institutional policies and program eligibility rules, to detect patterns that extend beyond any single campus.

The analysis looks at three main sources: (1) institutional policies and eligibility rules from scholarship programs, federal TRIO initiatives, and university support services; (2) published research on first-generation student experiences and identity development; and (3) public frameworks from universities that use broader first-generation definitions, like Brown, Cornell, and Tufts. Each source type serves a distinct function: institutional policies reveal how definitions operate as gatekeepers; published research provides the interpretive framework for understanding why those patterns persist; and university program frameworks demonstrate that more inclusive approaches are already operational. By examining how schools define first-generation identity in their policies and programs, this paper shows that overly simplistic definitions can make some students invisible, even when a school claims to support equity.

This conceptual approach helps identify structural problems that might not be evident in studies focused on a single campus. By examining patterns across different types of institutions, from elite research universities to regional public colleges, the paper shows how definitions act as gatekeepers in many settings. The examples presented in the sections that follow function as illustrative cases drawn from this analysis, not empirical findings, and are organized thematically to build the argument that definitional rigidity produces structural invisibility. The next section begins with the most concrete layer of that argument: the specific institutional mechanisms that exclude hidden first-generation students.

How Institutions Exclude Hidden First-Generation Students

Hidden first-generation students are excluded from many institutions. The following three examples illustrate how simple definitions act as barriers.

Scholarship Eligibility: At many institutions, first-generation scholarships explicitly require that neither parent holds a bachelor's degree from a U.S. institution. A student whose mother earned an engineering degree from the Indian Institute of Technology but now works in a service job would be ineligible, despite the family lacking practical knowledge of American financial aid systems, campus culture, or academic advising structures. The credential exists, but the cultural capital it supposedly represents does not.

Federal TRIO Programs: Student Support Services (SSS), funded by the U.S. Department of Education, defines first-generation students as those whose parents did not complete a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). A student whose father attended university in Nigeria for three years but did not complete a degree would qualify. However, a student whose mother holds a Mexican law degree that does not transfer to U.S. legal practice would not, even though both students

face identical challenges navigating American higher education without family guidance anchored in U.S. institutional knowledge.

Data Collection and Institutional Research: Perhaps most invisibly, first-generation students disappear from institutional data systems that drive funding allocation and program assessment. When universities report first-generation enrollment to state coordinating boards or accreditors, they use a binary metric of parental degree completion. A campus could have hundreds of students facing first-generation challenges yet report low first-generation enrollment, leading administrators to conclude that focused support programs are unnecessary.

These examples show a clear pattern: institutional policies create categories that exclude students whose experiences do not fit simple definitions. The results are real, students lose financial support, miss out on mentorship, fall behind academically, and may begin to believe their struggles are invalid. Understanding why these exclusions are so structurally persistent requires a theoretical lens, which the following section provides through the frameworks of cultural capital, community cultural wealth, and belonging.

Theoretical Framework: Cultural Capital, Community Wealth, and Belonging

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital helps explain why institutions systematically miss hidden first-generation students. Selective four-year institutions, particularly elite research universities and private liberal arts colleges, reward specific kinds of knowledge, ways of speaking, and behaviors that reflect middle- and upper-class cultural norms. Stephens et al. (2012) found that elite institutions such as Stanford explicitly emphasize independence and self-directed learning in their promotional materials, whereas regional public universities more commonly emphasize interdependence and communal support. This creates different manifestations of cultural mismatch depending on the institutional context, though first-generation students who are hidden experience navigational difficulties across all four-year institutional types.

Bourdieu (1986) explicitly argued that schools function as sites where "cultural capital can be acquired, to a varying extent, depending on the period, the society, and the social class, in the absence of any deliberate inculcation" (p. 244). Critically, he noted that "the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family" (p. 244). This system positions students whose families lack specific forms of cultural knowledge as inherently disadvantaged inside educational systems that treat middle-class cultural norms as universal standards of merit.

For hidden first-generation students, this situation creates a significant challenge. First-generation and working-class students bring valuable knowledge and perspectives, but these are not always recognized or rewarded by colleges. They often spend considerable time trying to figure out unwritten rules and expectations that others already seem to know, negotiating within a system that assumes

everyone understands how things work. The message they receive, even if unintentional, is that their ways of thinking and communicating are not quite right. This is not about merit or ability, but about which ways of being are treated as the standard.

However, Bourdieu's framework risks positioning hidden first-generation students as simply lacking something they need. Yosso (2005) directly challenged this deficit framing, arguing that "Critical Race Theory shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of communities of color as places full of cultural poverty and disadvantages and instead focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that commonly go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (p. 69). She explicitly named the problem: "While CCW [community cultural wealth] may include cultural knowledge about navigating institutions such as schools, it also may not." For example, because more than 50% of Latina/o undergraduates are first-generation college students, they may arrive at college without family guidance on how to choose a college. "At the same time, Latina/o students and families do have knowledge and skills that are not appreciated and acknowledged by the dominant culture" (p. 77).

The difference between Bourdieu's and Yosso's frameworks shows why defining hidden first-generation status matters. Bourdieu's view highlights how institutions value certain types of knowledge and ignore others. Yosso's perspective highlights what Bourdieu's might miss: students bring important knowledge that schools often fail to recognize. Hidden first-generation students are caught between these views, they may lack the specific knowledge Bourdieu identifies as necessary for success, but they possess the community strengths Yosso describes, which often go unrecognized.

Examining hidden first-generation students through Yosso's framework of community cultural wealth reframes the picture. These students possess aspirational capital, maintaining hope and ambition even when facing structural barriers. They have linguistic capital, moving fluidly across languages and communication styles. They carry familial capital, drawing on wisdom from family and community. They demonstrate navigational capital, finding ways through systems not built for them. They also show resistant capital, gaining strength from the experience of challenging inequity. The issue is not that these students lack important qualities, but that universities do not recognize or value what they bring.

These theoretical frameworks do more than explain why the institutional exclusions described earlier occur, they also illuminate how those exclusions are felt at the level of individual student experience. The next section examines that experience directly, focusing on belonging and what researchers call cultural mismatch.

Belonging and Cultural Mismatch

Colleges often talk about inclusion, but first-generation students may have a very different experience. There is often a significant gap between the values they grew up with and what the university expects. Many come from backgrounds where success means collective effort, asking for help is normal, and family and community are central. On campus, they find that college rewards independence and self-reliance. Stephens et al. (2012) call this a cultural mismatch, a fundamental disconnect between students' backgrounds and the institution's values.

Strayhorn (2019) argues that belonging means feeling like you matter and are accepted, supported, and valued in your academic network. But this sense of belonging breaks down when schools use narrow definitions to decide who qualifies for help. Ahmed (2012) points out this contradiction: universities talk about inclusion but maintain systems that functionally exclude people. As a result, students whose identities do not fit standard categories may be technically enrolled and recognized in name, but they remain practically invisible when it comes to substantive support.

This in-between status leads to what Stewart (2016) calls intersectional invisibility, in which people are marginalized by multiple identities yet not fully recognized by any of them. Hidden first-generation students navigate a college environment that expects them to be self-sufficient yet barely acknowledges their challenges. When universities fail to recognize this cultural mismatch, students are left to figure it out on their own. They may start to question themselves, feel isolated even in large classes, and wonder if they truly belong. Belonging breakdowns, as described here, are not uniform across all institutional settings, they are shaped by the specific structures and resources of each type of institution, which the next section examines.

Structural Invisibility Across Institutional Contexts

The way universities structure their systems, forms, and procedures often keeps hidden first-generation students invisible. Applications, scholarship forms, and surveys usually ask only about parental education, leaving no room for more complicated backgrounds. This approach is simple to administer, but as Harper (2012) notes, it leads universities to neglect the full range of student experiences even as they claim to care about equity.

For instance, a student applies for a first-generation scholarship but is turned down because their parent has a degree from another country, even though that degree provides no navigational advantage in the American system. Or universities report data to government agencies using strict categories, leaving no space for nuance. As a result, hidden first-generation students are left out of the numbers that decide who gets resources and whose success is tracked.

It is important to note that successful navigation looks different across institutional contexts. At elite research universities with substantial endowments and low acceptance rates, it often requires understanding unspoken norms for networking with faculty for research opportunities, leveraging

alumni connections for internships, and participating in high-status extracurricular activities that signal cultural capital to graduate schools and employers. Hidden among first-generation students at such institutions may be parents with advanced international degrees yet still lack access to the informal knowledge networks that shape success in highly competitive environments (Jack, 2019).

At smaller regional colleges or less-resourced public universities, successful navigation may instead require understanding how to build relationships with a limited number of advisors, access off-campus opportunities when transportation is scarce, and manage financial aid systems when institutional resources are constrained. Hidden first-generation students at these institutions face different barriers, often more material than cultural, though the two always intersect.

The main point is not that one type of college is harder than another, but that the kind of institution shapes what hidden first-generation students need and what they lose when they are invisible. A single, simple definition of first-generation status cannot reflect these differences. Recognizing this raises a practical question: what does meaningful institutional recognition actually look like, and what can it accomplish? The following section turns directly to that question.

Recognition as Inclusion: What Does Success Look Like?

The question of institutional recognition raises a fundamental tension: Are we supporting hidden first-generation students to be included within existing support structures, or are we challenging those structures as inherently exclusionary? The answer requires holding both simultaneously.

Several universities have already moved toward more expansive definitions in practice. Cornell University's First-Generation and Low-Income Student Support office explicitly includes students whose family circumstances may vary, including those with undocumented or DACA status (Cornell University, n.d.), recognizing that legal status intersects with first-generation experience in ways binary definitions miss. Tufts University acknowledges that students with other family circumstances, such as a parent who recently earned a bachelor's degree, may have varying exposure to the college application process (Tufts University, n.d.). Brown University goes further, allowing students to self-identify as first-generation if they may not have prior exposure to or knowledge of how to navigate higher education institutions, including students whose parents attended college outside the United States (Brown University, n.d.).

Yet recognition also means examining what inclusion really requires. The question is not only whether more students can access existing programs but also whether those programs are designed to build on students' strengths rather than simply remediate their supposed deficits.

Student success programs that effectively serve hidden first-generation students do both: they expand eligibility so students can access material resources, and they redesign programming to honor

what students bring rather than focusing solely on what they supposedly lack. The Kessler Scholars Collaborative demonstrates this paired approach, expanding first-generation definitions, building programming around self-identity exploration and peer guidance, and leveraging students' navigational capital to support one another (Ithaca S+R, 2025). According to their research, 74% of first-year scholars actively engaged with mentors throughout the year, and 83% said the mentorship helped them understand campus resources.

Recognition is not only about letting in hidden first-generation students; it is about changing their experience once they are there. What this looks like in day-to-day institutional practice, and what student affairs professionals can do to drive it, are the focus of the next section.

Implications for Student Affairs Practice

Student affairs professionals are uniquely positioned to change how universities view and support hidden first-generation students. This requires three interconnected practices: recognition, reflexivity, and the building of genuine relationships, alongside concrete institutional reforms across admissions, student services, and data collection.

Recognition and Redefining Eligibility

Recognition means challenging definitions that exclude students. When professionals advocate for more inclusive ways to identify first-generation students, both in how data is gathered and in who qualifies for programs, they make these students visible in substantive ways. Admissions offices can revise application questions to capture functional first-generation status rather than a binary parental degree-completion criterion, including questions about whether applicants have family members who can help them navigate U.S. higher education systems. Scholarship committees can implement holistic review processes that consider international credentials, partial college attendance, and family educational context. Student affairs divisions can expand eligibility criteria for first-generation programs to include hidden first-generation students, based on need rather than on strict parental-credential requirements.

Reflexivity and Professional Development

Reflexivity requires practitioners to examine their own assumptions. What do we truly mean when we say first-generation? Who are we unknowingly excluding? Training programs that dedicate time to these questions can help staff develop genuine compassion and a more nuanced understanding of students' experiences (Hsieh & Watson, 2022). Professional development should include a critical review of deficit narratives and an exploration of asset-based approaches that recognize community cultural wealth.

Relational Work and Community Building

Personal connections matter. When universities create spaces for students to share their experiences of college navigation and belonging, the effect is meaningful: hidden first-generation students recognize themselves in each other's stories and realize they are not alone. Student affairs professionals can create peer mentoring programs that connect these students with resources and build support networks grounded in shared experience, not just administrative categories.

Syracuse University's Whitman First Program offers a model, launched after first-generation enrollment jumped from 12% to 19%, that embeds support within specific academic communities rather than creating separate first-generation programming (Syracuse University, 2024). Tufts University's FIRST Resource Center takes a similarly community-centered approach, creating a physical space specifically for first-generation students that conveys a sense of belonging in ways a webpage cannot (Tufts University, n.d.).

Institutional Research and Data Redesign

Most importantly, student affairs and institutional research teams need to work together. Those who design surveys and collect data should collaborate closely with those who understand students' lives. This means updating data tools to capture the full range of first-generation experiences, including questions about cultural knowledge, navigation skills, and family support. It also means disaggregating data to track how hidden first-generation students are doing and making their experiences visible in the reports that drive resource allocation.

The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) has emphasized that progress in supporting first-generation students involves collecting detailed demographic data to better inform how to serve students, rather than relying on broad categories that obscure important differences within the population (NASFAA, 2023). When institutions move from asking whether parents completed degrees to asking whether students have the family knowledge and support to navigate the system, the implications for programming, funding, and accountability all follow.

Institutional leaders can also allocate dedicated funding for programs serving hidden first-generation populations who currently fall through gaps in existing support structures, create accountability mechanisms that track institutional progress in identifying and supporting these students, and work with federal programs such as TRIO to advocate for more inclusive definitions of first-generation status that reflect students' realities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Conclusion

Too many programs designed to help first-generation students miss the hidden ones completely. Their experiences show how limited simple definitions are and why universities need to understand

first-generation identity in its full complexity. Real equity and access will only happen when higher education treats belonging as an ongoing conversation that respects that complexity, rather than forcing everyone into the same category.

Redefining first-generation status is more than updating a policy handbook. It means changing how institutions listen to students, treat different experiences as valid, and respond when students say this does not capture my reality. When universities base their policies on students' real stories rather than administrative ease, things change: students who were invisible become visible, visibility leads to recognition, and recognition leads to belonging.

From a broader perspective, the question of how institutions define first-generation status reveals deeper tensions about the purpose of higher education. Are colleges and universities sites of social reproduction, institutions that, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued, mainly function to maintain existing class structures by rewarding students who arrive already fluent in dominant cultural codes? Or are they sites of potential transformation—spaces where, as Yosso (2005) and other critical scholars envision, disenfranchised communities can leverage their cultural wealth to resist and reimagine oppressive systems?

The invisibility of hidden first-generation students suggests that, despite equity rhetoric, many four-year institutions persist in functioning as reproductive sites. Binary definitions that privilege administrative tidiness over lived reality serve institutional convenience while obscuring the complexity of students' actual needs. Yet the growing movement to expand first-generation definitions and redesign support structures points toward the possibility of transformation. When universities like Brown, Cornell, and Tufts adopt self-identification frameworks and asset-based programming, they are not simply adjusting eligibility criteria; they are challenging the institution's fundamental function.

This change is what Ahmed (2012) calls institutional transformation, a deep shift in values, structures, and practices. It means acknowledging that navigating college looks different across institutions, not because students have different abilities, but because each college's context, resources, and culture create distinct challenges. A hidden first-generation student at an elite private university may face cultural barriers, whereas one at a regional public university may face resource constraints and limited advising. Both groups need recognition and support, but that support must fit their specific context rather than follow a single universal model.

Moving forward requires coordinated action: admissions should ask better questions, student affairs should create increasingly inclusive programs, institutional research should collect more detailed data, and decision-makers should build systems that reflect real student experiences rather than administrative simplicity. These changes work together to build systems that truly recognize and support all students.

These students are already on campus. They have always been here, attending classes and finding their way through college, often succeeding in spite of the definitions, not because of the support they receive. The real question is not whether hidden first-generation students deserve recognition, but whether institutions are willing to admit they have been measuring the wrong things and are ready to change before more students are left out.

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