

# Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

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Volume 1  
Issue 40 *Fostering Inclusive Learning  
Communities Together*

Article 16

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July 2023

## Odd One Out: The Barriers Faced as a First-Generation Student

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### Recommended Citation

Hudspeth, Charlotte "Odd One Out: The Barriers Faced as a First-Generation Student," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 40 (2023), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tithe/vol1/iss40/> 16

## **ODD ONE OUT: THE BARRIERS FACED AS A FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT**

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In this piece, I explore the most important barriers faced by students who are the first in their family to attend higher education, including some of my own personal experiences as a first-generation student. First-generation students are often underrepresented by higher education institutions. The barriers they face range from a lack of information within their household about accessing higher education to personal feelings of unbelonging. The piece explores how these barriers impact a student's likelihood of academic success, and offers suggestions on how these issues could be addressed.

### **Success**

Every person may define success the same way: “the accomplishment of an aim or purpose,” otherwise known as achieving their goals. But if you were to ask each person what accomplishing that aim would look like for them, the answers would all be different, since everyone has different dreams and goals they want to achieve. If you asked me, short-term success is being able to take what I have learnt from my biomedical science degree and apply it to a real-life clinical setting, preferably a hospital laboratory, through securing a job in my field of study. Long-term success to me would be to pursue my goal of progressing my academic skills to gain a PhD in biomedicine, as well as contributing to the advancement of science through research, hopefully resulting in the publishing of a research paper. Unfortunately, success does not come without overcoming obstacles. As a first-generation student (meaning that neither of my parents have been to university) coming from a low-participation geographical area (quintile 2 in the POLAR (participation of local areas) classification for young people's participation in higher education) and a low-income background, the odds of succeeding and achieving my goals seemed against me.

In the academic year 2012/13, 34% of UK full-time student enrolments were first-generation. By 2016/17, this figure had increased to 40% (HESA, 2018). This shows that over recent years, more first-generation students in the UK are attending university. Yet, despite this increase, first-generation students are still underrepresented in higher education, and face barriers in both accessing and completing university.

### **Barriers**

Although I had my family's full emotional support with going to university, there wasn't much academic support available. Being the first person in my family to attend meant that I did not have anyone outside of my school to guide me in the application process or to prepare me for what to expect. This is a common barrier for first-generation students, with many having limited access to resources and people with experience of higher education, creating a lack of information about higher education in the home (Partida, 2018). This means that many first-

generation students must independently research how to access higher education themselves or rely on the resources offered by their schools, as I did. Pasero (2016) found that most first-generation students did their pre-entry research online, using university websites and league tables, as opposed to second-generation students who were more likely to visit multiple institutions, attending open days. This means that first-generation students risk making uninformed decisions about the university they wish to attend, often selecting a university in a city they have never visited or simply selecting the university closest to home. Admittedly, I didn't even consider any universities that were further than 20 miles from my home, and when receiving university offers, I chose the university closest to home. For these reasons, universities must have informative and detailed websites, and must hold open days to help first-generation students with their university selection process.

A lack of social capital among first-generation students is common and can have a huge impact on a student's success. I was lucky that my school advertised and encouraged students to partake in NU Entry—an initiative offered by Northumbria University to students in their first year of sixth form or college who meet certain eligibility criteria. Students who complete the first year of NU Entry get 16 UCAS points to use when applying to the university. This scheme was extremely useful to me as I achieved just below the UCAS points that I was told I needed in my conditional offer to attend Northumbria, so the 16 extra points made up the difference. Without them, being accepted onto the course I wanted may have been more difficult. I strongly believe that pre-university outreach programs are crucial for preparing first-generation students for higher education. My school participated in many of these. They regularly had university representatives visit the school to tell us about their institution and who it would be suitable for, preparing us for what to expect when attending, and arranged university visits for whole year groups to local universities. I found this useful in preparing me for life as a higher education student. Cates and Schaeffle (2011) found that pre-university outreach greatly increased students' social capital and allowed access to more resources on attending higher education. This supports my view that such programs have a huge impact on first-generation students, making them more aware of courses offered, the application process, and how to prepare for higher education. For this reason, I think that every university should offer this type of support and should reach out to local schools, particularly targeting underrepresented students. This will help to overcome the barriers of underrepresentation and lack of family and peer academic support faced by first-generation students.

Another important barrier faced by first-generation students is that often we experience a lack of campus connectedness. This means that we don't feel as though we belong on campus and may feel unsatisfied with our relationship with the university. It has been found that first-generation students report lower ratings of belonging and lower use of services compared with non-first-generation students. There is a strong relationship between campus connectedness and student persistence, where the greater a student's sense of belonging, the more likely that they will persist to graduation, and therefore the greater their chances of success (Stebbleton et al., 2014). These findings demonstrate the importance of feeling connected on campus to succeed. They suggest that universities that engage with students and offer support for those who feel as though they don't belong will have greater graduation and success rates among first-generation students. One way to engage students that I found useful in making me feel included and like I belonged is having interactive lectures. For example, in one of my very first lectures at university, the

lecturer organized a quiz for us on Kahoot! (a quiz website joined using a code provided by the lecturer). The first prize was textbooks, which allowed students to get competitive, have fun, and help each other with the answers, while also providing an opportunity to engage with new people. This was the first moment that I felt part of the academic community. Therefore, I think it is important for lecturers and university staff to offer opportunities for students to speak to other students and make new friends. I recommend that all lectures have interactive elements to engage all students, as this will help to increase students' sense of campus connectedness and, ultimately, their chance of success.

## Summary

First-generation students are often underrepresented by universities compared with other minority students and face many barriers in attending university. This is the case both for applying to university and while studying. In my opinion, by increasing the social capital of first-generation students through targeted intervention (open days, university residentials, summer camps, and so on), the barriers mentioned in this piece could be significantly reduced, therefore increasing the success rates among first-generation students.

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