

Office of the President

TO MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE:

DISCUSSION ITEM

For Meeting of May 18, 2022

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AND THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This discussion will focus on first-generation college students and the “hidden curriculum”¹—that is, the implicit, unwritten rules about how to navigate and succeed in college. The item provides contextual information about first-generation college students at UC, including select demographic characteristics of this student population. Because first-generation college students are by definition the first in their families to attend college, they seldom have access to the tacit rules that prepare new students to succeed. Not being privy to these unwritten rules is a barrier to success for many first-generation college students as they navigate the brand-new college environment. The goal of this item is to inform discussion of how the University might better address the hidden curriculum and foster success for first-generation college students.

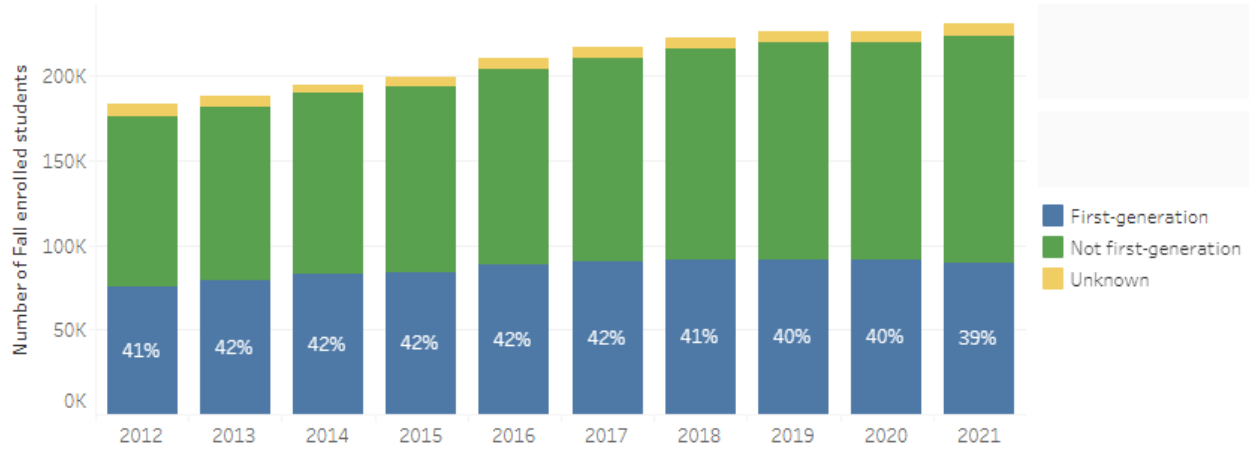
BACKGROUND

The UC system serves a large and growing population of students striving to be part of the first generation in their families to earn a four-year university degree. In fall 2021, nearly two in five UC undergraduates identified as first-generation² college students (see Figure 1). This translates to over 89,000 students at all nine undergraduate campuses.

1 Educational psychologist Philip Jackson coined this term in 1968, and it was the subsequent title of a book by MIT psychiatrist Benson R. Snyder. While the phrase seems to imply intention—a curriculum is something typically planned and disseminated—the implication here is that there are existing academic and social norms of which first-generation students might be unaware, but which are implicitly understood by students coming from a family with a history of higher education.

2 The University defines a first-generation college student as a student where neither parent nor guardian have earned a four-year college degree.

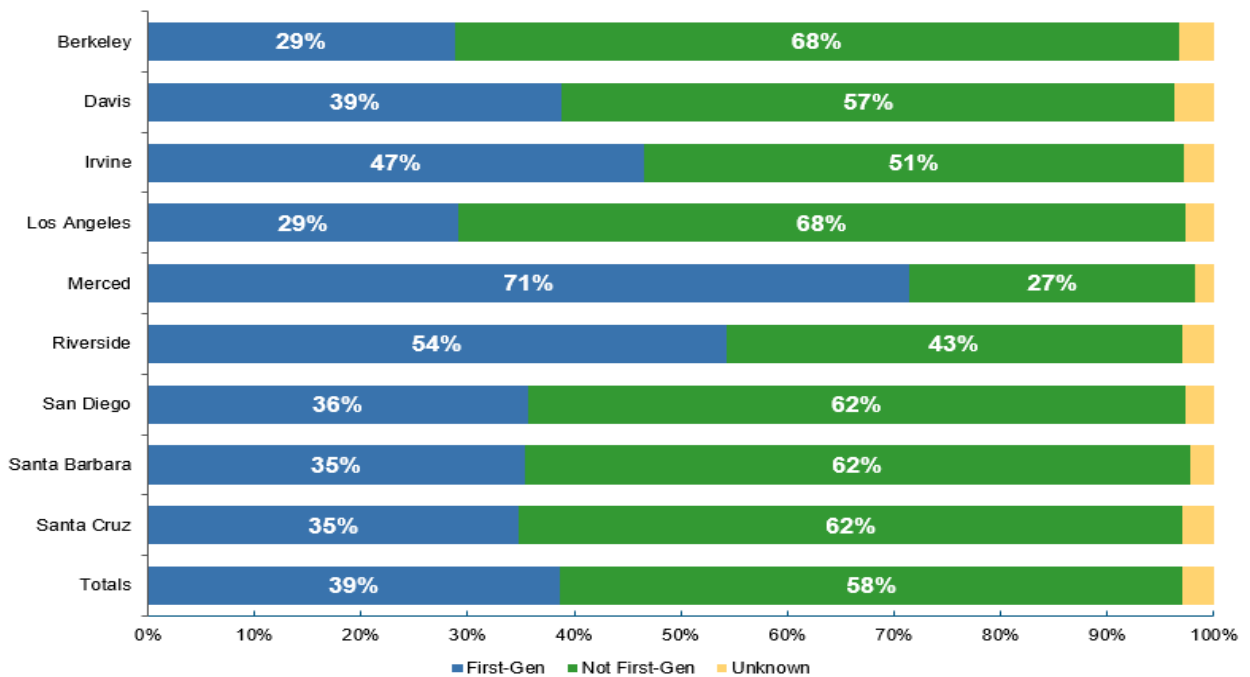
Figure 1. 2012–2021 UC Systemwide Undergraduate Fall Enrollment, by Generation Status



Source: University of California Information Center, 2022

At the campus level, UC Merced has the highest percent of first-generation college students, with more than seven out of ten undergraduates identifying as such. Further, more than half (54 percent) of all undergraduates at UC Riverside and nearly half (47 percent) at UC Irvine are first-generation students (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. 2021 Campus Fall Enrollment, by Generation Status

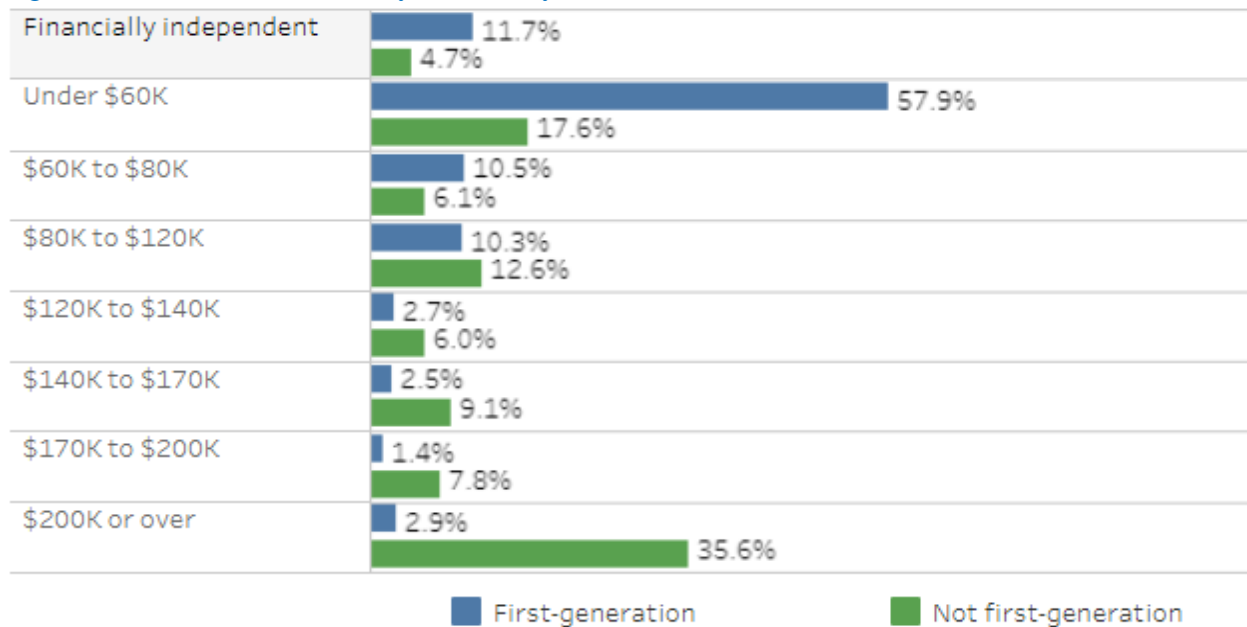


Source: University of California Information Center, 2022

UC’s first-generation students reflect greater ethnic diversity and come from homes with a lower median income than do their undergraduate peers. Compared with non–first-generation students, first-generation UC undergraduates are more likely to come from historically underrepresented

groups, to come from households where English was not the first or primary language spoken, to be transfer students, and to receive Pell Grants—the federal aid programs for families with incomes of roughly \$50,000 or less. Further, compared with non-first-generation college students, their first-generation counterparts are more likely to come from families with lower family incomes (see Figure 3). In 2020–21, nearly three in five first-generation undergraduates across UC came from families with incomes of less than \$60,000 per year. In contrast, fewer than one in five non-first-generation students come from families in this income category.

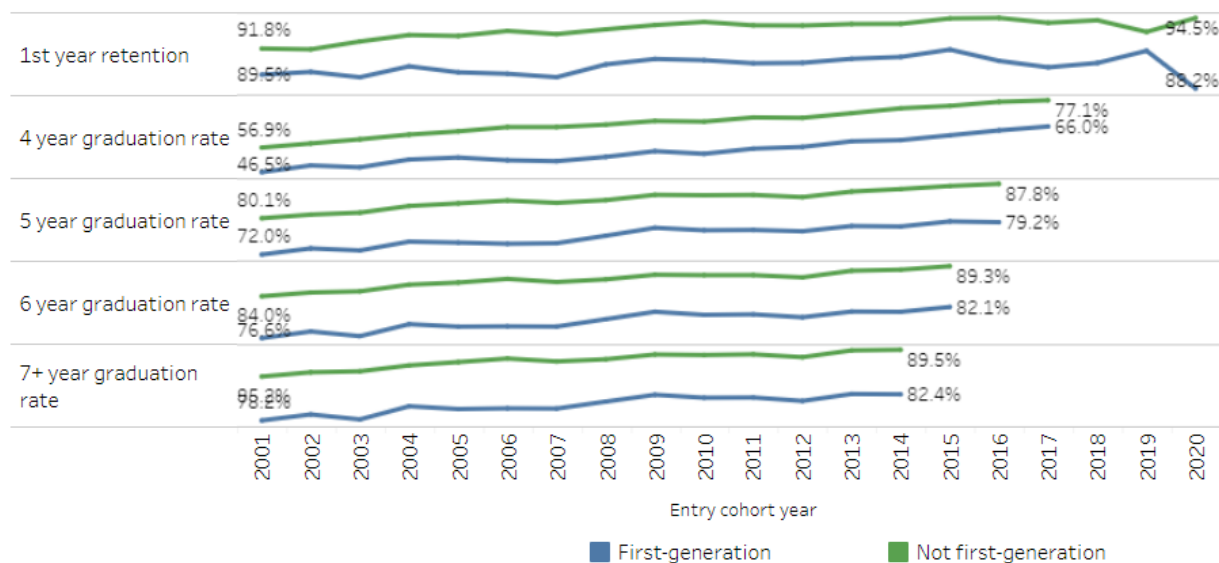
Figure 3. Distribution of Family Income by Generation Status



Source: University of California Information Center, 2022

First-generation college students at UC often find success, but gaps in completion remain. The retention and graduation trends for first-generation students parallel those of non-first-generation college students (see Figure 4). However, from first-year retention rates to seven-year graduation rates or greater, first-generation students are slightly behind their non-first-generation college peers, revealing continued completion gaps.

Figure 4. First-year Retention and Graduation Rates among Freshman-Entry Undergraduates, by Generation Status



Source: University of California Information Center, 2022

While several factors may contribute to this graduation gap, research has shown that first-generation college students struggle to adjust to college and identify a lack of information as a significant barrier to completing college.³ Students who are first in their family to attend college tend to have a more difficult time accessing and understanding information that would aid them in making decisions related to completion.⁴ This information barrier is also known as the hidden curriculum.

What is the Hidden Curriculum?

Research defines the hidden curriculum as a set of vague or unclear, unwritten rules that are “implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational interaction.”⁵ This means that the hidden curriculum is a set of expectations that students are supposed to follow, yet these rules are not expressly communicated or taught. The hidden curriculum is “hidden” because it is usually unacknowledged or unexamined and is accepted as the status quo. Those with prior knowledge of the rules consider them to be natural and universal, and following them is simply “how it’s done.”⁶ The students who know and understand these unspoken rules and tacit norms are

³ Gibbons, M. M., Rhinehart, A., & Hardin, E., “How first-generation college students adjust to college,” *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice* 20, no. 4 (2019): 488–510.

⁴ Pascarella, E. T., Person, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T., “First-generation college students,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 75, no. 3 (2004): 249–284.

⁵ Sambell, K., & McDowell. “The construction of the hidden curriculum: Messages and meanings in the assessment of student learning.” *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 23, (1998): 391–402.

⁶ Gable, R., *The hidden curriculum: First generation students at legacy universities*. Princeton University Press, 2021.

prepared to succeed in college because they already know the rules, and the students with no or little prior knowledge are not even aware when they are breaking the rules, or how to use the rules to their advantage.⁷

Most first-generation college students are unaware of the postsecondary hidden curriculum before going to college. Instead, many of them only learn this hidden knowledge through trial and error, missteps and confusing experiences where it seems as if everyone else knows what is happening except them.⁸ Some examples of the hidden curriculum may include learning how to attend a professor's office hours, how to interact with peers from different backgrounds, or how to use a college research library.

The Hidden Curriculum as a Barrier to Academic Success

One central reason why the hidden curriculum is a barrier to success for first-generation college students is largely due to its exclusionary nature. Without the informal advising a student might receive from a parent or guardian who has attended college, first-generation college students may be excluded from important services and resources simply because they did not know how to access them. This is especially true during the pandemic, where the number of students experiencing housing and food insecurity has increased. Despite the increased demand for services, more than half of students in a recent survey indicated they did not know their campus offered emergency support or they were not sure how to apply.⁹

Besides the hidden curriculum being a barrier to services and resources to address basic needs, it serves as a barrier to other educational opportunities. For instance, first-generation college students tend to have lower levels of extracurricular involvement and interaction with peers outside of class.¹⁰ This lower level of engagement limits social opportunities, access to new social and professional networks, and membership in professional organizations. First-generation college students may be missing out on important opportunities that could also transform their lives after college because they do not have access to the informal networks that lead to these opportunities. Specifically, families' lack of knowledge regarding the importance of collegiate professional and social networks to access internships and careers may restrict awareness of these opportunities for first-generation college students.¹¹ This lack of information related to career planning is also true for other educational opportunities, such as study abroad, undergraduate research, and community involvement.

⁷ Gable, *The hidden curriculum*.

⁸ Gable, *The hidden curriculum*.

⁹ Sanchez, A., "Deconstructing the hidden curriculum in COVID-19," eCampus News, April 15, 2021, <https://www.ecampusnews.com/2021/04/15/deconstructing-the-hidden-curriculum-in-covid-19/>.

¹⁰ Pascarella, E. T., Person, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T., "First-generation college students," *The Journal of Higher Education* 75, no. 3 (2004): 249–284.

¹¹ Parks-Yancy, R., "Interactions into opportunities: Career management for low-income, first-generation African American college students," *Journal of College Student Development* 53, no. 4 (2012): 510–523.

Making the Hidden Curriculum Explicit

To address the potential negative impacts of the hidden curriculum for first-generation college students, scholars recommend identifying the information for a public audience and making it explicit.¹² Further, research suggests that postsecondary institutions should provide earlier, more frequent, and more specific information about what to expect to help first-generation students navigate college campuses. Other recommendations include deepening parental engagement beyond newsletters and updates to more inclusive experiences for the families of first-generation students.¹³

For decades, UC campuses have engaged in efforts to shed light on the hidden curriculum for first-generation students and their families. In 2017, the University formalized a systemwide First-Generation Initiative¹⁴ to ensure that students and families have the *college knowledge* and support to avail themselves of the myriad services and opportunities available to them. The initiative was modeled after a UC Irvine faculty-led initiative to create mentor relationships between first-generation faculty and students. Under the umbrella of the systemwide initiative, campuses built upon existing efforts and instituted new programs and practices to support first-generation students and to expose the hidden curriculum.

Systemwide and campus efforts take a variety of forms including but not limited to:

- Dedicated first-generation student centers
- Living/learning communities
- Faculty- and peer-mentoring programs
- Summer bridge programs
- Summer research programs
- Career readiness and networking conferences
- Socials
- Etiquette dinners
- College terminology guides

At the systemwide level, a comprehensive website was created containing resources and featuring first-generation faculty, staff, and student stories. All ten UC campuses host first-generation websites containing resources for freshman, transfer, and graduate students; faculty members; and families (see Appendix A). The systemwide office also designed and furnished campuses with posters, pins, and T-shirts to be worn at the beginning of the fall term and for National First-Gen Day—simple, yet powerful gestures to welcome students and make visible to them successful role models and potential mentors, including chancellors and faculty.

¹² Gable, R., *The hidden curriculum: First generation students at legacy universities*. Princeton University Press, 2021.

¹³ Gable, *The hidden curriculum*.

¹⁴ “#Firstgen We’re a university of college trailblazers,” University of California, <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/initiative/student-opportunity/first-generation-students>

Notable examples of campus efforts to reveal the hidden curriculum abound. One common effort available at many UC campuses is first-generation living-learning communities. At UC Merced, where 71 percent of students are the first in their families to attend college, the Fiat Lux Program¹⁵ brings income-eligible first-generation students together in a living-learning community during their first year, promoting a sense of belonging and providing information and support for navigating the transition to college. The intensive four-year program provides students with dedicated counselors and student mentors, as well as a financial aid package of \$20,000 per year. Program requirements like advising appointments, faculty receptions, socials, and professional development workshops ensure that students are exposed to a wide range of experiences that will benefit them academically, socially, and professionally. The components of living-learning communities not only expose first-generation students to the hidden curriculum, but help them to identify ways to navigate and overcome this information barrier.

Another type of programming common among UC campuses is the dedication of centers and spaces exclusively for first-generation students. UC Santa Barbara provides dedicated space and programming for its 35 percent first-generation students¹⁶. The Opening New Doors to Accelerating Success (ONDAS) Student Center's mission is to promote success and retention among first-generation students. ONDAS also supports faculty professional development. Center services include mentoring, academic advising, a speaker's series, and text-based support networks for first- and second-year students and transfer students to help them gain knowledge about the hidden curriculum and how to make the most of their college experience.

In addition to programs that prepare first-generation students to get the most out of their undergraduate experience are summer programs that prepare them for graduate school and highlight information that is not otherwise made obvious to them. UC Riverside's Mentoring Summer Research Internship Program (MSRIP) provides opportunities for students to engage in faculty-supervised research to prime them for graduate study. During the eight-week program, students learn practical skills, from writing a research abstract to presenting their research at a culminating symposium. Students are also introduced to the graduate application process and experience. Ultimately, participants develop relationships with peers and faculty, increase their competitiveness for graduate school admission, and learn how to navigate and thrive in the graduate school environment.

College jargon can be a barrier to full participation in campus life, and first-generation students may not know the terminology. As a response, UC Riverside offers the R'Jargon Guide,¹⁷ containing registration, academic, financial, residential, and student service terminology specific to the Riverside campus. The guide demystifies terms like breadth requirements, dean, major, financial aid, and education abroad, the definitions of which may be taken for granted by

¹⁵ "Fiat Lux Scholars Program," University of California Merced, <https://fiatlux.ucmerced.edu/>

¹⁶ "Opening New Doors to Accelerating Success Student Center," University of California Santa Barbara, <https://ondas.ucsb.edu/home>

¹⁷ "Student Resources," University of California, Riverside, https://firstgen.ucr.edu/resources/students#campus_resources_and_terminology

individuals with prior higher education knowledge and experience. Similarly, UC Irvine provides the Guide to Thrive for First-Generation and First-Year Students¹⁸ with key terms and advice about everything from making the transition to college to adopting an academic mindset.

Family support is critical to first-generation students as they pursue a college degree, and that requires orientation to the hidden curriculum for not only students, but also their families. UC Santa Cruz features resources for parents and guardians on their first-generation initiative website.¹⁹ Resources include advice from first-generation students called “Student Voices: What I wish my parents/guardians knew” and guidance from other parents/guardians of current students and alumni, in different languages with English translation. These additional efforts to interact with families help to demystify the hidden curriculum and make information and support more clear and accessible.

For links to campus first-generation resources with additional examples of campus programs, activities and supports, see Attachment 1.

CONCLUSION

The hidden curriculum presents a real barrier to students who are the first in their families to attend college. Without interventions to make known the hidden curriculum, first-generation students will likely miss out on the full range of experiences that contribute to their personal and professional growth and to their future success.

Fully 42 percent of all UC undergraduates are the first in their family to attend college, compared with 25 percent at similar public institutions and 18 percent at Association of American Universities private research schools. Therefore, the University has made a decades-long commitment to exposing and explaining the hidden curriculum, and it can do more. Meaningful and effective support for first-generation students and their families can be transformational; however, these activities are also costly. Living-learning communities, summer programs, and peer mentoring, to name a few, require housing, paid staff, and other resources. With ongoing resources and support, the University can continue to ensure that first-generation students have the information and resources to thrive at UC and beyond.

KEY TO ACRONYMS

MSRIP	Mentoring Summer Research Internship Program (UC Riverside)
ONDAS	Opening New Doors to Accelerating Success Student Center (UC Santa Barbara)

ATTACHMENT: UC Campus First-Generation Resource Websites

¹⁸ “Guide to Thrive for first generation and first year students,” University of California Irvine <http://wp.due.uci.edu/ucfirstgen/wp-content/uploads/sites/34/2016/09/SSI-Guide-to-Thrive.pdf>

¹⁹ “First Generation Initiative,” University of California Santa Cruz, <https://firstgen.ucsc.edu/resources/parent-guardian-resources/index.html>

Attachment 1

UC Campus First-Generation Resource Websites

Berkeley	https://admissions.berkeley.edu/first-gen-resources
Davis	https://firstgen.ucdavis.edu/
Irvine	https://firstgen.due.uci.edu/
Los Angeles	https://firsttogo.ucla.edu/
Merced	https://fiatlux.ucmerced.edu/
Riverside	https://firstgen.ucr.edu/
San Diego	https://srs.ucsd.edu/support/first-gen.html
San Francisco	https://firstgen.ucsf.edu/
Santa Barbara	https://firstgen.ucsb.edu/
Santa Cruz	https://firstgen.ucsc.edu/