



American Youth  
Policy Forum

## **Providing a Continuum of Supports for First-Generation, Low-Income Students' Success**

*An AYPF Discussion Group*

### **Overview and Event Goals**

According to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, in 2020, [65 percent](#) of all jobs will require education beyond high school. Over a lifetime, individuals with a bachelor's degree earn [84 percent](#) more than those with only a high school diploma. Even within the same occupation, those with higher levels of education earn more money. Individuals with postsecondary education credentials are also [more likely](#) to vote, to volunteer, and to enjoy better health outcomes. The United States will be facing a deficit of [5 million](#) trained workers if our current trends in postsecondary graduation rates continue – a worrisome trend, considering the labor market needs and benefits of earning a postsecondary education credential.

As we look for strategies to increase postsecondary credential attainment for all students, we recognize that special attention should be paid to the needs of first-generation college students from low-income homes (FGLI). Given the difficulty of classifying this group of students, we acknowledge and hope to explore further the ways in which “first-generation” is defined, as well as other sub-categorizations that must be considered in addressing the needs of this population, such as a student's race, country of birth, language proficiency, school quality, and geographic location. Additionally, it is important to note that AYPF typically defines “postsecondary” as any experience beyond a secondary credential that puts a young person on a pathway to long-term success, as we acknowledge that there are many pathways to achieving a variety of different credentials (i.e., vocational certificates, apprenticeships, internships, etc.). In this context, we are specifically referring to the obtainment of two-year and four-year postsecondary education credentials by FGLI students, given the positive labor market and life outcomes associated with obtaining these credentials.

In this discussion group, we will explore the ways in which policy and practice can better support FGLI students. FGLI students often face unique and significant barriers to educational attainment, and on average have [lower rates](#) of postsecondary enrollment and persistence than their more affluent peers with parents who went to college. Nationally, fewer than [one-third](#) of FGLI (and fewer than one-half of low-income, non-first generation students) who enroll in a four year college will graduate within six years, according to the most recent data from the Pell Institute. FGLI students are also more vulnerable to the “[summer melt](#)” phenomenon, in which high school graduates are accepted to and enrolled in college but do not actually attend in the fall.

Various bodies of work indicate that these trends may be due to a variety of barriers that FGLI students face in accessing and persisting through postsecondary education. Academically, FGLI students are more likely to attend low-performing, under-resourced schools which may not adequately prepare them for

college-level coursework. Financially, the high costs associated with postsecondary education and the complicated processes for receiving aid may prevent many FGLI students from applying to, enrolling in, and completing college due to the inability to afford it. In terms of navigation or “college knowledge” barriers, the complexity of navigating the college-going process itself may hinder many FGLI students from achieving greater rates of college access and success. For instance, FGLI students may be unfamiliar with the complicated logistical processes required to actually get to college or may attend schools which do not provide adequate supports in these areas, such as applying for college and financial aid, taking college entrance exams, and meeting other important deadlines. Moreover, these students may feel particularly isolated once they get to college if, as the first in their families to go to college, they are unfamiliar with college norms or lack a sense of community among peers with similar life experiences.

The majority of interventions aimed at increasing postsecondary enrollment and persistence rates of FGLI students often do so by addressing a single barrier in isolation, such as programs that only focus on academic preparation or financial assistance. In addition to fragmentation across barriers, supports are often siloed across time periods. Many interventions occur while a student is in high school, or take place once the student is already on the college campus, rather than spanning over the entire transition process. The problem with these approaches is not that they are ineffective, but rather that the challenges they seek to mitigate do not occur in isolation – the obstacles that FGLI students face present a *collective* barrier that is best addressed comprehensively. AYPF believes that in order to most effectively support students to and through postsecondary education, particularly FGLI students, solutions must address multiple barriers, as well as span sectors and time periods. Youth-serving organizations and agencies must think of the best ways to provide a comprehensive continuum of supports for students in order to increase the likelihood of success in college and beyond.

The primary goal of this discussion group is to identify policy opportunities to encourage cross-system coordination in providing a continuum of supports to better address the needs of FGLI students. AYPF aims to achieve this goal by:

- Facilitating discussion on how to best address/improve siloed systems through:
  - Coordination across systems, between K-12 and postsecondary institutions
  - Coordination across time, from kindergarten through high school graduation, to the summer between high school and college, to postsecondary education
  - Coordination across barriers by combating the academic, financial, and navigation barriers in a comprehensive manner, rather than addressing a single barrier in isolation
- Highlighting research-supported best practices, programs, and policies that help facilitate FGLI students’ access, transition to, completion of postsecondary education in a comprehensive manner.