



Stephen F. Austin State University
Student Success Center and School of Social Work

First-Generation Student Needs Assessment

November 2022

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FOREWORD

At SFA, over 40% of undergraduate students are “first generation,” meaning they have neither a parent nor a guardian who completed a bachelor’s degree. It also means they are at-promise students for one of the greatest transformations life in America offers — being the first in their families to achieve four-year college educations.

Why is a bachelor’s degree transformative? In 2020, Forbes magazine reported that annual median earnings of bachelor’s degree recipients working full time were about \$25,000 higher than those of high school graduates. Over a lifetime, this adds up to substantially more wealth. Correspondingly, the employment rate for college graduates is significantly higher (83% compared with 69% for high school graduates in 2020). College graduates are also more likely to receive employer-provided retirement plans and health insurance, and less likely to live in a household receiving public benefits, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, and free and reduced-price lunch programs.

In addition to financial benefits, a college degree offers considerable quality of life benefits. College grads are more likely to exercise vigorously at least once a week, three times less likely to smoke, more likely to vote, and more likely to volunteer in their communities.

What does this all add up to? A 2021 study published by the National Academy of Sciences found that life expectancy for college graduates in America is still increasing compared with past generations. On the other hand, for the first time in American history, life expectancy has started to decline for high school graduates. A college degree is, therefore, a game changer for an individual. It produces not only a lifetime of benefits but also the benefit of a longer lifetime.

This is all the more important when we consider that this first-generation needs assessment reveals about a third of SFA’s first-generation students come from families hovering near the poverty line, with a family income of less than \$40,000. (For a family of four in the

United States in 2022, the poverty line was \$28,000.) A college degree places these students on a trajectory to break this cycle and realize their dreams. *A college degree is a dream conferred.*

I want to thank Raquel Skidmore, director of the Student Success Center; Kate Childress, coordinator of the Generation Jacks program; Dr. Emmerentie Oliphant, director of SFA’s Doctorate in Social Work program and Buddy Zeagler Endowed Professor for Community-Based Research; and all the students who worked on this study. This is the first ever comprehensive assessment of first-generation student needs at SFA, and it makes a powerful argument for increasing supports for this demographic.

This needs assessment uses SFA institutional data, the results of focus groups with students, information captured in a survey of first-generation students, and the real-life stories of our first-generation students gathered through techniques such as photovoice and conversation cafés to convey their lived experience and pinpoint where supports are working for them and where SFA still has work to do to lift these students up. I invite SFA administrators, faculty and staff to look at the recommendations made by this study, take them to heart and — most importantly — put them into bold action.

For our first gens, I can think of no better message than the one Curtis Mayfield provides in his exuberant anthem, “Move On Up”:

Move on up

And keep on wishin’.

Remember your dream is your only scheme

So keep on pushin’.

Marc Guidry, PhD

Associate Provost

Stephen F. Austin State University

PROJECT TEAM



"I AM A FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT. THIS IS MY STORY."

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the following people who supported this project:

- **Dr. Marc Guidry, associate provost**, for establishing this initiative and providing guidance during the project.
- **Dr. Freddie Avant, associate dean/director of the School of Social Work**, for his ongoing support to provide resources for the project.
- **All research participants** for their invaluable contributions to give us a better understanding of life as a first-generation student.
- **Project team** for their time, dedication and commitment to make the project a success.

This report is written from a strengths perspective, with utmost respect for our first-generation students. Their participation in the study enabled us to develop a deeper understanding of their needs, their experiences and the realities that are part of their everyday lives.

Through our conversations with SFA first-generation students, we have seen their strengths, resilience, skills to survive challenging situations, and ability to stay positive and focused on a successful future. With their help, we were able to identify the priorities SFA needs to address.

We hope this report reflects the voice of the first-generation students; we merely facilitated a process, and they told their story.

Emmerentie Oliphant, Raquel Skidmore and
Kate Childress

IRB# #2022-2183

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

First-generation students are in a unique position. College life is a new experience that can empower students and successfully initiate a career journey for them. It is an important priority for Stephen F. Austin State University to assist the first-generation student in successfully adapting to college life. SFA provides an abundance of services to first-generation students. With that in mind, this research was designed to identify the specific needs of first-generation students to further enhance the support and services SFA offers them.

In spring 2022, the Student Success Center and School of Social Work developed, conducted and implemented a needs assessment based on appreciative inquiry and participatory action principles. This research is based on the important principle that the “lived experiences” of first-generation students are crucial to the development of an understanding of needs. First-generation students are the experts of their own lives, and they have to participate in all aspects of the research process. The project team included students who participated in the development and decision-making about the research.

The needs assessment was based on a multi-data approach, including conversation cafés, key informant interviews, photovoice and a survey to first-generation students. The research was informed by guiding questions, including the following: What are students’ experiences? How do students navigate college life? What are their strengths? How do they access resources? What are the barriers and challenges they experience?

Important findings and themes emerged from the data. These findings informed priorities related to fulfilling needs (college preparation, academic success, financial security, and social support and wellness), equipping first-generation students with academic and soft skills, enhancing the learner-friendly environment, assisting with academic success, and maximizing support. Specific recommendations are provided to assist the SFA leadership team in making decisions about the implementation of the report’s findings.

It is important to note that the information gathered is based on the students’ perceptions. We would like to acknowledge that SFA has many services across campus that are provided to first-generation students. Some of these programs and/or services are listed below.

- **Academic Assistance Resource Center** provides free peer tutoring to all students and meets students’ needs with versatile tutoring options, such as in-person, online, livestream, individual and group walk-ins.
- **First-Generation Organization** is a student-led organization that creates community and service opportunities for first-generation students and/or other students who would like to participate and/or identify with the challenges of first-generation students and who could benefit from involvement in service projects and social engagement opportunities.

- **Generation Jacks, or GenJacks**, is a high-impact student support program coordinated by the Student Success Center. Designed specifically for SFA's first-generation students, the program is an extended learning community that offers academic support and resources, mentoring, service-learning opportunities, career and professional development, and social engagement. GenJacks students attend a three-day Summer Leadership Academy the week prior to classes beginning that provides tools and resources to help students start out strong in their academic journey.
- **Lumberjack Wellness Network** is composed of faculty and staff who feel passionate about removing the stigma around mental health. Through iCare ambassadors and a network of campus offices, LWN educates the SFA community on mental health issues. It empowers faculty and staff to have meaningful and helpful conversations with students and provides resources to students in need.
- **National First-Generation College Celebration** is held in November to celebrate the success of first-generation students. GenJacks partners with campus stakeholders to hold a resource fair and other special events throughout the week for first-generation students. This event allows first-generation students to be recognized for their successes and engage with campus resources, as well as increases campus awareness of our first-generation student population.
- **New Lumberjack Experience - SFAS 1101** course promotes student success and retention through a one-credit-hour course that develops a sense of belonging by discovering and connecting with the Lumberjack community. Key program goals are developing such skills as time management, study skills, and personal and academic goals, as well as contributing to a respectful and inclusive environment.
- **Registration Rally** is coordinated by the Office of the Registrar along with campus partners. It emphasizes the needs of first-generation students to ensure they have access to all things related to registration.
- **Residence Life** provides an opportunity for first-generation students who participate in GenJacks to join a Residential Learning Community, which builds community, social belonging and support among the first-generation student population.

INTRODUCTION

The mission of SFA focuses on engaging students in a learner-centered environment that offers opportunities to students to prepare them for the challenges of living in the global community. To fulfill the mission, faculty and staff provide personal attention to students. This is true for all students, including first-generation students who make up 42% of the student population. This report provides information based on the perceptions and experiences of the first-generation students.

For the purpose of the report, the definition of a first-generation student is *"an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree"* (Darrah et. al., 2022).

To effectively support first-generation students, SFA has to understand the realities and challenges students experience. It is important to understand first-generation

students as a diverse group with similarities and differences in experiences, backgrounds and views about higher education.

This report provides an overview of a needs assessment conducted in 2022. The assessment generated important evidence of needs, experiences and priorities as they relate to first-generation students. Multiple qualitative and quantitative data methods were used to engage first-generation students in the study. Findings were either confirmed or disputed by both methods.

Literature provides evidence that the findings are consistent with trends in first-generation studies. For example, AlMazrui (2016); Roksa, Silver, Deutschlander and Whitley (2020); Ma and Shea (2021); and Ricks and Warren (2021) provide information consistent with the findings of this needs assessment.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT PURPOSE

The purpose of this needs assessment is to explore the current situation of SFA first-generation students in order to meet their needs and improve student success, ultimately increasing retention rates and graduation rates for this student population.

In addition, the findings from the needs assessment can be used to raise awareness among faculty, staff and the campus community regarding first-generation students.

OBJECTIVES

1. Assess the needs of SFA first-generation students by focusing on academic and student life challenges (current situation), including quality of life (family) and experiences.
2. Provide the profile of current first-generation students based on existing data.
3. Identify the priorities to develop recommendations to SFA leadership.
4. Formulate recommendations to SFA leadership based on the data.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Student Success Center and School of Social Work used an appreciative inquiry approach to conduct the needs assessment. An appreciative inquiry is based on mixed methodology, including key informant interviews, conversation cafés, photovoice and a survey. The approach is based on the participatory action principles of inclusion, shared decision-making about the research process, collaboration and reflection. Of most importance is the inclusion of participants with “lived experiences of being a first-generation student” (Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

For the purpose of the study, an appreciative inquiry team was created. The team included first-generation students, GenJacks students and counselors, and graduate assistants, who were all trained in data collection procedures, including confidentiality and consent. The team of students facilitated the conversation cafés, photovoice and key informant interviews. They further assisted with the development of all data collection protocols, the online survey and the recruitment material. The team also provided validation for the findings.

The following four data collection methods were used:

- Conversation cafés to collect in-depth data related to experiences, stories, meanings and perceptions.

- Key informant interviews to engage first-generation students in questions about their experiences and needs.
- An online Qualtrics survey to collect the data from first-generation and GenJacks students on their quality of life as students.
- Photovoice to describe the daily lives of first-generation students at SFA. This method used pictures that students took of their college lives and how their lives are impacted by contextual or environmental issues. GenJacks students and first-generation students who are not part of the GenJacks program submitted photos and narratives describing their experiences related to their photos.

The data was analyzed and specific themes, trends and priorities were identified. As a result, the appreciative inquiry team is presenting recommendations to the SFA leadership team.

To increase the responses, all first-generation students were invited to participate.

Table 1 provides an overview of the final samples.

PARTICIPANTS

Table 1: Sample Information

Method	Sample Number of Participants
Conversation cafés	113
Interviews	30
Photovoice	24
Survey (general first-generation students)	382
Survey (GenJacks only)	61

Conversation café and key informant interviews

A total of 143 first-generation students participated in the conversation cafés and key informant interviews. In terms of age, 95% of the participants were between 18 and 25, with 3.33% between 25 and 30, and 1.67% older than 30. Participants were mostly Hispanic (55.88%), Black/African American (20.59%) and white (17.65%). The group included Asian (1.47%), American Indian (1.47%) and undocumented immigrant (2.94%) students. Most of the participants were female students (70%), 21.67% of the participants were male students, and 1.67% of the participants identified as transgender.

Most of the students were from Houston (45%), while 20% were from Dallas and 20% were from East Texas. Additionally, 15% indicated they were from outside the region, state or nation, including the Rio Grande Valley,

San Antonio, South Texas, West Texas and Austin. Most of the students lived on campus (73.33%) while only 8.33% lived with their parents/guardians/relatives. A full 40% of the participants indicated annual family income lower than \$30,000, and 10% indicated between \$30,000 and \$50,000. Some 11.67% reported above \$50,000 for family income, while 18.33% did not know. Most participants did not have any other family members enrolled in college (73.33%), and 23.33% indicated a sibling or cousin in college at the same time.

Only 13.33% were transfer students. Almost all — 95% — were full-time students, 35% were freshmen, 31.67% were sophomores, 16.67% were juniors, 15% were seniors and 1.67% were graduate students.

Survey

The survey was completed by 382 students. Mostly female students (77.66%) responded, while 19.78% of the respondents were male and 0.73% of the respondents indicated they were transgender. Of the respondents, 17.22% were freshmen, 18.68% were sophomores, 25.64% were juniors and 34.80% were seniors. Finally, 2.20% were graduate students. Most of the students were full time (87.91%), while 9.52% were part time. Of the participants, 44.69% were transfer students, 54.21% were not and 1.10% preferred to not respond.

Most of the participants were from Texas: 40.29% from East Texas, 13.92% from the Dallas area, and 28.94% from the Houston area. Only 14.65% were from other Texas regions or out of state.

Lastly, 21.94% of the participants were members of the GenJacks organization. Of those, 40.29% of GenJacks survey participants were from East Texas, 13.92% were from Dallas and 28.94% were from Houston. Only 14.65% were from other Texas regions, states and countries, including Mexico and the Dominican Republic [N=61].

Photovoice

Twenty-four (24) students participated in the photovoice project. Participants gave permission to include their names with pictures in this report.

PROFILE OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS AT SFA

The SFA Office of Strategic Analytics and Institutional Research provides up-to-date information on self-reported demographic data. The following profile provides information specific to the **fall 2021 undergraduate headcount data**.

This data is based on the total of 10,299 SFA undergraduate students enrolled in fall 2021. Of those, 4,301 were first-generation students equaling 42%. A total of 4,765 were not first-generation students (equaling 46%), and 1,233 (12%) were unknown.

Age Range:

- Most SFA first-generation students (80%) are aged 17-24 (3,437).
- 196 (5%) of SFA first-generation students are younger than 17.

Race/Ethnicity:

- Most SFA first-generation students (48%) are white (2,059).
- 1,284 (48%) of SFA first-generation students are Hispanic.
- 644 (15%) of SFA first-generation students are Black/African American.
- 176 (4%) of SFA first-generation students are mixed race.
- 45 (1%) of SFA first-generation students are Asian.
- 39 (1%) of SFA first-generation students are American Indian or Alaskan Native.

Gender:

- Most SFA first-generation students (68%) are female (2,921).
- 1,380 (32%) of SFA first-generation students are male.

Texas Region:

- Most SFA first-generation students (41%) are from East Texas (1,762).

State:

- Most SFA first-generation students (98.72%) are from Texas (4,246).

Nation:

- Most SFA first-generation students (99.98%) are from the United States (4,300).

Family Income:

- Most SFA first-generation students (30%) have a family income of \$39,999 or less (1,298).
- 938 SFA first-generation students (22%) have a family income between \$40,000 and \$79,999.
- 859 SFA first-generation students (20%) have a family income of \$80,000 or greater.

Parent Marital Status:

- 33% of SFA first-generation students have parents who are married.
- 1,133 SFA first-generation students (27%) have single parents.

Number in Household:

- Most SFA first-generation students (59%) have 1 to 4 household members (2,546).

Utilizing Veteran Benefits:

- Most SFA first-generation students (98%) are not utilizing veteran benefits (4,235).

Housing:

- Most SFA first-generation students (72%) are housed off campus (3,096).

Non-Traditional Course Delivery:

- Most SFA first-generation students (61%) experience traditional (face-to-face) course delivery only (2,609).

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in three categories:

1. General discussion of needs as identified by first-generation students
2. Overall experiences of first-generation students
3. Specific issues first-generation students want SFA leadership to know and understand

Needs as identified by first-generation students

First-generation students who participated in the study shared valuable information about their needs. Overall, it is evident that students' needs are linked to

the limited knowledge and experience they have when they start at SFA.

The data reflects specific categories of needs.

Figure 1: Categories of First-Generation Needs



- **College preparation needs:** First-generation students need information on how to effectively prepare for life as a student at SFA. Without information and experiences shared by family or parents, students are not able to develop a clear vision (view) of college life beforehand. Students who have family members who paved the way to college usually have a clear understanding of what college means and how one can effectively prepare to be a student.
- **Academic needs:** First-generation students have the same needs as any other student starting college life. This includes the need for academic support as well as information on how to achieve success academically, choose a career and develop a career path. Appropriate support on an academic level includes assistance with developing the skills to be academically successful. Since first-generation students have to navigate college life without experience shared by parents, they can encounter challenges with tasks that are manageable for non-first-generation students. It is evident that students need assistance to effectively prepare for and sustain academic success. Of the survey participants, only 10.75% said they are able to set goals for themselves, 6.55% said they are able to put aside study time over personal commitments, and 9.02% said they are organized (N=382). Academic stressors can impact their quality of life, which, again, influences academic success.
- **Financial needs:** Financial constraints and challenges overshadow the positive experiences of the first-generation students. Balancing financial responsibilities can include supporting families, parents and themselves. Students do not necessarily understand application processes and do not have the support or prior experiences from parents or family to complete applications, such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA.
- **Social support needs:** Students whose parents attended college have a "lived experience" hearing and observing college. First-generation students do not have a holistic view of what it means to attend college and be a student. Social support from family is essential for first-generation students to feel that they are supported and to be motivated. For example, survey participants mentioned they want more information on SFA Fraternity and Sorority Life.

- **Wellness support:** Social support needs extended further than family. They included friends, social connections, religious and social organizations, and fellow students. The need for a mental health support group was identified. Only 8.01% of the survey participants indicated that they know how to find help on campus when they experience mental health problems (N=382). Participants verbalized the need to engage more with different groups on campus. Just 9.14% of the survey participants said they know how and where to get help on campus if they feel unsafe.
- **Training needs:** Students identified specific training needs related to financial issues, skills enhancement, resource connection, future and career planning, time management, and money management. For example, only 10.8% of the survey participants indicated that they know how to study proficiently, and 13.7% said they know how to retain information learned in class (N=382).

Figure 2: Training Needs

TRAINING: FINANCIAL ISSUES Money management classes Training to complete FAFSA application Finding scholarship information	SKILLS ENHANCEMENT TRAINING Study skills development Note taking and recording guidance Time management classes Reading comprehension
RESOURCE CONNECTION TRAINING Ways to get involved in campus life Scholarship opportunities Connecting with resources	FUTURE PLANNING TRAINING Exploration of career opportunities Preparing for interviews Appropriate communication about jobs

Experiences of first-generation students

What are the perceptions and experiences of the first-generation students? How do they navigate college life, which is unfamiliar to them? What do they believe is needed for their success? What are the strengths and needs of first-generation students?

"We aren't all the same. Some of us come from different backgrounds. Our parents knew nothing, so we don't know anything either."

– Conversation Café Participant

NAVIGATING COLLEGE LIFE

First-generation students have to teach themselves how to navigate college life.

First-generation students do not have family experience to lean or depend on as they navigate college life. "My family doesn't understand the perspective of a college student," said a conversation café participant. In terms of attending college, some participants mentioned

that their parents do not always understand college life. "They know it's important and good for me, but they didn't go to college, so they don't know fully" and "... they think it is like high school or something like that ..." another conversation café participant said.

"As a first-generation college student, I have struggled academically and financially. Not having parents that can guide me through enrollment, scholarship/FAFSA application, study tips and time management has left me alone in the process of trying to achieve higher education. In addition to this, my parents cannot understand the basic struggles all college students have due to not having been in my shoes. As a result, I have had to self-advocate and search for answers myself. I try to explain to my parents what is going on, even if I don't even fully understand it."

– Vanessa Rojo, Photovoice Participant

"As time goes on, I share less with my parents due to the disconnect I feel with them. Personal issues, such as being stressed about assignments as well as struggling to balance a social and student life, are concepts that are unknown to them. Due to this, they are brushed off as insignificant and left to be dealt with alone," said a photovoice participant.

Students feel they do not have the confidence to function independently as they start college. They have to acquire specific coping skills with limited knowledge about higher education prior to starting their college life. *"I have to get my foot in the door. Network my own way to my future,"* said a student participating in a key informant interview. A conversation café participant said, *"Not having enough experience compared to other students."*

Students shared they do not know anything about college life, but they are expected to know everything. *"Do away with 'you should already know this' mentality,"* said a

key informant participant. *"We do not have a foundation to provide us, talk to, managing time,"* said a conversation café participant. *"Coming into school with zero knowledge about how college works,"* said a conversation café participant. *"I know y'all may not have the exact answers, but point us in the right direction,"* said a conversation café participant. Conversation café participants indicated not knowing college terminology is difficult, especially as they start college.

Students need to acquire specific knowledge to navigate college life. Only 14% of the survey participants indicated that they know how to navigate campus life as a student (N=382). Asked about their knowledge of specific procedures and resources, participants indicated they do not have adequate knowledge. Table 2 provides information about positive responses to knowledge of SFA procedures and resources.

Table 2: Knowledge About SFA Procedures and Resources

Procedure	Percentage
Apply for FAFSA	19.34%
Apply for scholarships	15.71%
Reapply for scholarships	6.34%
Apply for TASFA	2.04%

(N=382)

The data suggests that first-generation students who completed the survey do not know how to apply for FAFSA or the Texas Application for State Financial Aid. Only 19.34% indicated they know how to apply for FAFSA and 2.04% for TASFA. In terms of scholarships, only 15.71% know how to apply for scholarships and fewer (6.34%) know how to reapply (N=382).

In terms of strengths, participants understand it is important for them to be role models for the next

generation, making the path easier for the next group of students. Conversation café students shared the desire to help other first-generation students. *"My favorite thing about being a first-generation student at SFA is being an inspiration for others, especially my siblings. Since I live at home, my siblings watch me go to college every morning and work on my dream to, hopefully, become a veterinarian. Watching me has inspired my siblings to go to college after high school,"* said a photovoice participant.

STRENGTHS AT SFA

First-generation students experience a variety of strengths at SFA.

GenJacks Strengths

"GenJacks has provided me with a community that I never thought I would find in college. The program, mentors I have found in the program, and the friends I have made have given me an endless amount of support and have provided me with so many great resources."

– Survey Participant

GenJacks students who participated in the study experience the organization as a support for first-generation students. Of the survey participants who identified as GenJacks (N=61), 43.62% indicated that the organization helps them face challenges in college. Almost 28% (27.66%) of participants indicated they meet with their success coach monthly as recommended.

The following strengths were identified:

- GenJacks is a support system, according to survey participants: *"Big support system; there is always someone I can ask for help,"* and *"GenJacks helped me with academic support, getting involved, and one more thing — GenJacks is one of the greatest in my college experience."*
- Students feel they are more aware of resources due to the organization's effort to inform students of events. The organization specifically increases access to scholarship opportunities and social events. *"The giant support system and connections it has provided,"* was one survey response. Others discussed how the organization connects students with each other.
- GenJacks provides preparation for students before they start college: *"It helped me by establishing a support team right before I even started school,"* and *"Yes, helped me through the career and other things like academic, organization or study room,"* said a survey participant. GenJacks students specifically view the opportunity to register early as a benefit.
- Success coaches and staff provide academic and emotional support: *"They listen and teach me valuable information,"* staff is *"enthusiastic and supportive,"*

and *"My GenJacks SFAS professor, my GenJacks success coaches, and GenJacks mentors I know are always going to be there to help me if ever I need it,"* said survey participants. A key informant interviewee listed *"having a required meeting about everything ... having another person to support you"* as a benefit.

- The organization helps students believe in themselves: *"... believe that I can do it as the first generation in college,"* said a survey participant.
- GenJacks inspires students to be role models and influence other students and prospective students in a positive way. It provides mentorship and leadership opportunities: *"I had a counselor, and now I'm going to be one!"* said a survey participant.
- The organization creates a sense of unity among GenJacks students. It enables students to connect socially and feel less isolated: *"I was able to meet friends and not feel completely alone. If it was not for GenJacks, I would have probably moved back home,"* said a survey participant.
- Students feel that GenJacks focuses on each student member and truly emphasizes student success: *"I love that GenJacks is so community based and that every person involved with GenJacks truly wants to see students succeed. They want to support them every step of the way,"* and *"I love that they are always encouraging us to not hold ourselves back and to pursue what we want because we have so much to accomplish,"* said survey participants.

"Joining GenJacks has been the best part about being at SFA. I made new friends and opportunities has been brought to me thanks to GenJacks. I am grateful for all the things I've learned, and I thank my counselors for being the best."

SFA Strengths

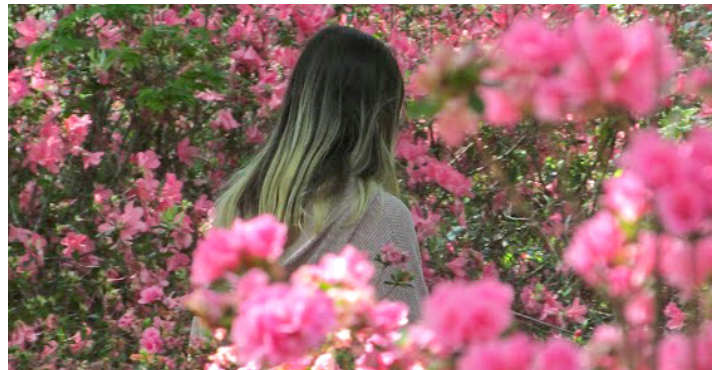
Participants identified a variety of strengths connected to SFA:

- SFA provides a safe campus where first-generation students feel welcome and are encouraged to be successful. *"My experience in college as a first-generation college student has been great. SFA has a very warm, welcoming campus environment and feels 'homey,'"* said a photovoice participant.
- The campus environment provides opportunities for self-care and wellness. Participants indicated that the calm environment on campus makes it a safe place to study.
- Faculty members create learning experiences outside the classroom, including service-learning projects and internships.
- SFA resources enable students to make a transition from high school to college. *"The resources the campus provides have made my first year in college a smooth transition from high school. My favorite resources SFA provides are the campus bus, organizations and events. They've helped me navigate campus, learn and become part of the community,"* said a photovoice participant.
- Faculty and staff are positive, supportive and available to assist students. *"Most of my professors have been supportive and are available any time I need help in my classes,"* said a photovoice participant.
- Instructors are viewed as supportive, welcoming, friendly and knowledgeable. *"The teachers are nice,"* said a conversation café participant.
- SFA feels *"like home to students,"* said a conversation café participant.
- Participants specifically mentioned the online programs. The Brightspace platform is considered a benefit and strength. Participants are able to keep track of assignments, have information in one place, and connect with other students. *"I am a full-time online student here at SFA! I will be the first to graduate with my bachelor's degree this year in my family (grandparents, mother, father). I have enjoyed my experience at SFA so much, and I feel that the courses have helped prepare me for my career. I want to be an example for my three boys when they get older. I want to demonstrate that they can do anything and be anything if they put in the work and the dedication,"* said a photovoice participant.



"My roommate and I both love to bike ride, and we decided on a beautiful day at the start of the fall semester to hop on our bikes and try to find the gardens on campus. We were both new to the campus, but after a lot of searching (and with the help of Google maps), we finally found them. We rode our bikes for a while before finally deciding to walk alongside them so that we could enjoy exploring further into the gardens. This specific picture was taken under a canopy of weeping willows. We were obsessed with this area and stayed there for about 20 minutes taking pictures and just enjoying how pretty it was!"

– Hannah Wilson, Photovoice Participant



"I learned that one key factor for adjusting to college life is taking time for yourself. It can be overwhelming and stressful to constantly stress about schoolwork all the time. I made it mandatory for me to go outside and relax. I love going for walks and enjoying the sun for a couple of hours. It not only gives me a minute to catch my breath, but it allows me to occupy myself with something that I enjoy. I definitely recommend finding a hobby or a routine that requires you to put yourself first."

– Halie Gross, Photovoice Participant

SENSE OF COMMUNITY AT SFA

First-generation students feel a sense of community at SFA. They chose SFA because of different reasons. The Nacogdoches community and the university create a welcoming environment. Conversation café participants indicated that they enjoy the sense of community and have friends among the GenJacks group. *"Nacogdoches is chill and calm, easier to make connections,"* said a conversation café participant. Students whose parents live near Nacogdoches felt that *"living near campus"* impacted their choice.

- **SFA and Nacogdoches environment:** Participants mentioned several strengths of the environment, for example, the beautiful scenery, nature and trees. Students mentioned that they enjoy being in a smaller town in a rural area. *"Less people — small town vibes,"* said a key informant interviewee.
- **The opportunities to connect with other students:** Conversation café participants specifically mentioned that several places on campus are safe areas to connect. The physical safety of meeting spaces is a priority for students. These places include the Steen Library (patio in front, open study areas, study rooms) and Cole STEM Building.
- **GenJacks program:** Students have heard about the GenJacks program for first-generation students. Several students indicated that they heard through word of mouth from students who attended SFA.
- **Access to resources:** SFA is known for offering easy access to information and resources on campus, including the AARC, Steen Library, Student Success Center, diverse student organizations and the Student Recreation Center. Students feel that they learn more about university life through access to services and organizations.
- **Affordability:** Compared with larger universities, SFA is considered *"more affordable,"* said a key informant interviewee.

It is evident that students share their positive experiences with each other and sharing that information impacts prospective students' decisions to attend SFA. They believe there are many benefits to studying at SFA, including accessible campus facilities and positive relationships with faculty, advisors and student support units. Safety and closeness to home were identified as the two major benefits. In terms of connections, the participants described relationships at SFA as *"more personable than other colleges."*

WHY DO FIRST- GENERATION STUDENTS CHOOSE SFA?

In the words of conversation café participants:

Small size of SFA

Nice people

Trees

Easier to make connections

School spirit

History of SFA

Small community

Better connections with professors

Supportive community members

Purple Haze

Landscape

Colors

Traditions

Friendly peers

Diversity of people

International programs

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Students experience challenges and barriers to balancing college quality of life. They need assistance with and support for navigating the changes.

Participants mentioned a number of unique challenges when they initially started college. Additional challenges are experienced as they navigate college life. It is evident that they do not always understand the services available to them. This impacts how they effectively navigate student life. *"I do not understand a good amount of resources available to me,"* and *"I feel lost a lot,"* said conversation café participants.

- **Being away from home:** First-generation students experience feelings of loneliness when they first move away from home to college. *"I am homesick for my family and miss being with family,"* said a key informant interviewee. Participants specifically commented on being alone and not connected to family. *"It is weird seeing myself in this position — absent in my family,"* said a key informant interviewee. Some participants mentioned that they are envious of friends who are at home and not going to college. *"I do everything on my own,"* and *"... trying not to be hard on myself,"* said a conversation café participant. Most of the survey participants responded that they live with a student roommate (36.70%), while 19.53% live alone and 18.18% live with family (parents/guardians/relatives). About a fifth — 18.52% — responded that they live with their spouse, while 4.71% live with a roommate who is not a student (N=382).
- **Food insecurity:** Participants reported specific challenges related to food. Almost a quarter — 23.88% — of survey participants indicated that they skip meals to save money, 22.89% said they worry about paying for food or meals, and 15.92% indicated that there are days they cannot afford to buy food (N=382). Conversation café participants mentioned that it is difficult to cook meals in the dormitories. *"My roommate had more money to buy her food this semester ... it is hard to buy bare minimum,"* said a conversation café participant.

"Using the kitchens in the dormitory can be problematic — for example, scheduling times," said a photovoice participant. A participant mentioned the following about food services on campus: *"Since students living on campus are required to have a meal plan, the food provided to students needs to be better. I like how SFA has food committee meetings so that students can express their concerns and suggestions for the dining halls, but after these meetings, the dining halls improve for a short period and then return to serving sub-standard food. Overall, the dining halls need to be consistently serving high-quality food to students,"* said a photovoice participant.

- **Emotional and physical well-being:** Students experience specific emotions in reaction to being on campus. Participants mentioned that they are scared of being on their own, away from family. A conversation café participant mentioned feeling isolated and fearful. Another student in a key informant interview said the following about being a first-generation student: *"... feels lonely, a lot of pressure, fears of failure, in need of support."* Another conversation café participant said, *"I do not have time and motivation for other things besides homework and work."* Participants indicated that they discuss emotional problems with friends and family. In fact, 24.75% of the survey participants said they struggle with mental health, while 2.16% indicated they use Counseling Services on campus. Only 13.20% of survey participants said they have time for self-care (N=382). Examples of self-care activities identified by participants are reading, journaling, exercising, spending time with family and walking. Students reported weight gain when starting on a college level. A key informant interviewee attributed weight gain to having class during the day and working in the evenings. In terms of physical wellness, only 19.92% of survey participants indicated that they have adequate health insurance (N=382).

Table 3: Access to Health Services

Access to Health Services	Percentage
I use health services on campus.	4.31%
I struggle with health issues.	10.15%
I have to figure out health issues on my own.	18.53%
I use health services off campus.	6.60%

(N=382)

Table 3 shows that 10.15% of survey participants struggle with health issues; 4.31% use health services on campus, while 6.60% use them off campus; and 18.53% have to figure out health issues on their own.

- **Financial barriers:** Participants mentioned specifically balancing a healthy financial situation and studying at the same time. Financial barriers include not having a financial safety net, feeling concerns about their family's financial security, burdening their parents and having to work part time while studying. Their financial resource concerns negatively impact their focus on studying.

- **Fitting in/belonging on campus:** Participants indicated it is difficult to balance involvement on campus with work and family life while focusing on studying. Not having a good understanding of what college life and studying entail contributes to feelings of not fitting in. *"Not knowing what to do on campus (meeting with professors, getting involved, networking, gaining skills). First-generation students don't know about these aspects of college,"* said a conversation café participant. Students feel they do not have a foundation to build on due to the fact that their parents cannot advise them what to do. Of the survey participants, 8.62% feel they are judged and 7.24% stereotyped as first-generation students.

Table 4: Student Involvement on Campus

Involvement on Campus	Percentage
Academic or professional organization	9.71%
Intramural sport club	5.14%
Generation Jacks	21.71%
Greek-letter organization	4.57%
Honor society	3.43%
Intercollegiate athletics	0.57%
Leadership mentoring program	3.43%
Multicultural organization	5.71%
Religious or spiritual group	2.29%
Student government	0.57%
Student media (yearbook, newspaper, radio)	0.57%

(N=382)

The survey participants indicated involvement with GenJacks (21.71%). Participants also reported involvement in academic or professional organizations (9.71%). Involvement in religious groups (2.29%), student government (0.57%) and student media activities is low (0.57%).

- **Stress about their future:** Participants indicated that they are concerned about their future after they graduate.

"Not knowing what to do after undergrad," said a key informant participant. This impacts positive attitudes about graduation. A total of 43.48% of survey participants reported that they plan to work full time after graduation, 26.09% plan to apply for graduate school, 9.78% plan to travel, 6.52% plan to work part time, and 2.17% plan to join the military or missionary work (N=382).

ATTITUDES AND MINDSETS



"I do many things at SFA, and I have so many amazing opportunities! This is a photo of me and two other GenJacks. We are a part of AXEperience here at SFA. One aspect of AXEperience is running the Purple Haze student section at all sporting events. We make the crowd loud and hyped up for all our Lumberjack teams! This picture is of me and my friends going crazy and causing chaos at a basketball game! I attend anywhere from one to four games a week! I love doing this and being able to show off my Lumberjack pride! Axe 'em, Jacks!"

– Alyssa Mauz, Photovoice Participant

A positive attitude and mindset enable the first-generation student to effectively navigate college life.

As mentioned, first-generation students experience unique challenges while in college. It is evident that they have the strengths and resilience to overcome these challenges. They are aware of the importance of managing the challenges in a positive way in order to be successful. *"Sometimes you have to separate the unwanted burdens,"* said a key informant interviewee. Conversation café participants emphasized the importance of the *"oneself mindset,"* meaning they have to focus on their studies and responsibilities. Participants mentioned specific attitudes and actions that enable them to stay positive. These include *"... perseverance, constant reassurance, determination, and excitement for success and future."*

Participants specifically emphasized the importance of their faith and prayer in dealing with challenges. *"God, church and religion,"* said a key informant interviewee.

First-generation students are motivated by the desire to enhance themselves and their quality of life: *"First generations have more motivations. We want to better*

our lives and do better for our children, future generations and our environment," said a key informant interviewee.

They understand that their own attitudes about challenges impact their quality of life in college. They also understand the importance of social connection and seeking support.

"I think my independence helps me and knowing I'm not alone because my friends are in the same situation," said a conversation café participant.

Participants mentioned they want to be successful and independent as students. They understand that they need to work hard to achieve their goals. One conversation café participant described it as, *"Putting myself out there."*

"Track, my teammates, taking time for my family (cousin), going on walks or runs. Always keeping my mind busy."

– Conversation Café Participant

Table 5: Attitudes About Being a First-Generation Student

Attitudes About Being a First-Generation Student	Percentage
I am proud to be the first of my family to go to college.	40.52%
I know I will have a good career because I am a first-generation student.	14.31%
I am comfortable around my peers who are not first-generation college students.	26.21%

(N=382)

Table 5 indicates that 40.52% of the survey participants are proud to be the first in their family to go to college, 26.21% feel comfortable around non-first-generation peers, and 14.31% know they will have a good career after attending college.

Some conversation café participants agreed that they are dealing with imposter syndrome: *“Imposter syndrome — some students say they get help from parents, but first-gen parents don’t know how to help.”*

“Attending college is a huge deal for me not only because I am achieving a goal of mine, but I am also proving to my children that we can do anything we set our minds to.

I am determined to earn my bachelor’s degree and hopefully continue the road to my master’s degree. The staff and faculty at SFA have made this a great experience for me, and I am very appreciative of that. I am extremely proud to say that I am a first-generation college student attending SFA.”

– Photovoice Participant

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

First-generation students need a positive internal and external support system. First-generation students experience positive support from their family and friends to attend college. In addition, SFA provides support through instructors, advisors and student organizations. SFA has an extensive network of support services for first-generation students. Almost a quarter — 24.83% — of the survey participants indicated they feel there are people around them that they can contact if needed, but 13.35% said they would like to have a bigger support system (N=382).

- **External support (family, friends, parents, extended families, siblings, children and grandparents)**

From the key informant interviews, it is evident that family provides external support to first- generation students. This includes parents, grandparents and siblings. In addition, friends and partners provide support.

Conversation café participants indicated that even though families provide support, they do not always understand college life. Without prior knowledge and experience of college, parents are not always able to understand the realities of a first-generation student’s life. Parents often have expectations that their child will achieve and excel due to the fact that they are attending college: *“You are going to do well because we are sending you to college,”* said a key informant interviewee. A conversation café participant said, *“Can’t be myself without fulfilling other expectations first.”*

Students mentioned increased responsibility toward their families due to attending college, for example, translating for parents and assisting with financial support.

Table 6: External Support System (Outside SFA)

External Support System	Percentage
Friends	20.75%
Family	17.85%
Parents	15.57%
Siblings	11.08%
Children	2.91%

(N=382)

Table 6 provides information on survey participant responses to the support systems they have. The data shows that most first-generation students feel that their support comes from friends (20.75%), family (17.85%) and parents (11.08%).

- **Internal support (SFA resources)**

For students to be successful at SFA, they need to understand the array of resources available to them and how to effectively access these resources.

Table 7 provides information on the support system at SFA.

Table 7: Internal Support System (SFA)

Internal Support System	Percentage
Instructors	9.36%
Advisors	8.88%
Student organizations	4.87%
Religious organizations	2.59%
Sports organizations	0.63%
Band	0.24%
Peer mentors	1.65%
Other	2.44%

(N=382)

At the SFA level, instructors (9.36%) and advisors (8.88%) provide the most support, according to survey participants. Just 1.65% responded that peer mentors provide support, while 4.87% indicated that student organizations provide support (N=382). This data is not consistent with qualitative data from the key informant interviews and conversation cafés. The qualitative data reflect that peer mentors and student organizations play a significant role in effectively supporting and involving students on campus.

The conversation café participants reported they know about a variety of resources available to first-generation students, but they do not necessarily know what these resources offer them. They mentioned that social media can be used to effectively connect them with resources. They would like to learn more about resources. The following organizations and services were specifically identified as supportive to students:

- AARC
- AXExperience
- First-Generation Organization
- Football Club
- GenJacks
- Horticulture Club

- Office of International Programs
- Pre-Veterinarian Club
- Steen Library
- ROTC
- Social Work Organization
- Student Success Center
- Sustainability Club (Geography)

It is evident that the GenJacks program provides significant support. The students perceive GenJacks as a family. They specifically named the SSC staff and GenJacks leadership team as very supportive.

Participants mentioned that social connections are considered very important to fit in, but some find it difficult to engage. Participants also mentioned the support of roommates and fellow students. *"We would like to connect with more students in the same situations,"* said a conversation café participant.

In addition to being aware of resources, students need help with specific processes at SFA. They mentioned that their parents do not necessarily know how to help them with the completion of applications and documents needed for enrollment at a college.

Participants also mentioned some services that were not easy to access. Students experience some of the SFA services to be " ... inaccessible or difficult to access ... health clinic difficult to get in," said a key informant interviewee. Access to services has to be viewed in context of personal views and choices about the services. For example, 16.53% of the survey participants indicated that they do not access mental health services because they fear being labeled (N=382).

Participants mentioned a combination of internal and external support is experienced. "Growing up, my friends shared their stories with me when I was their shoulder to cry on; however, I felt I needed a shoulder to cry on, and I'm glad to inform you that the counseling group, my Yellow House friends and my roommate were those shoulders for me. They were beneficial," said a photovoice participant.

FINANCIAL INSECURITY

Financial insecurity contributes to the stress of SFA's first-generation students. First-generation students experience stress, especially related to financial insecurity. They feel guilty taking or asking for money from their families and feel responsible to still contribute. Conversation café participants experience guilt feelings for being enrolled at a university while their parents and families are struggling financially. They emphasized experiences of additional financial stress that they did not anticipate due to limited knowledge about being in college. Participants mentioned that it is challenging not having a financial safety net.

Students feel financially responsible for their families.

"When my dad sends me financial support, I send it back to my mom because I stress about life at home," said a key informant interviewee.

Like other students, first-generation students have to balance work, family and study life. "You know when you're just working and trying to pay for living. I've added stress," said a conversation café participant.

The financial demands of being in college with limited financial support contribute to stress. Key informant interview participants indicated that they have to balance working and studying: "Nervous about financial issues, first bill was scary."

Table 8: Work Situation

Work Situation	Percentage
I do not work.	30.42%
I work one job.	50.81%
I work two jobs.	11.65%
I work more than two jobs.	2.27%
I prefer not to respond.	4.85%
Total	100%

(N=382)

Of the survey participants, 30.42% indicated that they do not work, while 50.81% have at least one job and 11.65% indicated they have more than one job (N=382). "A lot of us have to work 40 hours a week in order to stay afloat," said a key informant interview participant.

In terms of their financial situation, 30.94% of the participants said they are concerned about accumulating debt, while 4.10% said they did not know if they are accumulating debt. Only 8.21% indicate that they are not concerned about debt at this time, whereas 22.39% said they

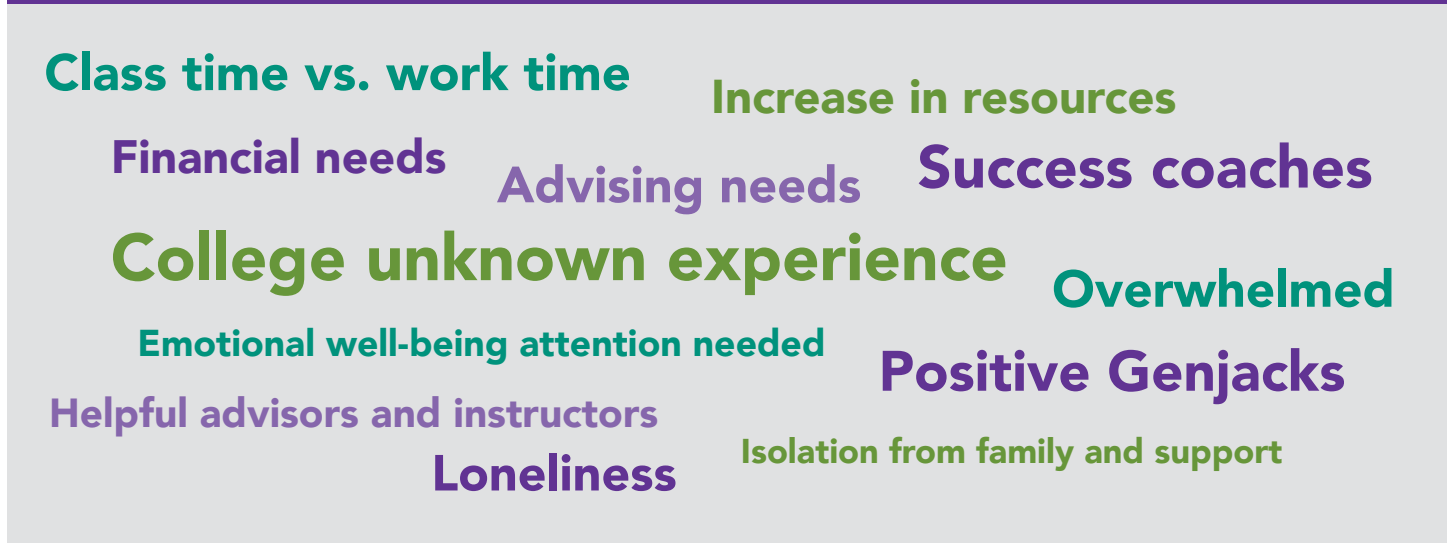
are struggling financially to pay for college. Almost a third — 31.97% — of the participants receive financial aid (N=382).

Low percentages of students indicated that they send money home — 4.21% said every week, 5.18% every month and 8.74% occasionally. Most of the students (60.52%)

responded that they never send money home. This is not consistent with the qualitative data, which shows students indicated that they send money to their families (N=382). Overall, it is evident that it is difficult to maintain financial stability while studying.

Specific realities first-generation students want SFA leadership to know and understand

Figure 3: Word Cloud — Important Realities for First-Generation Students



Participants listed specific realities that they would like the SFA leadership team, faculty and staff to know and understand. This is a comprehensive list provided by the students.

- First-generation students feel overwhelmed by the new experiences of college, including the significant increase in academic work and financial burdens.
- Without preparation and guidance from parents who attended college, it is an unknown experience.
- Families' unrealistic view of college can impact expectations and adds stress on the first-generation student to succeed.
- Students have very positive experiences with GenJacks. They feel the organization has helped them develop, connect, find support and access services.
- Instructors need to be aware that first-generation students often have to support themselves financially and are often working up to 40 hours a week. This deeper understanding should be part of the learner-friendly environment. *"Professors must know that we are first-generation students in the classroom,"* said a key informant interviewee.
- Availability of classes predominately between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. implies that students have to work at night, leaving limited time to study.
- It is difficult for students to find scholarships, and participants feel SFA has limited first-generation scholarships.
- Transportation in the Nacogdoches community impacts their ability to access resources outside SFA. *"Public transport in Nacogdoches is a problem; city bus routes are slim to none. SFA transport needs more stops outside campus,"* said a conversation café participant.
- Additional emotional wellness and mental health services specifically designed for first-generation students are needed — not specifically counseling, but utilizing a mental health day as an excuse when needed, mental illness prevention, suicide support and other support groups.
- First-generation students can experience loneliness, which may be connected to isolation from family and friends. Some key informants mentioned that it is important that feelings related to isolation and loneliness are shared in support groups.
- In addition to general advising, there is a need for specific advising as it relates to first-generation students. Advisors have to be informed if they are advising a first-generation student.
- Resources need to be provided in a way that students feel safe to ask questions. *"More resources where we can ask questions without being afraid to obtain more information,"* said a conversation café participant.

PRIORITIES

To increase first-generation student success, SFA should prioritize:

- addressing the needs identified by the first-generation students in this study
- providing services to enable first-generation students to transition from high school to college
- developing knowledge and awareness of the uniqueness of first-generation students
- scaling the Generation Jacks program to include 500 first-generation students (currently capped at 125 participants per cohort)
- connecting first-generation students with resources on campus and in the community
- and exploring financial support and scholarship opportunities that are specifically allocated to first-generation students.

PRIORITIES

Address needs

Transition from high school to college

Develop knowledge and awareness

Scale the GenJacks program

Connect students to resources

Explore financial support and scholarship opportunities

RECOMMENDATIONS

Priority: Address the needs identified by the first-generation students in this study.

Recommendations:

- Create a First-Generation Action Team to raise awareness and educate the campus community on first-generation needs and priorities.
- Disseminate a First-Generation Needs Assessment Report to stakeholders and the campus community.

Suggested Action Plan:

Recommendation	Stakeholders	Timeline	Estimated Cost
Create First-Generation Action Team to raise awareness and educate the campus community on first-generation needs and priorities.	SSC, GenJacks success coaches, college representation, advisors, first-generation student representation, AARC, HUB, LWN-iCare Ambassadors, etc.	Spring 2023	In Kind
Disseminate First-Generation Needs Assessment Report to campus community.	First-Generation Needs Assessment Team	Spring 2023	In Kind (use email and website)

Priority: Provide services to enable first-generation students to transition from high school to college.

Recommendations:

- Make SFAS 1101: The New-Lumberjack Experience a requirement for all incoming first-year students.
- Evaluate the current SFAS 1101: The New-Lumberjack Experience curriculum to ensure that the needs of first-generation college students are met.

Suggested Action Plan:

Recommendation	Stakeholders	Timeline	Estimated Cost
Make SFAS 1101: The New-Lumberjack Experience a requirement for all incoming first-year students.	Division of Academic Affairs leadership, academic college deans and department chairs, SSC, SFAS 1101 instructors and teaching assistants, academic advisors, Orientation and Transition Programs	Fall 2024	\$45,000 to increase number of instructors (\$24,000) and TAs (\$11,000) and increase program coordinator stipend (\$10,000)
Evaluate the current SFAS 1101: The New-Lumberjack Experience curriculum to ensure that the needs of first-generation college students are met.	SSC, Center for Teaching and Learning, FGO	Fall 2023	Included in increased stipend for program coordinator (increase time for curriculum review and revision, exploration of additional content, engagement with instructors, and evaluation tasks)

Priority: Develop knowledge and awareness of the uniqueness of first-generation students.

Recommendations:

- Create an infographic/flyer on unique needs of first-generation students, including campus contacts.
- Educate faculty and staff on unique needs of first-generation students through workshops and presentations.
- Seek and encourage first-generation representation.

Suggested Action Plan:

Recommendation	Stakeholders	Timeline	Estimated Cost
Create an infographic/flyer on unique needs of first-generation students, including campus resources/contacts.	SSC, CTL, FGO, University Marketing Communications	As soon as possible	Cost to print flyers
Educate faculty and staff on unique needs of first-generation students through workshops and presentations.	Deans and chairs, First-Generation Action Team, CTL, SSC	Ongoing	In Kind
Seek and encourage first-generation representation.	Student Government Association, student organizations, SFA leadership committees	Ongoing	In Kind

Priority: Scale GenJacks to include 500 first-generation students (capped at 125 participants per cohort).

Recommendations:

- Increase number of designated rooms in Residential Learning Communities for first-generation students.
- Renovate accessible multi-purpose space ("learning lounge") for studying, collaborating and building community on the first floor of the library.
- Create a new student success coordinator/academic advisor position.
- Increase salary for additional duties and responsibilities for current program coordinator/advisor.
- Hire one additional student worker dedicated to GenJacks tasks.
- Hire 20 additional instructors for GenJacks required courses.
- Continue Summer Leadership Academy and First-Generation Celebration held in November.
- Strengthen first-generation student involvement and engagement.
- Offer professional development support to staff members.

Suggested Action Plan:

Recommendation	Stakeholders	Timeline	Estimated Cost
Increase number of designated rooms in Residential Learning Communities for first-generation students.	Residence Life, SSC, Office of Admissions	Fall 2024	No extra cost should be needed to designate more existing rooms in the residence hall
Renovate accessible multi-purpose ("learning lounge") space on the first floor of the library.	Division of Academic Affairs, SSC, Lumberjack Learning Commons, Physical Plant Department	Fall 2022- Fall 2023 (in progress)	Expenses will be covered under the library renovation fund
Create a new student success coordinator/academic advisor position to assist with scaling program.	Division of Academic Affairs, SSC	Fall 2024	\$60,000 (includes benefits) for a new coordinator/academic advisor personnel line
Increase salary for additional duties and responsibilities for current program coordinator/advisor.	Division of Academic Affairs, SSC	Fall 2024	\$10,000 stipend for current program coordinator/advisor
Hire one additional student employee dedicated to GenJacks tasks.	Division of Academic Affairs, SSC	Fall 2024	\$5,000 paid student employee position
Hire 20 additional instructors for GenJacks required courses.	Division of Academic Affairs, SSC, faculty and staff	Fall 2025	\$25,000 for instructors for GenJacks required courses (SFAS 1110 and SFAS 2150)
Continue Summer Leadership Academy and First-Generation Celebration.	SSC, campus partners	Fall 2024	\$60,000 for Summer Leadership Academy and First-Generation Celebration
Strengthen first-generation student involvement and engagement.	SSC, Student Life, OIP	Ongoing	\$225,000 for first-generation socials and involvement/service projects, etc.
Offer professional development support to staff members.	Academic colleges and campus departments/units	Ongoing	\$20,000 for first-generation professional development for staff

Priority: Connect first-generation students with resources on campus and in community.

Recommendations:

- Create an app to enhance student utilization of support services (one-click electronic access point).
- Establish a Dreamer's Center or initiative to address minority students.
- Promote existing peer mentor groups for first-generation students.
- Offer first-generation students access to laptops through Information Technology Services.

Suggested Action Plan:

Recommendation	Stakeholders	Timeline	Estimated Cost
Create an app to enhance student utilization of support services (one-click electronic access point).	UMC, ITS, Project Management Office, and all campus department stakeholders, alumni, etc.	Fall 2024	Approximately \$200,000
Promote existing peer mentor groups for first-generation students.	Campus peer mentor programs, success coaches	Fall 2023	\$15,000 for shirts for students/staff and promotional items
Establish a Dreamer's Center or initiative to address minority students.	School of Social Work, SSC, OIP, First-Generation Action Team	Fall 2023	\$50,000
Offer first-generation students access to check out laptop computers through ITS.	ITS, First-Generation Action Team	Fall 2024	\$110,000 for technology/computers for first-generation students

Priority: Explore financial support and scholarship opportunities specifically allocated to first-gen students.

Recommendations:

- Assist students with FAFSA/financial aid and scholarship applications.
- Continue to educate high school students, parents and counselors on FAFSA/scholarship apps.
- Offer FAFSA and scholarship application workshops.
- Identify additional scholarship opportunities specifically for first-generation students.

Suggested Action Plan:

Recommendation	Stakeholders	Timeline	Estimated Cost
Assist students with FAFSA/ financial aid and scholarship applications keeping in mind the needs of first-generation students/parents.	Office of Admissions, Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships	Ongoing	Existing funds
Offer FAFSA and scholarship app workshops and information keeping in mind the needs of first-generation students/parents.	Office of Admissions, Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships	During Showcase Saturdays and other SFA recruiting events	Existing funds
Continue to educate high school students, parents, and counselors on FAFSA/ scholarship apps.	Office of Admissions, Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships	Ongoing	Existing funds
Identify additional financial and scholarship opportunities specifically for first-generation students.	Division of Academic Affairs, colleges and academic departments, Office of Development, SSC	Ongoing	\$500,000 for first-generation student scholarships and \$5,000 for supplies for students in need (notebooks, planners, pens, scantrons)

CONCLUSION

The study provides evidence of the needs of first-generation students, their overall experiences and specific information they would like the SFA leadership to know and understand about them. Through the descriptions of their lived experiences, it is clear that first-generation students have strengths, resilience and support to navigate the unfamiliar experiences of college life. At the same time, they experience many barriers and challenges to academic success and successful preparation for college. This study highlighted specific needs as identified by the students, and themes emerged. These themes

include navigating college life, strengths at SFA, sense of community, challenges and barriers, positive attitudes and mindset, internal and external support systems, and financial insecurity as a major stressor.

The findings of the study are in line with an abundance of published research on first-generation students. As the SFA Envisioned Strategic Plan (2015-2023) aims to create transformational student experiences, it is anticipated that the SFA community will successfully focus on the priorities of the report.

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