

Report on First-Generation Scholars in the Profession

Status Update for 2021-2024

American Political Science Association's Committee on the Status of First-Generation
Scholars in the Profession 2024-2025

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APSA First-Generation Status Committee Mandate

On September 2, 2015, the APSA Council approved a new standing Committee on First-Generation Higher Education Scholars in the Profession, parallel to the existing APSA status committees. The goal and mission of this Committee are to bring focused attention to the ways that class, economic inequality, and mobility can affect the ability of political scientists to thrive educationally and professionally throughout their careers.

To this end, the Committee has sought to understand how first-generation status is defined and studied, identify the issues and challenges first-generation scholars face in the profession, help address these concerns through scholarships, panels, and events, and make recommendations to the broader APSA community regarding first-generation scholars.

The report includes the activities of the Status Committee and its findings from 2021-2024. More information about the Committee and its work is available [here](#).

Who is a First-Generation Scholar?

In the United States, the term first-generation college student (FGCS) typically refers to persons whose parents did not earn a baccalaureate degree, or in the case of students living with and supported by only one parent, whose parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree.¹ The term thus includes students whose parents completed a two-year degree or have taken college-level classes. Today, more than half of college students are first-generation college students.² There is significant overlap among first-generation college students and other minority groups, including low-income students, immigrants, and US veterans.³

In conceptualizing first-generation scholars (FGS), as opposed to first-generation college students, the Committee has adopted an alternative definition that includes:

- scholars who have parents or legal guardians who have attained neither a bachelor's nor an associate's degree and/or
- international scholars who are the first generation to study and/or teach at the college or university level in the United States.

1 "Higher Education Act of 1965, 1998 Higher Education Act Amendments Subpart 2-Federal Early Outreach and Student Services Programs," Chapter 1-Federal Trio Programs Section, 402A. 20 U.S.C. 1070a-11.

2 Ilana Hamilton, "56% Of All Undergraduates Are First-Generation College Students," *Forbes*, 13 June 2023.

3 Sophie W. Schuyler, Jonique R. Childs, and Timothy A. Poynton, 2021, "Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color: The Importance of Academic, Transitional Adjustment, and Mental Health Supports," *Journal of College Access*, 6(1): 2-25.

The Committee adopted this definition to be inclusive of different first-generation experiences.⁴ However, this definition is not without its critics. The definition includes students whose parents have received associate’s degrees. It does not include domestic students who are among the first generation in their family to teach at a college or university in the United States, but it includes international students who are. It, thus, groups international students whose parents received four-year degrees with domestic students whose parents did not.

Representation of First-Generation Scholars in the Profession

First-generation scholars are a minority of graduate students and faculty in the United States. For example, according to the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, in 2021, 28% of doctorate recipients did not have at least one parent with a college/university degree.⁵ This percentage represents a sharp decline, over the past 50 years, of the percentage of graduate students without one parent with a college degree. In 1970, almost 65% of doctorate-earners did not have at least one parent with a college/university degree. The rate of decline has slowed over time, with the most recent decade marking the smallest rate of decline since the 1970s.

Figure 1 provides information on the number of APSA members who report that they do not have at least one parent with a 4-year college or university degree. This information is based on the annual APSA membership survey. Importantly, the survey response rates are low.⁶ Therefore, the information provided in these figures does not necessarily represent all APSA members. These figures also represent only a subset of first-generation scholars as defined by the Status Committee. The Status Committee defines first-generation scholars more broadly to include US scholars whose parents did not attain a degree from either a 4-year *or* a 2-year college or university, and international scholars who are the first generation in their immediate family to study and/or teach at a US college or university. Additional analysis of the APSA data is needed to identify what percentage of APSA members fall into the other categories of first generation scholars recognized by the committee.

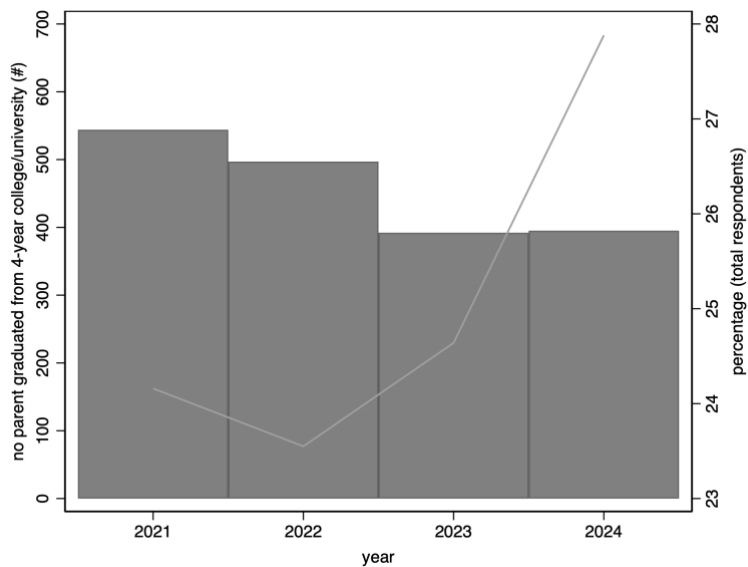
As Figure 1 illustrates, between 23.55% and 27.88% of respondents to the APSA membership survey between 2021-2024 indicated that neither of their parents graduated from a 4-year college or university. The trend is similar to the national average of doctorate recipients referenced above.

⁴ After the completion of the report, APSA and the Status Committee updated the definition of First Generation Scholars. The updated definition can be found on the Committee’s webpage.

⁵ Approximately, 98% of the doctorates included in the survey were PhDs. National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES), 2022, “Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities: 2021,” NSF 23-300. Alexandria, VA: National Science Foundation.

⁶ The response rates for the APSA member surveys are: 23.16% (2021); 22.23% (2022); 16.68% (2023) and 14.53% (2024).

Figure 1: APSA Members with neither parent graduated from 4-year college/university



Source: APSA member survey data

Committee Activities

In recent years, universities have adopted various initiatives to improve the representation of first-generation college students in graduate programs and to assist them in completing PhD programs. These initiatives include the following: increasing funding opportunities; making information about programs and processes explicit; creating opportunities for connections among faculty and graduate students; and reducing administrative barriers to assistance. In addition, a growing body of research has begun to examine how bridge programs -- programs designed to prepare students for the next phase of their academic career -- might be used to increase access to PhD training for underrepresented groups, including first-generation students.⁷

The Status Committee is primarily engaged in two types of activities to facilitate first-generation scholars in attaining their goals: hosting panels, roundtables, and other events around APSA’s annual conferences and distributing travel grants to first-generation scholars to attend the annual conference.

⁷ Alexander Rudolph, Kelly Holley-Bockelmann and Julie Posselt, 2019, “PhD Bridge Programmes as Engines for Access, Diversity and Inclusion,” *Nature Astronomy* 3:1080–1085.

Committee Roundtables and Events

Research shows that first-generation scholars face many institutional and social challenges in graduate school. They often report feelings of a sense of otherness, disconnect, and impostor syndrome.⁸ These feelings can stem from many factors, including not having family members to rely on for advice, a dearth of information about graduate education, and a lack of explicit information about programs, requirements, and processes.⁹

These feelings, the research suggests, may result in first-generation students being less engaged in campus life and activities, and in students' having more limited interactions with faculty. According to some research, many first-generation students who have persisted through an undergraduate degree have reportedly developed self-sufficiency coping mechanisms. Many take on a "get on with it" approach that does not include seeking additional resources.¹⁰ However, because graduate studies require connection to and direction from faculty, these patterns can hinder first-generation graduate students in their careers.

To support first-generation scholars in the profession, the Committee has hosted the following roundtables and co-hosted the following receptions at the APSA annual conference.

2024

- Roundtable on "The First-Gen Handbook: Navigating the Hidden Curriculum in Political Science"
- Joint Reception for APSA Status Committees, Caucuses, and the Race, Ethnicity, and Politics (REP) Section
- APSA Reception Honoring Women of Color in the Profession

2023

- Roundtable on "Being a First-Generation Scholar"
- Diversity and Inclusion Combined Reception

2022

- Roundtable on "APSA Committee on the Status of First-Generation Scholars"

⁸ Susan K. Gardner and Karri A. Holley, 2011, "Those Invisible Barriers are Real: The Experiences of First-Generation Doctoral Students," *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 44, 77–92; Karri A. Holley and Susan K. Gardner, 2012, "Navigating the Pipeline: How Socio-Cultural Influences Impact First-generation Doctoral Students," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 5:112–121.

⁹ Susan K. Gardner, 2013, "The Challenges of First-Generation Graduate Students," *New Directions for Higher Education*. 2013:163 43-54.

¹⁰ Ibid.

- Joint Reception for Allied Status Committees, Caucuses, and Organized Sections
- APSA Reception Honoring Women of Color in the Profession

2021

- Roundtable on “APSA Committee on the Status of First-Generation Scholars”
- Joint Reception for Allied Status Committees, Caucuses, and Organized Sections
- APSA Reception Honoring Women of Color in the Profession

2020

- Roundtable on “Best Practices in Supporting First-Generation Faculty and Graduate Students in the Profession”
- Joint Reception for Allied Status Committees, Caucuses, and Organized Sections
- APSA Reception Honoring Women of Color in the Profession

2019

- Roundtable on “APSA Committee on the Status of First-Generation Scholars in the Profession”
- Joint Reception for the Asian Pacific Americans (APA), Blacks, First Generation Scholars, and Latinos and Latinas in the Profession Status Committees, the APA and Latino Caucuses, and the REP Section
- Reception Honoring Women of Color in the Profession

2018

- Roundtable on “The Status of First-Generation Scholars in the Profession”
- Joint Reception for APA, Black, First Generation, and Latino Status Committees
- Reception Honoring Women of Color in the Profession

Committee Travel Reimbursement Grants

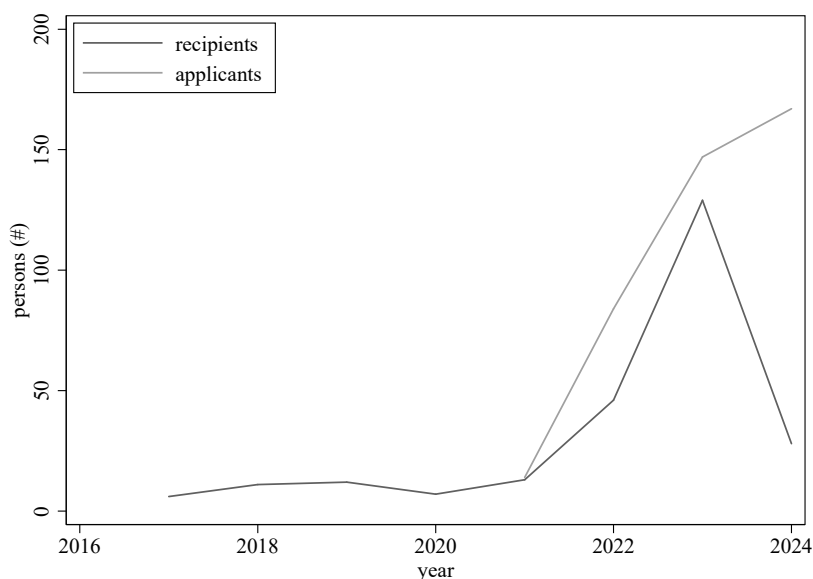
First-generation scholars can face significant financial obstacles in completing their education. Research suggests that students whose parents did not graduate from four-year colleges or universities are more likely than other students to rely on their own financial resources to fund their graduate education.¹¹ They also tend to carry higher undergraduate student loan debt. The financial demands of these students often result in their seeking additional employment or taking

¹¹ Thomas Hoffer, Scott Sederstrom, Lance Selfa, Vince Welch, Mary Hess, Shana Brown, Sergio Reyes, Kristy Webber and Isabel Guzman-Barron, 2003, *Doctorate Recipients from U.S. universities*. Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

out loans.¹² This, in turn, can affect their degree progress. Studies have found that the more financial support students receive, the less time it takes for them to complete their degrees.¹³ In addition, the need to hold jobs outside of their graduate program reduces the amount of time first-generation students dedicate to coursework, research, and connecting with faculty, while also increasing the likelihood that they will reduce their enrollment to part-time; all of which increases the risk of attrition.¹⁴

To help alleviate the financial obstacles that first-generation scholars face, APSA and the Committee has offered reimbursement grants to first-generation scholars since 2017. The number of travel reimbursement applicants and grants allocated by year is summarized in Figure 2 below. Notably, the number of applicants nearly doubled in 2023.

Figure 2: Number of Travel Grant Applicants and Recipients



Source: APSA program data

¹² Susan K. Gardner, 2013, “The Challenges of First-Generation Graduate Students,” *New Directions for Higher Education*, 163:43-54; Susan K. Gardner and Karri A. Holley, 2011, “Those Invisible Barriers are Real: The Experiences of First-Generation Doctoral Students,” *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 44:77-92; Karri Holley, A. and Susan K. Gardner, 2012, “Navigating the Pipeline: How Socio-Cultural Influences Impact First-Generation Doctoral Students,” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 5:112-121.

¹³ William G Bowen and Neil L. Rudenstine, 1992, *In Pursuit of the PhD*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Stephen L. DesJardins, Dennis A. Ahlburg and Brian P. McCall. 2002, “A Temporal Investigation of Factors Related to Timely Degree Completion,” *Journal of Higher Education*, 73(5):555-581.

¹⁴ Sandra Seay, Donald Lifton, Karl L. Wuensch, Lynn K. Bradshaw and James O. McDowelle. 2008. “First-Generation Graduate Students and Attrition Risks,” *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 56(3):11-25.

Visit the APSA's Committee on the Status of First-Generation Scholars in the Profession [webpage](#) for more information.

Concluding Remarks

First-generation scholars face unique challenges within the profession that present obstacles to their academic success, particularly in terms of mentoring and financial resources. At the same time, they are also a wonderful resource, as this Committee has shown, to other first-generation scholars. We recommend that future Status Committees revisit the definition of first-generation scholars and expand the network of first-generation scholars – beyond the recipients of the travel reimbursement grant -- who may contribute to mentoring and APSA first-generation travel grants. We recommend that future Committees systematically study the way other universities have attempted to address the issues that first-generation scholars face. We further recommend that PhD-granting universities consider making additional resources, particularly financial resources, available to first-generation scholars, such as travel grants, since APSA is unable to meet the high demand among scholars for these grants.

Appendix

Resources for First-Generation Scholars

General Resources:

- [A Field Guide to Grad School](#)
- [Chutes & Ladders: The Hidden Curriculum that Makes or Breaks Academic Careers](#)
- [How to Pass Comps](#)
- [Managing Your Mental Health During Your PhD](#)
- [Strategies for Navigating Graduate School and Beyond](#)

First-Generation Scholar Resources:

- [1st Generation Faculty & Staff Association](#)
- [First-Generation Faculty of Color: Reflections on Research, Teaching and Service](#)
- [First Generation Scholars Roundtable, Political Science Department, CUNY Graduate Center, May 3, 2023](#)
- [How Does Being a First Gen Faculty Member Change the Way You Teach?](#)
- [Navigating Graduate School as a First-Generation Graduate](#)
- [Predoctoral Summer Institute for First-Generation and Diverse Scholars](#)
- [You Never Stop Being First-Generation](#)
- [What I Wish I'd Known as a First-Gen Graduate Student](#)

APSA First-Generation Status Committee Members

2024-2025

- Dawn Brancati (Co-chair), Brown University
- Orçun Selçuk (Co-chair), Luther College
- T. Mark Montoya, Northern Arizona University
- Kal Munis, Auburn University
- Tugba Bozcaga, King's College London
- Chao-yo Cheng, Birkbeck, University of London
- Najja Baptist, Howard University

2023-2024

- Holley Hansen (Chair), Oklahoma State University
- Dawn Brancati, Brown University
- Orçun Selçuk, Luther College
- Carie Steele, Northern Arizona University

2022-2023

- Josue Franco (Chair), Cuyamaca College
- Dawn Brancati, Yale University
- Holley Hansen, Oklahoma State University
- Jessica Lavariega Monforti, California Lutheran University
- Daniel Mallinson, Penn State Harrisburg
- Orçun Selçuk, Luther College
- Carie Steele, Northern Arizona University

2021-2022

- Davin Phoenix (Chair), University of California, Irvine
- Dawn Brancati, Yale University
- Josue Franco, Cuyamaca College
- Holley Hansen, Oklahoma State University
- Jessica Lavariega Monforti, California State University Channel Islands
- Joshua Miller, University of North Carolina at Charlotte
- Daniel Mallinson, Penn State, Harrisburg
- Carie Steele, Northern Arizona University

2020-2021

- Lorrie Frasure (Chair), University of California, Los Angeles
- Rosella Cappella Zielinski, Boston University
- Josue Franco, Cuyamaca College
- Jessica Lavariega Monforti, California State University Channel Islands
- Daniel Mallinson, Penn State, Harrisburg
- Joshua Miller, University of North Carolina at Charlotte
- Celeste Montoya, University of Colorado, Boulder

- Davin Phoenix, University of California, Irvine

2019-2020

- Lorrie Frasure (Chair), University of California, Los Angeles
- Rosella Cappella Zielinski, Boston University
- Jessica Lavariega Monforti, California State University Channel Islands
- Celeste Montoya, University of Colorado, Boulder
- Joshua Miller, University of North Carolina at Charlotte
- Francisco Pedraza, Arizona State University
- Davin Phoenix, University of California, Irvine

2018-2019

- Lorrie Frasure (Chair), University of California, Los Angeles
- Rosella Cappella Zielinski, Boston University
- Celeste Montoya, University of Colorado, Boulder
- Francisco Pedraza, Arizona State University
- Ricardo Ramirez, University of Notre Dame
- Davin Phoenix, University of California, Irvine
- Tom Wong, University of California, San Diego

2017-2018

- Lorrie Frasure (Chair), University of California, Los Angeles
- Pei-te Lien, University of California Santa Barbara
- Celeste Montoya, University of Colorado, Boulder
- Francisco Pedraza, Arizona State University
- Ricardo Ramirez, University of Notre Dame
- Tom Wong, University of California, San Diego

2016-2017

- Lorrie Frasure (Chair), University of California, Los Angeles
- Els de Graauw, Baruch College
- Virginia Gray, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
- Jessica Lavariega Monforti, California State University Channel Islands
- Pei-te Lien, University of California Santa Barbara
- Ricardo Ramirez, University of Notre Dame
- Tom Wong, University of California, San Diego