



# Straight from the Source

What Works  
for First-Generation  
College Students

# The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education

The Pell Institute, sponsored by the Council for Opportunity in Education, conducts and disseminates research and policy analysis to encourage policymakers, educators, and the public to improve educational opportunities and outcomes of low-income, first-generation, and disabled college students.

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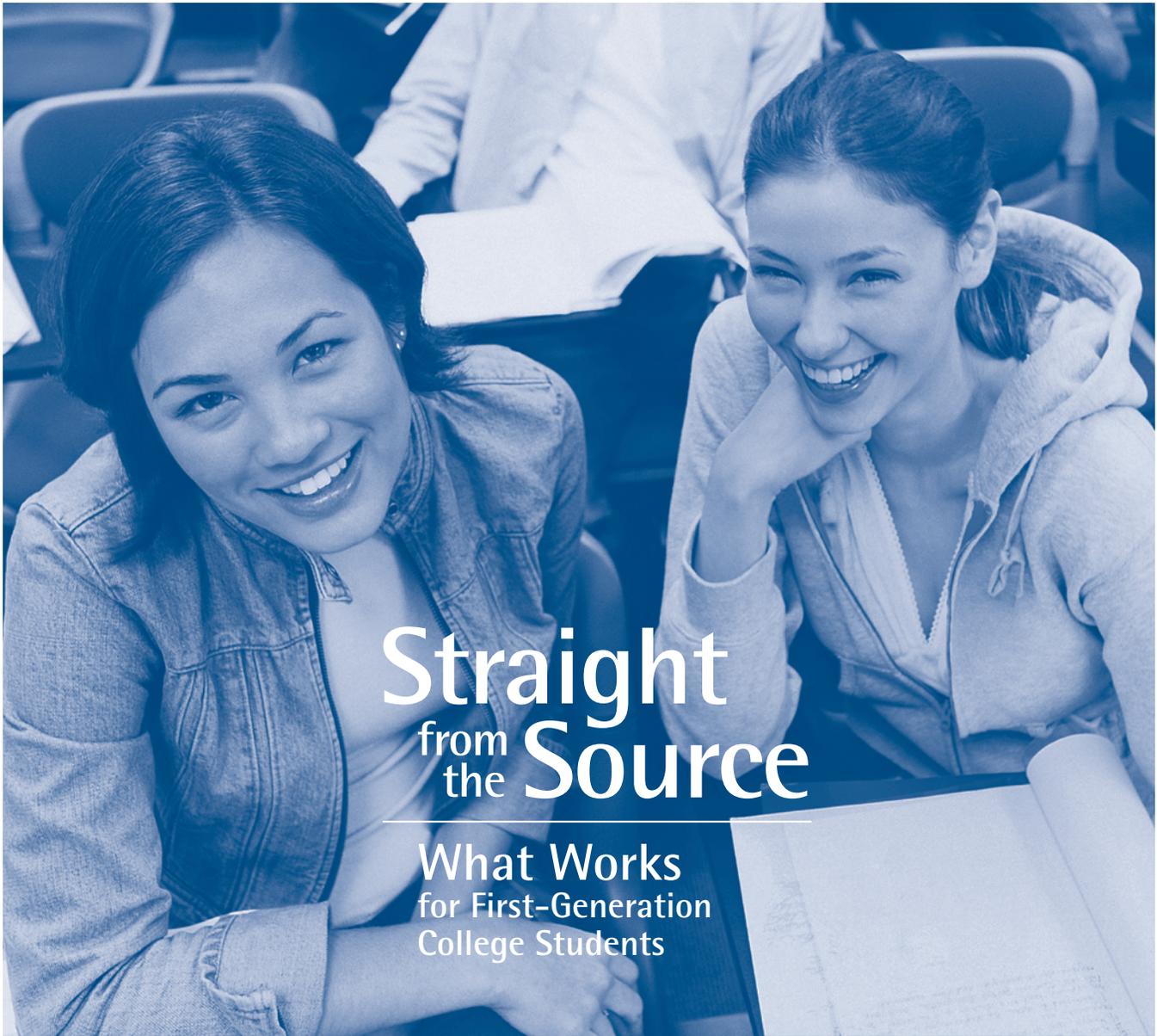
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DECEMBER 2006 THE PELL INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF OPPORTUNITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Jennifer Engle, Adolfo Bermeo, and Colleen O'Brien

# Acknowledgements

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This report was written by Jennifer Engle, Research Analyst; Adolfo Bermeo, Senior Scholar; and Colleen O'Brien, Director, at the Pell Institute.

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We heartily acknowledge the efforts of these individuals in the process of conducting this research. We also recognize that responsibility for the content of this report, including any errors or omissions, lies solely with the authors.

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# Executive Summary

**In recent years**, college attendance for first-generation students has had a high profile in Texas. First-generation students—students whose parents did not attend college—have increasingly been the target of efforts to increase college-going and completion rates in the state. Such efforts demonstrate a growing recognition by state policymakers and educators that expanding postsecondary opportunity to students who have previously lacked college access—namely the state’s large and increasing low-income, minority, and first-generation populations—is critical to the future social and economic well-being of Texas.

Given such high-profile efforts in the state, it is important to consider how first-generation students respond to the messages and programs being targeted toward them. With support from the Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation (TG), the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education conducted focus groups with first-generation students in Texas to ascertain which messages and services have the most impact on whether or not they enroll in college. The students, recent alumni of pre-college programs, were either currently enrolled or about to enroll in two- and four-year colleges and universities throughout Texas at the time of the interviews.

First-generation students identified three crucial steps along the pipeline to college where support was most helpful in making a successful transition from high school:

- Raising aspirations for college.
- Navigating the college admissions process.
- Easing the initial transition to college.

Overall, first-generation students say it is the relationships and trust they developed with pre-college program staff that allowed them to be receptive to the messages and services that these programs have to offer. Preparing for and going to college is a “leap of faith” for these students because no one else in their families has done it before them. First-generation students and their parents must feel that they can trust program staff, who are their guides through this process, in order to be able to take that step forward for themselves and for their families.

## Raising Aspirations for College

Many first-generation students had no or low aspirations for going to college prior to participating in pre-college programs. They did not think a college education was necessary to get a job and/or they did not think going to college was possible because they could not pay for it or could not get in. What worked to raise their college-going aspirations?

■ **Connecting college to job and career interests.** Activities such as career interest inventories, career day programs and speakers, and job shadow and internship programs helped students explore their career interests and options beyond unskilled labor or the military, as well as helped them connect those career aspirations to postsecondary goals and choices.

■ **Getting informed about college and how to pay for it.** Activities such as financial aid workshops and college visits not only raised students’ aspirations about whether they could go to college, but also expanded their perspective on what colleges were affordable or within their reach.

■ **Perceiving themselves as college material.** Addressing gaps in preparation through tutoring and counseling helped students improve their academic standing. Providing opportunities for learning beyond the scope of the high school curriculum allowed students to achieve at levels they thought impossible, such as placing into the top ten percent of their high school class.

■ **Understanding that college is possible.** Some students thought it wasn’t possible for them to go to college and graduate because of the lack of college experience in their families and communities. Engaging students with role models showed them that it was possible to succeed and demonstrated the potential for improving their lives and the lives of others in their families and communities by getting a college degree.

■ **Getting personal and being persistent about college.** Students were not always initially receptive to outreach efforts from program staff about the importance of preparing for and going to college. Some-

times it took months and even years before program staff were able to convince students that they should and could go to college. Getting personal and being persistent worked better than waiting for students to seek help or merely pointing resources out to students.

## Navigating the College Admissions Process

As the first in their families to go to college, most first-generation students did not receive help from parents or other family members in the admissions process because of a lack of “college knowledge” — that is, how to prepare for, apply to, and pay for college. Many of the students were also the first generation to grow up in this country. Furthermore, many students were not receiving much help from overburdened high school counselors who could not talk with them about college until their senior year, which is late in the game. As a result, first-generation students relied heavily on pre-college programs and staff to make it through the college admissions process. What made a difference?

■ **Starting early, meeting often.** For many first-generation students, pre-college program staff were their most important sources of information and support, which they provided as early and as often as possible. Even when they started late, though, many students were still successful at getting admitted to college with the help of the pre-college programs.

■ **Taking it step by step.** From college entrance examination testing to college visits to college applications to financial aid forms, first-generation students needed help at every step. Understanding the process as a progression of steps and learning how one step related to another allowed students to keep moving forward toward college.

■ **Finding out how to pay.** The cost of college can be a harsh reality for all students. In the case of first-generation students, getting information about financial aid was especially important. Most students were completely unaware of the types and sources of financial aid available and how to apply for them. Without guidance, and more importantly, assistance in applying for aid, the financial barriers to college would have crushed students’ aspirations.

■ **Getting the family involved.** While the college application process can be confusing for all students, it is especially so when no one in the family has gone before. By getting parents and other siblings involved,

first-generation students felt that pre-college programs helped lessen some of the confusion and stress. Efforts by program staff to reach out to and develop relationships with students’ parents throughout the process made parents feel more comfortable with and supportive of students’ college-going plans. As one student said, “It helped them help me.”

■ **Making connections in the community.** Pre-college programs were an important link between first-generation students and their parents and existing state and local resources aimed at helping this population get into college. Pre-college programs provided information about the college admissions process to students and their parents through their own activities as well as by referring students to available resources in the local community such as the state-supported GO Centers.

## Easing the Initial Transition to College

First-generation students overwhelmingly said that it is much more difficult to stay in college than it is to get in. As one student said: “Getting into college is one thing. It’s actually sticking it through that’s the hard part.” As the first in their families to go to college, these students describe experiencing academic, social, financial, and family issues that made the initial transition to college difficult for them. What mattered most?

■ **Being academically prepared for college.** The most difficult transition faced by first-generation students was related to academics. Due to a lack of rigorous coursework, low teacher expectations, and limited resources in the urban and rural school systems they attended, many students felt they lacked the content knowledge and study skills necessary to succeed when they started college. Students said that pre-college programs did help, at least in part, to ease the academic transition to college by:

- *Increasing college preparedness.* Tutoring and supplemental academic courses helped close gaps in students’ academic preparation by covering and/or reinforcing material from the high school curriculum as well as by developing study skills. Academic enrichment courses and programs provided students with advanced subject content and skills, allowing them to not only to catch up but leap forward.
- *Creating a bridge to college.* Summer bridge programs helped students gain experience with registering for classes, finding classrooms on campus, and going to the bookstore. Students also developed study habits

and skills for succeeding in college courses with additional tutoring and other support provided during such programs.

- *Continuing support through the first year of college.* When students were not academically successful during their first semester, they did not get much help from college professors or advisors. Instead, they reached out to pre-college program staff to help them weather the crisis.

■ **Acclimating students to the college environment.** First-generation students describe experiencing the same anxieties and problems as other students in making the transition to college. However, pre-college programs helped them to anticipate and deal with such common anxieties by acclimating them to the college environment.

- *Navigating campus life.* Being exposed to college life in pre-college programs through pre-admissions campus visits as well as weekly academic year programs and summer residential programs at local colleges meant that the first-generation students felt prepared to navigate a college campus as freshmen.
- *Connecting with peers.* Meeting peers from different family and cultural backgrounds while in pre-college programs helped first-generation students interact with a diversity of students once they got to college. Interacting with peers who had different academic backgrounds also helped socialize students to the norms and expectations of college life.
- *Balancing social life with academics.* Students said that the structure, discipline, and commitment required to participate in pre-college programs (i.e. attending workshops every Saturday morning during the school year) helped them learn to prioritize academics over socializing with peers when they went to college.

■ **Involving parents in the transition to college.** For first-generation students, going to college is truly an experience that involves the entire family. Pre-college programs helped prepare students as well as their parents and families for this new experience by getting everyone involved. For example, when students participated in residential summer programs, the students learned what it was like to be on a college campus while the families experienced what it would mean to have their children go to college. As one student said: “It’s nice to have your family holding one hand and to have someone else guide you from the other hand too.”

■ **Helping students manage the financial aspects of college.** First-generation students generally felt they were well-prepared by pre-college staff to apply for financial aid. In fact, they often asked staff for help with reapplying for aid as well as with navigating the financial aid office even after going to college.

- *Making ends meet.* First-generation students had fewer problems with the application and award process than with the amount of the award, which was insufficient to cover the rising costs of college attendance. Tuition increases, stagnant grant aid, and the high costs of textbooks and transportation left many students struggling to pay for college.
- *Working less.* Most first-generation students opt to work rather than to take out loans, making it difficult for them to focus time and attention on their coursework.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

First-generation students not only shared what worked to help them make the transition from high school to college; they also talked about what didn’t work or what could work better to help get more students like them get into college. Based on students’ own suggestions, we offer the following recommendations to practitioners and policymakers:

■ **Get the message out to all students about college as early as possible.** While the students we talked to benefited from getting involved in pre-college programs, they realized that there were many students like them who did not get involved because either they did not know the programs existed or the programs did not have enough resources to serve them. What can be done to provide all students with the information they need about why and how to go to college?

- Strengthen partnerships between school-based, community-based, and state- and federally-funded pre-college programs in order to coordinate messages and services, and to maximize resources to better meet students’ needs and serve more students.
- Develop stronger links between pre-college programs and state college access campaigns such as College for Texans, as well as national efforts like the Know-How2Go campaign sponsored by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the American Council on Education, or the College Access Initiative sponsored by the student loan guarantee agencies.

- Drastically reduce high student-counselor ratios that prevent guidance counselors from talking to students about college before their senior year. In addition, hire and/or provide more support for dedicated college counselors in every high school.
- Increase funding for pre-college services and programs. Students were very concerned about how persistent budget shortfalls and potential cuts would affect whether programs could continue serving them through graduation and/or help others in need of services.

■ **Better prepare students for college.** While pre-college programs can help to improve students' academic preparedness for college, they cannot completely close gaps that develop as a result of students' K-12 experiences. What can be done to improve students' preparation for college?

- Align high school graduation requirements with college entrance requirements to ensure that all students know the coursework they need to be successful in college and have the opportunity to take it. An important step in achieving alignment is to make the college preparatory curriculum the default curriculum for high school, as many states have already done.
- Address gaps in students' academic preparation for college by providing coursework and tutoring outside the classroom. Furthermore, academic preparation should go beyond remediation by providing students with opportunities to take advanced coursework such as honors, Advanced Placement, and dual enrollment courses.
- Provide additional funding and support to under-resourced schools, which frequently serve students who are underrepresented in higher education and are in need of the most assistance to get prepared for college.

■ **Provide more support for students once in college.** While students felt they received ample support from pre-college programs to help them get in, once they arrived on campus they didn't have the support needed—academic, social, financial—to help them

stay. What can be done to help improve the chances that, once enrolled, students will succeed in college?

- Advise students to attend colleges and universities that have well-developed support programs in place, especially for first-year students, as well as strong records of successfully retaining and graduating students.
- Extend the individualized and intensive support provided by pre-college programs to the college campus by extending the pre-college programs themselves, increasing coordination between existing pre-college and campus-based programs, and/or developing campus-based programs where they do not currently exist.
- Reduce barriers to students' participation in support programs—such as lack of information, inability to pay, and/or inconvenient hours due to students' work schedules—by offering flexible services that take students' characteristics and needs into consideration.
- Provide students with additional financial aid, especially grants and work-study, as well as counseling about how to manage unmet need. In particular, students need more guidance on how many hours to work vs. how much debt burden to assume during college in order to make decisions that promote persistence. Providing students with meaningful on-campus work in their field of study can help them meet their financial *and* academic goals.

By going to straight to the source, it is our hope that the words of the first-generation students presented here will improve practice in outreach programs and postsecondary institutions. In addition, we hope that raising awareness and generating dialogue among policymakers about the impact and benefits of pre-college programs and services will result in increased opportunities for more students and their families to take the “leap of faith” and start their own college-going traditions.

# Introduction



**College attendance** for first-generation college students has never had a higher profile in the state of Texas. Students whose parents did not attend college have been a major focus of recent efforts to improve postsecondary participation and completion rates in the state, including the College for Texans Campaign, the Higher Education Assistance Program, and the First-Generation College Student Initiatives. Such efforts were created in response to the adoption of *Closing the Gaps 2015: The Texas Higher Education Plan* by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) in 2000. In the *Plan*, the Board recognizes that expanding postsecondary opportunity to students who previously lacked college access—namely the state’s growing low-income, minority, and first-generation populations—is critical to the future social and economic well-being of Texas.

With so much attention focused on this population, it is important to consider how first-generation students respond to the messages and services targeted to them. With funding from the Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation, the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education conducted a research study about the transition from high school to college for first-generation students in Texas. The purpose of the study was to ascertain from first-generation students themselves which messages and services have the most impact on whether or not they enroll in college. The findings from this study are intended to assist administrators and staff in outreach programs and post-secondary institutions in Texas and around the country by informing and improving the practices they use to help first-generation students get into and through college. The findings are also intended to raise awareness and generate dialogue among state and federal policymakers about the impact and benefits of pre-college programs and services for first-generation and other educationally at-risk student populations.

## Major College Access and Success Initiatives in Texas

### College for Texans Campaign

The College for Texans campaign is a central part of the efforts to carry out *Closing the Gaps*, the state's higher education plan. The goal of the statewide awareness and motivational campaign is to enroll an additional 430,000 people into the Texas higher education system by 2015. The campaign slogan is: "Education. Go get it." Major initiatives of the campaign include:

- A comprehensive website for students with information about how to prepare for, apply to, and pay for college.
- College enrollment workshops that provide direct assistance with college application and financial aid forms for 12<sup>th</sup> grade students.
- GO Centers located throughout the state (including several mobile GO Centers) that provide additional application assistance to students and their parents.

The state legislature directed the Coordinating Board (THECB) to undertake the campaign in 2001. Annual funding for the campaign, which includes state, federal, and private monies, is about \$5 million.

### Higher Education Assistance (HEA) Pilot Program

The HEA pilot program, started by the THECB under direction from the state legislature in 2001, aims to improve the number of students who go to college from high schools with the lowest college-going rates in the state. The first component of the program involves requiring high schools with college-going rates in the lowest 10 percent to develop a partnership plan with a local college or university to improve performance over a five-year period. Partnership plans may include activities such as providing college test preparation workshops, hosting parent and/or college nights, and offering college credit courses in high school. The second component of the program requires the THECB to offer twice-yearly college enrollment workshops in three areas of the state with the lowest college-going rates. Initial funding for the HEA pilot program came from the state legislature as well as from federal grants. The THECB partnered with several organizations and Texas college and universities to continue the program after the initial funding ended.

### First-Generation College Student Grant Program

This program, run by the THECB from 2003–2006, provided sub-grants to Texas colleges and universities to develop recruitment and retention programs to support postsecondary access and success for first-generation college students. Grant awardees offered college enrollment workshops to students who attended local high schools with low college-going rates and high concentrations of first-generation students. Awardees also provided comprehensive support services, such as tutoring, mentoring, and advising, as well as \$500 renewable scholarships to entering first-generation, low-income students who attended their institutions. The program also sponsored sub-grants used to identify and implement innovative model programs for first-generation students. Federal funding for the program has ended, although the state is trying to secure additional funds to continue the program.

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*In addition, the THECB requires all public colleges and universities in the state of Texas to report on their own efforts to increase college access and success for low-income and first-generation students, and compiles reports of institutions' best practices.*

Sources: College for Texans Foundation ([www.collegeforalltexasfoundation.com](http://www.collegeforalltexasfoundation.com)), Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board ([www.theccb.state.tx.us](http://www.theccb.state.tx.us)).

**The purpose of this study** was to ascertain from first-generation students themselves which messages and services have the most impact on whether or not they enroll in college. The study design involved focus groups with 135 first-generation students in Texas. Students who participated in the focus groups were recent alumni of pre-college TRIO programs—Talent Search and Upward Bound—enrolled in two- and four-year institutions throughout the state. The focus groups, conducted by two researchers, addressed several key areas including aspirations and encouragement to go to college; academic prepa-

ration for college; “college knowledge” about how to apply to and pay for college; and academic, social, and cultural transitions to college. One or more focus groups of 10-15 students each were conducted in El Paso, Edinburg, Kingsville, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. Students had to contend with a number of difficulties in order to participate in the focus groups such as arranging time off from work, transportation, and/or childcare, which are similar to the difficulties they experience getting to class every day. We are grateful for the effort on the part of students who were able to attend the focus groups.

## About the Talent Search and Upward Bound Programs

The Talent Search and Upward Bound programs are federally-funded TRIO programs that aim to increase college awareness, preparation and participation among low-income and first-generation students. Colleges and universities as well as community-based organizations apply for grants from the federal government to administer TRIO programs in their local service areas. Both programs offer counseling, tutoring, mentoring, and workshops to provide students with information about the college admissions process as well as to provide assistance with obtaining financial aid (i.e. help with filling out the FAFSA) and preparing for college entrance examinations. Upward Bound offers a more intensive program that includes supplemental academic instruction in key college-preparatory courses on Saturdays throughout the school year and during a six-week summer program held on a college campus. Many Upward Bound programs culminate in a bridge program that assists students with the transition from high school to college.

In order to participate in the Talent Search program, students must be between 11 and 27 years old and have completed the fifth grade. Two-thirds of the participants must be both low-income and potential first-generation college students. A typical Talent Search program serves about 14 target middle and high schools. In 2005, about 385,000 students were served in 468 Talent Search programs nationwide, with an average of 800 students per program. More than 21,000 students were served by 28 Talent Search programs throughout the state of Texas in 2005.

In order to participate in the Upward Bound program, students must be between 13 and 19 years old and have completed the eighth grade. A typical Upward Bound Program serves about six target high schools. In 2005, more than 56,000 students were served by 760 Upward Bound programs nationwide, with an average of 74 students per program. In Texas, about 4,500 students were served by 61 Upward Bound programs statewide in 2005.

In both programs, two-thirds of students served must be low-income and potential first-generation college students. The rest are either low-income or potential first-generation college students only.

The study design also called for interviews with 10-15 recent pre-college program alumni who graduated from high school, and were otherwise prepared for college, but did not enroll or left after the first semester. Considerable efforts were made by program staff and researchers to include these students in the study; however, we were unsuccessful in these efforts. Program staff were either unable to reach these students due to outdated contact information or unable to get students to respond to their repeated phone calls and e-mails. Program staff were able to make contact with some of these students, but work conflicts made it difficult for them to participate even when after-hours meetings and phone interviews were offered to accommodate their schedules. The difficulties we experienced contacting first-generation students for our study are indicative of the obstacles that both students and program staff must overcome in order to meet the college-going needs of this population.

Finally, the study design involved convening informal focus groups of TRIO program administrators and staff at each site in order to provide context for the student interviews. Two formal interviews were also conducted with Upward Bound and Talent Search program staff from across the state at a national meeting of TRIO program personnel in Washington, DC.

# Literature Review



While access to higher education has expanded dramatically in recent years, students whose parents did not go to college remain at a distinct disadvantage. First-generation college students, most of whom come from low-income and minority backgrounds, face a number of challenges that make it more difficult for them not only to get into but through college as well. This brief review of recent research on first-generation college students focuses on the demographic and educational characteristics of this population and the factors that affect their access to and success in college.

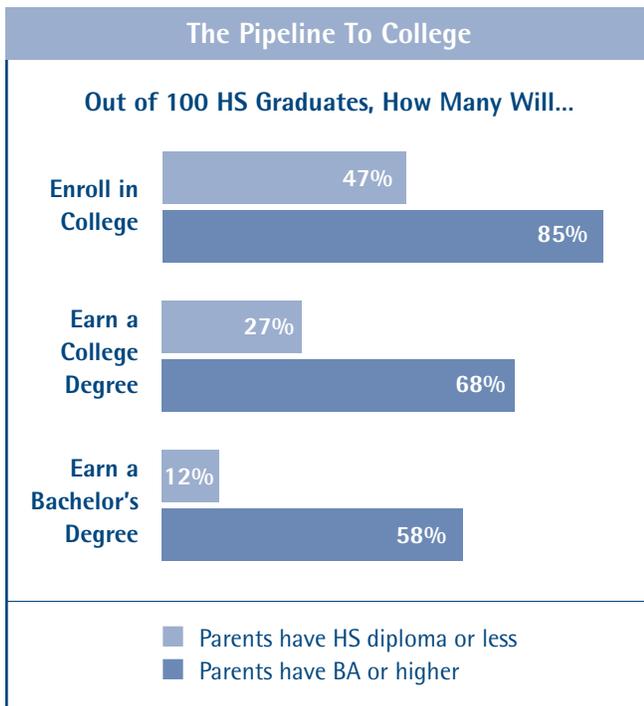
## Characteristics of First-Generation Students

First-generation students—students whose parents have not attended college and/or have not earned a college degree—are much less likely to go to college than their peers, particularly in the four-year sector. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS: 88):

- Less than half (47 percent) of students whose parents did not go to college enrolled in any postsecondary institution the year after graduating from high school compared to 85 percent of students whose parents had college degrees.
- Among graduates who did go to college, 56 percent of first-generation students attended a two-year institution or less, compared to 23 percent of students whose parents had college degrees (Berkner & Chavez, 1997).

Data from the 1995-1996 Beginning Postsecondary Study show that first-generation students comprise 47 percent of all entering college students, but are overrepresented among entering students at less-than-two-year and two-year institutions, where they are 73 percent and 53 percent of the population respectively. First-generation students are underrepresented at four-year institutions, comprising only 34 percent of the entering student population (Choy, 2001).

First-generation students are both less likely to attend college and less likely to persist to a degree. Data from



Sources: Calculated using data from Berkner & Chavez (1997) and Chen (2005).

the NELS Postsecondary Education Transcript Study shows that:

- First-generation students were twice as likely to leave college without earning a degree compared to students whose parents had college degrees, 43 versus 20 percent respectively.
- Even among students who expected to earn bachelor's degrees and attended four-year institutions, first-generation students were much more likely to leave (29 versus 13 percent) and much less likely to earn a degree (47 versus 78 percent) than students whose parents had a college degree.
- Overall, only 26 percent of first-generation students who graduated from high school and enrolled in college earned a bachelor's degree within eight years compared to 68 percent of students whose parents went to college (Chen, 2005).

The findings from the NELS studies are consistent with previous research that found first-generation college students are at a disadvantage relative to their peers with regard to retention, especially during the crucial first year of enrollment, and degree attainment (Berkner et al, 2002; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Ishitani, 2003; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton et al, 2001).

Lower rates of college attendance and completion among first-generation students are due, in part, to their demographic and enrollment characteristics:

- First-generation students are more likely to be female, older, African American or Hispanic, have dependent children, and come from lower-income families than students whose parents have college degrees.
- First-generation college students are also more likely to delay entry into postsecondary education, to begin college at two-year institutions, to commute to campus, to take classes part-time while working full-time, to stop in and out of college, and to need remedial coursework.

All of these characteristics are independently associated with lower rates of college attendance and degree attainment and they are all interrelated. These characteristics further intersect with first-generation status to limit postsecondary opportunities and outcomes for students whose parents did not go to college (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al, 2003, 2004; Somers et al, 2004; Terenzini et al, 1996; Volle & Federico, 1997; Warburton et al, 2001).

However, as the research has also shown, first-generation status itself is a risk factor even after taking demographic and enrollment characteristics into account (Berkner et al, 2002; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton et al, 2001). Therefore, as Choy (2001) suggests, it is useful to examine how parents' level of education is related to other factors that affect whether and how students successfully get into and through college, and in doing so, gain insights into how to help mitigate the effects of first-generation status as a risk factor for this population.

## Factors that Affect Access to College

There are a number of factors that negatively affect the college-going chances of students whose parents did not complete any education beyond high school, including:

- Lower levels of academic preparation.
- Lower educational aspirations.
- Less encouragement and support to attend college, particularly from parents.

- Less knowledge about the college application process.
- Fewer resources to pay for college.

In combination, these factors reduce the likelihood that first-generation students will “choose” to go to college at all, as well as limit the types of colleges (i.e. sector, selectivity, and location) that first-generation students consider attending, ultimately affecting their chances of completing a bachelor’s degree.

### Academic Preparation for College

Students whose parents did not go to college are considerably less likely to be prepared for college than their peers (Choy, 2001). A rigorous high school curriculum, particularly one that includes advanced math, can greatly improve the chances that first-generation students will go to college. Horn and Nunez (2000) found that taking advanced math courses in high school more than doubles the chances that first-generation students will enroll in a four-year college. However, the likelihood that first-generation students will take college-preparatory courses is limited by a lack of availability of such courses as well as a lack of encouragement, particularly from parents. As Horn and Nunez also found, increased levels of parental encouragement and involvement greatly increase the likelihood that students will take a rigorous high school curriculum and enroll in college, regardless of parents’ level of education. Therefore, outreach to first-generation students and their parents about the importance of taking advanced coursework, especially in math, could improve their rates of college preparation and enrollment. However, there is still the problem of limited course availability in schools that serve this population.

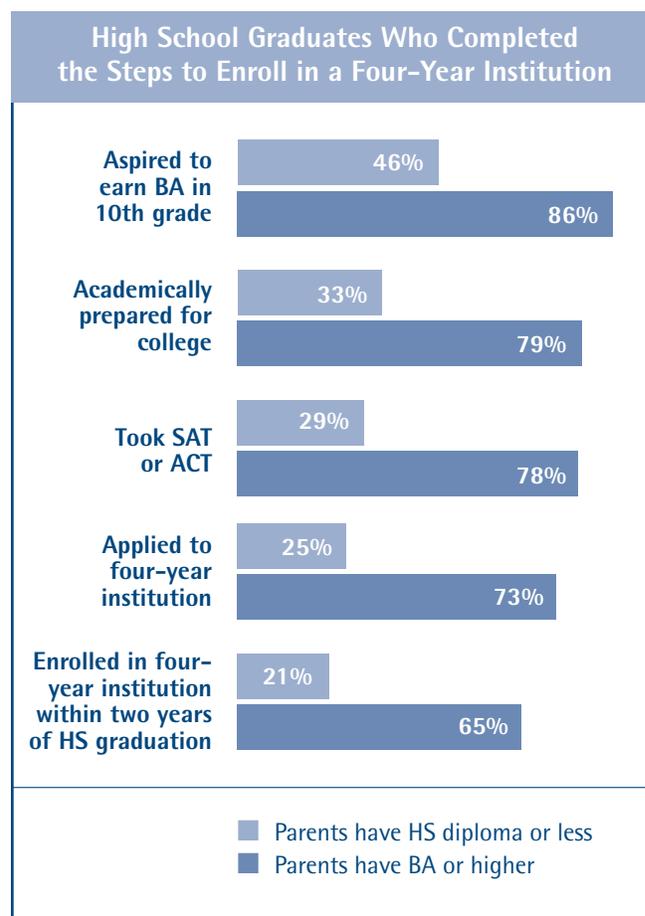
### Aspirations for College

As early as the eighth grade, first-generation students have low expectations about the highest level of education they will receive (Choy, 2001). In twelfth grade, only about half (53 percent) of first-generation students expect to earn a bachelor’s degree compared to nearly 90 percent of their peers (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Choy, 2001). Hossler and his colleagues (1999) found that strong encouragement and support from parents is the most significant factor affecting whether students aspire to and enroll in college. Unfortunately, first-generation students report receiving less encouragement and support, and to some extent discouragement,

from their parents to go to college (Billson & Terry, 1982; Horn & Nunez, 2000; London, 1989, 1992; Terenzini et al, 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Due to a lack of exposure to postsecondary education, the parents of first-generation students may not be aware of the social and economic benefits of college attendance (Volle and Federico, 1997). Additionally, they may lack pertinent information or have misperceptions about the college-going process, particularly about college costs and financial aid, which may lead them to discourage their children from pursuing postsecondary education (Vargas, 2004).

### Planning for College

First-generation students and their parents often lack—and lack access to—important “college knowledge” about the process of preparing, applying, and paying for postsecondary education. College knowledge among parents of first-generation students is limited by their own lack of experience with the college admissions pro-



Source: Choy (2001).

## Profile of First-Generation College Students in Texas

Using newly available state-level data from the U.S. Department of Education's 2004 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), it is possible to obtain detailed information on first-generation students attending college in Texas. First-generation status is defined here as students whose parents did not complete any education beyond high school.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, 35 percent of undergraduate students attending college in Texas are the first generation in their families to attend college, which totals approximately 365,000 students. First-generation students are underrepresented at public and private four-year institutions, where they comprise 30 and 23 percent of the populations respectively. First-generation students are overrepresented at public two-year institutions, where they comprise 42 percent of the population. Information was not available for for-profit institutions in the state-level NPSAS data. Nationally, first-generation students are overrepresented at for-profit institutions at 49 percent of the population.

First-generation students attending college in Texas differ considerably from their peers in terms of their demographic and enrollment characteristics. Compared to students whose parents have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, first-generation students are more likely to:

### Demographic characteristics

- be **female** (57 vs. 52 percent)
- come from **minority backgrounds** (59 vs. 37 percent)
- come from **lower-income families** (mean income \$45,000 vs. \$83,000)
- have **parents born outside the U.S.** (34 vs. 22 percent)
- be **non-native English speakers** (24 vs. 10 percent)
- be **married** (31 vs. 19 percent), **have children** (35 vs. 17 percent), and be **single parents** (19 vs. 9 percent)
- be **financially independent** from their parents (62 vs. 42 percent)
- be **older** (average age 28 vs. 24)
- have **earned a GED** (9 vs. 4 percent)

### Enrollment characteristics

- **delay entry** into postsecondary education after completing high school (49 vs. 30 percent)
- attend college **closer to home** (average distance 80 vs. 163 miles)
- **live off-campus** (94 vs. 83 percent)
- need **remediation** (49 vs. 33 percent)
- attend **part-time** (49 vs. 36 percent)
- **work full-time** while enrolled (40 vs. 31 percent)
- **not receive financial help from family** to pay for college (83 vs. 61 percent)

Taking these differences into consideration may help target resources and programs at the state and institutional level to support postsecondary access and success for first-generation students attending college in Texas.

<sup>1</sup> First-generation status is defined in a number of ways in the literature. It is defined here as students whose parents did not complete any education beyond high school. It has been defined elsewhere as students whose parents do not have a college degree (although they may have attended college) and as students whose parents do not have a bachelor's degree (although they may have earned a certificate or associate's degree). Regardless of the definition used, however, most studies find considerable differences between first-generation students and their peers.

cess as well as by lack of access to key informational sources (i.e. the Internet, parent-teacher conferences, college nights) due to barriers such as language and resources (i.e. cannot afford to take time off work) (Choy, 2001; Oliverrez & Tierney, 2005; Tornatzky et al, 2002; Vargas, 2004). Consequently, first-generation students are less likely to complete the necessary steps toward enrolling in college, especially a four-year institution, even if they are college-qualified and have aspirations to attend college (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Choy, 2001; Volle & Federico, 1997). However, research has found that the chances that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will take the necessary steps to apply to and eventually enroll in a four-year institution are considerably higher if they and/or their parents have received guidance on the college admissions process, particularly if they have received information about financial aid (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Vargas, 2004).

### Choosing a College

First-generation students who do enroll in college are much more likely to choose to attend less selective two-year or four-year colleges and universities, even when they are qualified for admission to more selective institutions (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Pascarella et al, 2004). This is due to a number of factors, primarily related to cost and location. First-generation students are more likely to cite obtaining financial aid, finishing in a short period of time, and being able to work while attending college as very important reasons for their choice of institution. First-generation students are also more likely to choose institutions that are close to home and/or allow them to live at home (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). As these findings suggest, first-generation students may not be fully aware or able to take advantage of (i.e. pay for) the full range of postsecondary options available to them (Vargas, 2004). The decision to attend a less selective two- or four-year college or university can have a negative effect on a student's chances of earning a degree, particularly a bachelor's degree, due to lower graduation rates at these institutions (Pascarella et al, 2004; Vargas, 2004).

### Factors that Affect Success in College

While students whose parents are college-educated tend to experience "college as a continuation" of their academic and social experiences in high school, going to college often constitutes a "disjunction" in the lives of first-generation students and their families. Due to the

lack of college-going experience in their families, first-generation students have to make much more complex academic, social, and cultural transitions to college life, especially during the crucial first year (Terenzini et al, 1994). Whether and how first-generation students navigate these transitions, particularly during their initial adjustment to college, has an effect on whether they can be successful in college and persist to graduation.

### Academic and Social Integration

First-generation students tend to be less prepared academically for college than their peers. They not only require more remedial coursework and lack study and time management skills; they also experience more difficulty navigating the bureaucratic aspects of academic life and have less confidence in their academic abilities (Bui, 2002; Cruce et al, 2005; Penrose, 2002; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al, 1996). First-generation students also tend to perform at lower levels academically in college than their peers; however, this remains true even after taking prior preparation and performance into account (Chen, 2005; Lohfink & Paulson, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al, 2003, 2004; Warburton et al, 2001). Thus, the lower performance and persistence rates of first-generation students are more likely attributable to the fact that they are less likely to engage in the academic and social experiences associated with success in college (Pike & Kuh, 2005) such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities, and using support services (Billson & Terry, 1982; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al, 2003, 2004; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al, 1996).

First-generation students' lower levels of academic and social integration are greatly affected by the way in which they attend college (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Due largely to lack of resources, first-generation students are, as previously mentioned, more likely to live and work off-campus and to take classes part-time while working full-time, which limits the amount of time they spend on campus. Recent research has found that increases in financial aid, particularly grants, scholarships, and work-study, increase the likelihood that first-generation students will persist in college, while increases in

loan debt increase the likelihood that they will depart (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Somers et al, 2004). As Pascarella and his colleagues (2004) found, working while attending college has stronger negative implications for first-generation students in terms of postsecondary outcomes than for their peers.

## **Cultural Adaptation**

First-generation students not only face barriers to their academic and social integration, they also confront obstacles with respect to cultural adaptation due to discontinuities between the culture (i.e. norms, values, expectations) of their families and communities and the culture that exists on college campuses. As Rendon (1992) describes, first-generation students often experience problems “that arise from [living] simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted in neither” (pg. 56). At home, first-generation students report that relationships with family and friends who did not go to college often become strained and difficult to maintain as they are perceived as changing and separating from them, which causes intense stress for these students (Lara, 1992; London, 1989, 1992; Olenchak & Hebert, 2002; Piorkowski, 1983; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Rodriguez, 1982; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002; Terenzini et al, 1994, 1996).

On campus, first-generation students, particularly those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, often describe themselves as unprepared for the isolation and alienation they felt upon entering college (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). First-generation students are more likely to view the campus environment, particularly the faculty, as less supportive and less concerned about them (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al, 1996), and they are more likely to report having experienced discrimination on campus (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al, 1996). As research has shown, the extent to which first-generation students can participate in and transition across these two worlds—which can be aided or impeded by the level of support available at home and on campus—has a significant impact on whether they can be successful in college (Phelan et al, 1993).

# Findings

**As previously stated**, the purpose of this study was to ascertain from first-generation students which types of support and services have the most impact on whether or not they enroll in college. Presented here are the findings from focus group interviews conducted with first-generation students who participated in pre-college programs and who are currently enrolled in two- and four-year colleges throughout the state of Texas. According to these first-generation students, pre-college programs and services can best help them make the transition from high school to college by focusing on:

- Raising their aspirations for college.
- Helping them navigate the college admissions process.
- Easing their initial transition to college.

Overall, though, first-generation students say it is the relationships and trust they develop with pre-college program staff that allow them to be receptive to the messages and services that these programs have to offer to help them get into and through college.

## Raising Aspirations for College

For many students, getting involved in a pre-college program like Talent Search or Upward Bound was the first step they took toward considering going to college, even if they didn't know it at the time. Students' initial reasons for getting involved in the programs sometimes had less to do with wanting to go to college than with wanting to spend time with friends outside of class, to go on field trips, or to get the stipend available in some programs. Many students were encouraged to join by friends, siblings, and cousins who were also in the programs and who said it was "fun." As one student said:

*We actually fell into the program. I went because of my friends. We didn't have any intention of going to college. It was this program that gave us this motivation.*

Some were encouraged to join by teachers and counselors at their schools who were involved in the programs. Others learned about the programs from class presentations, assemblies, orientation programs, and school announcements.

While many students got involved in middle or early high school, others did not. Some students would "hang around" the program offices for months before eventually getting involved in the programs. Other students described how they would "run away" from program staff who tried to recruit them. Such students were reluctant to get involved with the programs because they either did not think about going to college or they did not think they could get in to it:

*I used to run away from her [the program director]. Every time I would see her, she's like "Come here! Fill out this form!" She would try to make me fill out all these applications, and when I was a freshman, sophomore, and junior, I didn't really... I didn't think of college at all. I thought I was going to join the Army, and that was it. I was like, "Why waste my time?"*

Like this student, many of the first-generation students had no or low aspirations for going to college upon getting involved with a pre-college program. Some students said they didn't plan to attend college before getting into the program because they planned to join the military or work after high school. Other students didn't plan to go to college because they didn't think it was even an option for them. As one student explains, many students either think they can't pay for it and/or they think they aren't "college material:"

*I think many students don't want to study, because they don't really know what's out there for them. They think it's so hard. People think you need to be smart to go to college, and there's no money out there for them. They just don't realize the help is there for them.*

Some students did want to go to college before joining a pre-college program, but they didn't know how or whether they could accomplish their goal because no one in their family had gone to or finished college before them:

*I wanted to go to college but I think I was afraid I wouldn't even make it to [high school] graduation because of my surroundings and the way life was portrayed around me. But once I [got into the program], it showed me that there are other options.*

*I knew I was gonna go to college, but I felt like I would probably end up flunking out 'cause both of my parents did. So, I just thought I was gonna do the same thing. Then they told me about [the program].*

*I knew college was there. Don't get me wrong, I knew it was, but I saw it so far away. I was one of those students who did not know anything about college, nothing. I didn't even know you had to turn in an application for college. Until I met [my program advisor].*

According to students, involvement with pre-college programs helped increase their college-going aspirations by:

- Raising awareness about their educational and career interests, postsecondary choices, and options for financing college.
- Helping them improve their academic achievement as well as increase their academic self-confidence, thereby allowing them to see themselves as “college material.”
- Demonstrating the potential to improve their lives and the lives of others through the attainment of a college education.

### Raising Awareness

Many first-generation students had limited educational and career goals prior to getting involved in a pre-college program. According to students, getting informed about the long-term economic benefits of earning a college degree helped raise their educational and career aspirations:

*I wasn't planning to go to college. I figured after I graduated from high school I could get a job easy like that. But when I joined [the program], the counselors told me that getting a job isn't that simple these days. They require higher education. So they explained more about how you need different college degrees to get different jobs.*

*Honestly I didn't think of it [going to college]. Prior to this [program], I was just like “Oh, I'll just work with my uncle or something and just help the family out” like that. But, I mean with a degree and everything you make more money and you could help out more. And it'll be easier, but it'll take longer.*

*A lot of people just don't see the need of coming to college. They think “I might as well just get a 9-to-5 doing telemarketing and getting paid \$9.50 an hour.” You don't care about going to college and you don't care about four*

*or five years later. You see things immediately 'cause you need what you need and you need it right now. But if you tell somebody, “This is what you'll get at the end if you go to college. You can be successful this way if you go to college. If you get your degree and go get your Master's or your Ph.D., then you're set for life.” But a lot of people don't see it like that.*

Students' aspirations for college also increased in response to participating in activities such as career interest inventories, career day programs and speakers, and job shadow and internship programs. As these students explain:

*They have good speakers who would come talk to us like engineers and teachers. And from their speeches, I got influenced, and I wanted to go to school.*

*They expose you to different people in different professions that makes you realize “How'd they get there?” Well, they had to go to college. They help you out so you can achieve your dreams of being a doctor, a teacher, a scientist. 'Cause you won't do it if you don't have information.*

*They have activities like “I am interested in...”. It makes you wonder, “What if I studied for that? If I studied for that, where would I go to school and how am I going to pay for it?” That's where they come in with “There's money for that.”*

According to students, such activities helped raise their awareness of their career interests as well as helped them connect their career aspirations to postsecondary goals and options. Furthermore, activities that provided students with information about financial aid not only raised their aspirations about *whether they could go to college*, but about *where they could go to college* as well.

### Increasing Achievement

Some first-generation students did not aspire to go to college because they did not think they were “college material.” While some of the students were high-achievers in high school, many more of them were average to under-achieving students who could have “gone either way” with respect to college. According to students, their involvement in pre-college programs helped raise their aspirations for college by increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence in their academic abilities:

*They build up your self-esteem because you might feel like, “I can't do anything.” And at school they don't care.*

*The teachers don't pull me to the side and say straighten up my grades a little because you need this in college. Well, here [in the program], they do. They treat every student like that. It's not just some students here. They treat everybody the same. They tell everybody, "You can do it. College is for you." And if that's in your head, you might achieve anything.*

Students' aspirations for college also increased in response to activities that helped them improve their grades, such as after-school tutoring programs and regular counseling sessions about their academic progress that reinforced the message that earning good grades and developing good study habits were necessary for getting into and succeeding in college. As this student explains:

*That program really helped us get away from the Cs and going to Bs and As. And because of the program, I was able to go pick up my grades, I was able to graduate top of my class. I was able to just be motivated to go to school, and that's not what I had. I was like "Yeah, I want to go to college," but I didn't see it. I was just "Okay, I'm going to graduate and start working." It was never "college, college." And that program, what it did was it motivated us.*

Students' aspirations grew not only in response to activities that addressed gaps in their academic preparation, but also in response to activities that provided academic enrichment and advancement:

*They brought out my potential. Before I didn't even believe I could graduate in the top ten percent in my class or get into dual credit. And they just like brought out this new whole person in me. I was like, wow, if I can do this, anybody can.*

*I felt proud. I felt more professional. I felt more experienced, more in control and had more confidence in myself after I did that [program]. After that it was like I could just do anything if just set my mind to it. I could go to college.*

Many first-generation students did not have much confidence in their academic abilities, which led them to think that they were not "college material." As a result, they often had low expectations and aspirations for college. By increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence in their academic abilities as well as improving their academic performance, the students began to believe that college was possible.

## Improving Lives

Some first-generation students thought it wasn't possible for them to go to and finish college because few people they knew had done it before them. Activities exposing students to role models showed them it was possible to go to college despite the lack of college-going experience in their families and communities:

*They had a panel of college students and graduate students that came out of [the program] do presentations. They kind of give you a model of how it is possible for you to go on with your life, and become whatever you dreamed of even though you've come from an atmosphere where college is not even an option. They were really influential towards me. So then I started being in a mode where I said, "You know what? It's okay if my background is not that influenced by college. But you know what? I'm going to do something about it."*

*They had seminars where people came in and told their success stories to the program. It made you feel like you belong and you should be a part of this. You should be given this opportunity to drive yourself forward. And just because you're Hispanic and low-income or a woman you can still do it even though your parents might not speak English or your family might not have any money, you can go to a really awesome university and you can graduate and you can go to another awesome university and get your doctorate. I think I was brought up thinking that it was the impossible thing for me to do.*

First-generation students were not only motivated by the possibility that they could overcome their background experiences to go to college, but also by the opportunities that going to college offered for improving the social and economic conditions in which they live. Students said they wanted to go to college to "be somebody or something" and to "have a better life" than their parents have or were able to provide for them:

*[The program] pointed me in the right direction. They gave me a purpose to be, to make something out of my life instead of just being another Hispanic out there on the streets, in jail or dead.*

*I want to have a better life than what my parents gave me, since I came from a single-parent household, and my dad wasn't really around. I want to be able to have a career and support my family better.*

*Seeing my mom work so hard, just seeing how hard she struggled, I didn't want to struggle like that. So that's*

*what really motivated me to want to go to college, seeing her.*

Although first-generation students aspired to go to college in order to have a better life than their parents, they also felt that they would not have had the chance to go to college if not for the hardships endured and sacrifices made by their parents. This was particularly true among students from immigrant families. As a result, these students were motivated to go to college in order to take advantage of opportunities not available to their parents, and in doing so, to show their appreciation to them:

*My parents know what it's like to just not have the opportunities and they see that we do have opportunities here. And it's like there's no excuse. There is no excuse really for us not to take advantage of it. My mom would love to come back to college. But she kind of knows her time is up so she's like, "Well, it's for you now."*

*The reason I wanted to go to college was because both of my parents came from Mexico. They didn't even get past their elementary years 'cause as soon as they were able to walk they had to go work and earn money. Seeing them work, they struggled really hard. Even though they couldn't help me with my homework, they'd always tell me, "Do your best 'cause we wish we had this opportunity you have. That's why we came over here, to give you the opportunity to be successful, graduate, go to college." And I've always told myself and them, "You do it because they took the risk on coming over here."*

*My parents want me to better myself, and they want me to be somebody they want to be proud of and they want me to show everybody that I can do it. I want to go to college to give them back everything that they've given me and more 'cause they've always supported me. They've always been there for me no matter what, ups and downs. So I just want to pay them back for what they've done for me.*

As the words of these students suggest, first-generation students do not view going to college as a solely individual pursuit, but rather as the culmination of generations of effort and progress in their families and communities. One student described herself as part of a "chain" that extends throughout the generations of her family. She was motivated to go to college because, as she said, "If you stop, you also affect the other generations, the ones that came before and the ones that come after." First-

generation students feel that the benefits of going to college extend not only to themselves, but to others as well.

As a result, first-generation students were motivated to go to college not only to improve their own lives, but also to improve the lives of others. Many students said they were motivated to go to and finish college because doing so would make them role models for others in their families and communities:

*A lot of Latinos do not experience having a degree. When you're the person from your family to get that, it's like a big deal! Because it's like, "Oh, she did it, and now I can do it." And you see your cousins, your brothers following in your footsteps. And even your older cousins, they want to go back to school, because they see all the opportunities you're getting after college.*

Other students said they were motivated to go to college in order to train for careers, particularly as teachers and counselors, that would allow them to give back to their communities in order to create opportunities for populations who are underrepresented in college:

*There's a lot of Hispanic students that are not doing so well in public schools, and that's what I want to do. I want to be a counselor there and help out 'cause now I see that anybody can do anything.*

Activities such as community service projects sponsored by pre-college programs also helped raise the college-going aspirations of first-generation students by demonstrating the potential to improve their lives and the lives of others through the attainment of a college education. As this student explains:

*We were doing a lot of volunteer work. And you get to see how much the community is really impacted by it. So this program has really helped me find out more about college, and how I could benefit, not just for me but for the whole community, how to help out others.*

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While first-generation students felt that their involvement in pre-college programs greatly increased their aspirations for college, they felt that their high schools did not. According to students, high school teachers and counselors took a more passive approach to encouraging them to go to college which they did not find as helpful as the more (inter)active and "intrusive" approach taken by pre-college program staff:

*I had a lot of teachers who said they saw potential in me. But they wouldn't direct me. They just said just make sure you go to college.*

*In high school they just tell you that you should go to college, but they don't tell you how. Like, they have meetings where they'll tell you about certain colleges. But I mean, they don't do like [the program] where you actually go to a university or have someone from the university talk to you. I wish they would have had something sort of like that 'cause if you don't join this program then you have no way of knowing anything about it.*

*I think they [program staff] helped me more than the high school teachers did. The teachers would say, "Yeah, you can go to college." But they wouldn't talk to you about their experiences like they did here and they didn't take you to visit schools or anything like that.*

*They [program staff] actually went to the school to recruit you, not "Here's the website, go visit it." They made appointments with you and your parents.*

First-generation students overwhelmingly felt that high school teachers and counselors need more information about pre-college programs and resources, and that information about the programs needs to be more systematically available to all students earlier in high school. Some students talked about how they would have gotten involved with the programs earlier if they had learned about them sooner. Other students described how many of their peers either did not know that the programs existed or they did not know what the programs could do for them, so they did not get involved. As this student explains:

*I think this is really important: You need to go to the classes and let students know about these programs because nobody went to our classes. I found out about it out of my own curiosity, but not everybody has curiosity like I do. So I think they should have an office set up right there in the counseling center with signs just letting people know. Because a lot of my friends at my high school, they did not know. I mean, we were all in the same boat, we all didn't know what to do to get into college.*

However, it should be noted that first-generation students said that it still made a difference for them in terms of getting interested in and prepared for going to college even when services were not provided until junior or senior year.

## Navigating the College Admissions Process

As the first to go to college in their families, most students were unable to receive much help from parents or other family members in navigating the process of applying to college. According to students, they and their parents lack important "college knowledge" about how to prepare for, apply to, and pay for college:

*It [the program] did help me go to college. I didn't know how to fill out any paperwork, or how to apply or anything. No one ever went to college in my family.*

*It [the program] made my transition from high school to the university easier because I really, I wouldn't have known how to go through all of the paperwork and all the process of that since I am the first one in my family to go to college.*

*My parents don't know anything about college. They didn't even graduate from high school.*

### Texas Higher Education at a Glance

Institutions of Postsecondary Education	Four-Year	Two-Year
Public	42	67
Private, non-profit	51	4
Private, for-profit	11	33
Average Tuition	Four-Year	Two-Year
Public	\$4,694	\$1,282
Private	\$16,868	
Number of Undergraduates		
Total	1,082,667	

Sources: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2006), and *Chronicle* (2006).

Many of the first-generation students were not only the first to go to college in their families, they were also often the first generation of their families to live in this country. Language was a major barrier to receiving help from their parents in the college admissions process:

*My mom just signed papers. She never knew what she was signing. She just knew it was something for school. She knows how to read, but not very well. She does not know English. She does not drive to this day. I have had to do a lot of things on my own, and for her. And she would just sign these papers, and I would turn them in.*

*My parents didn't know a lot about how to fill out the forms and all that. My mom only speaks Spanish so she was like, "You have to try this program because we can't help you. We're not able to help you so you need someone. Try this program and see if they can help you because we're not going to be able to."*

Students also said they did not receive much help from high school counselors. The lack of assistance from high school counselors was mostly due to high student-counselor ratios that made it difficult for students to gain access to counselors until their senior year, which is late in the college admissions process:

*I couldn't even talk to my counselor most of the time. I'd have to see my counselor after school, 'cause I could never talk to her during school she was so busy.*

*I didn't really get any attention from my counselor until my senior year. She was so busy with the seniors, so when I was a sophomore and junior I'd have to like practically beg her to see me. And I think they should really pay more attention to sophomores and juniors to get 'em ready and start looking at scholarships and stuff.*

Some students said that program staff were able to help them make contact and advocate for them with high school counselors when they weren't able to themselves:

*If I couldn't speak with my counselor then I would go to my [program] advisor and get their advice. And they usually had the number to the counselor and they would try to call just to get me in the doorway, at least with an appointment or something like that.*

For other students, pre-college program staff offered advice in place of high school counselors who were not available to them. Peers in the program were also a source of advice:

*If I went to my counselor, she's always busy. I couldn't talk to her one-on-one. With [my program advisor] it was different. I could go to her whenever she was there. And I could talk to her. And it wasn't just her. It was [the other program advisors] too. Like if you're not in the program, you'd have to talk to your counselor, and that's the only one you can talk to. But in the program you can talk to anyone, even your peers. So that really helped me out.*

For all students, pre-college program staff were an important, if not the most, important source of information

and support throughout the college admissions process. A key factor was providing information to students as early as possible. Students said they would not have considered going to college before their senior year, nor would they have known that you needed to start preparing for college before then. They also wouldn't have known that they needed to apply to college before high school was over or that they had to apply to college at all. As these students explain, they were actually ahead of other students in their high schools as a result of being involved in pre-college programs:

*I didn't know that you could start applying so early, you know. The program staff told me "Scholarships are coming up already." And I really wasn't even thinking about it because it was barely, like, August or September. And they were already telling me "Are your essays ready? Have you filled out these scholarships?" And I'd be, like, "Well, this year just started." And they'd be, like, "No, you have to be on top of it. You know, there's students from other schools who sent in these scholarships already, and once they get enough scholarships, they just stop accepting them." So that's what really helped me.*

*[The program] tells you so many things that you never even heard of when you're in high school. They're like "You're going to take the SAT and the ACT when you're just a junior." And when senior year came and your [high school] counselors are like, "Oh have you taken...?" And you're like, "Yeah. I did that last year. Like where were you with that when I was with [the program]?"*

*In [the program], we were already set; I was already set. I already had my financial aid, I already had my schedule, I already had orientation set up for me. I was ready to go to school and my other friends [in high school] were like, "Oh my god, I don't have any financial aid, I haven't even started on financial aid." But, we already knew about the requirements for financial aid. We knew the terminology, we knew how to do a scholarship. We knew how to approach an application for any school. We were set to go to school.*

Providing assistance not only early but often and intrusively throughout the college admissions process was also key for students:

*We just need people who are just constant, just constant. Because, if you have somebody over you, hovering and saying, "You need to do this, you need to do that," it really helps. You just need that push. I think we just need more people like [my counselor] that just make you do stuff. That keep bothering you and bothering you so you just do it so they'll stop! They kept on you in the program,*

*not bugging, but pushing you 'til you got it done. And I'm really thankful for them being pushy and reminding and everything, because I wouldn't be here right now!*

From taking college entrance exams to filling out financial aid forms to going on college visits to completing college applications to choosing colleges, pre-college program staff worked with students throughout the entire admissions process. Pre-college programs provided financial and other information about the college admissions process to students and their parents through their own activities and services as well as by referring students to available resources in the local community such as the state's GO Centers.

With respect to college testing, students said they found it helpful that the programs provided assistance with test preparation as well as paid for test administration fees, including fees for retaking exams. According to students, they would not have taken these exams without this financial and other support:

*My advisor really did help me with the SAT. When it was my senior year, I didn't know anything. And she really just sat down there and told me you need to take the SAT. And I was like, "I don't have money for it. I can't pay for it. I'm struggling right now." She said, "Oh, we'll pay for it." So, I took the test the first time and I didn't do too good on it. I was like just doubting myself. I was like, "I'm not going to college, I can't, this is too hard." She started encouraging me, "You can do it, you can do it" so I took the test again. I scored pretty high. I almost got a scholarship but I just needed a couple of more points. But if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have taken that test. And right now, I'm thinking that I'm pretty smart [laughter] and that I used to be all kind of dumb. She really did encourage me to do better.*

*I was a pretty good student but I didn't do good in things like taking tests. So, [my advisor] was the one who took her Saturdays off to sit down and talk to me and try to help me take tests. 'Cause, grade-wise I was As and Bs, but test-wise I would flunk. So, when it came time to get ready for the SAT, I didn't do good the first time. But the second time I did real good, and if it really weren't for [my advisor] actually taking time and getting tutors that I didn't have to pay for I probably wouldn't even be at [my college] or any college right now. She really was my motivation.*

Regarding financial aid, students said they found the assistance from programs to be extremely helpful. For some students, it was the most important source of support the programs offered to help get them into college:

*To me, the main thing they did to get me into college was financial aid. I wouldn't be able to go to school if it wasn't for financial aid, so just the fact that they directed me to and helped me with the financial aid papers. I didn't know financial aid, what it was, what it was for.*

Students said the programs helped them to understand the differences between the various types of aid (grants, scholarships, and loans); to identify the various sources of aid (federal, state, institutional, external); to complete applications for governmental, institutional, and external aid; and to interpret financial aid award letters from institutions. They were completely unaware of available sources of financial aid, including state and federal grant aid programs, until they became involved in the programs.

A number of students said they planned to join the military because they didn't think there were any other options for paying for college. Until they got involved with a pre-college program, military recruiters (not high school counselors or college admissions officers) were the only adults reaching out to students about how to pay for college:

*I actually was just going to join the Navy, because they pay for college and everything. But [my advisors] told me there were other ways to get money for college, like scholarships and grants, so I didn't join.*

*I did want to go to college, but it was my senior year, and I didn't know how I was going to pay for college, so I joined the Reserves. But [my advisor] told me to apply for scholarships. So through the year, I just kept filling out applications for scholarships, and praying. Somehow every scholarship I applied for, I got, and somehow I was able to get a full ride to [my university], so I quit the Reserves before time and I headed off to college.*

Students were also unaware that it could "pay off" to graduate in the top 10 percent of their high school class and/or to take the college preparatory curriculum in terms of admissions and financial aid until they got involved in the programs. As this student explains <sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup>The student is referring to the Texas Top 10 Percent Rule, which qualifies in-state students who are in the top 10 percent of their high school graduating class for automatic admission to any public university in Texas. Admission to a university does not guarantee acceptance into a particular college of study or department, however. Other restrictions may also apply. For more information, see <http://www.collegefortexans.com/additional/top10rule.cfm>.

*I thought high school was just something you just had to go to. I didn't know there was any chance, I didn't know that if you graduated in the top 10 percent you'll get more chances of getting accepted into college and maybe get more money.*

Receiving information about financial aid from program staff not only affected students' decisions about whether they could go to college, but about where they could go to college as well. As this student explains:

*I've always been a [University of Texas] fan. There's pictures of me as a three-year old with a Longhorns sweater on. But I didn't think with my parents that I could afford it. Living over there is so expensive, and my parents were just telling me, "I'm sorry. We really want you over there, but if you don't get scholarships I don't think we're going to be able to pay for it." But the counselors helped me see that it's not just scholarships. There's money everywhere, it's just your job to find it. And that's what really made me believe, I can go.*

Campus visits also helped students consider more options about where to attend college. According to students, most programs arrange visits to local and regional two- and four-year colleges and universities. Some programs also arrange visits to colleges and universities located out-of-state. Campus visits help students learn to identify differences between types of institutions (i.e. two- and four-year) as well as to identify features of the institutions (i.e. majors/programs offered) that will help them make decisions about where to apply and ultimately go to college:

*We visited a lot of schools, so we'd get an opportunity to see what was out there - what types of schools there were and what they had to offer to us. We got to go out there and see what's out there. So they opened up our eyes like, "Wow. This school here is nice. It might be for me."*

Most of the pre-college programs required students to apply to at least three institutions. Many programs paid for the applications fees, which students found helpful given their financial situations. Students relied on advice and support from program staff throughout the application and acceptance process in order to help them choose which institution to attend. While many students said they applied to at least one college or university out-of-town or out-of-state, most decided to attend local postsecondary institutions due to financial and family concerns. Students said they wanted to attend institutions close to home in order to be near family and/or to live with family in order to reduce the costs of

going to college. Students also often said they wanted to attend the local institution where their pre-college program was hosted because they felt it would help ease the transition to college. As this student explains:

*That's one reason why I went here because, I mean, by going here every summer you get a whole bunch of connections with different teachers, different people, like people in higher places up there. So I went here because I knew I had a chance because [the program] just opened a lot of doors here for me. And then also I figured if I'm here, if I ever needed help, I can go over to the [program]. And when you realize what all [this college] has done for you, why not come here?*

### Major State Financial Aid Programs in Texas

Program	Description
<b>Early High School Graduation Scholarship</b>	Grant aid for students attending any Texas college or university who graduated from high school early with the Recommended or Distinguished Achievement High School Curriculum.
<b>Texas Educational Opportunity Grant</b>	Grant aid that covers full tuition and fees for financially needy students enrolled in Texas public two-year colleges.
<b>TEXAS (Toward Excellence, Access, and Success) Grant</b>	Need-based grant aid for eligible students attending a public college or university in Texas. Must have completed the Recommended or Distinguished Achievement High School Curriculum.
<b>Texas Public Educational Grant (TPEG)</b>	Grant assistance for students with financial need at public colleges and universities in Texas.
<b>Tuition Equalization Grant Program (TEG)</b>	Grant aid for financially needy students attending private, non-profit colleges or universities in Texas.
<b>Texas B-On-Time Loan Program</b>	Interest-free loans for eligible students that are forgiven if students graduate on-time with a B average. Students may attend any Texas institution.
<b>Hinson-Hazlewood College Access Loans</b>	Loan program for eligible students with unmet need, but who are not necessarily financially needy. May attend any Texas institution.
<b>Tomorrow's College Investment Plan</b>	The Texas 529 college savings plan.

Source: [www.collegefortexans.com](http://www.collegefortexans.com).

Many students did find that attending the institution where their pre-college program was hosted helped to ease the transition to college given their familiarity with the campus, its staff, and its resources. However, while students may find such institutions accessible, they may find it difficult to be successful given historically low transfer and/or graduation rates at many of these institutions. Thus, as students explain, they feel that more support is needed from these institutions in order to increase their chances of persisting through graduation.

## Easing the Initial Transition to College

First-generation students overwhelmingly said that it is much more difficult to stay in college than it is to get in. As one student said: “Getting into college is one thing. It’s actually sticking it through that’s the hard part.” As the first to go to college in their families, these students describe experiencing academic, social, financial, and family issues that made the initial transition to college difficult for them. As these students explain, their involvement in pre-college programs helped ease the transition to some extent by:

- Preparing them academically for college.
- Acclimating them to the college environment.
- Involving their parents in the college-going process.
- Helping them manage the financial aspects of college.

However, first-generation students strongly felt that more support is needed from high schools to help them prepare for college as well as from colleges and universities to help them become successful, particularly during the first year of college.

## Preparing Students Academically for College

The most difficult transition the students faced was related to academics. According to students, high school was, in retrospect, not challenging enough due to a lack of rigorous coursework and low teacher expectations. As a result, many students felt they lacked the content knowledge and study skills necessary to succeed academically when they began college:

*High school doesn’t prepare you for college. We were in shock our freshman year. It’s totally different. It’s like in high school you don’t really have to study. It’s just hard in college because you have to study and I’m not used to it. But if you don’t, you’re not passing. And you have*

*to go to class. In college, if you don’t go to class, that’s you. Your professor doesn’t care really if you pass or fail. That’s all on you.*

*High school teachers don’t really teach you to be responsible. In high school they’re always telling you, “Remember to turn this in. Remember to do this, or do that.” When you get here, it’s like you don’t have all that. They tell you to do it once and then that’s it. In high school, they’re like, “Okay, well I’ll give you another day to do it.” And in college, you have to do it that day, and turn it in like as soon as class starts. And the teachers [in college] are like, “If you don’t do it, that’s your problem.”*

*In high school I did pretty good. But I was like, “Oh my god” when I got here. I wasn’t prepared. It wasn’t what I expected. I learned a lot my first semester. From the high school end, I think we need to change the way that they do classes. And they need to be hard, really. They need to be a lot harder. ‘Cause in [high school] English you’re taught this way, and you make such easy grades, and you’re like “A” on every paper. And then the teachers [at college] are like, “Oh this is terrible. Where did you all learn grammar? This is terrible.” I think high school should have been a lot harder.*

Some students, particularly those from urban and rural areas, attributed their poor preparation for college to the low quality and performance of the schools they attended. A lack of resources, including a lack of updated textbooks and certified teachers, negatively impacted these students’ academic achievement in high school as well as their preparation for college:

*Well, in my high school, I don’t know what was the deal with the education. That’s supposed to be the number one thing in school, man. But, in my high school, the school district really didn’t supply the books. We didn’t have enough books to pass around and the books we did have, my cousin used ten years ago. They were trying to close [our high school] down when I was there and they really didn’t educate us like they should have. They had a lot of teachers trying to get their certification instead of having teachers that were certified already.*

*That’s the main problem here at the schools in [our city], good qualified teachers. My senior year we went through nine English teachers. They’d come in and some of them would try to teach but after you go through so many teachers, you’re like, “How long you going to be here?” I remember getting in class and it’s a new teacher and we can get into something and then the next day it’s a new*

*person. We didn't learn nothing in our English class our senior year. And you'd be surprised but students were actually mad at the fact that they weren't actually learning anything.*

A number of students said that their participation in tutoring and supplemental academic courses offered by pre-college programs helped to close some of the gaps in their academic preparation by covering and/or reinforcing material in the standard high school curriculum. These activities helped students not only successfully complete high school but get into college as well:

*Now [the program] has good teachers. They have good teachers, especially in math. It's like kids who are going to [local area high schools], they don't have these good teachers, but they can come to [the program] on Saturdays and learn and catch up to the things they're supposed to learn by the time they get out of school.*

*The teachers were great. I needed help in English and science, but all the teachers were there for you. They helped you. And stuff you didn't know already, they taught you and they moved beyond what you already knew so that way when you go back to school you know it already.*

*When most people think of [the program], they think of college but we often forget about how [the program] prepares us for high school. I remember coming on Saturdays learning what we were gonna learn [in school] the next week. And then in class when the [high school] teacher's teaching, you find yourself calling out the answer like "I know this already." [The program] teaches you what you are learning in school so we get that down and then we move on. And they're actual teachers so they know the curriculum. And that helps our GPA. I think that's important because you've got to get through high school before you can make it to college.*

The academic services provided by pre-college programs not only addressed students' preparation gaps, but also provided opportunities for academic enrichment and advancement. According to students, the interactive academic courses offered by some pre-college programs got them more interested in learning than their high school courses, which were focused on preparing them for statewide testing. Some of the students' high school teachers even got involved in the programs in order to have the opportunity to teach material outside the scope of the standardized high school curriculum:

*I like the experiments [in the program's science class] because in my science class in high school a lot of it*

*was tests and that's what they teach you for, the tests we have to take. It's just questions and multiple choice. But when you come to [the program], they're like "We're going to do this experiment and we're going to make this explode!" And you're like "Wow, that's so cool!" It's fun but you're learning at the same time. We did research on algae and we would go out to the lakes and test the algae levels and stuff like that. We learned about pH levels and chlorine and I was like "Wow, this is a different way of learning. This is actually fun."*

*Three of our high school teachers when they started finding out about the program they went to [the program director] and were like "Can we teach a class on Saturdays because we want to teach what we're interested in?" [Our high school science teacher] taught [program] classes on Saturday and he got to teach how to make silly putty, fun things that he liked about science but he couldn't teach us at the high school.*

First-generation students who participated in pre-college programs that offered a summer bridge felt it helped to ease their academic transition to college. In the bridge programs, students often took one or more college courses while living on campus at the program's host institution for six to eight weeks in the summer prior to their freshman year of college. According to students, they felt the bridge program was helpful because they gained experience with registering for classes, finding classrooms on campus, and going to the bookstore. They also developed study habits and skills for succeeding in college courses with the additional tutoring and other support provided during the program:

*It's not like it really shocked me [when I went to college] 'cause I did the bridge program. Some people were like, "Where's this class?" And I already knew where to go. And as far as classes go, I kinda know what to do because they [bridge program staff] would give me worksheets with tips on how to study. So, I mean it [bridge] really did teach me a lot and it didn't hit me as hard as I see most people. They're like, "Oh my god." I'm just like, "Oh, well, just do this." And I give 'em some of my worksheets about how to study.*

*I went to bridge and I started off really bad. Took a couple of quizzes and didn't start off too good 'cause I don't like to study. But, since they were having us go to tutoring [for the bridge program], I'd go in there, and like I'm not just going to sit there. So, I'd start going through my notes, reading up, studying for quizzes. Like actually going to the teacher, asking him for help. And I also studied. And towards the end, it was very easy.*

## Support Programs for First-Generation Students in College

A number of students were involved in a federally funded Student Support Services (SSS) program while enrolled in college. Students who participated in SSS said the most helpful services provided by the program included early registration, academic advising, career counseling, and financial aid counseling and monetary assistance (i.e. book stipends and/or book loan programs). Students at one of the community colleges found their SSS program, which was focused on students who wanted to transfer to a four-year institution, very helpful. This program helped students create a personalized transfer plan, which aided students with course selection and other transfer decisions (i.e. timing) based on articulation agreements with other colleges and universities. The program also took students on campus visits to possible transfer institutions across the state. However, students did feel that the program needed more information on how to finance their education at their intended transfer institutions, particularly since they started at two-year institutions in order to save money and/or avoid taking loans.

Some students were involved with an Educational Opportunity Center program, another federally-funded TRIO program, while in college. These students were part of an innovative initiative offered by a community organization that automatically enrolled its Talent Search students in the EOC program upon graduating from high school. This allowed the organization to continue serving its pre-college TRIO students while they were enrolled in postsecondary institutions in order to provide much-needed support (i.e. help with financial aid forms and referrals to campus resources) during the transition to and through college. As one student who participated in the program said "They are with you every step of the way."

A number of students also participated in campus-based support programs that they found helpful, including tutoring, study skills workshops, supplemental instruction, and learning communities. Students also participated in, and found helpful, freshman orientation programs, campus-sponsored summer bridge programs, and freshman orientation or success courses. Students at one institution actually said that institutions should target pre-college program alumni at freshman orientation. As the first campus-sponsored event they are required to attend that is not offered under the auspices of the TRIO program, students said that several of their peers from the program did not attend. Institutions could use freshman orientation as an opportunity to reach out to these tentative students.

*What the bridge program does is that they help us out at the same time we're still in the program. We go to classes and afterwards we go to tutoring. What they want with that bridge program is to be able to be involved in that very, very important part of our lives in that transition from high school to college where it's what's going to break us or not.*

Despite the amount of assistance provided by the pre-college programs, students said they still did not feel fully prepared to make the academic transition to college. A number of students said they were not academically successful during their first semester:

*Even though I went to bridge, the first semester I got here, I got all Cs because it was a shock. Because in bridge you sat in a class of 30 or less, but when I got to my first semester, I took sociology and that class had 500 students. Here I believe you're a number. There are so many students, they can only reach a handful. Here I'm still*

*at the stage where I'm unable to approach my professor after class. You know, people are standing in line to talk to him, and there you are, "Oh god, it's my turn. Let me actually talk to him and actually get through to him." That's something I wasn't prepared for.*

Many students said they did not receive much assistance from college professors or advisors upon experiencing academic difficulties during their first semester. Some students felt that professors "don't care" whether they pass or fail their courses while other students felt intimidated by asking professors for help after class. Still others felt that professors were not available enough to help them (i.e. limited and/or inconvenient office hours). They also found college advisors to be unavailable, uninterested, or unsupportive when they faced academic problems:

*I don't have an advisor because you don't need an advisor to register.*

*They're [college advisors] as brain-dead as the counselors in high school. Honestly, when they gave me my first four classes, they gave me four reading-intensive courses. They don't tell you anything. At all. They just let me take whatever classes I wanted to, and then I did, and they were all really hard. And I pretty much failed that semester.*

*I think the advisors here really don't motivate you. The semester that I got those Cs, the nursing advisor told me, "You know what? Maybe it's time for you to start looking for a different career." She told me, "I don't think you're cut out for this." And I just sat there, and I was like, "Oh my god." And then she told me, "Yeah, you know what? People here need really high GPAs." And I told her, "Well, we can keep trying!" And she was like, "No. I don't think that this degree's going to be for you." So, I left the office thinking, "Oh my god, maybe I should change degrees."*

As a result, a number of students said they reached out to pre-college program staff to help them manage and overcome their initial academic failure in college:

*They [my program advisors] are the ones who helped me when I got all the Cs. 'Cause all my life, I believed that I'm not smart. And at that time when I got all Cs, I went to [my program advisor] and I told her, "You know what? I'm just going to stop going to college. I'll just find something else to do." But she was there to motivate me. And I guess that's what I needed. I just needed motivation, encouragement, like "You know what? Everybody goes through this." And I felt that it was the end for me, but just with that little inspiration that she gave me, I was able to come back the following semester, and I got really good grades from then on.*

*People don't realize how crucial that first semester is. I mean, honestly, when I first started I got four Ds. I was honestly thinking about dropping out or going to community. I talked to [my program advisors], and they kind of convinced me to come back. Since then I've pretty much got it together; I got on the Dean's List three times.*

*On my first day of classes my first semester, I freaked out. I was not ready for it, at all. I didn't know about [the learning center on campus], I didn't know about anything. But what helped me is that I called [my program advisor] that same day and I said, "You know what? I can't make it. I'm going back [home] right now!" And I just wanted to quit, that day, after classes. The first day. And she said, "You know what? Just stay there for a month, if you don't like it you can come back." And*

*after that, she called me, really often, once a day for a week at least. She would call me and say, "How're you doing? How're classes?" And I would tell her my problems in classes, and she would say, "This is what you should do, in order to get good grades in this class. This is how you should study for this class." I think that's what really helped me, because like I had the connection with a friend that would motivate me to stay there. 'Cause I didn't know anybody else for the first semester.*

Many students said they continue to rely on pre-college program staff to provide them with advice on how to deal with academic and other problems they encounter while at college, to direct them to resources (i.e. support programs) on campus for help, and to advocate on their behalf with professors and advisors in order to resolve such problems. While students greatly appreciate the support they receive from pre-college program staff, such support is provided on an informal and individual basis because it is outside of the scope of the programs as currently funded. A number of students suggested that academic and other support during the initial transition to college needs to be formalized either by extending pre-college programs and/or developing campus-based programs for the first semester or year:

*I think someone should meet with you during the first semester since it's so crucial. Maybe they should have an appointment with you once a month or something. I know that would be hard because there are so many students. But if you don't make it that first semester, people don't come back. Because I actually thought about leaving. But then I thought, "You know what? I have to stick it out." So, I did, and after that my grades were better. But it was just because I got a feel of how college life was. But I think that if somebody would have been there during the semester helping me out I think that would have helped a lot.*

*I think [the program] should extend 'til the first semester because I think that first semester makes or breaks college students. I think that [the program] should help your graduating class stick together at college, because a lot of people can't afford a fraternity or all those special clubs that ask for fees. [The program] could help people come together and talk about how everybody's doing in study groups. And that way you already know people from your high school, or people that come from your area, and that way you can help each other out.*

*I think they should extend the time that we go to that six-week [bridge] program after we graduate from high*

*school, extending that maybe into the fall. And then, you know, letting us transfer wherever we want to in the spring or have us stay there for an entire year if we want. That way, we have a whole year of circumstances to fall back on.*

*I think we need like a program from high school to the ending of college. That'd be good 'cause that'll keep a lot of people going like they kept us going from high school to college. Like, actually since you got us in college, well, help us finish.*

Student involvement in existing support programs like Student Support Services (SSS), another federally-funded TRIO program, varied by campus. On some campuses, there were strong connections between the pre-college TRIO programs and the SSS program (i.e. the same staff worked for both programs or both programs were located in the same office or building on campus), which led many Upward Bound and Talent Search students to get involved. On other campuses, however, either there were no SSS programs or there was not a strong connection with the pre-college programs, which limited student involvement. Furthermore, some students said they did not get involved in SSS or a similar program because they either did not know about it or they felt they did not have time to get involved because they were overwhelmed by the initial transition to college (i.e. balancing their work, social, and academic lives). Students who were involved in SSS or other campus-based support programs, though, did find it helpful and even recruited other students from the focus groups to join.

Overall, first-generation students describe the academic transition as one of the most difficult they have to make when they get to college. Students' involvement in pre-college programs helped ease this transition, however they feel that more support is needed from high schools to help them prepare academically for college and that more support is needed from postsecondary institutions to help them be academically successful, particularly during the first year of college.

### **Acclimating Students to the College Environment**

First-generation students describe experiencing the same anxieties and problems as other students with respect to navigating campus life, making connections with peers, and balancing a social life with academics. However, students also describe how their involvement with pre-college programs helped them to anticipate

and deal with such common anxieties by familiarizing them with the college environment.

A number of students said their involvement with pre-college programs helped prepare them to navigate a college campus as well as campus life. Depending on which pre-college program they were involved in, students were exposed to college life through pre-admissions campus visits and/or weekly academic programs throughout the year and summer residential programs held on college campuses. As a result, students often felt more prepared than many of their peers to navigate a college campus as freshmen, particularly if they attended the postsecondary institution that hosted their pre-college program, which many of them did:

*I mean, going to [this college] is like, nothing new. Staying on campus, that's like, nothing new. We've been coming [here] since the ninth grade. So, you kind of get used to it 'cause it's like you've already been here since ninth grade. I've been here for like five years, so I think I'm a senior now!*

*It didn't feel any different because we've pretty much been here already for about two or three years on Saturdays so we kind of get used to it. So, it didn't feel like a first day. It felt like a regular day, so I was used to it. I knew where I was going so it wasn't any different.*

*[The program] helps us transfer from high school to the college setting. It's helped me learn the ropes, learn the lifestyle, learn the campus. It gives you so much confidence when you come into college. You're not an incoming freshman that you don't know anything—that you're scared to come. It's like you're ready for that life.*

Students who enrolled in the college where their pre-college program was located said that, among other things, they knew where buildings, offices, and classes were located on campus; they knew where and to whom to go if they needed assistance on campus; and they knew how to access and use various services on campus (i.e. they already had a campus I.D. to access the computer center). They also already knew several professors on campus (i.e. those who had taught their bridge courses) and they knew they could visit the pre-college program offices and staff for assistance if needed.

Students also said that learning how to make connections with peers from other schools while participating in pre-college programs helped them better adjust to college life. Most of the pre-college programs served students from several middle and/or high schools in a

given geographic area, which introduced students to peers from other schools. As a result, students said they found it easier to make friends when they went to college and/or they already had friends they knew from the program who were also attending their college:

*It teaches you how to make friends, not to be scared to talk to people. It's neat because you make your friends and those are your friends for life even after you leave. I still talk to one of my friends. She was from [a small city on the border] and I go see her, I call her. And my other friend she's in [a large city], and you just keep in touch with those people. It was hard for me adjusting like that, but it helps you.*

*The program helps you make connections. Like, I would have never known her [another student in the room] or anybody from her high school here at college. But since they [the program] put us together, you at least have somebody that was from somewhere close to where you are from, in other words, part of your environment, so therefore, you just feel secure when you go to college.*

*That's how I met all these guys [other students]. Like there's a bunch of kids from a bunch of schools from all around the area. It kind of helped that transition, like when you go to college. I know someone from [this high school]. Sometimes I've had classes in college with him [another student in the room], or sometimes I had classes with them [other students in the room]. I'm not going to a class where I don't know anyone. So, I'm a little more confident when I talk to a professor, maybe. Or, if you miss a class, you can ask for notes. I mean, it really helps a lot.*

Students also commented on how the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the other students they met in pre-college programs helped prepare them for the adjustment to college life. Many students came from either isolated rural communities or racially segregated urban neighborhoods. Rural students described the experience of meeting urban students and visiting cities outside of their small towns, while urban students described meeting students from other neighborhoods in their own cities:

*[The program] really helped me transition from living in the dorms to transitioning college life because I didn't know what it was like besides my little town.*

*I was one of the few Hispanics over there at all. I thought like it was going to be racially segregated [among the students in the program] because there were Blacks and*

*whites and Hispanics. And I thought, "Oh man, I'm going to be beat down by Black people," 'cause I'm Hispanic. I honestly thought that it would happen. But that wasn't my experience. I would speak Spanish, and they'd be like, "What'd you say?" And then I would have to explain what I said in Spanish. And people would get into it, because they don't know what that is. And my Asian friend, he brought me things from home, and I brought him things from home because they don't have Hispanic things there.*

*We get caught up in racism. I mean [our large city] is diverse. It is very diverse, but you have your communities where you have your Blacks, you have your Hispanics, you have your whites and, you know, it's like that. And it [the program] was a time where everybody could just come together and be happy and get smart and have fun without fighting, you know.*

Students felt that meeting peers from different family and cultural backgrounds helped prepare them to interact with the diverse student bodies on college campuses. Students also felt that interacting with peers with different academic backgrounds helped socialize them to the norms and expectations of college life. As these students explain:

*I think it helped living with someone who is not like you [in the bridge program]. You learn so much. My roommate would get home from class and study, and I was like, "Do you have a test or something?" And she was like, "No." I was like, "So why are you studying?" She's like, "'Cause that way I can just know it." I was like, "That's weird." Because I was just like being a bum. I'd sit down and read, but if she was still reading, then I felt like I had to. And so, I learned from my roommate.*

*It would be like two o'clock in the morning [during the bridge program] and we just got finished playing so we go in our room and we're like, "Dang, we got to do that homework! We've got to read that story! It's time for some popcorn reading!" So he [my roommate] reads one page. I read the next page. We just go back and forth like that. He was the smart one. I was the one that people thought was smart because I was with him. But we just had that bond with each other. To this day, we're still friends. I wasn't always the smartest but it rubs off.*

Students also mentioned that the structure and discipline of participating in the pre-college programs (i.e. attending workshops on Saturday mornings during the school year) helped prepare them in terms of learning how to balance their social and academic lives when they went to college:

*For [the program] you have to wake up early every other Saturday to go to all the meetings and the workshops and it's like the whole Saturday when your classmates are at games or at the mall. And you're like "Should I go? Do I want to go? It's early!" But it becomes routine and you're like "Okay, I got to go." But that's good because you start getting that mentality early on. Its responsibility that helps you prepare for what you're going to do. It doesn't matter if it's a Saturday in college. In college sometimes you don't have weekends either. You have to be able to be like "I have to study guys. Sorry." It's hard to say no, but sometimes we have to. If you want to get where you want to be, you have to make the sacrifice. So it just gives you that discipline that you're going to need to be on your own at college.*

*I think it just provides that structure. It gives us that foundation that we need in order to succeed because college is quite different than high school in the sense that you can make your own decisions. You don't have anyone over you. You don't have anyone telling you to wake up, you know. But, we knew we needed to be in class at eight o'clock in the morning [during the bridge program] whether you felt like it or not. But we got up. We got up every morning. And made it to class. Made it to breakfast 'cause that's at 7:30. So it gives you that endurance, that stamina and that focus that you need to actually do that on your own once you go to college.*

### **Involving Parents in the College-Going Process**

For first-generation students, going to college is an experience that involves the entire family. Due to lack of college-going experience in their families, students as well as their parents are often unprepared for dealing with the issues and problems that may arise during the transition from high school to college. However, being involved in pre-college programs not only helped prepare students but also helped prepare their parents and families for the experience as well.

First-generation students and their parents experienced tremendous anxiety about the decision to go to college, particularly the decision to go away to college. As a result, a number of students decided to attend college close to home and/or to live at home while going to college in order to ease this transition for the family:

*I had that mentality that I was going to go to [the local university], 'cause I don't like being apart from my family.*

*My mom didn't want me to go far so I chose here because it was close to home. They don't want you to leave, they*

*don't want to not see you for a long time. They start getting to you even before you graduate, "Well don't go far, don't go, stay here, don't leave us."*

*I got a wonderful opportunity to go study [at a private institution out-of-state] almost fully paid. My mom said I could go but I could see in her face that she was like "Don't even think about it." So I decided I'm not going to go because I'm attached to my mother very much.*

However, the transition was still difficult even when students attended college close to home and/or lived at home while going to college:

*At first I didn't want to leave home. I was scared. But now I get the whole sense of why you need a dorm room with all this work. And you need quietness, you know, to study and whatnot. Because my mom is like, "I don't see you anymore." I guess she sees me drifting farther and farther away from her. Because I'm like constantly ignoring her to lock myself in my room to study.*

According to students, activities that approximated the college-going experience, such as residential summer programs, helped ease the strain on their families by preparing them and their parents for spending time away from home and/or separate from family while attending college:

*It's good to help you adjust to the life that you are going to have when you do graduate because when I came [to the summer program] I was a mama's girl. I love my parents, I'm always with my parents and it was hard. I would call them every weekend crying. There was weekends when I would be "When are you going to come get me?" but my parents would make me stay. I wasn't used to being away from home so it was a good experience.*

Activities that involved parents throughout the college preparation and application process also helped ease the transition to college for the entire family. According to students, the efforts by program staff to reach out to and develop relationships with their parents made them feel more comfortable with and supportive of students' college-going plans:

*[My program counselor] knew that we had no clue of what college was. She would sit down with my parents and explain to them. And call them, even when I was at school. My parents would go and she would set up appointments with them at the office, at school, whatever was convenient for my parents. My parents said, "Okay, just tell us what you need to get into school, and we will*

*do it.” So, I think it was just the ease of her being able to talk to my parents and then turn around and talk to me. There was no, “Let me talk to you, communicate this to your parents.” It was directly from her to my parents. It helped them help me.*

*My parents agreed with whatever my [program] counselors said. So, if they said, you have to climb a mountain, my parents agreed. Because when I applied and I had my interview with [my counselor] she understood where we were coming from and she understood that my mom didn't have any college experience. And the way that she approached my mom and everything, it made my mom feel very safe as far as my education. So, if I drop a course and I don't talk to one of my old [program] advisors, my mom has a problem with it. She just has so much trust in them.*

Such efforts also made students' parents more likely to encourage siblings and other family members to get involved with pre-college programs and/or to go to college. As this student shares:

*My sister graduated with [the program]. And my parents were like, “Well, get your sister in it, get your sister involved.” And so that's what helped me get into the program. And then now that I graduated, “Get your brother involved. Get your brother involved.” So that's why I'm bringing my brother in.*

Many students had siblings or cousins who had participated in the programs before them and/or had recruited siblings and cousins to get involved with them or after them. As one student said: “I got my cousin involved because I didn't want to go by myself. I have this thing about taking people with me.” For first-generation students, going to college is truly an experience that involves the entire family. Pre-college programs helped prepare them as well as their parents and families for this new experience by getting all of them involved in it. As this student said: “It's nice to have your family holding one hand and to have someone else guide you from the other hand too.”

### **Helping Students Manage the Financial Aspects of College**

First-generation students receive a considerable amount of help from program staff with the financial aid application process prior to enrolling in college. Students also often ask pre-college program staff for help with re-applying for aid as well as with navigating the financial aid office after going to college. The financial issues and problems that students do experience when they go to

college have less to do with the award process than with the amount of the award, which they feel is insufficient to cover the rising costs of college attendance.

While some first-generation students said that their parents help them pay for the costs of attending college (i.e. allowing them to live at home while they go to school), most students said that their parents were unable to contribute financially. According to students, however, the manner in which the expected family contribution is determined does not seem to accurately reflect their parents' limited ability to pay, thereby awarding them an insufficient amount of aid to cover their financial need:

*It's been hard, 'cause, I got into [the program] because I'm low income but I don't qualify for financial aid. I don't qualify for anything, I don't get grants. And all I can do is get loans, and I don't want that. That's the thing I'm dreading as I start college is that I know how pricey it is right now, and it's kind of hard, 'cause I can't qualify to get any sort of money.*

*It's based on the government's determination of what's poverty and what's not, so you don't get anything. When your parents can barely afford to pay all their bills but the government says with their income they can afford to send you to school. I'm like no they can't afford to send me to school!*

The amount of aid awarded to students is also insufficient because increases in grant aid are not keeping pace with increases in tuition and fees:

*It's sad that we get a Pell Grant for the first year, but the Pell Grant is not inflated the same way tuition is in inflated. The tuition goes up about 10 percent every year. And that's hard whenever you're not sure you're going to have the money and then the Pell Grant's not enough and scholarship is not enough and they cut the Texas grant, which I think is also a very bad thing.*

*They should consider we're not rich. Because every year, it [tuition and fees] goes up, go up, go up. I just hate the fact that financially, they assume that we can make it, when in reality, we're not.*

*I don't like the fact that they tell you “You need to go to school, you need to go to school” and they have this big old deal with going to school but yet they're cutting our funding. How do you expect students to come to school when they are cutting our funding and we don't have a way to pay to come to school? I don't understand that. Or even with the books. “Come to school, come to*

## Unmet Financial Need Among First-Generation College Students in Texas

In addition to allowing a more complete profile of first-generation students in Texas, the state-level data from NPSAS 2004 provide a more detailed understanding of what and how first-generation students<sup>1</sup> pay for college in Texas. The data are drawn from the 2003–2004 school year.

First-generation students, on average, pay less to attend college than their peers whose parents have gone to and/or completed college. This is due to the fact that first-generation students are much more likely to attend lower cost public two-year institutions and much less likely to attend higher cost private four-year institutions than their peers. However, first-generation students and their families are not able to contribute as much to pay for the costs of attending college as their peers. Thus, as shown here, first-generation students demonstrate greater financial need than their peers.

First-generation students receive about the same amount of financial aid as their peers, despite having greater financial need. The result is that first-generation students fall about \$1,000 short of the amount they need to pay for college, even after receiving loans. Without loans, first-generation students fall nearly \$4,000 short. Meanwhile, students whose parents have a bachelor's degree or higher receive about \$2,000 more than they need, even before receiving loans. If you multiply the amount of unmet need (after loans) by the number of first-generation students attending college in Texas, there is about \$365 million in unmet need among this population. Without including loans, there is about \$1.5 billion in unmet need among first-generation students. By contrast, students whose parents have bachelor's degrees or higher receive approximately \$3.5 billion more aid than they need.

Parents' Education Level	Average Tuition and Fees	Average Total Cost of Attendance	Mean Expected Family Contribution	Financial Need <sup>2</sup>	Mean Total Amount of Aid		Unmet Need <sup>3</sup>	
					w/loans	w/out loans	w/loans	w/out loans
<b>Total</b>	\$4,698	\$14,149	\$9,645	\$4,504	\$6,571	\$3,460	-\$2,067	\$1,044
<b>HS or Lower</b>	\$3,550	\$12,538	\$4,829	\$7,709	\$6,742	\$3,857	\$967	\$3,852
<b>Some College</b>	\$4,379	\$13,585	\$6,778	\$6,807	\$7,223	\$3,776	-\$416	\$3,031
<b>BA or Higher</b>	\$5,664	\$15,550	\$14,588	\$962	\$6,092	\$3,023	-\$5,130	-\$2,061

<sup>1</sup> This analysis was limited to first-time, full-time in-state undergraduates in order to eliminate the effects of factors such as out-of-state tuition, part-time status, attendance at multiple institutions, etc. on the calculations.

<sup>2</sup> Calculated by author.

<sup>3</sup> This analysis is modeled after analyses conducted by Mortenson (January 2006).

*school." Okay so maybe you get money to pay tuition, but how are you supposed to pay \$500 for your books?*

According to students, the amount of financial aid available is not only insufficient to cover the cost of tuition and fees, but also the (not so) incidental costs associated with going to college such as textbooks and transportation. Many students said they were completely unprepared for the high cost of textbooks during their first semester at college. As a result, many students either did not buy their textbooks or they did not buy them until late in the semester. Many students also said they felt unprepared for dealing with the costs associated with

transportation to and from campus (i.e. car payment and gas prices) as well as parking on campus.

Students realized that loans are available to help off-set the costs of attending college, but they were generally loan averse. Many students felt loans were a "last resort," which was a message students said was reinforced by program staff. Furthermore, the amount of loans offered seemed to exceed the amount of debt that students thought they realistically could repay upon graduation given their economic backgrounds:

*Loans were an option I had to take these last two years of school. I'm not even close to maxed, but they're trying*

*to give me more and I can't take any more. I don't want any more, I don't want something I can't pay back and they're like here's some more. I was like I don't want any more. My family can't afford it.*

As a result, many first-generation students worked in order to pay for college and to support themselves as well as their family in some cases. Most students who worked did so part-time (about 20-30 hours), but some students did work full-time. Some students worked on campus, but most students who worked did so off-campus. Students who worked off-campus generally felt that their employers “don’t care” that they are going to school but “you can’t say nothing if you want a job.” Not surprisingly, students said they find it difficult to manage taking classes and working at the same time:

*After I graduated, I moved out. I got a full-time job and then I started school. So, I was going full-time to both school and my job. Sometimes, I would go overtime. Then, I got a second job, so it was really difficult for me. But it was more than just living on my own. It was working, going to school, and just trying to keep up your grades. It's mainly the lifestyle.*

*I work two jobs and go to school and it's hard, real hard. I go to school early in the morning and right after work I go home at like 9:00 or 10:00, and I'm too tired to do my homework.*

*People don't realize how much work it is to stay in college. It's its own job in itself, plus if you've got another job you go to, too. I mean, it's just a lot.*

While first-generation students felt they were well-prepared in terms of how to apply for all available types of financial aid, the amount of aid available to them was generally not sufficient to cover all of the costs of attending college. Students were unprepared for how to make up the difference. They generally opted to work rather than to take out loans, which made it difficult for them to focus time and attention on going to school. In addition to more financial assistance, first-generation students also need more preparation for managing unmet financial need. For instance, students need more guidance on how many hours to work while enrolled in college as well as how much debt burden is realistic to assume during college in order to make financial decisions that promote persistence to degree attainment. Currently, the decisions that students make about where and how to attend college based on their lack of financial resources may actually decrease their chances of earning a college degree.

## Relationships with Program Staff

First-generation students told us that they would not have likely made the transition from high school to college without the information and services provided by pre-college programs. However, they also said that it was the relationships and trust they developed with program staff that allowed them to be receptive to the services and support that these programs have to offer to help them get into and through college. As this staff person said:

*I think, for us, the most important thing is the development of relationships. You've got to develop that trust and that relationship first before you can even really get into this is what you need in order to be successful in high school, the testing skills, the study skills, and things like that.*

The process of establishing relationships with students can be difficult because other adults in students' lives have been either unsupportive or untrustworthy. Too many students said that a key adult—a parent or family member, a teacher, a counselor, or a coach—actually discouraged them from getting involved in a pre-college program and/or from going to college:

*My coach told me if it wasn't for track, I wouldn't make it in college. I was discouraged. I really wanted to prove him wrong 'cause I went to college not for track but for academics. 'Cause I got hurt so basically he was like "You're done then, you're done, you don't have anything left to do. You probably won't even make it in school." It seems like I proved him wrong.*

*My grandmother told my mom that I wasn't gonna graduate from high school when I was little. She said I was gonna be a drug dealer, wasn't gonna amount to anything. And then when I showed her my acceptance letter, she was, like, "Oh." So that was a real, real big thing when I wasn't doing good in school, though. I was, like, I mean, "My grandmother was right. You know, I can't do this." But then once I started excelling, I was, like, "Yeah, I really can."*

*Now that I'm in college, they [my family members] are kind of supportive, but, like, in high school, they would say I wasn't gonna make it. And, I invited, like, a lot of family members to come to my [program] graduation, and five people showed up. So I was, like, "You know what? Maybe they're right, I shouldn't go." But then I just went. And now they're kinda jumping on the boat, but I don't know [if it will last].*

Even adults who encourage students to go to college may let them down by not following through on promises of support to help get them there. As this staff person explains:

*I think they have very minimal expectations of what help they'll get, at least this is what I see with my kids. It takes them a year to a year and a half, depending on the student for them to realize what I mean when I say, "If you will let me know what's going on, I will help you" because they've heard that in various guises too many times and gotten very minimal help.*

According to students, they felt that they were able to develop relationships with program staff because they were "relatable" to them:

*She's [my program advisor's] relatable to us because she's older but she's not so old. She knows everything and at the same time she's still connected to the younger age and stuff.*

*They never really brought someone [staff] into the program that wasn't down to earth or who was uppity. Everyone who was there always made you feel like that you could come to them if you needed something. I'm not even in the program anymore but I still go to [my program advisor] for anything.*

Students also said that they were able to develop relationships with program staff because they were consistently available and supportive of them:

*I joined this program because she [my program counselor] had told me that she was gonna be there every step of the way. I had the same counselor for two years, and it's the same point of reference, the same constant. You have something stable, and you have someone calling you, you have someone checking on you. And, I just think that's the most awesome thing, that you're not just thrown into an office like "Okay, go see somebody." You have the same person every year. You develop relationships with them. You can call them and they call you. I think that's awesome.*

Students further said that they were able to develop relationships and trust with program staff because they felt how much the staff cared about them. As a result, students often referred to program staff as a "second mother," an "older brother or sister," or "a friend," like this student:

*I think what helped me the most is instead of being an advisor for me, [my advisor] became a friend, someone*

*I could count on. She became a friend, someone I could trust. It's like she's no longer just somebody who's in an office. She just turns into this person that you know that if you have a problem, you know she has your back. She's someone who I will remember for the rest of my life. I'm going to owe a piece of my diploma to her, 'cause she's the one who put me up there.*

According to students, the relationships they developed with program staff helped motivate them to go to and persist in college because they did not want to disappoint them and/or they wanted to show their appreciation for them:

*I remember I was more afraid of [my program advisor] coming after me than for me quitting college. But, really you develop a relationship that you have more than respect for her and you don't want to let her down.*

*My study habits weren't good the first semester. I made two Cs and I had made two Bs. And then I thought about it, and I was like, "You know, there's too many people that got me here, so therefore I should show them why I'm here." And my second semester I got three As and two Bs.*

*It was one of the [program] teachers that made me want to stay [in college], because he dedicated a lot of time to me, and, therefore, I felt that by him doing that for me, I should show that I appreciate him.*

Students also said the relationships they developed with program staff helped motivate them to go to and persist in college because they know that they can always rely on them to continue to give them advice and support even after they graduate from the program, which they often do. As this student explains:

*I think everybody feels that, just to know that there's somebody there to help you, you're gonna get motivated to do it. You always have somebody to call on here no matter what.*

Staff too felt that the relationships they developed with students "made the difference" in terms of motivating students to go to and persist in college. As this staff person explains:

*We make that personal connection with the students. And if they feel that they have someone to*

*talk to, someone that they can go to, someone that they don't want to let down, they do try harder. They will stay focused. They know that there's someone out there that cares, someone that's going to get onto me if I fail out or if I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do. They come back to us to help them. So it's definitely that relationship that we build, I think, that makes a difference in them staying in.*

While first-generation students said that they were unlikely to have made the transition from high school to college without the information and services provided by pre-college programs, they also stressed the importance of the relationships and trust they developed with program staff that allowed them to be receptive to the services and support that these programs have to offer. Preparing for and going to college is a “leap of faith” for first-generation students because no one else in their families has done it before them. Students and their parents must feel that they can trust program staff, who are their guides through this process, in order to be able to take that step forward for themselves and for their families.

# Conclusions and Recommendations



Given the high profile efforts in Texas to improve college participation and completion rates of first-generation students, the purpose of this study was to learn from the students themselves which messages and services had the most impact on whether or not they enroll in college. In their words, pre-college services and programs can ease the transition from high school to college by focusing on:

■ **Raising students' aspirations for college.**

Many first-generation students had no or low aspirations for going to college prior to receiving pre-college services. They didn't think going to college was necessary to get a job and/or they didn't think going to college was possible for them because they couldn't pay for it, they couldn't get in, or no one in their families had done it before them. Although not always initially receptive to pre-college program staff and services, students did respond to persistent, interactive, and personal outreach to them *and* their parents about going to college. According to students, the earlier the outreach, the more effective it was. However, students said it still made a difference in terms of getting interested in and prepared for college even when services were not provided until their junior or senior year.

■ **Helping students navigate the college admissions process.**

First-generation students could not receive help from parents in the admissions process due to a lack of "college knowledge" about how to prepare for, apply to, and pay for college. Unfortunately, many students did not receive much help from high school counselors either due to high student-counselor ratios. Pre-college program staff were the most important sources of information and support, which they provided early, often, and throughout the entire process. In addition to providing information through their own activities and services, pre-college programs also referred students and their parents to available resources in the local community such as state GO Centers. Pre-college programs were an important link for first-generation students and their parents to existing state and local resources aimed at helping them get into college.

### ■ **Preparing students academically for college.**

The most difficult part of the transition to college for first-generation students was related to academics due to unchallenging high school experiences that left them unprepared for college. Academic services offered by pre-college programs—such as tutoring, college preparatory courses, and summer bridge—did help to mitigate (although not eliminate) gaps in students' academic preparation for college. Despite such assistance, many students were not successful in their first semester, which reinforced their doubts that they are not "college material." Failing to receive much help from college professors or advisors, students reached out to pre-college program staff, relying heavily on them to help manage and overcome initial academic failure.

### ■ **Acclimating students to the college environment.**

First-generation students describe experiencing the same anxieties and problems as other students in making the transition to college life. However, involvement with pre-college programs helped students to anticipate common anxieties by acclimating them to the college environment. Students were exposed to college life through pre-admissions campus visits, academic year programs, and summer residential programs held on college campuses. As a result, students felt more prepared to navigate a college campus, make connections with peers, and balance social life with academics when arriving on campus, thereby easing their transition to college life.

### ■ **Involving parents in the college-going process.**

Due to the lack of college-going experience in their families, students as well as their parents were often unprepared for dealing with the transition from high school to college. Pre-college programs helped prepare students and parents for the experience by offering students activities that approximate going away to college and by involving parents throughout the college-going process. In particular, efforts by program staff to reach out and develop relationships with parents made them feel more comfortable with and supportive of students' college-going plans. For first-generation students, preparing for and going to college was truly an experience that involved the entire family.

### ■ **Helping students manage the financial aspects of college.**

With considerable help from pre-college program staff both before and after going to college, first-generation students were knowledgeable about how to apply for financial aid. Students tended to have

fewer problems with the application and award process than with the amount of aid awarded, which was insufficient to cover the rising costs of college attendance. Tuition increases, stagnant grant aid, and high costs for textbooks and transportation left many students struggling to pay for college. Most students opted to work rather than to take out loans, which made it difficult for them to focus time and attention on their coursework.

### ■ **Developing personal relationships with students.**

First-generation students said they would have been unlikely to have made the transition from high school to college without the information and services provided by pre-college programs and staff. Furthermore, they emphasized that it was the relationships and trust they developed with program staff that allowed them to be receptive to the support that helped them get into and through college.

## As first-generation students shared

first-hand what worked to help them make the transition from high school to college, they also addressed what didn't work or what could work better to help get more students like them get into college. Based on students' own suggestions, we offer the following recommendations for practitioners and policymakers:

### ■ **Get the message out to all students about college as early as possible.**

Students said that messages and services aimed at getting them interested in and prepared for going to college need to be more widely advertised and available to all students as early as possible. While the students we talked to benefited from getting involved in pre-college programs, they realized that there were many students like them who did not get involved because either they did not know the programs existed or the programs did not have enough resources to serve them. As one student said: "I'm glad that I had the opportunity to do this and I hope other people do too. 'Cause everybody deserves the chance to better themselves and go to college and be somebody." What can be done to provide all students with the information they need about why and how to go to college?

- Strengthen partnerships between school-based, community-based, and state- and federally-funded pre-college programs in order to coordinate messages and services, and to maximize resources to better meet students' needs and serve more students.
- Develop stronger links between pre-college programs and state college access campaigns such as College for

Texans, and national efforts like the KnowHow2Go campaign sponsored by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the American Council on Education, or the College Access Initiative sponsored by the student loan guarantee agencies.

- Drastically reduce high student-counselor ratios that prevent guidance counselors from talking to students about college before the senior year. In addition, hire and/or provide more support for dedicated college counselors in every high school.
- Increase funding for pre-college services and programs. Students were very concerned about how persistent budget shortfalls and potential cuts would affect whether programs could continue serving them through graduation and/or help others in need of services.

■ **Better prepare students for college.** While pre-college programs can help to improve students' academic preparedness for college, they cannot completely close gaps that develop as a result of students' K-12 experiences. Students felt they lacked the necessary content knowledge and study skills when they started college due to a lack of rigorous coursework, low expectations by teachers, and limited resources in their high schools. What can be done to improve students' preparation for college?

- Align high school graduation requirements with college entrance requirements to ensure that all students know the coursework they need to be successful in college and have the opportunity to take it. An important step in achieving alignment is to make the college preparatory curriculum the default curriculum for high school, as many states have already done.
- Address gaps in students' academic preparation for college by providing coursework and tutoring outside the classroom. Furthermore, academic preparation should go beyond remediation by providing students with opportunities to take advanced coursework such as honors, Advanced Placement, and dual enrollment courses.
- Provide additional funding and support to under-resourced schools, which frequently serve students who are underrepresented in higher education and are in need of the most assistance to get prepared for college.

■ **Provide more support for students once in college.** While students felt they received ample support from pre-college programs to help them get into college, once they arrived on campus they didn't have the support needed—academic, social, financial—to help them stay. What can be done to help improve the chances that, once enrolled, students will succeed in college?

- Advise students to attend colleges and universities that have well-developed support programs in place, especially for first-year students, as well as strong records of successfully retaining and graduating students.
- Extend the individualized and intensive support provided by pre-college programs to the college campus by extending the pre-college programs themselves, increasing coordination between existing pre-college and campus-based programs, and/or developing campus-based programs where they do not currently exist.
- Reduce barriers to students' participation in support programs—such as lack of information, inability to pay, and/or inconvenient hours due to students' work schedules—by offering flexible services that take students' characteristics and needs into consideration.
- Provide students with additional financial aid, especially grants and work-study, as well as counseling about how to manage unmet need. In particular, students need more guidance on how many hours to work vs. how much debt burden to assume during college in order to make decisions that promote persistence. Providing students with meaningful on-campus work in their field of study can help them meet their financial *and* academic goals.

By going straight to the source, it is our hope that the words of the first-generation students presented here will improve practice in outreach programs and postsecondary institutions. In addition, we hope that raising awareness and generating dialogue among policymakers about the impact and benefits of pre-college programs and services will result in increased opportunities for more students and their families to take the “leap of faith” and start their own college-going traditions.



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