

# Falling Far From the Tree

BY KRIS HARVEY

**A few success factors and strategies can help you increase the number of first-generation college students at your school. It's easier than you think.**

**W**hen it comes to kids, parents and college, the facts aren't surprising. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Not only does research reveal that parents' education levels are a significant factor in determining whether or not high school graduates enroll in college, a U.S. Department of Education report also found that students whose parents have high school diplomas only were less likely than their peers whose parents have bachelor's degrees to decide to go to college, take college preparatory courses, receive help from their parents with entrance exams and get assistance from their parents with applications.

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But, what if statistics also showed that when students whose parents have high school diplomas successfully follow through with the college preparatory steps mentioned earlier, their enrollment rates at four-year institutions match those of students with college-graduate parents? Would that surprise you, perhaps inspire you? Well, it's true.

Sadly, only 27 percent of students whose parents didn't go to college currently enroll in four-year institutions while 71 percent of students whose parents have bachelor's degrees do so. The best part for school counselors and parents is that increasing the enrollment of first-generation college students is easier than one would think. In fact, once you know the key success factors and become familiar with effective strategies, it's an attainable goal. For starters, closing this gap requires a key understanding of a few simple steps and statistics.

## Step 1 – Decide

This step is arguably the most important and probably the most overlooked. Many federally funded programs and nonprofit organizations focus their efforts on tutoring students in classes, preparing them for the SAT or ACT or providing financial aid. Yet, unless students *want* to go to college, telling them how to get in and how to pay for it is a waste of time and resources. And, although programs exist that devote energy to influencing students' decisions about higher education, they only reach a small percentage of first-generation college students.

In addition to the lack of emphasis from outreach programs, there's often

a similar lack of emphasis at home. Parents without a college education often don't encourage their children to go to college. In fact, some even actively discourage them from going. Oftentimes these parents:

- Think they're just fine without a college degree and believe their children will be as well
- Believe they can't pay for college
- Don't want their kids to leave home
- Interpret encouraging their children to go to college as an insult to their own way of life

Because the percentage of students who decide to go to college doesn't change much between eighth and 12th grades, it's important to influence students' decisions by eighth or ninth grade. In fact, it declines slightly for both groups.

To accomplish this, expose students to role models – college students and college graduates – early. Because their parents didn't graduate from college, these students may not know anyone currently in college. And if their parents aren't college graduates with professional careers, it's unlikely other adults in their lives are. When selecting role models, try to find college students and recent college graduates with similar backgrounds to your students'. If possible, recruit high school alumni who fit the criteria. Then, invite these role models to come speak at your school or create a job-shadowing or mentoring program. Short on role models? Reach out to professional community organizations for volunteers.

## Step 2 – Prepare

Unfortunately, most first-generation college students don't understand the

connection between their curriculum and their likelihood of being accepted to college. But, taking the proper classes in high school is absolutely critical to adequately preparing students for enrollment in a four-year institution. Not surprisingly, students whose parents didn't graduate from college are far less likely than students whose parents have bachelor's degrees to be academically prepared to attend.

The most important thing school counselors can do at this stage is to encourage students to take more math classes. The rigor of a student's high school mathematics curriculum is strongly associated with enrollment in a four-year institution. Of the high school graduates enrolling in a four-year institution, 76 percent took four years of mathematics. Those who took low-level or no mathematics only account for 6 percent.

The numbers also show that even when students whose parents didn't go to college are capable of taking higher-level math classes, they are less likely to do so compared with their peers whose parents have bachelor's degrees.





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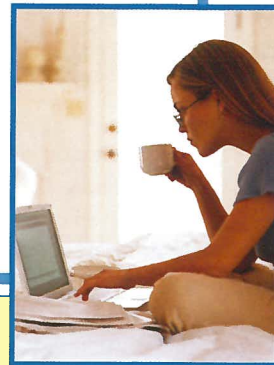
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To help first-generation college students prepare for college, put together an information packet specifically designed for them. Include in it a simple three-step process of how to select an appropriate high school course plan. Your goal here is to connect the dots for them. For example: pick a career, select an appropriate college major and choose the relevant high school course plan. Be sure to give examples for each step, listing five or six careers per packet. Under each career, provide one or two majors and one high school course plan per major. Using actual majors and course requirements from your local four-year college can be helpful.

For the best results, develop four packets per school year – two for the fall semester and two for the spring semester. Repetition works with these students. Not only are you reinforcing the concept, but you also are exposing them to a wider variety of careers. Four packets with five or six careers in each packet results in course plans for 20 to 24 different careers, which offers your students a greater range of understanding – and inspiration.

Lastly, post an electronic version of the packets on the counseling section of your school's Web site so it's always available, but don't forget to distribute and make available paper versions of the packets for those students who don't have computer access.

### Step 3 – Test

Taking a college entrance exam is the last step before the application process begins. Most counselors know the score students receive on this exam considerably affects the likelihood they will get accepted. According to a report by the National Association of College Admissions Counseling (NACAC), standardized test scores are second only to grades in college prep courses in the admission decision.

In fact, SAT and ACT scores rank ahead of: grades in all courses, class rank, essay or writing sample, counselor or teacher recommendation and work/extracurricular activities. And their importance is on the rise. In 1993, 46 percent of institutions

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College Parents of America, Washington, DC, is a nonprofit association for parents whose children currently attend or plan to attend college. Its resources include "Decade of Decisions," a quarterly electronic newsletter that guides parents during the 10 years from seventh grade through college graduation. Information is customized to a student's graduation date. Parents may subscribe to the newsletter free of charge at [www.collegeparents.org](http://www.collegeparents.org).

reported considerable importance for admission tests; by 2003 it had risen to 61 percent.

The key success factor for this step is to engage the parents. Parents without a college degree are far less likely to talk to their children about college entrance exams than parents with a college degree. When the parents are involved, their children are much more likely to use study guides, take sample tests on Web sites and participate in SAT/ACT prep sessions. Subsequently, these students score higher on tests than peers with uninvolved parents.

One way to successfully engage parents is to hold separate information sessions just for them. This helps prevent the intimidation factor they often feel at

sessions where more educated parents are present and may help them feel more free to ask questions. It's also important to keep in mind that parents without college degrees probably did not take the SAT and are thus likely to have a different set of questions than their more educated counterparts. If you want to encourage participation and address the specific needs of this unique group, it's important to provide a comfortable and supportive environment.

Handouts at these information sessions are essential and should include a list of recommended books their children can use to study for the SAT or ACT. Be sure to note which ones are available in your school's library, and don't forget to include a list of Web

sites that offer sample questions. You also may want to let them know what fee-based prep courses are available in your area, but be sure to offer lower-cost options, too.

#### Step 4 – Apply

Once a student has decided to go to college and taken the proper courses and entrance exams, it's time to apply. Although most universities now offer online applications, this can actually hinder rather than help students and parents with limited computer access and skill. Additionally, even students with computers at home are often unaware of application deadlines. The numbers also show students whose parents didn't graduate from college are less likely to be involved in the stages of the application process, including attending information sessions and visiting campuses.

A key success factor for this stage is to increase the school's assistance



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with applications. Data show that students who get less help at home are not getting more help at school. Unfortunately, the amount of assistance with college applications students receive from teachers and counselors doesn't vary with parents' level of education. Counselors who want to increase the number of first-generation college students must change this fact.

Consider offering college application help sessions for students whose parents don't have bachelor's degrees. Staff these sessions with teachers and counselors, and if necessary, recruit additional staff from volunteers of local civic organizations and your parent/teacher association. Such organizations also may be interested in donating food for your sessions or money to cover needy students' application fees. Finally, don't forget to reach out to your local university to see what resources it may be able to

contribute in the way of volunteers or waived application fees.

#### Step 5 – Enroll/Pay

All in all, when students of non-college-educated parents successfully complete the first four steps, they are as likely to enroll in a four-year institution as their peers with college-educated parents; approximately 89 percent from each group enroll. This statistic suggests that if students get this far, they manage to find a way to pay for college. In other words, the lack of financial resources doesn't appear to be a major factor in determining whether or not students of non-college-educated parents actually go to college. In fact, what this finding may suggest is that the many financial aid programs are successfully serving these students.

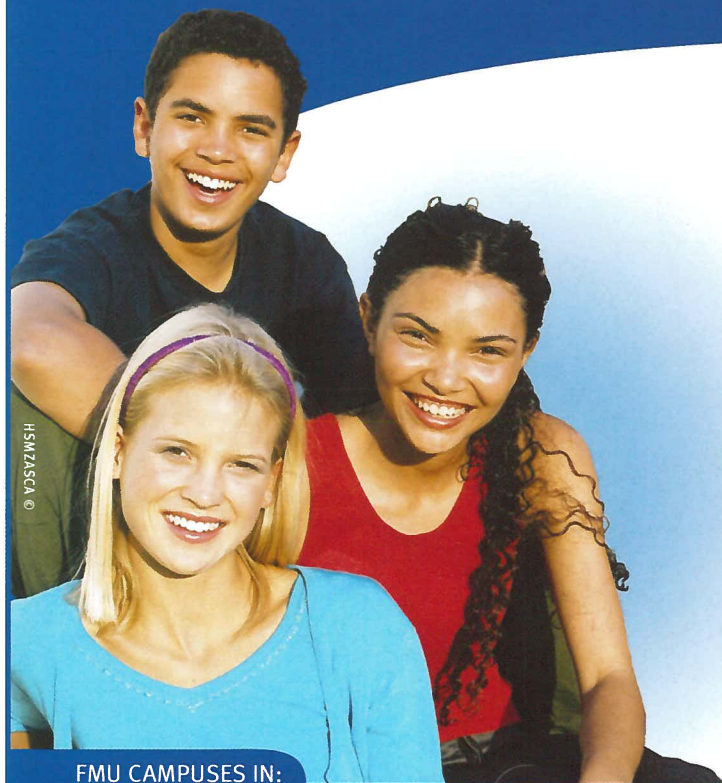
To help first-generation college students, design a comprehensive plan for them. The plan should include a

strategy to address the key success factor for each step in the process. Use the strategies recommended here or develop your own. The most important thing is that you have a plan catering to the specific needs of this unique group of students.

In short, the statistics for first-generation college students are bitter-sweet. But with an understanding of strategy, guidance from school counselors, parent involvement and the right plan, success is within reach – and oh-so-sweet.

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*Kris Harvey was a first-generation college student who graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Purdue University and received her master's degree from Georgetown University. She is founder and executive director of Blossom Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing the number of first-generation college students. She can be reached at kris@blossomproject.org.*

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