

How Can UIS Faculty and Staff Support First-Generation College Students (and all students).

Now that we are a few weeks into the fall semester, I wanted to take a moment to share something that has been on my mind as I talk with our students about how they are settling into their first semester. There are some simple things we can do to make the college experience a little easier to navigate for our first-generation students – and really all our students.

Nearly half (47%) of our incoming Fall 2026 first year class has identified as a first-generation college student, up from 24% in 2015. That means almost one out of every two students in our first-year class may be navigating college without the benefit of a parent or guardian who has earned a bachelor's degree and experienced a four-year residential college or university themselves.

And that matters.

Nationally, only 1 in 5 first-generation students who begin college as first-year students will go on to complete a bachelor's degree. This is not because first-generation students aren't academically capable. Rather, continuing-generation students *students whose parents have completed a bachelor's degree, particularly those whose parents experienced a traditional residential college or university* often arrive with something their first-generation peers may not have: a built-in support system with knowledge and experiences that can help them navigate challenges with classes, campus life, finances, college bureaucracy, and career networks.

First-generation students are often learning how to be a college student while they are also learning their college coursework.

The good news is that UIS students do not have to navigate college alone. Each of us can help make the path a little clearer. Supporting first-generation students doesn't necessarily require doing something more. Often, it means making the things we already do a little more intentional, transparent, and welcoming. And these practices can benefit every student.

Here are a few ideas that stood out to me from recent workshops I attended at that National Conference on Student Success in Higher Education and from conversations I've had with students so far this semester:

Build connection and belonging.

Learn students' names. Give them opportunities to connect with one another. Arrive a few minutes early or stay after class to talk. A simple "How are things going?" can go a long way toward helping a student feel seen and connected.

One of our students spoke very highly of her faculty member who started each class with a question that each student answered about themselves. Not only did she feel her instructor got to know her, but she got to know more about her classmates.

Those small moments of connection matter.

Demystify College.

Don't assume students know how things work. I've had several conversations with several of our first-years this semester feeling overwhelmed that in addition to their coursework, they are also learning how to be a college student.

Consider all the things that may be unfamiliar to a new student:

- What are office hours really for?
- If they cannot attend your scheduled office hours, how should they arrange another time to meet you?

- When is it appropriate to email you with questions-and how quickly should they expect a response?
- How should they use a rubric to guide their work?
- What level of familiarity should they have with the software required for an assignment?
- What does “college-level” work look like in your course?

The more we can make these expectations visible, the less students must figure out on their own.

One student came to me last week because she was overwhelmed by a class assignment that required Excel. Her faculty member thoughtfully created videos demonstrating the Excel basics and functions needed for the assignment, and the videos were really helpful. The challenge was that she was completely new to Excel, so the assignment was taking her much longer than she anticipated.

I encouraged her to reach out to her instructor, explain that she was new to Excel, and let him know that she was using the videos, but was concerned she might not finish by the due date. Her instructor was very supportive and gave her an extension. As you can imagine the student was very relieved and thanked me for encouraging her to reach out. She had someone to ask who could guide her. Think of all the students who don't.

Transparency also matters when it comes to grading. Last spring, a student received his grade with feedback that his presentation was very good, but it would have been stronger with props and gave examples of what he could have used. Nowhere in the syllabus or canvas course materials had students been told that these were expectations for the presentation.

The student also struggled financially and had difficulty purchasing his textbooks. Expecting students to meet an unstated expectation-particularly one that may involve purchasing materials-can create barriers we never intended to create.

Normalize asking for help.

Students sometimes interpret needing help as evidence that they aren't capable. We can help change that message by talking about academic support as something successful students use-not something students use because they aren't successful. Sharing that we have all struggled, revised, learned, and asked for help can make a difference – that is what the learning journey is about.

One way to check if students understand material is to reframe, “Do you have any questions?” with asset-based language encouraging students to share what they *do* know:

- What insights or perspectives are you leaving with today?"
- "What ideas or connections are you eager to explore further?"
- "Where do your experiences connect with what we just covered?"
- "What questions or wisdom do you want to bring into the room?"

These questions can help create a classroom culture where students recognize that they already bring knowledge and experiences with them-and that learning means building on those strengths.

Creating a Culture of Growth

Every student comes to us with strengths, experiences, and knowledge. Creating an environment where it is okay not to know something-and where growth is expected-helps students see that struggling with something doesn't mean they don't belong. Celebrate progress, not just final outcomes. Help students recognize what they have learned, where they have improved, and what they can do differently the next time they encounter a challenge.

Consider where flexibility can help.

Students are balancing academics with work, family responsibilities, finances, and many other parts of life. When possible, transparent, and consistent flexibility can give students an opportunity to recover from a difficult week rather than allowing one setback to derail an entire semester.

Sometimes the students most likely to ask for an exception are the students who already feel comfortable navigating college systems.

Connect students with campus resources.

Sometimes the most important thing we can do is help a student know where to go next. Don't hesitate to connect students with the Learning Hub, their academic advisor, Counseling Center, Financial Aid, their hall director, or other campus resources. Students may need us to make that connection more than once before they feel comfortable reaching out on their own.

A referral can be more powerful when we explain **why** we are making it and what the student can expect when they get there. If possible, try to connect students with someone in that office. I will often reach out by email to a person I know in the department (copying the student), making the introduction and why I am directing the student to them. I also ask if there is someone else I should be directing the student to, reply to both of us, so the student knows who to go to. This can decrease stress for a student, because there is someone they can talk with directly, not just go to an office.

A Simple Addition to Your Syllabus or Canvas Course

One particularly straightforward way to let first-generation students know that support is available is to include a brief statement in your syllabus. It opens the door for students who may have questions but aren't sure whether those questions are "normal" or whether they should ask.

Here is a statement you are welcome to use or adapt:

First-Generation College Students

If you are the first in your family to pursue a bachelor's degree, attend a traditional four-year residential university, or attend university in the United States, you may have questions about coursework, college expectations, or navigating college life. **Please know that you are not alone, and I encourage you to reach out if you have questions or would like additional support.** The [UIS First Gen Initiative](#) can also connect you with resources and support designed to help you thrive at UIS.

What One Small Thing Can You Try?

As you think about your work with students this semester, I encourage you to choose just one of these practices to try.

- Maybe it is learning one more thing about your students;
- Maybe it is explaining something you normally assume students know.
- Maybe it is sharing a campus resource in your next class or meeting.
- Maybe it is checking in with a student who seems to have disappeared.

Small moments of connection, clarity, and encouragement can have a much bigger impact than we realize.

And if you are a first-generation college graduate yourself, consider sharing that with your students. Sometimes knowing that someone who teaches, advises, or works on a college campus was once in their shoes can be incredibly powerful.

Our students don't have to navigate college alone. Together we can help make the path clearer, help students recognize the strengths they already bring with them, and create an environment where every student has the opportunity to succeed.

Thank you for the many ways you support our students every day,

Lisa McGuire

Program Director for Retention and Student Transitions
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* For purposes of the UIS First Generation Initiative, the characteristics of a first-generation college student include a student whose parent(s) or legal guardian(s) ...

- have not completed a bachelor's degree;
- have earned their bachelor's degree from an online program;
- have earned their bachelor's degree from a country other than the United States.