

# Understanding the Support Networks of First-Generation College Students

In an effort to strengthen colleges' academic, nonacademic, and financial support services, this exploratory study funded by the Institute of Education Sciences examines the support networks of first-generation students and how they seek help when they need it. The first part of the study seeks to:

- understand whom first-generation college students turn to for academic and nonacademic support and describe the support networks and help-seeking behaviors of first-generation students
- generate insights that colleges may use to strengthen existing services or develop new approaches to supporting first-generation college students

## Data Collection

In spring 2022 and 2023, Community College Research Center (CCRC) researchers collected data in partnership with two community colleges and two four-year universities in California. The researchers generated lists of network members by asking students to list the people they turn to for academic support and nonacademic support that year, even if the interaction was brief.

## Whom do students turn to...

### For academic support?

**39%** turn to friends from childhood or high school

**33%** turn to friends from college

**31%** turn to siblings

**29%** turn to an academic advisor

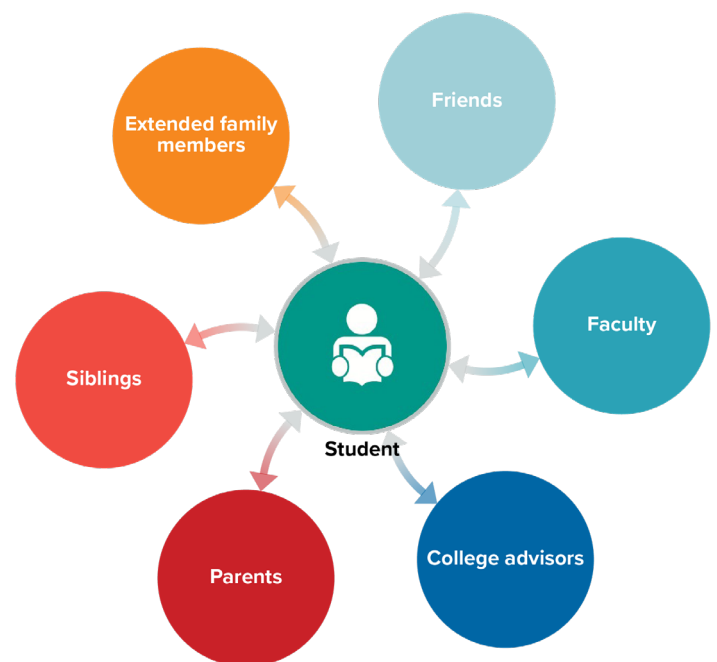
**21%** turn to a faculty member

### For nonacademic support?

**49%** turn to parents

**48%** turn to friends from childhood or high school

**38%** turn to siblings



# The People in First-Generation Students' Social Networks

- **Parents** were an important source of emotional and tangible support. Though they were rarely a resource for academic help, parental support contributed to students' academic experience by, for example, helping them stay on track with assignments.
- **Siblings** and extended family members were sources of advice, academic skills, and referral to on-campus activities and services. Families could also be a source of difficulties, including the expectation that students take on family responsibilities.
- **Peers** provided networking and navigational help, academic advice, connections to school resources, and help with things such as commuting.
- **Advisors** were often from targeted, ongoing programs and provided academic help and campus information, career advice, and other referrals. Students described strong connections with advisors who they met with multiple times during the year.
- **Faculty** who were identified as a source of academic support were instrumental in connecting students with campus resources.

High school counselors, teachers, or coaches were identified by fewer than 10% of respondents as a source of support, but staff from college access programs such as Avid and Upward Bound often provided academic and nonacademic support in high school and into the first year of college.

## One Student's Story

Rosa (whose name has been changed) is a student at a four-year college. She is studying pre-health and wants to be a nurse. She described being fearful of her professors when she first started college and not wanting to ask for help. But her boyfriend, who attends community college, encouraged her to reach out to faculty and go to office hours. She credits the faculty with helping her understand career pathways and how to locate resources on campus.

"It's usually when they're explicitly told to me," she said. "So, the learning center, I found out about it because my communications teacher actually gave us a tour of the library, which I thought was super cool. ... That was my first semester. So, I knew about everything in the library."

## Implications for Colleges

- Wide variation in students' networks suggests that colleges may need more granular information about students' backgrounds in order to direct resources and services.
- Advisors and peer mentors from targeted support programs are an important source of help for students; removing barriers to entry for these programs may help first-generation students stay on track.
- Colleges can expand family and alumni programming to strengthen the web of support around first-generation college students.
- The integration of support services and tours of campus resources directly into courses helps to raise their profile and makes it more likely that students will use them.

A report on this research is coming soon. Read more about CCRC's research on first-generation students by scanning the QR code. For questions contact Hoori Santikian Kalamkarian ([hoori.kalamkarian@tc.edu](mailto:hoori.kalamkarian@tc.edu)) or Melissa Herman ([mlh2233@tc.columbia.edu](mailto:mlh2233@tc.columbia.edu)).

