

The Atlantic

Why Making College Free Isn't Enough For First-Generation Students

Hillary Clinton's plan might sound nice, but financial burdens are just one of many hurdles on the path to a degree.



Students walk across Columbia University in New York.

Mike Segar / Reuters

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Presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton has a [comprehensive plan](#) for making public colleges and universities tuition free for families with annual incomes less than \$85,000—and eventually, \$125,000—during her first term. If Clinton becomes the president and is able to push this plan through Congress, it will be manna from heaven for millions. This is particularly true for first-generation

college students, who are more likely to be low-income than the traditional college student.

But even if Clinton and Congress can address this issue successfully, the financial burden of higher education is hardly the only barrier that first-generation students face when it comes to earning the college degrees so many see as a path to prosperity. In addition to financial challenges, first-generation students are navigating a system that is new to them, that taxes them experientially, psychologically, and emotionally.



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Yet even when they make it a priority, schools struggle to develop programs to help these students. One reason is that defining [who first-generation students are](#) and are not is in itself a challenge. Broadly, they are the first in their immediate or extended families to apply to and enroll in a college or university. First-generation students frequently come from families with incomes [less than \\$24,000 per year](#), today's poverty line. While first-generation students are disproportionately low-income and students of color, [50 percent of all first-generation students](#) are white and of low-income backgrounds. Some first-generation students have served in the military, and a large minority are over the age of 24, making them [adult learners](#).

Because pinning down exactly how many students are first-generation is difficult, estimates vary widely, which makes the process of creating programs and securing funding to sustain them complicated. As a [2015 paper by Robert K. Toutkoushian and two other researchers at the University of Georgia](#) noted, the share of first-generation college students nationwide could be as low as 22 percent and as high as 77 percent nationwide. The pool of students who fall into this category is so large and diverse that any systematic efforts to address the barriers that impact the success of first-generation students in higher education must recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach will likely fail. The academic, financial, and psychological needs of an adult learner who works full-time, has served in the military, or is

raising a family are quite different from a 17-year-old going straight from high school to college.

To understand the common obstacles many first-generation college students encounter, though, my own experience is a good starting point. I grew up in a low-income black family in Mount Vernon, New York, just outside New York City—one that relied on welfare by the time I finished middle school in 1983. My mother's annual income, which supported a family of seven, was \$16,600 per year.

My poverty alone made me a very good candidate for need-based aid in 1986, when the state of New York offered a maximum of \$3,000 per year in need-based aid through its [Tuition Assistance Program](#), which was pretty generous at the time. My family's poverty certainly would have made me an ideal candidate for Clinton's tuition-free proposal now. My academic credentials, though, also showed me to be an excellent candidate overall for college admission. I graduated from Mount Vernon High School in June 1987, 14th in a class of more than 500, with a 3.83 GPA, an 1120 SAT score, and a 5 on my AP U.S. History exam, which earned me six college credits.

While I did attend a rigorous magnet school program while in high school, most first-generation students do not have access to this opportunity. According to the Stanford University education professor Sean Reardon, the achievement gap that many first-generation students confront is more than just inadequate academic preparation for college. It is the combination of greater concentrations of wealth among parents with a college education [who live in school districts increasingly segregated by wealth and race](#) that accounts for much of this achievement gap. In *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*, Reardon wrote, "it appears that the income achievement gap has been growing for at least fifty years," and is at least twice as large as the achievement gap between blacks and whites. With more first-generation students than ever applying to and enrolling in college, the need to recognize and confront the web of barriers they face has become a must, as academic preparation and financial need are only the first of several obstacles.

Despite my own academic advantages, I stumbled my way into college, and at any number of times, could have easily stumbled out. My college journey in many ways was and remains typical for low-income first-generation students. My family and I knew no one who had completed a college degree and nothing about financial-aid packages, the admissions process, or that college would require me to juggle academic, social, familial, and job obligations. Things that an affluent family would take for granted in the process of applying to and enrolling in college did not even occur to me or my family. I never saw any college up close until I walked onto the University of Pittsburgh's campus for my first freshman orientation in late-August 1987.

I decided on the University of Pittsburgh for two reasons: its goofy brochure with a pizza pie on the front cover, and a telephone conversation with Columbia University's admissions office. Columbia had accepted me, but their financial-aid office refused to offer me any aid. During our phone conversation, Columbia asked 17-year-old me to grant the school permission to "send out a private investigator to track down [my] father and take a look at his finances." Columbia hoped my father—whom my mother divorced when I was eight and who was in the middle of a 40-year-long struggle with alcoholism—would pay between \$1,200 and \$3,000 of my \$17,000-per-year tuition bill. I knew beyond a doubt that what Columbia proposed would never happen. Although Columbia may no longer engage in this specific practice, many high-achieving, low-income first-generation students continue to face [an extra bit of scrutiny](#) from elite private and public universities. Practices such as these represent another obstacle for first-generation students, [who may already be leery](#) about attending an elite college.

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The University of Pittsburgh, on the other hand, offered me a half-tuition academic scholarship of \$3,750 per year. Pitt's tuition of \$7,500 per year was easily the

cheapest of the eight schools to which I applied, including the State University of New York at Buffalo, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and Yale University.

Once at Pitt, I had to plow through financial, academic, and personal issues that 1987-88 school year. I was homesick that first semester. I was adjusting to a new city, a full academic load, and a new job in the computing lab. It didn't help that I had precious little money to buy books. After a student stole my honors calculus textbook during one of my computer-lab shifts, I did not even have the money to replace it.

In one six-week stretch between early November and mid-December 1987, I missed nearly two-thirds of all my classes. Whether honors calculus, computer programming, or East Asian history, my coursework was not the issue. Having few friends my age, though, was. The ones I did befriend came from middle-class backgrounds and had little experience with the poverty, the abuse, or the New York that was my upbringing. I simply felt that I was a social and racial misfit, in and out of the classroom, in an area as unlike New York as I could have imagined.

I was depressed, but still aware enough to consider meeting with a counselor. Only, I thought Pitt's psychological services were just available for what I assumed were real emergencies. Feeling depressed was normal in the first semester, I thought. My depression didn't qualify, I believed. So I never did try to make an appointment with a mental-health professional.

A 2012 National Alliance on Mental Health [survey of college students](#) showed that roughly one in four students suffer from depression or some other mental illness during their time in college. Yet 50 percent of those coping with depression and other issues do not seek "mental-health services and supports." For the 50 percent who do solicit services, their awareness about their illness and peer support are among the keys to recovery. I only recovered because I refused to lose my scholarship. That, and a commitment to befriending adult learners and graduate students my second semester, made a difference. I managed to make the dean's list my second semester, and finished my freshman year with a 3.02 GPA.

The biggest test was still to come, though. I had missed the March 15 deadline to put down a \$350 deposit to guarantee a dorm room for my sophomore year. I had asked my parents for help. But my mother could only stretch \$850-a-month of welfare, food stamps, and vouchers so far. And while my father said that he had wired me the funds via Western Union, he never actually sent the money. I knew at the end of the spring semester that I would have to go back to New York, find work for the summer, and make enough money to find a place in Pittsburgh in the fall. In retrospect, I recognize that I should have contacted a Pitt administrator about my situation, but I had no idea at the time whom I should reach out to.

Nothing worked out that leap year the way I thought it would. I found myself [unemployed for the summer](#) and homeless in Pittsburgh for five days. Three of those five nights I spent on a concrete landing in a stairwell on campus in what is now Wesley Posvar Hall before I found a room to rent in a rowhouse for \$140 a month. My father did give me \$400 the week before, which I used to secure my 200-square-foot room. I shared a bathroom and a kitchen, but it was better than my previous residence. To be back in Mount Vernon with my mother, my abusive stepfather, and my five siblings in a two-bedroom apartment would have been a death sentence to my higher-education efforts. According to data from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, there are at least 58,000 homeless college students in the U.S. Not knowing where to turn for help and the isolation that comes with no physical address was a problem for me, and [remains an issue for so many others](#).

I was lucky that my bout with homelessness lasted less than a week. But I still had to go through the fall 1988 semester with just \$205 left over from my financial-aid package and little or nothing to eat, except tuna-fish sandwiches and pork neck bones and rice.

The thing about poverty and race in a rich country like the U.S. is that the poor and the vulnerable seldom disclose their bad situations to anyone. This is often out of embarrassment or pride, because those who are poor or of color do not want to be the living embodiment of a racial or poor-person stereotype. That was certainly the

case for me. It took deciding to meet with Pitt's ombudsman to work out my billing issues before I had enough aid to cover the cost of food, books, and rent.

But to do this, I had to heed social psychologist Claude Steele's advice in *Young, Gifted, and Black*, and learn from people whom I would otherwise refuse to trust, because many "can feel mistrust and apprehension in" predicaments similar to my own. After years of being in school with authorities who practiced tough love, and affluent classmates who frequently made light of my poverty, my instinct was to keep quiet about my troubles. I only reached out because I knew \$10 would not feed me for the entire month of November. But I was relatively lucky there as well. Many first-generation students don't get the support they need and a good number drop out. According to the Pell Institute, only between 11 and 25 percent of all first-generation students graduate with a bachelor's degree within six years of enrolling in college, with a dropout rate of between 38 and 47 percent.

Ultimately, four years of pursuing my bachelor's in history, with minors in both mathematics and black studies, cost about \$52,000 by the time I finished up at the University of Pittsburgh in 1991. I borrowed \$13,000 in student loans, made \$14,000 at a variety of jobs that covered my necessities, and had \$15,000 in academic-scholarship money. My mother and father kicked in just \$1,400 total, mostly during my first three semesters.

But it wasn't just the tuition assistance that got me through; forming bonds with older students, being proactive in getting the help I needed, and being able to compartmentalize my academic, social, work, and familial obligations made me a successful student. Today, millions of first-generation students often enter college not knowing where to turn for help. Many times, first-generation students these days do not even know that they need help. Some public colleges and universities offer [first-year experience programs](#) to help first-generation students navigate the personal, professional, and academic aspects of their college experience.

Many higher-education institutions, however, either do not have such programs, or the programs themselves are understaffed, underfunded, and underdeveloped. Many institutions [do not provide enough counselors](#) in the form of psychologists

and social workers to help first-generation students work through issues around familial obligations, financial aid beyond tuition, campus climate, and interpersonal development. Few programs provide opportunities for faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate peers to serve as mentors throughout a student's higher-education experience. Where opportunities do exist, [the lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity](#) among college staff and [faculty](#) can also be a barrier, as first-generation students frequently find themselves working with potential mentors with little understanding of the challenges they face.

Though examples of success abound, the availability of programs for first-generation students even today is haphazard, and would require state-level and collaborative efforts beyond the appropriations of a Hillary Clinton administration and a bipartisan Congress to address.

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