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THE ROLE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS IN CLOSING EQUITY GAPS FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS AT RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

First-generation college students, defined as those whose parents did not complete a bachelor's degree, represent one of the largest and most persistently underserved populations in American higher education. At research universities in particular, where institutional culture, academic expectations, and social dynamics have historically been calibrated for students from college-educated families, first-generation students face compounding equity gaps that extend well beyond academic preparation. This review article examines the role of student affairs professionals as institutional agents in closing those gaps, arguing that the student affairs function is not supplemental to the academic mission but integral to it when equity is understood as a core educational outcome. Drawing on recent empirical literature, practitioner surveys, and institutional case studies from 2021 to 2025, the article analyses five domains of student affairs practice through which equity work is carried out: proactive academic advising and early alert systems, summer bridge and transition programming, peer and faculty mentorship frameworks, financial aid literacy and basic needs support, and mental health and wellbeing infrastructure. The article further examines structural tensions that constrain student affairs professionals in equity-focused work, including resource scarcity, institutional siloing, the burden of data-driven accountability, and the increasingly turbulent policy environment in which first-generation programming operates. Recommendations are offered for institutional leaders, policy makers, and student affairs practitioners seeking to move from ad hoc support to systemic equity-oriented practice.

Keywords: First-generation college students, Student affairs, Equity gaps, Higher education, Academic advising, retention, Research universities, Student success.

1 INTRODUCTION

There is something structurally peculiar about first-generation students at research universities. They arrive having cleared extraordinary hurdles: a college-going culture that was never assumed in their household, an application process with no parental roadmap, and often years of watching peers whose families simply knew things that theirs did not. They arrive, in other words, already having demonstrated a form of resilience that most of their peers have never been asked to perform. And then, frequently, the institution greets them with a culture, a set of hidden curricula, and a spatial and social architecture that was not designed with them in mind.

The scale of the problem is well documented in the research literature. Research shows that 33% of first-generation students drop out within three years of enrollment, compared to just 14% of students whose parent attended college [1]. First-generation students are also 1.9 times less likely to enroll in professional doctoral programs and, once enrolled, 1.4 times less likely to complete them [2]. The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education documented, in a 2025 research brief released on National First-Generation College Celebration Day, that the share of first-generation students enrolled in American colleges and universities declined from 66% in 1996 to 53% in 2020, suggesting that even raw enrollment equity is moving in the wrong direction [3].

These enrollment and completion gaps are not natural facts. They are institutional products, the accumulated outcomes of systems that were built for a particular kind of student and have adapted only slowly, and often reluctantly, to the demographic realities of the twenty-first century student body. That the gaps persist despite decades of programming and policy attention speaks not to the intractability of first-generation disadvantage but to the insufficiency of interventions that treat first-generation students as problems to be solved rather than assets to be supported.

The student affairs professional steps into this context to intervene. Working across advising offices, residential life programs, counseling centers, financial aid offices, cultural resource centers, and career services, student affairs staff represent the most consistent and sustained point of contact between first-generation students and the institutional apparatus of support. They are, in the language of social capital theory, institutional agents: individuals who occupy positions of influence within organizations and choose to leverage that position on behalf of students who lack inherited access to institutional knowledge [4]. Whether that potential is realized depends on funding, institutional culture, professional preparation, and structural positioning, none of which can be taken for granted.

This article reviews what the evidence tells us about how student affairs professionals can and do close equity gaps for first-generation students at research universities, where the challenge is in some ways sharpest because the institutional culture most strongly reflects a historical standard that excluded the students now being invited in. The article is organized around five domains of student affairs practice before synthesizing findings, examining structural barriers, and offering recommendations grounded in current evidence and practitioner experience.

2 BACKGROUND: WHO FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS ARE AND WHAT THEY FACE

2.1 Defining and Situating the Population

The standard operational definition of a first-generation college student is one whose parents, or in some institutional formulations whose legal guardians, have not completed a four-year college degree. This definition, adopted by federal programs including the TRIO suite and codified in institutional data systems, is useful but imperfect. It flattens a population of considerable internal diversity: a student whose parent completed some college but no degree occupies a meaningfully different epistemic position relative to higher education than one whose family has had no college-going tradition for generations. It also tends to obscure the degree to which first-generation status correlates with, but is not reducible to, other socioeconomic markers including low income, first-language status, immigration history, and race and ethnicity [5].

At research universities specifically, the population is further shaped by the selectivity dynamics of those institutions. First-generation students admitted to research universities have typically demonstrated strong academic credentials; the equity gaps they experience are therefore less about academic preparation in any absolute sense and more about the cultural and navigational dimensions of fitting into an environment whose norms, expectations, and social codes were historically calibrated for a different kind of student. Kim and Park (2025), in a mixed-methods study at a Midwestern public university, found that first-generation college students struggled most not with academic coursework itself but with navigating college resources, understanding campus norms, and engaging with the informal dimensions of academic life, including faculty relationships and social networks [6].

2.2 The Equity Gap at Research Universities

Research universities present a distinctive context for first-generation student equity work for several reasons. Their emphasis on research productivity can create cultural distance between faculty and undergraduate students generally, a dynamic that is amplified for students who may already feel uncertain about whether they belong in an elite academic environment. The undergraduate experience at a large research university is characterized by significant autonomy: students are expected to seek out resources, build professional networks, and navigate complex bureaucratic systems on their own initiative. This expectation, broadly described in the literature as a culture of proactive self-advocacy, assumes a degree of institutional fluency that first-generation students have typically not had the opportunity to develop [5].

Beyond these cultural and navigational demands, the financial dimensions of the equity gap are also acute. Research universities, even public flagships, increasingly operate in an environment of resource constraint that falls disproportionately on students from lower-income backgrounds. Emergency financial pressures, food and housing insecurity, and the competing demands of paid employment are more prevalent among first-generation students than among their continuing-generation peers, and these pressures interact with academic demands in ways that can be difficult for institutions whose support structures were designed for students without such competing claims on their time and energy [3].

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE STUDENT AFFAIRS INTERVENTION PIPELINE

Figure 1 below presents a conceptual model of the student affairs intervention pipeline, illustrating the five staged domains through which student affairs professionals engage with first-generation students across the arc of the undergraduate experience. The model is not intended to suggest that interventions are purely sequential; in practice, multiple domains operate concurrently and are most effective when they are coordinated within an integrated institutional strategy. Rather, the pipeline structure reflects the chronological intensity of each domain: pre-enrollment outreach is by definition front-loaded, while career preparation typically intensifies in later undergraduate years.

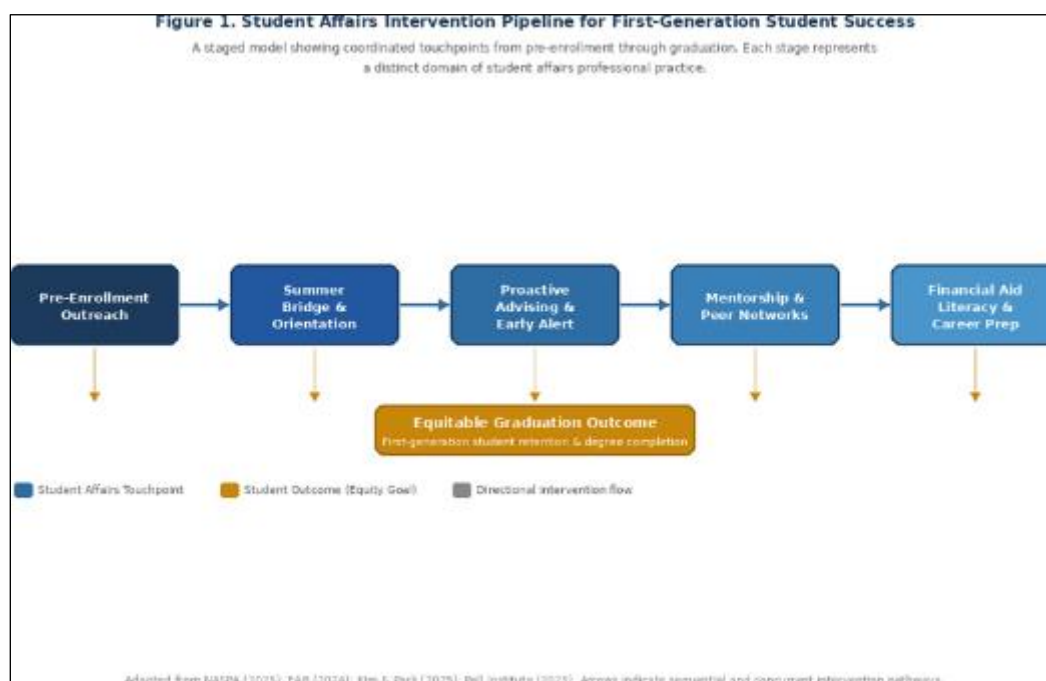


Figure 1: Student Affairs Intervention Pipeline for First-Generation Student Success. Adapted from NASPA (2025); EAB (2024); Kim and Park (2025); Pell Institute (2025).

The convergence of all five domains on a single equity outcome, equitable graduation and degree completion, is deliberate and theoretically grounded. The literature consistently shows that no single intervention is sufficient to close the equity gap for first-generation students [7]. What works is a coordinated institutional architecture in which multiple student affairs functions operate with shared data, shared goals, and shared accountability. Sections 4.1 through 4.5 below examine each of these five domains in turn.

4 FIVE DOMAINS OF STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTICE

4.1 Proactive Academic Advising and Early Alert Systems

Academic advising is perhaps the most extensively studied domain of student affairs practice in relation to first-generation student success. The fundamental insight of decades of research is that first-generation students are less likely than continuing-generation students to proactively seek help, not because they need it less, but because they are less certain that help is available, less confident that asking for it is appropriate, and less familiar with the institutional mechanisms through which it is delivered [6]. The implication is direct: advising models that wait for students to come in are models that will systematically underserve first-generation students.

The proactive advising model, in which advisors initiate contact with students at defined intervals and at identifiable risk moments such as a missed class, a dropped grade, or a lapse in registration activity, has emerged as the most robustly supported approach to closing this particular dimension of the equity gap. Georgia State University's GPS Advising system, which uses predictive analytics to identify students at risk and dispatches advisors to make personalized contact, has been cited across the literature as a landmark case: the system contributed to a five-percentage-point increase in graduation rates and produced the most dramatic gains among first-generation and Pell-eligible students [9].

Early alert systems represent the technological infrastructure underlying proactive advising. By integrating academic performance data, attendance records, and engagement metrics, these systems allow advisors and student affairs professionals to intervene before a problem becomes a crisis. A 2025 analysis of retention strategies noted that institutions deploying early alert systems can substantially shorten the time between identifying a problem and delivering a response, a dynamic that matters especially for first-generation students whose financial situations may mean that a small academic setback rapidly becomes a withdrawal [9]. The critical caveat is that early alert systems produce good outcomes only when they are adequately staffed and when the interventions triggered are genuinely responsive to student circumstances. Data without action is surveillance, not support.

4.2 Summer Bridge and Transition Programming

The transition from secondary school to university is a structurally high-risk period for first-generation students. It is the moment at which the absence of family college knowledge is most acutely felt, when institutional navigation demands are highest and the student's capacity to meet them is most tenuous. Summer bridge programs, which bring incoming first-generation students to campus before the first semester to build academic skills, social connections, and institutional familiarity, have consistently demonstrated positive effects on this critical transition period.

A review of the evidence by EAB (2024) found that structured pre-college programs increase second-year retention by seven to thirteen percentage points across demographic groups, with the largest effects among first-generation and low-income students [8]. The mechanisms are multiple: bridge programs reduce the social isolation of the first weeks of college, create peer networks that persist into the academic year, demystify institutional processes, and build academic confidence before high-stakes assessments begin. Critically, the research suggests that the peer relationships formed in summer bridge contexts are among the most durable protective factors against first-year attrition.

The quality of bridge program design matters enormously, and student affairs professionals bear primary responsibility for it. Programs that are purely academic in focus, emphasizing remediation rather than transition and integration, tend to underperform those that combine academic preparation with social orientation, cultural affirmation, and explicit attention to the navigational skills that first-generation students need. The NASPA First-Generation Student Success Conference (2025) highlighted culturally responsive program design as a key differentiator between bridge programs that improve outcomes and those that produce stigma without support [12].

4.3 Peer and Faculty Mentorship

Mentorship relationships, both with faculty and with near-peer students who have successfully navigated the institution, consistently appear in the literature as protective factors for first-generation student persistence. The mechanism is partly informational: mentors transmit institutional knowledge that first-generation students could not have inherited. But it is also fundamentally relational and identity-affirming. Research on first-generation Latinx students found that faculty influence was a critical factor in students' pathways into doctoral programs, with faculty mentors providing not only practical guidance but the reflected recognition that students' intellectual potential was worth investing in [6].

Peer mentorship programs, in which continuing first-generation students mentor incoming ones, have particular advantages at research universities because they combine institutional navigation knowledge with identity resonance

in a way that staff advising alone cannot replicate. The University of Wisconsin-Madison, UNC Charlotte, and Syracuse University have all launched first-generation mentorship programs tied to enrollment growth; Syracuse saw first-generation enrollment increase from 12% to 19% between fall 2022 and fall 2023, a jump that institutional leadership attributed in part to the visibility and community of its first-generation program [8]. That visibility matters: first-generation students who can see others like themselves succeeding in an institution receive a message about belonging that no amount of formal programming can manufacture.

The ACPA and NASPA Professionals Competency Framework, updated through a draft revision process in 2025, explicitly positions student affairs professionals as facilitators of mentoring relationships and cultural responsiveness, recognizing that well-being, belonging, and psychological safety are not peripheral to the student affairs function but central to it [13]. This professionalization of the mentorship facilitation role is significant: it moves mentorship from an informal, personality-dependent practice to an institutionalized competency expectation.

4.4 Financial Aid Literacy and Basic Needs Support

Financial stress is the most consistently documented barrier to first-generation student completion. Research published in the *College Student Affairs Journal* found that first-generation students score substantially higher on financial strain measures and lower on financial knowledge, self-efficacy, and preparedness than continuing-generation peers [8]. The implications are direct: a first-generation student who does not understand how to navigate FAFSA renewal, who does not know that emergency funding exists, or who has no framework for managing educational debt is a student whose departure risk is elevated by something that is not academic at all.

Student affairs professionals working in financial aid literacy occupy an especially important equity-facing role. Beyond processing aid applications, they serve as translators between bureaucratic systems and students whose families have no prior experience with educational finance. They identify students in financial crisis before withdrawal becomes the only option. They connect students to emergency funding, food pantries, housing assistance, and mental health resources in ways that require both institutional knowledge and interpersonal trust. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice has documented extensively that food and housing insecurity among college students is far more prevalent than institutions typically acknowledge, and that these basic needs deficits fall disproportionately on first-generation and low-income students [14].

The post-pandemic period has intensified this dimension of student affairs work. The disruption of campus life during 2020 and 2021 made visible how much first-generation students had relied on campus infrastructure for needs that more affluent students could meet privately. Institutions that have responded by investing in food pantries, emergency funds, and basic needs case management have seen measurable improvements in retention among their most vulnerable populations; those that have treated these investments as temporary pandemic responses have allowed the underlying equity vulnerabilities to persist [14,16].

4.5 Mental Health and Wellbeing Infrastructure

The mental health dimensions of first-generation student equity work are both well documented and persistently underfunded. A 2024 report from Gallup and the Lumina Foundation found that 54% of students who identified as being at risk of leaving college cited emotional stress as the primary threat to their enrollment status, with personal mental health reasons cited by 43% [10]. First-generation students, who navigate institutional environments while also managing the psychological weight of being pioneers in their families and communities, carrying imposter syndrome, and often supporting family members emotionally and financially, are disproportionately represented in these statistics.

Counseling centers at research universities are among the most chronically understaffed student services operations on campus. National benchmarks suggest a ratio of one counselor per 1,000 to 1,500 students as a target for meeting demand, yet many large research universities operate at ratios of one to 3,000 or worse. The differential impact on first-generation students is compounded by the underutilization pattern that characterizes this population's relationship with mental health services: first-generation students are less likely to seek counseling voluntarily, partly due to stigma that is amplified in communities where seeking help is culturally coded as weakness, and partly due to the practical barriers of scheduling, cost, and time [15].

Student affairs professionals across divisions have an important role in bridging this gap. Residential life staff trained in mental health first aid, academic advisors who recognize the signs of crisis and know the referral pathways, and peer wellness educators embedded in living-learning communities can extend the reach of formal counseling services in ways that are more accessible to students who would not independently seek them. The integration of mental health awareness into non-clinical student affairs roles is an evidence-based practice that several research universities have begun formalizing through training programs and case management protocols [15].

5 SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: STUDENT AFFAIRS DOMAINS AND EQUITY OUTCOMES

Table 1 synthesizes the five intervention domains reviewed above, mapping each to its primary function, the key student affairs roles involved, available evidence of effectiveness, and the specific equity gap the intervention is designed to address.

Table 1: Student Affairs Intervention Domains: Functions, Roles, and Evidence of Equity Impact

Intervention Area	Primary Function	Key Staff Role	Evidence of Effectiveness	Equity Gap Addressed
Pre-Enrolment Outreach	Familiarize prospective students with university culture and resources	Admissions & Outreach Counsellors	Increases enrolment of first-gen students from under-resourced schools [7]	Information asymmetry; college knowledge deficit
Summer Bridge Programs	Academic preparation and social integration before first semester	Academic Affairs Coordinators, Peer Mentors	Increases second-year retention by 7 to 13 percentage points [8]	Academic unpreparedness; social isolation
Proactive Academic Advising	Mandatory check-ins, degree planning, early-warning flagging	Academic Advisors, Early Alert Officers	Georgia State GPS system raised graduation rates by 5 percentage points [9]	Navigation deficits; undeclared major drift
Peer and Faculty Mentorship	Identity-affirming relationships that validate academic belonging	Mentorship Coordinators, Faculty Liaisons	Improved belonging and persistence, especially for students of colour [11]	Isolation; imposter syndrome; lack of role models
Financial Aid Literacy	FAFSA navigation, emergency funds, scholarship identification	Financial Aid Counsellors, Basic Needs Officers	Reduces financial attrition; financial stress is the leading barrier to completion [8]	Financial knowledge gap; emergency crisis vulnerability
Mental Health & Wellness	Counselling access, stress management, crisis intervention	Counselling Centre Staff, Case Managers	54% of at-risk students cite emotional stress as primary threat to enrolment [10]	Mental health inequity; underutilization of counselling services
Career Services Integration	Internship access, networking, professional identity development	Career Counsellors, Alumni Relations Staff	First-gen students 1.9x less likely to enrol in professional doctoral programs without intervention [11]	Professional capital deficit; network poverty

Note. Evidence ratings draw on studies cited as references [1-15]. Effectiveness data from EAB (2024) [8], Georgia State University GPS system [9], Gallup-Lumina (2024) [10], and Scholars Strategy Network (2025) [2].

6 STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO EQUITY-FOCUSED STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTICE

6.1 Resource Scarcity and Caseload Constraints

The most consistent structural barrier to effective student affairs work with first-generation populations is inadequate resourcing. Proactive advising, mentorship facilitation, and basic needs case management are labor-intensive practices that require sustained professional attention. Yet student affairs divisions at research universities are frequently the first target of budget reductions, and caseload ratios that might be manageable at a small liberal arts college become unworkable in institutions enrolling tens of thousands of students. The disconnect between institutional commitments

to equity in strategic plans and the resource allocations that would be required to make good on those commitments is a persistent feature of the higher education landscape that practitioners navigate daily.

The 2025 First Gen Forward national practitioner survey, drawing on responses from 571 professionals at 411 institutions across 47 states, found that student affairs staff working with first-generation populations were experiencing significant resource pressures amid a broader turbulent institutional environment [7]. Many practitioners reported managing programs for first-generation students while also absorbing broader portfolio responsibilities, a pattern that produces burnout and turnover in exactly the roles most critical to first-generation student continuity. High turnover in student affairs staff is particularly damaging for first-generation students because their relationships with specific professionals are often among the most important belonging anchors they have on campus.

6.2 Institutional Siloing and Integration Failures

First-generation student success is not producible by any single student affairs office operating in isolation. It requires coordination between academic affairs and student affairs, between financial aid and counseling, between residential life and career services. Yet research universities, by virtue of their size and complexity, tend toward siloed operations in which different offices maintain separate data systems, separate caseloads, and sometimes competing institutional incentives. A student in academic difficulty who is also in financial crisis and experiencing mental health challenges is not three separate problems to be addressed sequentially by three separate offices; she is one person whose circumstances interact and whose needs require a coordinated institutional response.

The case management model, in which a single student affairs professional serves as an integrating navigator across multiple service domains for a defined caseload of first-generation students, has demonstrated effectiveness in addressing this siloing problem.

However, it requires both investment in the coordinating role and the institutional infrastructure, shared data systems, interoperability protocols, and culture of collaboration, that allows a navigator to actually navigate. Institutions that invest in case managers without investing in the systems they need to do their work produce frustrated professionals and disappointed students.

6.3 The Policy Environment and Definitional Instability

The current policy environment poses particular challenges for first-generation programming. The ongoing contraction of federal TRIO funding, the rollback of DEI offices and programs at institutions responding to political and legislative pressure, and the legal uncertainty around race-conscious programming following the Supreme Court's 2023 admissions decisions all create an environment in which the institutional infrastructure that supports first-generation work is under pressure. First-generation status, as a category grounded in parental educational attainment rather than race or ethnicity, has some legal durability that race-conscious programming lacks. But in practice, the administrative and political headwinds affecting equity-focused work in higher education are rarely category-specific; they create a climate in which student affairs professionals doing equity work must navigate institutional risk aversion as well as student need.

Wildhagen (2026), in a provocative analysis published in a peer-reviewed sociology of education journal, raises the additional question of whether the first-generation category itself has become a vehicle for evading more direct reckoning with social class in American higher education [5]. The critique is theoretically pointed: by focusing institutional attention on first-generation status as a category, institutions may be addressing a symptom of class inequality while leaving the underlying structural dynamics untouched. Student affairs professionals who work most closely with these students are often acutely aware of this tension even when institutional frameworks do not name it.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

The evidence reviewed in this article supports a set of concrete recommendations for institutional leaders, student affairs practitioners, and policy makers committed to closing equity gaps for first-generation students at research universities. These recommendations move beyond isolated or one-off programming toward the structural, resourcing, and accountability commitments that the evidence shows are necessary for durable impact. They are presented below as five priorities, each building directly on the domains and structural barriers discussed in the preceding sections.

First, institutions should move from opt-in to opt-out models of first-generation support. The research consistently shows that first-generation students do not proactively seek help at the rates at which they need it. Programs that require self-identification and voluntary enrollment systematically underserve the population they are designed to reach. Proactive identification at the point of enrollment, automatic placement into advising cohorts, and mandatory first-semester check-ins should be baseline practice, not exceptional programming.

Second, student affairs divisions need to be resourced at a level commensurate with the equity commitments institutions have made in their strategic plans. This means real investment in advising ratios, case management capacity, counseling center staffing, and the technology infrastructure that makes early alert systems actually work. Equity aspirations without resource commitments are institutional theater. Institutions that are serious about closing equity gaps must treat this investment as a budgetary priority rather than an aspirational line in a strategic plan.

Third, coordination across institutional silos must be structurally mandated rather than left to professional goodwill. Data sharing agreements, joint appointments, and integrated case management protocols are administrative decisions that require leadership investment. The research evidence on what works for first-generation students consistently points to integrated, whole-student approaches; institutions that maintain fragmented service architectures are choosing, structurally, to underserve this population.

Fourth, student affairs professionals working with first-generation populations need ongoing professional development grounded in the scholarship of equity, cultural responsiveness, and intersectionality. The ACPA and NASPA competency revision process of 2025 provides a useful framework, but professional development must be resourced and treated as essential work, not an add-on to already overloaded roles [13].

Fifth, institutions must invest in evaluation and accountability. Post-program assessments, disaggregated outcome data, and honest reporting on whether equity gaps are actually closing are necessary conditions for learning and improvement. Institutions that measure inputs rather than outcomes, counting programs rather than tracking whether students graduate, will not know whether their equity work is working.

8 CONCLUSION

First-generation students arrive at research universities as proof that the aspiration of higher education as a vehicle of social mobility is not entirely illusory. They have beaten statistical odds, navigated systems without guides, and presented themselves to institutions that, for most of their history, were not designed with them in mind. What happens next is an institutional choice. Whether that choice results in sustained support or in gaps that persist unaddressed depends far less on the students themselves than on the institutions they have entered.

Student affairs professionals stand at the most consequential point in that choice. They are the advisors who initiate contact before a student falls too far behind, the mentorship coordinators who build relationships that outlast any single program cycle, the financial aid counselors who know about the emergency fund that the student did not know to ask for, and the residential life staff who notice when someone has gone quiet. They are, in the most practical sense, the difference between a first-generation student who graduates and one who does not.

The evidence reviewed in this article is unambiguous: well-designed, adequately resourced, and institutionally integrated student affairs practice measurably closes equity gaps for first-generation students. What the evidence also makes clear is that the conditions required for that practice to function are not guaranteed, and in the current environment are under active pressure. Closing equity gaps for first-generation students is not a problem that can be solved by individual professional excellence operating against inadequate systems. It requires institutions to make, and keep, structural commitments. The students have already done their part.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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