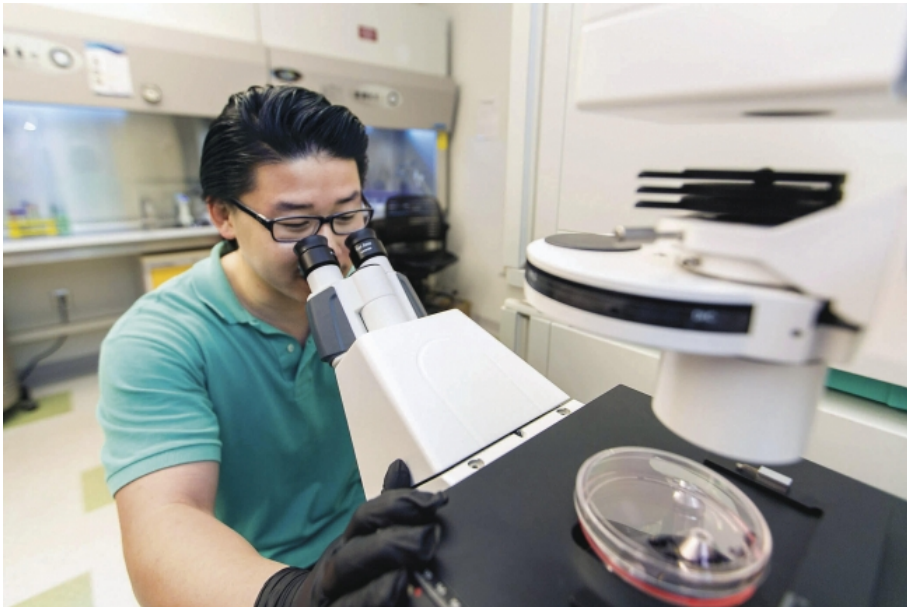


## DIVERSITY IN ACADEME

# The Challenge of the First-Generation Student

Colleges amp up efforts to retain them, but hurdles remain



Anh Viet

Tae-Hyun Sakong migrated from South Korea at age 7 and today majors in neuroscience at Trinity U. His life is a world apart from that of his parents, neither of whom attended college. “I would kill to be able to explain to them what I do,” he says.

Korean at a grade-school level.

By Katherine Mangan | MAY 18, 2015

**T**ae-Hyun Sakong would love to be able to tell his parents why he decided to major in neuroscience, and what it was like to help his biology professor probe a genetic risk factor for Alzheimer’s disease.

The Trinity University undergraduate also wishes he could tell them about the anxiety and depression that overwhelm him when he compares himself with classmates who attended elite prep schools and spend spring breaks in Cancun. But his parents, who never went to college, speak little English, and he speaks his native

"I would kill to be able to explain to them what I do," he says.

Michael Soto, an associate professor of English at Trinity, understands. A first-generation college student himself, he grew up in Brownsville, Tex., on the border with Mexico. His parents couldn't understand why he decided to pursue a doctorate in English after graduating from Stanford.

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### Diversity in Academe: First-Generation Students

Check out the rest of our special report on efforts to help this growing group of students succeed.

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"It was probably four years into graduate school that my mom finally stopped asking me when I was going to go to law school," he says.

The support Mr. Soto received as an undergraduate prompted him to become a champion for first-generation students, who now represent about 15 percent of Trinity's undergraduate population.

Mr. Sakong, 22, says that if it weren't for professors like Mr. Soto and James Roberts, his biology professor and adviser, he would have dropped out long ago.

As colleges seek to diversify their student bodies and patch up their leaky pipelines for disadvantaged students, many are expanding efforts to connect students who are the first in their families to attend college with supportive classmates, advisers, and professors. Some colleges have formal, longstanding programs in place, while others offer scholarships or informal support groups. But despite the fact that a growing number

of first-generation college students are arriving on their doorsteps, many other colleges are doing little to meet their needs, either because they have trouble identifying such students or because their budgets are strained.

The challenges these students face are daunting. First-generation students tend to work longer hours at their jobs, are less likely to live on campus, and are more likely to have parents who would struggle to complete financial-aid forms. They're also more likely to arrive academically unprepared for the rigors of college and to require remediation before they can start earning college credit.

Many feel the tug of family responsibilities, rushing home after class to take care of younger siblings or missing classes to care for an ailing grandparent.

The disparity in household income is striking: Median family income at two- and four-year institutions for freshmen whose parents didn't attend college was \$37,565 last year, compared with \$99,635 for those whose parents did. *The New York Times* calculated those figures using data from the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Having lived so close to the margins, "first-generation students tend to be risk-averse," says Thomas G. Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.

"Many of them continue being breadwinners for their families when they go off to college."

**C**learly, these students need extra support to stay enrolled, and colleges have a strong interest in identifying their most vulnerable groups to keep them from dropping out. But identifying first-generation students isn't as easy as it sounds.

Colleges usually have to rely on self-reporting, since the Census Bureau no longer tracks parents' education attainment. The Common Application, like many colleges' own applications, asks students about the highest level of education their parents achieved. More than 28 percent of the 800,000 students who used the Common Application last year reported that they were first-generation students. They represent a diverse swath of society. At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where about one in five undergraduates is a first-generation student, about 90 percent are white, many from small towns and farms.

Then there's the whole issue of whom to include. Some colleges use the first-generation designation when neither of the student's parents attended college. Others define it more narrowly to mean that neither parent graduated from college, or from a four-year college in the United States. That definition, used for eligibility in some federal-aid programs, would consider the daughter of two community-college graduates a first-generation college student.

However you define them, first-generation students represent a significant share of the prospective students that colleges, eager to trumpet their track records in diversifying their enrollments, are trying to recruit.

Of students who entered four-year colleges as freshmen last year, more than 45 percent reported that their fathers had no college degree of any kind, and 42 percent said their mothers lacked degrees, a survey found. About a quarter of their parents had no postsecondary education, according to the survey by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute.

The Council of Independent Colleges concluded in a report released earlier this year that small and midsize colleges, with their small classes, involved faculty members, and extracurricular activities, do the best job retaining low-income and first-generation students. The students are more likely to finish their bachelor's

degrees in four years at a smaller private college than they are in six years at a public nondoctoral university, the researchers found.

Despite the higher sticker prices at small private colleges, first-generation students who attend them pay on average only \$1,000 more per year than do similar students at public research universities, mostly because of more generous scholarships, the report found.

Smith College is a case in point. Seventeen percent of its undergraduate students have parents who didn't graduate from college, and it is among the institutions that offer generous perks to qualified first-generation students. Last month, at a campus event for newly accepted students, faculty and staff members who were themselves the first in their families to attend college wore T-shirts proclaiming their first-generation status.

Among them was the college's president, Kathleen McCartney.

Smith College

Kathleen McCartney (right), president of Smith College, and Debra Shaver, dean of admission, were themselves the first members of their families to attend college.



"I want them to know that I was once a first-generation college student and that they should set their aspirations as high as they want to," she says. While first-generation students tend to feel pressure to emerge from college with a clear career path, "I want them to know that if they want to major in philosophy, they should major in philosophy," she says. She tells students that employers value strong liberal-arts backgrounds.

**W**hen elite institutions like Smith, Amherst College, or Harvard University enroll significant numbers of first-generation students, their stories are often splashed across the news. But regional state universities and community colleges have been identifying and supporting these students for decades, through federal TRIO programs, a collection of outreach and student-services efforts geared toward low-income students.

"We have seen this trend of elite colleges and universities that are well endowed actively and aggressively recruiting low-income, first-generation students," says James T. Minor, deputy assistant secretary for higher-education programs at the U.S. Department of Education.

"They tend to be high-achieving students, and we think that's wonderful," he adds. "But that, unfortunately, is not the majority of students from that demographic." He believes the overwhelming majority of first-generation students attend community colleges and open-access four-year public colleges, many of which, he says, have benefited from 50 years of TRIO-funded programs.

Some examples include a "talent search" program that allows colleges to offer intensive preparation for students at underserved schools and the McNair Scholars Program, which encourages first-generation and other underrepresented college students like Trinity's Mr. Sakong to pursue doctoral study.

California State University-Dominguez Hills is a largely minority campus in Los Angeles's South Bay where more than 60 percent of freshmen are the first in their immediate families to attend college. The university offers a TRIO-funded support program for first-generation and low-income students that includes academic coaching, tutoring, peer mentoring, financial-literacy training, and graduate-school preparation.

"Everyone always asks, Is the student ready for college? But we also ask, Is the university ready for the student?" says William Franklin, interim vice president of enrollment management and student affairs. He was a first-generation student himself who graduated from the University of Southern California after being recruited by USC and a TRIO program called Upward Bound.

"We need to ensure that we work closely with parents," he said, "and that first-generation students know how to navigate this place when they may not have a parent or sibling to talk to about financial aid, housing, or adding and dropping classes."

A number of public universities have designated scholarships for first-generation students, but many are deterred by the extra cost of intensive advising and financial support the students typically require.

"The budget pressures that all higher education is under have four-year state institutions, particularly flagships, looking more carefully at the revenue potential of those they enroll," says Mr. Mortenson of the Pell Institute. According to that metric, foreign and out-of-state students who pay full freight are the most valuable, while, he says, "the lowest priority are the lowest-income students who require an institutional discount."



Those students, though, make up a sizable chunk of the total prospective student population, and many colleges have concluded that they're worth investing in.

To help students who are most likely to fall through the cracks, a nonprofit group called the College Advising Corps this year placed about 450 recent college graduates of its 23 partner colleges into more than 500 underserved high schools in 14 states. The new graduates serve as full-time college advisers, supplementing the work of professional college advisers who, on average, are responsible for 450 students (and up to 1,000 or more in states like California), according to Nicole Hurd, founder and chief executive of the advising group.

About 70 percent of the corps' young advisers are from underrepresented minority groups, and more than half have parents who never graduated from college.

An analysis of the program by Stanford University found that high-school seniors who met with an adviser were 30 percent more likely to apply to college, 24 percent more likely to be accepted by at least one, and 26 percent more likely to submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or Fafsa.

And despite their disadvantaged economic status, three quarters of the students who enrolled in college persisted through the second year — about the same as the national average.

A spokesman for the advising group said it doesn't yet have comparative graduation rates, but it hopes to start tracking them soon.

One of those advisers, Erica R. Elder, returned to her high school in Bassett, Va., to provide the kind of boost that helped get her into the University of Virginia.

The challenges she has faced as an adviser remind her of her own struggles while applying to college.

She has encountered students who didn't see college as a realistic option, and who were ready to give up with any minor setback in the admissions process. Parents who were ashamed about their meager earnings and ignorance about college wouldn't look her in the eye during financial-aid nights.

But when acceptances started rolling in for students she has advised, she would arrive at school at 8 a.m. to find two or three students ready to greet her. "When they come bursting into my office," she says, "it's the best feeling in the world."

*This article is part of:*

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