

Some ways to support First Gen, Low Income students at Boston College

General Info and Some Campus Resources

Approx 200-230 First Gen students admitted to BC each year. There are approximately 1000 first gen students at BC right now and about 65% are low income.

Existing Support Programs:

Learning to Learn (LTL) – Serves students who are first gen and low income with advising, programing, limited funding, short term computer loan.

More in depth specifics on Learning to Learn – Staff provide monthly advising for 200+ students. The BCF1RST summer acclimation prepares students for their first year. Courses offered include the Applications of Learning Theory Course, Topic Seminar and Capstone course for first gen students. The Living Learning Community (LLC) floor provides first gen students the opportunity to meet one another and attend programing. The safe spaces for students to discuss their struggles include weekly meetings of DIOP and Sisters Let’s Talk. Other student-run groups include First Gen Club and First Gen Advisory Counsel. The Ronald B. McNair program prepares students for graduate study. As part of the program, students are paired with faculty mentor for guidance and research, workshops in writing personal statements, etc. They also visit grad school campuses and present their research at a symposium.

Other programs at BC serving many first gen, underrepresented and low-income students (with apologies for my brevity):

The Bowman AHANA Intercultural Center (BAIC) Serves AHANA students with summer pre-first year program Options Through Education (OTE), summer course funding, advising, and programming.

The Montserrat Coalition assists low income students with funding for books, fees, some travel costs and other necessities. Students entering BC know they are Montserrat students when they arrive on campus. Programming includes Dinner Club, food pantry, book loans.

First gen student experience:

- First gen students have all of the worries of other BC students – many more magnified, plus some gaps of understanding, more people dependent on them and less money.
- First gen students experience the imposter syndrome even more keenly, they may have attended underfunded schools and are even more shocked at the academic expectations.

- Experiencing the jarring difference in what others can afford to spend at school on books or on Ubers to Boston for dinner with friends or on various breaks, or how to behave in formal settings. Many of our students visit the Career Center's **closet** to get clothes to wear for job interviews. They attend **arranged etiquette dinners to understand how to approach events in terms of dress, rules, etc.**

How to help First Gen/Low Income Students – “normalize the struggles”

- These students often have to tell their stories multiple times to individuals and offices on campus around issues such as financial aid, struggles with computers, inability to afford transportation home, etc. Share your struggles in school with your students, whatever they were/are.
- First gens often can't afford books – donate books to Montserrat lending library, put books on reserve, tell class about scanning at library, ebooks, etc. Talk openly about options in class, including inviting students to talk to you if they can't afford books – maybe you have a desk copy.
- Build Interdependent learning into the course, whether with other students or student/teacher meetings. Allow students to share their lives in some form – maybe an opening short essay allowing them to share their strengths and worries.
- Start support early, and explain thoroughly, often support is offered too late. Put resources on your syllabus and talk about supports on campus during the first weeks of class (not necessarily the first day).
- Don't assume all students go away for Spring Break or to exotic locales during vacation time.
- Create community – Know which students have attended summer preBC programs or live in LLCs. First Gen celebrations happen all year and we just finished with First Gen Week here on campus (invite your students to announce events in class and then attend an event if appropriate).
- Tell of your own academic struggles, explain office hours on your syllabus, explain academic resources, address the myth of the perfect BC student who never struggles and never asks for help.

- Recognize the **extra pressure** first gens feel to do well (hard to imagine at BC, but they often carry their families in their hearts and minds). They doing well for the siblings who will follow them and may be sending money home.
- Financial literacy training especially important for first gen low income students. Understanding financial aid – **They probably filled out the FAFSA by themselves. Encourage them to visit their financial aid officer if they talk about this issue with you.**
- First gen students at BC are often students of color, but not always. Often white students aren't seen as possibly first-gen students.

Possible resources for more information:

- Anthony Jack from Harvard wrote *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students* - the contrast between poor students who managed to get scholarships to private high schools and learn some of the unspoken rules and expectations of college such as approaching teachers in office hours as the norm vs poor first gen students who don't even know what office hours are. However, often colleges bring first gen students to their campus and don't support them.
- The book *Limbo: Blue Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams* by Alfred Lubrano explores the difficulties of low income/first gen students leaving home to enter college – Unrealistic expectations of family members, the strain of being needed at home while away at school and the guilt of that distance, losing a sense of who you really are when you don't fit in at home or at school.

Two recent huge struggles for first gens in 2020/21:

Covid (and working from home)

Starting in Spring 2020 students were sent home, but what about those who couldn't go home because of safety issues? Or couldn't afford to travel home on short notice? Or had Wifi issues at home or too many relatives at home all needing Wifi or no privacy for Zoom meetings

MLE Floor attacks last year

Repeated racial attacks on this floor in dorm last year. Many of the students who choose the MLE floor are also first gen, they are often attracted to the multicultural floor as a "safe space."