

Designing for Impact: Lessons Learned from a Near-Peer Mentoring Model for First-Generation Students

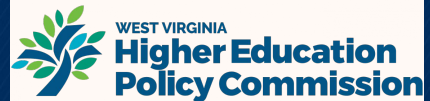
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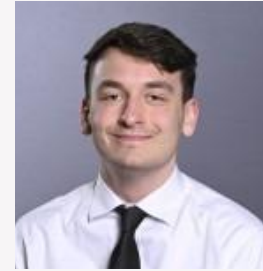
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Acknowledgements

- We thank the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission and the WV Community & Technical College System for providing funding for the First-Generation Student Success Grant at WVU.
- We thank the many WVU first-generation students who provided or received mentoring and who gave feedback to improve the mentoring program.
- We thank the WVU faculty and staff who assisted us with this work. Big shout out to our partner in Financial Aid, Brian Bollinger, who works tirelessly to make college affordable and attainable for students.



Introduction

- As first-generation students, we are aware of and have lived experiences of collegiate challenges – affordability, imposter syndrome, lack of familial role models, navigating pitfalls.
- First-generation/underrepresented students at large universities struggle to receive individualized support, in STEM and beyond.
- Lack of support = decreased sense of belonging.

Is there a way to bridge this support gap as informed by first-gen students and faculty who have been successful?



WVU Already Offers so Much!

- FirstGen Office, Webpage, Signage, Door Cards, student newsletter etc.
- Institution-wide definition of FirstGen and opportunities to self-identify as a student, faculty, or staff.
- FirstGen events & FirstGen Mountaineers student club
- Free campus-wide tutoring, 500+ student clubs, WVU Up All Night, Purpose Center
- Discipline-specific advisors, Office of Undergraduate Research, access to research opportunities (RAP, SURE, 497 courses), study abroad, etc.

It can be overwhelming for first-generation students to choose among the many options which can lead to decision paralysis.

How do we support them in making informed decisions?

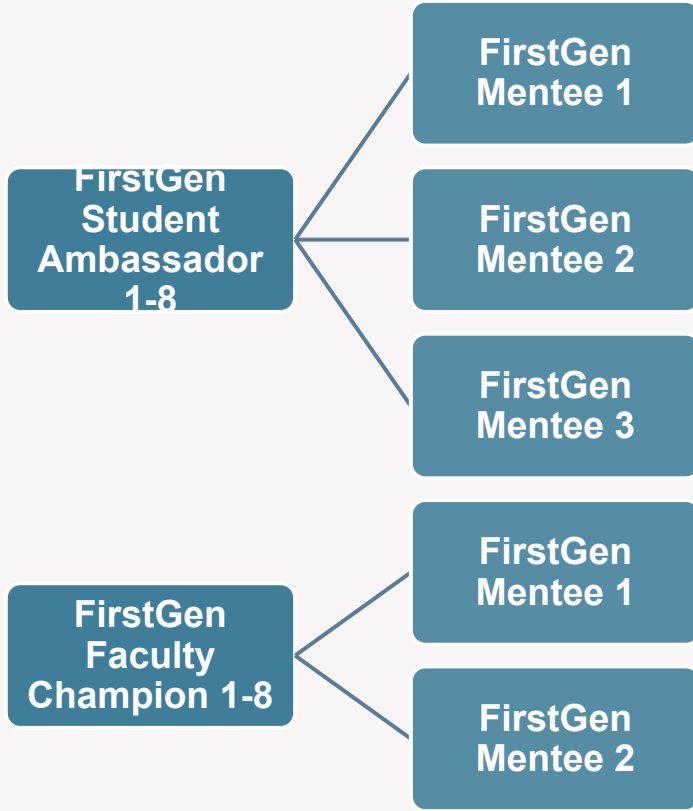


To Bridge the Gap.....

- Establish a near-peer mentoring program through the creation of ***FirstGen Student Ambassadors (and Faculty Champions) who.....***
 - Provide role models
 - Frequent communication
 - Biweekly touchpoint emails
 - Event information (academic and non-academic)
 - In-person lunch meetings

How did we “create” this program from scratch?





Mentoring Program Logistics

- 8 FirstGen Student Ambassadors mentored 3 students each □ 24 first gen students per semester
- 8 FirstGen Faculty Champions mentored 2 students each □ 16 first gen students per semester
- 40 FirstGen students mentored in Fall 2025 and 40 new students mentored in Spring 2026



Mentoring Program Logistics

What barriers did you perceive during your first several years of college that you feel were directly or peripherally related to your status as a first-generation college student?

Ambassador Selection

- Successful 3rd and 4th year FirstGen students applied for Ambassador position.
- Application included questions on FirstGen status, perceived barriers to college, leadership, and mentorship experiences.
- Project team: Reviewed applications and conducted online interviews.
- One evening of in-person training was provided.

Champion Selection

- FirstGen faculty were invited to apply.
- Application included questions on FirstGen status, perceived barriers to college, reasons for wanting to provide mentoring to FirstGen students.



Mentoring Program Logistics

Ambassador expectations

- attend once per semester training
- near-peer mentoring of three 1st/2nd year FirstGen students each semester
- attend/assist with one FirstGen focused event each semester
- attend the end of year banquet to celebrate FirstGen and be recognized as a FirstGen Student

Ambassador Near-peer mentoring included

- meet with each mentee for lunch twice per semester: 1-on-1 & group
- communicate with mentees via email biweekly/as needed to answer questions
- maintain a journal documenting anonymized comments from mentees to inform ongoing interventions and structural barriers in academia.

Received -

- \$400 per semester
- Free lunches
- Leadership & mentorship experience



Mentoring Program Logistics

Why do you wish to have mentor? What do you expect to get out of or need from this mentoring experience?

Mentee Selection

- 1st and 2nd year FirstGen students applied to be matched with a FirstGen mentor.
- Application included questions on FirstGen status and why are interested in being mentored.
- Project team: reviewed applications and selected mentees.
- Mentees were assigned to mentors with same, similar, or aligned major.

Anecdotal lesson learned □ *The closer, more aligned the mentee and mentor's majors, the more positive the experience for both!! (Meeting logistics, interests, etc.)*



Mentoring Program Logistics

FirstGen Mentees

- Communicate with the mentor via email biweekly
- Meet with the mentor twice per semester
 - 1-on-1 meeting (3-4 weeks in)
 - Group meeting (8-9 weeks in)
- attend the end of year banquet to celebrate FirstGen

Received -

- Free mentoring
- Free lunch

Anecdotal lesson learned □ *1st and 2nd year students are not as “excited” by free lunch as str 3rd and 4th year students and faculty/staff. Led to mentoring via free tutoring in our NSF S-STEM proposal submission.*



Biweekly Communication

- Initiated from mentors to mentees
- Template provided biweekly with personalization encouraged
- Mentors sent by email or by other means depending on mentees' preferences

Did you know WVU offers free tutoring resources? You can explore options at tutoring.wvu.edu/. Seeking help is a strength—you don't have to do everything on your own.

The REACH Lounge (3rd Floor, Student Services Center, next to the Lair) is also a great space to study and connect. It offers quiet study areas, printing and technology access, peer assistants and success coaches, free snacks, and even a therapy dog, Ruby.

Have you attended your instructors' office hours? These are designed for you—whether you have questions, want feedback, or are looking to build connections and learn about opportunities. If you're unsure how to prepare, this [short PowerPoint](#) can help.

(Consider briefly highlighting tutoring resources most relevant to your major and sharing a short personal example if helpful.)



Meet a Few of Our First-Generation Student Ambassadors



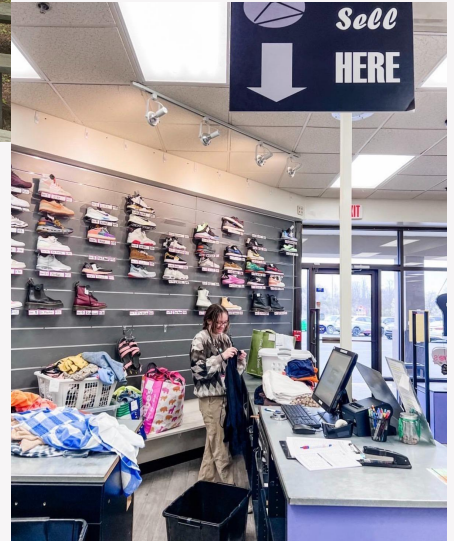
Taylor Maddocks: FirstGen Student

- I am from Preston County, WV.
- I am a senior double major in Criminology & Social Work, and I am currently applying to law schools.
- I am active in WVU Collegiate 4-H and the WVU Undergraduate Social Work Organization.
 - Social Media Manager for 4-H
 - Secretary/Volunteer Coordinator for USWO
- I am a FirstGen Student Ambassador.
- I am also completing my social work field placement at the WVU LGBTQ+ Center.



Taylor's College Experiences

- I work part-time in retail in addition to my internship and coursework.
- I do a lot of volunteer work with my student organizations, namely volunteering at the Rosenbaum House and throughout the Morgantown area.
- My main focus currently is on law and child welfare. I have applied to four law schools, with my top choices being Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, OH and the University of Pittsburgh in Pittsburgh, PA.



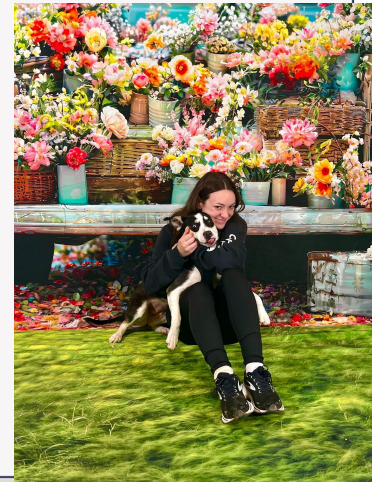
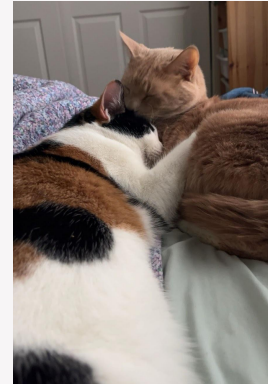
Regan Cassady: FirstGen Student

- I am from Martinsburg, West Virginia.
- I am a senior majoring in Public Relations, and I am in the 4+1 program for my Masters in Integrated Marketing Communications.
- I am in a professional service sorority on campus, and I was an Honors College peer mentor and teaching assistant for three semesters.
- I am a FirstGen Student Ambassador.



Regan's College Experiences

- I have an on-campus job with the WV Brownfields Assistance Center. I also have two cats with me in Morgantown!
- I am passionate about my first-gen status and love to help others find their way in a world that isn't designed for them.
- I participate in several activities and clubs on campus including the Omega Phi Alpha service sorority, PRSSA, and I recently traveled to Europe with WVU Abroad!



Tyler Seifert: FirstGen Student

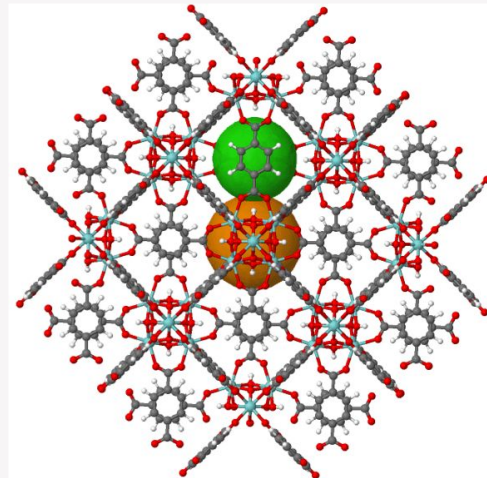
- I am from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.
- I am a senior in Physics and Chemistry at WVU.
- I plan on getting a PhD in Chemistry at Temple University to pursue a career in being a research professor.
- I do research in Physical Chemistry with Dr. Gullion.
- I am a First2 Student Director and have engaged in PDSA work involving (i) documenting and improving chemistry tutoring and (ii) STEM outreach to WV high school students.
- In Spring 2026, I mentored two first-gen students through the Ambassador program.



Tyler's College Experiences



- I work in Dr. Gullion's lab and am working on analyzing the structure of UiO-66 and its interactions with chemical warfare agents.
- I am also investigating the molecular structure of chitin in tobacco hornworms.
- I am the president of the American Chemical Society at WVU where we perform community service and tutor our fellow peers.



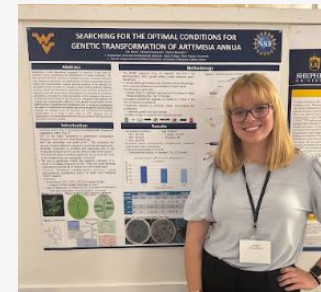
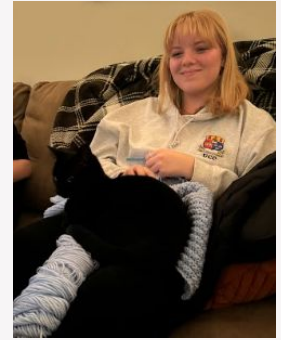
Ella Moats: Friend of FirstGen

- I am from Morgantown, WV.
- I am a senior majoring in Biology and Psychology
- I am starting a PhD in Animal Sciences at Washington State University next year.
- I am a First2 Student Director and have engaged in PDSA work involving documenting and analyzing how attendance at PDSA-studied events affects persistence.
- In Spring 2026, I mentored two first-gen students through the Ambassador program.



Ella's College Experiences

- I have been doing research for the past 5 years and loved every second of it! I have gotten to work with plants, bacteria, and proteins in exciting research.
- I volunteer as an Eberly college ambassador, work in labs on campus, and occasionally work weddings!
- I participate in the First2 Network Club and enjoy crocheting, line dancing, reading, working out, and baking!



FirstGen Ambassador Experiences

From the perspective of Tyler and Ella.....

What Did We Learn?

Data Collection

- FirstGen Student Ambassadors ($N=60$ entries) and Faculty Champions ($N=44$ entries) maintained *journals* documenting anonymized comments from mentees.
- FirstGen Student Ambassadors were asked to complete a *post-survey* ($N=4$)
- FirstGen Student Mentees were also asked to complete a *post-survey* ($N=8$). Survey included collegiate belonging.

What concerns, challenges, or barriers did your mentees share? (Include academic, social, and financial.)

What strategies did you use to improve your mentees' college experiences this semester?

What is the most beneficial change/growth you identify in yourself as a result of the mentoring you received.

Results: Mentee Retrospective Pre/Post Responses

- Mentees ($N=8$) reported higher post-survey ratings on all three measures of campus inclusion: ***feeling respected, comfortable,*** and a ***sense of belonging.***
- Feeling respected increased from 3.88 to 4.25, while both comfort and belonging increased from 3.63 to 4.63.
- All improvements were statistically significant ($p < .05$) , suggesting meaningful positive change following the mentoring experience.



Results: Mentee Reported Personal Growth

- Core personal change
 - Greater willingness to ask for help.
 - More confidence using tutoring and office hours.
 - Stronger help-seeking from peers, mentors, and campus resources.
- Additional growth areas
 - Improved communication with new people and older students.
 - Better time management while balancing school and work.
 - Greater focus on post-graduation planning and career preparation.

Thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses.



Results: Student Ambassadors Reported Growth of Mentees

- Many Ambassadors did not feel they could answer this question.
- Ambassadors who did answer observed growth in ***social adjustment***, including becoming more comfortable at WVU, forming friendships, and coming out of their shells.
- They also noted ***practical growth***, such as securing jobs, planning for the future, changing academic paths, and becoming more comfortable asking for help.

Thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses and reflections from journals.



Results: Faculty Champions Reported Growth of Mentees

- Mentors observed substantial growth for many mentees, especially in ***confidence about academic and career paths*** and ***balancing future careers with personal interests***.
- Concrete examples include mentees ***moving from confusion to clear career plans, from feeling defeated in a difficult course to feeling hopeful*** as performance improved, and from ***isolation to collaborating*** on problem-solving and even starting a student organization.
- Mentors also recognized that growth was not uniform; some mentees appeared already highly proactive or had limited contact, so observable change depended on students' starting points and the frequency and depth of mentoring interactions.

Thematic analysis of journal reflections.



Results: Key Findings from Ambassador Mentoring

- Near-peer mentoring ***fostered consistent, relationship-based contact*** between Ambassadors and most mentees, using in-person meetings, email, and text to surface needs and connect students with campus resources.
- ***Mentees reported substantial personal growth*** (average self-rated gain of **67%**), especially in willingness to seek help, communication and time-management skills, and planning for post-graduation, and mentors observed that many mentees became more socially established and confident over time.
- Quantitative survey data showed ***statistically significant increases in feeling respected, comfortable, and a sense of belonging*** in the university community after mentoring, aligning with broader evidence that peer mentoring supports first-generation students' belonging and adjustment to college.

Thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses and reflections from journals.



Results: Key Findings from Faculty Champion Mentoring

- Faculty Champions ***increased students' sense of belonging*** through regular, personalized contact by email and in-person meetings.
- Mentors ***helped students feel seen*** and supported by listening to concerns, validating experiences, and treating them as whole people.
- Faculty ***reduced anxiety*** by clarifying academic processes, normalizing help-seeking, and connecting students to resources.
- Small relational actions, such as check-ins, lunches, encouragement, and peer connection, ***helped students feel more connected*** to campus.

Super! But we cannot help FirstGen students if they don't enter college.

Thematic analysis of journal reflections.



A little about our FirstGen Drive In High School Visits to increase awareness and advocacy among educators....

- Included a FirstGen informational campaign parallel with college recruitment (characteristics of FirstGen students, collegiate success, institutional supports, how to assist, financial concerns)
- FirstGen student panelists discussed their lived experiences
- Proposed 4 West Virginia regional, in-person site visits targeting interactions with a minimum of 60 educators (\$100 gift card/educator)
- In reality: One in-person visit ($N=4$), and two virtual visits ($N=13$).

Anecdotal lessons learned □ *Virtual visit just as good as in-person.*

Financial aid discussion and presentation is critical and should be the first presentation!



Additional Team Member: Brian Bollinger, Student Financial Aid Coordinator, WVU HUB

“Brian may be the most important team member we didn’t realize we needed. His work focuses on helping students afford college, recognizing that without access, all the support we offer afterward is meaningless. Brian’s dedication to making college attainable truly changes students’ lives.”



Results: Drive In Visit Post Survey

PROMPT	Average BEFORE	Average AFTER	p-value
I understood the unique challenges first-generation students face in succeeding in college.	3.71	4.71	<.01
I felt confident identifying and supporting the needs of first-generation students in my school.	3.18	4.35	<.01
I had empathy for the experiences of first-generation students navigating academic and financial barriers.	4.35	5.00	<.05
I understood the types of institutional support that exist for first-generation college students.	2.53	4.65	<.01
I could describe strategies to help first-generation students prepare for and transition to college.	2.94	4.47	<.01
I felt motivated to actively encourage and mentor first-generation students in pursuing higher education.	4.00	4.94	<.01
I believed my school was equipped to better support first-generation students.	3.35	4.06	<.01



Results: Key Findings from Drive In Visits

- Drive-In Site Visits produced statistically significant gains across all measured areas of educator support for first-generation students.
- Participants reported ***higher knowledge of first-generation student challenges, stronger empathy, and greater confidence in identifying needs and offering support.***
- The largest gains were in ***awareness of institutional supports*** (2.53 to 4.65) and ability to describe effective college transition strategies (2.94 to 4.47).
- Educators also ***reported stronger motivation to mentor first-generation students*** and greater confidence that their schools can better support them.
- ***Reflections show plans for concrete follow-up actions***, including identifying first-generation students earlier, increasing college-planning meetings, expanding FAFSA support, and sharing new resources with colleagues.



Conclusions

- For FirstGen students who are disconnected and have not found their collegiate community, near-peer mentors are helpful.
- Early engagement with FirstGen students is important.
 - Connect with them during Welcome Week
 - Expand outreach during first-semester on campus as FTF or FTT
- Focus on tutoring as a way to connect mentees instead of lunch meetings.
 - Use virtual resources such as Zoom when needed
- Financial aid discussions with teachers and parents are critical!

All our FirstGen collegiate support has no effect if FirstGen students perceive college as not affordable and never attend.





Let's Go!TM