

# Cornell College

W H I T E P A P E R S E R I E S

## **CORNELL COLLEGE'S COMMITMENT TO SERVING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS**

A Presidential White Paper  
From Sue Astley, Professor of Psychology;  
Joe Dieker, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the College;  
and Jonathan Brand, President

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*Note to readers: For this White Paper I've taken a more academic approach, collaborating with Professor Sue Astley and Dean of the College Joe Dieker to share the research behind Cornell College's new Rise Up Program serving first-generation students. I welcome any comments or observations you might have on this topic. You can always reach me at 319-895-4324 or jbrand@cornellcollege.edu.*

Diego Verdugo '12 is an emblem of how Cornell College changes lives—or more specifically, how Cornell College offers students the opportunities and environment so that they gain the confidence and skills to transform their own lives. After all, the research suggests that first-generation students such as Diego, who is from the small border town of Douglas, Arizona, and is the son of manual laborers with elementary school educations, will struggle to complete, let alone even undertake, a college education. However, thanks to Diego's abilities and persistence, and Cornell College, his experience was a complete success.

At Cornell College, it starts with an unjaded and supportive environment, undergirding infinite opportunities, in which students feel comfortable getting engaged and then get engaged. That was definitely the case for Diego who availed himself of every opportunity he could find. Beyond his degree in economics and business, Diego was able to complete a second major in Spanish. Thanks to the freedom of our One Course curriculum, Diego spent two months in Montevideo, Uruguay (his first time abroad), interning for the Southern Cone Group investment and advisory firm—an opportunity funded by Cornell's Berry Center for Economics, Business, and Public Policy. There he developed two articles introducing farmers to hedging price risk related to Uruguayan farmland development. In addition, one of his classes took a weeklong trip to Chicago to meet with professionals at the Board of Trade, Bank of America, and the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, as well as with influential Cornell alumni, such as Berry Center founder Jim McWethy '65. Again, such opportunities are only possible thanks to a block system that permits students to devote all of their time and energy to one class.

Diego also got involved in campus life as a leader. He served as president of Zeta Tau Psi multicultural fraternity, as an executive board member of Cornell's Diversity Committee, and as a three-year work study student for the Office of Intercultural Life.

At the end of the day, Cornell supported Diego, and he made the most of it. Now, employed by the Principal Financial Group, Diego, himself, said: "without the knowledge that my professors have bestowed on me, the invaluable lessons that my peers have given me, and the extraordinary opportunities that Cornell has extended to me, my professional future would be highly uncertain."

And, in a broader Cornell College context, the experience that Diego Verdugo had as a first-generation student at Cornell is our aspiration for all students who come to Cornell as the first in their families. However, recognizing that Diego's experience is anomalous in relation to the general educational trends of first-generation students nationwide, we must build on our formidable strengths going forward—with the goal of encouraging all first-generation students to excel like Diego. This goal is that much more important, given the nationwide changing demographics of college-going students who will increasingly be first-generation.

Research amply demonstrates that first-generation college students face more worries about finances and also have less effective family support, information about what is involved in attending college, and self-confidence than their peers. First-generation students are also less likely than the overall student population to complete their academic goals and, if they do complete their degrees, they are also less likely to be enrolled in graduate or professional education programs afterward.

It probably comes as no surprise that many colleges and universities maintain a special (and entirely appropriate) commitment to educating first-generation students. After all, if we (1) accept that education is an optimal path to a lifetime of personal and professional success, and (2) recognize that first-generation college students are the first in their families to have the privilege of graduating from college, then we should expect colleges and universities to embrace educating first-generation students with a special passion. Serving such students offers both immediate and prospective benefits.

Cornell College shares a commitment to first-generation students as central to our mission with a long history of serving these students. For example, in the 2013-2014 academic year, 25 percent of the new students entering Cornell College were first-generation college

students. Our goal is to help these students step into new spheres, thanks to life-changing educational experiences.

Fortunately, small residential liberal arts colleges already incorporate many of the recommended best practices associated with student engagement and learning, and these practices are especially beneficial to first-generation students. At Cornell College, we are confident that, in the classroom, our first-generation students have excellent educational experiences. To complement those experiences, we are now expanding how we serve first-generation students through the Rise Up Program, funded by the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, which will provide outside-of-class support to first-generation students to ensure that they have outcomes equivalent to that of their peers and that fulfill Cornell's Mission and Core Values.

### **Understanding the Need**

In the 1995-1996 academic year, 34 percent of the new students enrolling in U.S. four-year colleges were in the first generation of their families to attend college<sup>1</sup>. The enrollment of first-generation students in higher education has significantly increased in recent years<sup>2</sup> and is expected to continue to grow.

A substantial body of evidence indicates that first-generation students fare less well in college and afterward than do other students. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini noted that "... the evidence is reasonably clear that first-generation students as a group have a more difficult transition from secondary school to college than their peers. Not only do first-generation students confront all of the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any college student, their experiences often involve substantial cultural as well as social and academic transitions."<sup>3</sup> Pascarella et al. indicated that first-generation students "are more likely to leave a four-year institution at the end of the first year, less likely to remain enrolled in a four-year institution or be

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<sup>1</sup> Choy, S. (2001). Essay: Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment. In J. W. et al. (Ed.), *The Condition of Education 2001*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Government Printing Office.

<sup>2</sup> Strayhorn, T. L. (2006). Factors influencing the academic achievement of first-generation college students. *NASPA Journal*, 43, 82-111.

<sup>3</sup> Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 75(3), 249-284.

on a persistent track to a bachelor's degree after three years, and are less likely to stay enrolled or attain a bachelor's degree after five years.”<sup>4</sup>

First-generation students are likely to have different resources available to them than their peers. Among the areas in which first-generation students have different resources than those from college-educated families are<sup>5</sup>:

- Finances. First-generation students report lower socioeconomic status<sup>6</sup>, lower family incomes<sup>7</sup>, and higher levels of stress about finances<sup>8</sup> than do peers.
- Family support for higher education. York-Anderson and Bowman found that first-generation students felt less family support for attendance at college.<sup>9</sup> They have less knowledge about college in general, career options, and means of obtaining professionally relevant experiences and opportunities.
- Self-confidence. Psychologists use the term “self-efficacy” to refer to confidence that one can overcome barriers and problems that come up in pursuing goals. First-generation students have lower academic self-efficacy than do those from college-educated families.<sup>10</sup>

The differences between first-generation students and those from college-educated families may be particularly acute in the context of a selective liberal-arts college where coursework is rigorous and where students do best when they are fully prepared soon after arrival to pursue the many opportunities available outside of class.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> First-generation students, in general, are also documented to be less well-prepared academically than are other students, both in terms of standardized test scores (Bui, 2002) and general academic background (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). However, given that Cornell is a selective college, differences between first-generation and other students in this domain are likely to be less than at colleges with lower entrance requirements.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Bui, K. V. T. (2002). First-generation college students at a four-year university. *College Student Personnel*, 36(1), 3-11.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Mehta, S. S., Newbold, J. J., & O'Rourke, M. A. (2011). Why do first-generation students fail? *College Student Journal*, 45(1), 20-35; Ramos-Sanchez, L., & Nichols, L. (2007). Self-efficacy of first-generation and non-first-generation college students: The relationship with academic performance and college adjustment. *Journal of College Counseling*, 10, 6-18.

<sup>8</sup> Mehta, S. S., Newbold, J. J., & O'Rourke, M. A. (2011). Why do first-generation students fail? *College Student Journal*, 45(1), 20-35.

<sup>9</sup> York-Anderson, D. C., & Bowman, S. L. (1991). Assessing the college knowledge of first-generation and second-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 32, 112-116.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Gibbons, M. M., & Borders, L. D. (2010). Prospective first-generation college students: A social-cognitive perspective. *Career Development Quarterly*, 58, 194-208; Ramos-Sanchez, L., & Nichols, L. (2007). Self-efficacy of first-generation and non-first-generation college students: The relationship with academic performance and college adjustment. *Journal of College Counseling*, 10, 6-18.

## Addressing the Need

A few recent studies have shown that liberal arts colleges provide educational experiences with greater correspondence to empirically-vetted good practices in higher education than do other institutions of higher education.<sup>11</sup> These good practices include academic challenge, academic interactions with peers, and meaningful teaching interactions with faculty. Most relevant to first-generation students, Seifert, Pascarella, Goodman, Salisbury, and Blaich showed that attending a liberal arts college had the most beneficial effect on first-generation students.<sup>12</sup> Thus, effective educational practices that are the hallmark of liberal arts colleges—for example, seminar-style classes of fewer than 20 students; significant, recurring opportunities to write and speak in classes; ample student-faculty research experiences; and consistent contact with a faculty advisor—can be especially helpful for students whose parents have not completed a bachelor’s degree.

The positive changes that occur in the enriched environment of a liberal-arts college, however, may still leave first-generation students behind their peers at the end of four years. Thus, students who come to college with significant financial challenges, limited family support, lower academic and professional self-confidence, and a lack of knowledge about professional and postgraduate opportunities need assistance in addressing these issues very early in the college experience. Cornell’s new Rise Up Program is designed specifically to address these challenges for our first-generation students.

First-generation students are more likely than non-first-generation students to lack professional mentors or connections that will help them plan and follow a path to professional success. The Rise Up Program provides encouragement, guidance, information, and pre-professional experiences designed to address the areas of challenge outlined above. Students who participate in the Rise Up Program will meet regularly with a faculty mentor who is aware of challenges facing first-generation students and can direct students to the resources they need. In addition to working with other first-generation students, they will also make connections with

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<sup>11</sup> Pascarella, E. T., Wolniak, G. C., Cruce, T., & Blaich, C. (2004). Do liberal arts colleges really foster good practices in undergraduate education? *Journal of College Student Development*, 45(1), 57-74; Pascarella, E. T., Wolniak, G. C., Seifert, T., Cruce, T., & Blaich, C. (2005). *Liberal arts colleges and liberal arts education: New evidence on impacts*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/ASHE.

<sup>12</sup> Seifert, T., Pascarella, E. T., Goodman, K. M., Salisbury, M. H., & Blaich, C. (2010). Liberal arts colleges and good practices in undergraduate education: Additional evidence. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(1), 1-22.

professionals who can mentor, guide, advise, and open doors for them. Rise Up participants will get assistance in obtaining high-level pre-professional experiences during their third and fourth years in college—guidance that they will possibly not receive within their families. Cornell’s premier internship program, Cornell Fellows, will be expanded to facilitate some of these experiences. A further goal of these endeavors is to determine the most effective interventions for first-generation students at liberal arts colleges and to share these with other campuses.

Fortunately, the career-relevant experiential components of the Rise Up Program fit well with the College’s Strategic Plan, specifically *Reimagining the Liberal Arts*: “All Cornell students will have access and opportunity for intentional and relevant experiential learning that will increase the connections between the college learning experience and entry into the professional world and/or further graduate study.” The Strategic Plan specifies a need for “Increased funding for student/faculty research, off-campus study, internship support, and other opportunities” and “programmatically budget support for the college’s experiential learning centers” (which includes the Cornell Fellows Program). The initiatives under the umbrella of the Rise Up Program will ensure that first-generation students have wonderful opportunities for experiential learning.

Ultimately, as with all Cornell students, we wish to provide our first-generation students an excellent preparation for demanding careers and graduate study, specifically by addressing some of the challenges they face. In so doing, we hope to:

1. Increase self-confidence and knowledge about college and careers (including opportunities offered through the college).
2. Promote career exploration and develop skills necessary for pursuing advanced opportunities.
3. Increase the percentage of students who complete an internship, student/faculty research, or a Cornell Fellowship to the College so that it matches our general student body percentage.
4. Increase the percentage of first-generation students who enter graduate programs immediately after college so that it matches our general student body average, as well as have five to seven first-generation students apply for prestigious post-graduate scholarships or fellowships.
5. Increase the persistence and graduation rates of first-generation students at Cornell.

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First-generation students face special challenges in higher education that additional interpersonal support, information about strategies and opportunities, and career-relevant hands-on experiences can help address. As all Cornellians know, Cornell College is a selective liberal arts college characterized by academic rigor, dedicated faculty, and small class sizes. These attributes make Cornell College an ideal setting in which to improve the success of first-generation college students.

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