

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Honors in Practice -- Online Archive

National Collegiate Honors Council

---

2021

## First-Generation College Student Network

Ashleen Williams

Ainsley Ash

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchchip>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), [Gifted Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Liberal Studies Commons](#)

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors in Practice -- Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## First-Generation College Student Network

ASHLEEN WILLIAMS AND AINSLEY ASH

University of Mississippi

**Abstract:** Authors describe the college's First-Gen Student Network, a cohort of faculty, students, and practitioners committed to equity, access, and success of first-generation learners. Optional biweekly meetings address a range of topics, including financial aid and opportunities for employment.

**Keywords:** first-generation college students; student success; networking; student engagement; University of Mississippi (MS)—Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

**Citation:** *Honors in Practice*, 2021, Vol. 17:258–59

The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College at the University of Mississippi often prides itself on being the edge of the knife in conversations about equity and access, yet such conversations only work in honors when we commit tangible actions and resources to generate positive outcomes. Over the last couple of years, we have recognized a group that was consistently forgotten in our campus conversations and in our honors community: first-generation college students.

We realized that we were not linking success in the classroom with success in the community at large. We also noticed that the imposter syndrome, which holds many students back from achieving their full potential inside and outside the classroom, seems to be heightened among first-generation students. As a result, we decided that first-generation students did not need another club to add to their résumé or mindless activities to fill their time. They needed a network of resources that would make the transition to college life easier and, subsequently, make success and upward mobility feel more feasible and tangible.

In August 2019, we created the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College (SMBHC) First-Gen Student Network to help first-generation students across campus navigate the college experience. This network brings together

faculty, students, and staff to create a community and, perhaps more importantly, a network of resources. Optional biweekly meetings address a range of topics from financial aid and finding a job to networking and interviews. Professors and students talk, for instance, about the difficulty of going home and of explaining college life to friends and family who may feel removed from it. Our increased social media presence has led to many campus departments and organizations sharing and resharing our materials and events, in turn creating more resources for students as well as a larger community of key stakeholders who can effect positive change.

The First-Gen Student Network works in honors. Many students in the SMBHC are white and affluent at an already white and affluent university. Our network has created an academic counterspace made up of racially and socio-economically diverse young people on a campus with few formal university spaces where such conversations can take place among a representative group of students. This year, the network planned a university-wide, week-long, First-Gen success celebration, a multi-day networking opportunity now being used as a springboard for larger conversations about equity and action university-wide. Furthermore, the connection with honors creates an opportunity for undergraduate research on first-generation college student experiences, needs, barriers, and pathways to success. This research informs campus initiatives and programming, placing honors at the forefront of the conversation and in a place to secure resources.

One of the key strengths of the First-Gen Student Network is that it is not a club entailing an application, mandatory meetings, or dues. While in name our events and resources are for first-generation students in the honors college, these events are open to all, and we encourage cross-campus partnerships. We recommend that honors colleges and programs ask first-generation students what they want and need to feel supported on campus and to use a network of these students to understand and address potential knowledge gaps. Identifying these students as early as possible will make the network beneficial for students as well as campus administrators, staff, and faculty, helping build a culture centered on first-generation student success. The first-generation student network model can benefit from and contribute to higher education's social capital when financial capital is unavailable and meritocracy is a myth.

---

The authors may be contacted at  
[amwill17@olemiss.edu](mailto:amwill17@olemiss.edu).