



# First Generation Students: First In The Family, Less Likely To Succeed In College

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This brief compares first generation and continuing generation students at Fresno State based on their demographic characteristics, academic preparation, college activity and academic performance. Students are considered first generation (FGS) if neither of their parents earned a Bachelor's degree. Continuing generation students (CGS) are those for whom at least one parent earned a four-year degree.

One of Fresno State's strategic planning goals is to promote the success of all students. Another is engagement with the region. First generation students make up more than two-thirds of the undergraduates from Fresno State's service area (Figure 1). Studies consistently show that FGS are less likely than CGS to succeed in college. This pattern is true at Fresno State as well. Understanding these two student populations and addressing the needs that help FGS succeed at rates equivalent to their CGS counterparts is essential to achieving Fresno State's goals. ([Click here to see full report.](#))

**FIGURE 1**  
**Fall 2008 First and Continuing Generation Undergraduates by County of Residence**

| California County         | First Generation |     | Continuing Generation |     |
|---------------------------|------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----|
|                           | N                | %   | N                     | %   |
| Fresno                    | 5329             | 67% | 2603                  | 33% |
| Tulare                    | 1274             | 73% | 465                   | 27% |
| Madera                    | 543              | 71% | 227                   | 29% |
| Kings                     | 374              | 68% | 180                   | 32% |
| Other California Counties | 2710             | 61% | 1697                  | 39% |

Note: Fresno, Tulare, Madera, and Kings counties compose Fresno State's service area.



## FGS AND CGS DEMOGRAPHICS

In fall 2008, 66% of our undergraduate students were FGS. FGS are most likely to be Hispanic (85%) and least likely to be White (46%). Asian, African-American and American Indians are also more likely to be FGS than CGS (74%, 69% and 70%, respectively). Both genders are more likely to be FGS than CGS, but females are slightly more likely to be FGS than males (69% to 62%).

## ACADEMIC PREPARATION

The average high school GPA of FGS and CGS are equivalent, but CGS students were nearly twice as likely to take the SAT. On average, FGS who tested scored approximately 100 points lower on the SAT Comp than CGS (Figure 2). FGS were also more likely than CGS to need remediation in English and Mathematics (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 2**

**Fall 2008 SAT Scores for First-time Freshmen**

|            | First Generation |     |              | Continuing Generation |      |              |
|------------|------------------|-----|--------------|-----------------------|------|--------------|
|            | # of Students    | Avg | No SAT Score | # of Students         | Avg  | No SAT Score |
| <b>SAT</b> |                  |     |              |                       |      |              |
| Verbal     | 1600             | 438 | 12%          | 778                   | 498  | 6%           |
| Math       | 1602             | 458 | 11%          | 778                   | 510  | 6%           |
| Comp       | 1602             | 896 | 11%          | 778                   | 1008 | 6%           |

**FIGURE 3**

**Fall 2008 First-Time Freshmen Who Needed English and Math Remediation**

|                 | First Generation |     | Continuing Generation |     |
|-----------------|------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----|
|                 | # of Students    | %   | # of Students         | %   |
| <b>English*</b> | 1261             | 70% | 394                   | 48% |
| <b>Math*</b>    | 1092             | 60% | 351                   | 42% |

\* Percentages are the portion of the total first generation or continuing generation new freshmen.

## WHAT FGS AND CGS DO AT FRESNO STATE

According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) survey administered at Fresno State in spring 2007, freshman and senior FGS ask questions and contribute to class discussion less often than CGS students. First generation students spend more hours than CGS providing care for dependents living with them and commuting to class, while spending fewer hours in co-curricular activities (e.g., organizations, campus publications, student government, intercollegiate or intramural sports). Additionally, FGS seniors spend more hours in a typical

7-day week working for pay off campus than do CGS. All of these differences are small, but statistically significant and the literature shows that such factors affect student success in college.

## ACADEMIC SUCCESS

The first-term GPA of CGS is higher than that of FGS. Continuing generation freshmen at Fresno State are more likely than first generation freshmen to be retained after their first year (85% to 81% for the Fall 2007 cohort). CGS graduate at higher rates as well. For the most recent cohort, 56% of CGS graduated in 6 years compared to 43% of FGS that entered as freshmen. Although the difference is smaller for students who transferred to Fresno State, the pattern is the same. In 6 years, 70% of CGS transfer students had graduated; 68% of FGS transfers had done so.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN AND WHAT DO WE DO?

As is the case nationally, Fresno State's first generation students are less prepared for college, participate less while on campus, and succeed at lower rates than their continuing generation counterparts. Previous research, conducted as part of Fresno State's ad-hoc Retention Oversight Group (ROG), found that high school GPA is the strongest predictor of first-term GPA and first-term GPA has the greatest influence on first-year retention ([see ROG Report for details](#)). Data in this current study show similar FGS and CGS high school GPAs, yet Fresno State's FGS earn a lower first-term GPA. Perhaps this can be partially explained by group participation. The largest secondary influence on GPA and first-year retention shown in the ROG research is participation in support groups such as EOP and CAMP and enriching experiences such as community service and learning communities.

Two recommendations in the ROG report are developing an integrated first-year experience program to get new freshmen off to a good start and implementing strategies that impact first-term GPA. The First Year Experience project, focusing on first-generation students, began in fall 2009 with 50 students and 8 faculty members. It includes pedagogical and co-curricular activities that have been shown to help students succeed; learning communities, service learning and mentoring. IRAP and the FYE faculty are tracking the program's success which will feed into planning the FYE program's second year.

