

First generation college students at Stony Brook University

The term "first generation student" is widely used in higher education to signify students who come from families with limited or no college experience, but because there is no generally accepted definition for the term that captures all students, production of precise statistics about this group can be challenging. The Office of Institutional Research, Planning & Effectiveness at Stony Brook has assembled various data sources to describe this population, and recommends in almost all cases that **first generation students be characterized as "about a third" of Stony Brook's undergraduates**. Reliable statistics for family educational capital do not exist for Stony Brook's graduate and professional students. The apparent increase in the number of first generation students in the data table below is an artifact of how data are collected and does not represent a real increase.

Confusion is inserted into this term because the broad definitions from three sources: 1) in instances where first generation is related to attainment of family members, "college degrees" may include associate's and bachelor's degrees and sometimes even sub-baccalaureate certificates; 2) in other instances, first generation may be characterized by college attendance rather than attainment, and this lower threshold significantly depresses the statistic because of the relatively large number of individuals in the United States who attend some college without completing a degree; 3) characterizations of first generation rely upon attributing attendance or attainment to parents without consideration of step-parents, legal guardians, grandparents, etc., and in other instances, first generation will attribute college attendance or attainment to family members, including siblings, step-siblings, etc.

Data presented here rely on information supplied during the process of applying for financial aid. About 65-70% of Stony Brook undergraduates apply for financial aid in a given year. Use of these data is restricted to the administration of aid and may not be used for other purposes, although the Privacy and Technical Assistance Center of the U.S. Dept. of Education has clarified that preparation of statistics from these data constitutes an acceptable administrative use of the data (PTAC-FAQ-9, January 2017). This question asks what is the highest level of education completed by each parent (college or beyond, high school, or middle school / junior high). Students for whom neither parent has completed college or beyond and have indicated at least one parent with known educational attainment of high school or middle school / junior high are classified as first generation in the table below. Students for whom either parent completed college or beyond or both parents had unknown or missing educational attainment are not classified as first generation. Data for fall semesters are captured as of the census date for enrollment, even if financial aid data for that year are subsequently updated. For students who did not apply for financial aid in a given year, parental educational attainment information are used from the most recent year, if available.

Students for whom parental education information is not available, first generation status is supplemented from the Stony Brook new student preference form completed by students before coming to Stony Brook. This form asks incoming undergraduates, "Are you the first in your family to attend college?" This question relies on attendance rather than attainment and extends to the entire family, not just parents. Crosstabulations of this question against information on the financial aid application show a 20-25% mismatch in responses (both false positives and false negatives), and so these data are used only to supplement missing educational attainment data described above. Finally, because data are missing, we recommend in general calculating percentages excluding students for whom data are missing or unknown.

First generation status	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013	Fall 2014	Fall 2015	Fall 2016	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Fall 2020
First generation	3,672	3,815	3,859	4,162	4,483	4,866	5,316	5,448	5,709	5,799
Not first generation	6,419	7,088	7,441	8,294	9,056	9,516	10,092	10,463	10,158	10,644
No info/unknown	5,694	4,934	4,692	4,024	3,292	2,644	1,956	1,611	2,042	1,567
Grand Total	15,785	15,837	15,992	16,480	16,831	17,026	17,364	17,522	17,909	18,010
First generation as a percent of:										
All undergraduates	23.3%	24.1%	24.1%	25.3%	26.6%	28.6%	30.6%	31.1%	31.9%	32.2%
All undergraduates w/ data	36.4%	35.0%	34.2%	33.4%	33.1%	33.8%	34.5%	34.2%	36.0%	35.3%