

EDUCATION LIFE

Are You First Gen? Depends on Who's Asking

By ROCHELLE SHARPE NOV. 3, 2017

Trying to help a high school senior get into his dream school, Laurie Kopp Weingarten called the college to emphasize that the boy should be able to lay claim to the latest, and fuzziest, of all admissions hooks: being a first-generation student.

The student's mother had never enrolled in college; his father had a degree but had died when his son was a toddler. The student had grown up in a household with little money and where college had never been discussed. Surely, Ms. Weingarten assumed, the boy could be counted as a first-generation college applicant, deserving of an admissions bump for being disadvantaged.

But after describing the situation, she was given a firm no, recalled Ms. Weingarten, the director of **One-Stop** College Counseling in Marlboro, N.J., who had been hired by the student's worried grandfather. The school considered a student first generation only if neither parent had a bachelor's degree. "I was just shocked," said Ms. Weingarten, who would identify the college only as a prominent engineering school. "To me, that boy was first gen all the way. He wasn't raised by his father."

In fact, the boy *was* first gen, at least according to the Higher Education Act, which says that, for federal programs, only the education level of parents who regularly live with a student should be counted. There's ample reason for confusion, though. The Department of Education interprets first-gen status in at least three different ways: the legislative definition (no parent in the household has a bachelor's degree) and the two used for research (no education after high school; no degree after high school). Still other definitions are often used by colleges and educational associations.

With so many variations on what constitutes higher education and even more assortments of family structures, it's no wonder there are lots of ways to slice and dice the label. Using data from a longitudinal study begun in 2002, Robert K. Toutkoushian, a University of Georgia education professor, analyzed eight different definitions of the term and found that the number of students who could be called first gen in a 7,300 sample ranged from 22 percent to 77 percent.

Policymakers have begun to wrangle with the definition of "first generation," which, according to Maureen Hoyler, president of the Council for Opportunity in Education, entered the legislative lexicon in 1980 as a better way to identify disadvantaged students without referring to race or ethnicity.

Whether used as code for "low income" or "underprivileged" or as a proxy for affirmative action, the label comes with assumptions: that the student's parents have little or no experience navigating the academic, financial and cultural barriers to higher education, including an application process that stymies even the most savvy parent. Filling out financial aid forms can be a nightmare, especially when parents don't speak English, Ms. Weingarten said.

"First gen" may be the latest buzz phrase in higher education but its import is not just academic. Colleges have always viewed their mission as promoting social mobility, but given rising income inequality and the skills needed to get high-paying jobs, they have intensified their efforts to enroll and lift disadvantaged students.

Nearly 60 percent of admissions directors said they were likely to increase their recruiting of first-generation students this year, according to a survey by Inside Higher Education in September. Many colleges will give admissions preference to these students for overcoming obstacles, or use the status to mitigate poor test scores.

They also try to make degrees more affordable. Both Bowdoin and Trinity colleges, for example, waive application fees for first-gen students; Pitzer College has a few endowed scholarships. The University of Wisconsin just began offering free tuition for first-gen transfer students, while Duke last year created one of the most generous, comprehensive programs of all. It will select 240 first gens to attend for free all four years; they will receive a computer, books and travel between semesters at no cost.

Colleges can identify first gens on the Common Application, which asks for parents' education history. Along with the application, the organization sends a customized summary of candidates' attributes, including, since 2013-14, first-generation status. When this is combined with the entry that shows that the application fee was waived for financial reasons, it's apparent who is both low income and first gen. But the Common Application definition is different from the legislative one. It's the same as the one used by the engineering school that Ms. Weingarten called — neither parent can have a bachelor's, even if they didn't raise the child.

It may seem like hairsplitting. But in the frenzied competition for admission to selective schools, where counselors have seen students get their DNA tested to see if they qualify as minorities, it's an important distinction. Several said they advise their first-gen clients to highlight their status, either in essays or interviews. When Ms. Weingarten meets new clients, one of her first questions concerns their parents' education level. "This process is so difficult, if you have an honest advantage, you should use it," she said.

Certainly there are affluent parents who never went to college, punching holes in the idea that first gens are by definition disadvantaged. One college counselor told of a first-gen student on the East Coast who arrived at her counseling appointment in a Porsche. She wrapped herself in the first-gen mantle, bringing it up whenever she could and was admitted to several selective schools.

Conceivably, one can be both first gen and legacy. One first-generation student in Minnesota is applying to her grandmother's alma mater. "I definitely don't fit the stereotype for a first-generation student," she said. "I'm a middle-class white girl." Her mother owns a small business and her father works as a middle manager in information technology at a Fortune 500 company.

To be sure, most first-generation students come from families with low incomes and minimal exposure to college. Only 12.5 percent of all students whose parents didn't get a bachelor's degree come from families with incomes exceeding \$106,000, according to an analysis of federal data by Robert Kelchen, an assistant professor at Seton Hall University. Many education experts even use the terms "first gen" and "low income" interchangeably. Officials who practice "holistic" admissions — examining family background, recommendations and essays in addition to grades and test scores

— say they can figure out who is truly disadvantaged by looking at how candidates overcome obstacles, whatever those may be.

How much first-gen status really matters for college admissions is unclear. At Harvard, it's "one of 50 factors" under consideration, said William R. Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid. "This is not a mechanical process." Some counselors view it as a "tipping factor" for students who are tied with others in the admissions pool; others insist that it is much more important.

"It's something that colleges love to brag about," said Brian Taylor, managing director of Ivy Coach, a New York counseling company, noting that many colleges list their first-gen statistics in their brochures.

Many students turn to online communities like College Confidential and Reddit to question whether they fit the definition. One student, raised by his stepfather, wondered if he'd be disqualified because his biological father had a degree; another student worried about her mother's online education from Kaplan University. A lively discussion followed a post by a student applying to Columbia who wanted to omit degrees her parents earned abroad.

Colleges don't typically check information. But consultants urge their clients not to lie. Cyndy McDonald, a consultant in Visalia, Calif., encourages students to write essays about their first-generation backgrounds, even if they don't meet a college's definition.

"These students have unique experiences," she said. "They don't have the legacy card to drop."

The most disadvantaged students don't usually write essays about those experiences, Mr. Fitzsimmons said. They may think their backgrounds would be held against them or they may not even have heard of the first-gen label. Some assume they don't qualify because they have siblings who have gone to college.

Anthony A. Jack, a Harvard education professor who researches the experiences of lower-income students, said a student once asked if he could join a support group even though his father had a master's degree. The boy had been raised by extended family who had not gone to college, and the father, who had an arrest record, had not been part of his son's life. "That's not a parental influence," Dr. Jack said.

Some support groups and scholarship organizations define the term broadly to be more inclusive. To underscore economic issues, the University of Pennsylvania has created an F.G.L.I. program for “first-generation and/or low-income students.” Brown opened its First-Generation College and Low-Income Student Center last year.

Some public policy experts believe the definition should be narrowed for admissions and financial aid. Tomiko Brown-Nagin, a Harvard law professor, argues that only those most in need should receive special admissions considerations. She wants both parental education and income taken into account, limiting the definition to those whose parents never attended college and are eligible for Pell grants. That means an income below \$50,000. “Universities must attack disadvantage at its roots,” she wrote in a University of Chicago Law Review article.

The Institute for Higher Education Policy last year released a report, financed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, similarly calling for the definition to be narrowed so that students whose parents had an associate degree could no longer be counted as first gen.

The institute’s analysis of education statistics helps explain its reasoning. If students who attended a four-year college had parents with no education after high school, only 50 percent graduated within six years. If at least one parent had some college but no degree, the graduation rate was 57 percent. But if at least one parent had an associate degree or higher, the rate jumped to 72 percent.

Dr. Jack, who is serving on an American Sociological Association task force to tackle the issue, says he wants to focus on how people use the term. It evokes images of a Horatio Alger character striving for success, he said, which is far better than language that stigmatizes students for being at risk. For some people, “this is affirmative action that won’t ruffle any feathers. It’s more palatable.” But, he said, supporting first-generation students is no substitute for admissions that considers race.

To figure out what first generation really means, he said, it’s important to step back and examine the goals of higher education. “What,” he asked, “are we trying to do with the definition?”

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A version of this article appears in print on November 5, 2017, on Page ED16 of Education Life with the headline: Are You First Gen? .

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