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## Expanding First Generation Student Support Services at VCU

The Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute at Virginia Commonwealth University  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Megan Coe  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Becky Durfee  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

*See next page for additional authors*

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## **Authors**

The Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute at Virginia Commonwealth University, Megan Coe, Becky Durfee, Jessica Laux, Milos Manic, Kristen Reed, and Wei Zhang

## EXPANDING FIRST GENERATION STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES AT VCU

### TEAM MEMBERS

Megan Coe, Pediatric Hospital Medicine Fellow, Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU Health  
Becky Durfee, Associate Chair, Department of Statistical Sciences and Operations Research  
Jessica Laux, Director, Risk Management, Safety and Risk Management  
Milos Manic, Professor, Computer Science Dept.; Director, VCU Cybersecurity Center  
Kristin Reed, Associate Professor, Department of Focused Inquiry  
Wei Zhang, Professor, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering

*Project Sponsor: Tomikia LeGrande, Vice Provost for Strategic Enrollment Management*

### PROJECT ABSTRACT

This project aims to increase first-generation student outcomes by taking existing YouFirst programming to scale. The team proposes to expand university outreach and to leverage expanded engagement into the construction of a First Gen Network through a university-wide ambassador program. This network will grow programming over the next three to five years through annual faculty and staff outreach and the creation of a pipeline for cross-unit communication and collaboration.

### QUEST 2025: TOGETHER WE TRANSFORM

The project aligns with VCU's Quest 2025 by focusing on the needs of the diverse student population in an attempt to improve retention and graduation rates. More specifically, the following theme and goal are addressed:

**Theme I:** Transform the lives of our distinctive and diverse student population through a university culture that supports every student's success through inquiry, discovery, innovation, civic engagement and creative expression.

**I.3** Enhance the university culture supporting student success, including improved retention and graduation rates

Even though VCU has a multitude of nationally recognized offerings to help first-generation students flourish and graduate, many faculty and staff members are unfamiliar with the services the university provides. By increasing awareness among faculty and staff more students can be referred to those services as needs arise, ultimately resulting in higher retention and graduation rates among the first-generation student population.

### PROJECT GOALS

The goals of the project are to raise awareness of the Division of Strategic Enrollment Management's (SEM) award-winning current offerings for first-generation students and to expand the program by establishing the framework for a First-Generation Network. In turn, both of these strategies will increase retention and graduation rates among first-generation students over time. Thirty-three percent of VCU's students are first-generation, thus supporting the need for this call to action.<sup>1</sup> This segment of the student population have attrition rates that are more than double that

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<sup>1</sup> LeGrande, T. (19 June 2019). Testimony given at hearing on "Innovation to improve equity: exploring high-quality pathways to a college degree." U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor.

of VCU's general population.<sup>2</sup> While first-generation students show larger than average receptivity to academic support, they also show less access to support structures, particularly at home.<sup>3</sup>

In May of 2019, VCU was named to the inaugural cohort of First Forward Institutions by NASPA's (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators) center for First-generation Student Success and The Suder Foundation. First Forward institutions are those who have demonstrated a commitment to improving experiences and advancing outcomes of first-generation college students. The creation of FirstGen Zone training is designed to bring awareness to faculty and staff members at VCU.

The offerings targeting first-generation students highlighted in the newly established First Gen Network will include: the Summer Scholars Program, the Altria Scholars Program, TRIO, and the YouFirst Program. The Summer Scholars Program offers first-generation students the opportunity to come to campus the summer before their first year, where they can take classes, receive individualized learning support and attend workshops to ensure their success. Currently, less than one hundred students take advantage of that opportunity. The Altria Scholars Program offers coaching for first-generation freshmen and sophomores in the business and engineering fields, as well as scholarships to juniors and seniors. Through TRIO, first-generation students receive enhanced advising and benefit from tutors and mentors, as well as help with FAFSA forms. The YouFirst program offers mentoring, monthly gatherings and parental outreach. The team aims to increase awareness of these existing programs for first-generation students among faculty and staff.

## **PROJECT STRATEGIES**

The team blended academic research and local stakeholder interviews to determine strengths and identify potential needs. Through one-on-one meetings with SEM staff, the team heard SEM's assessment of programming highlights, learned of the external validation of strengths through national recognition, and discussed opportunities for growth. The team met with Dr. Daphne Rankin from the Division of Strategic Enrollment Management, who explained that the team's suggested efforts to help first-generation students were already in place. She mentioned that while the existing programs are successful, faculty and staff at VCU are largely unaware that they exist. She requested that the team focus on creating an awareness campaign, aimed at enlightening the employees of the university about SEM's efforts. In addition, the team then met with sponsor Dr. Tomikia LeGrande, who suggested the university's efforts should be expanded to reach more first-generation students. She recommended the team create a proposal for expanding the current offerings, while simultaneously warning the team that the budget for such an endeavor would be limited unless outside partnerships were established.

Throughout the duration of the project, the team continued to have bi-weekly discussions and meetings with stakeholders to discuss progress and next actionable steps. Drawing from first-hand stakeholder reports, an informal survey of the university, and the success of the pilot training program, the team produced a vision for taking YouFirst programming to scale, engaging more units university wide.

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<sup>2</sup> 16% as compared to 7%. Tolen, M. (19 August 2019). CSI [College Student Inventory] Comparison by at risk factor group. Pdf.

<sup>3</sup> First Generation Academic support receptivity scores 7 points higher than VCU's overall student average, whereas in access to general family support First Generation students at VCU score 3 points lower than average, the second lowest score of any demographic group reported. *ibid*.

## **ACTION STEPS**

- Gathered data and peer-reviewed research on national trends in first generation student retention, best practices in growing first-generation programming, and predictors of risk among current VCU undergraduates
- Met with stakeholders in the Office of Strategic Enrollment Management [SEM] to survey existing programming and assess needs
- Collaborated with SEM to develop a draft curriculum for new faculty orientation and reached out to disciplinary advisors to gauge familiarity with current offerings
- Created a proposal for expanding the current offerings to reach more students and develop mechanisms for collaboration between units

## **OUTCOMES**

Members of the team assessed the needs for two points of intervention: further engagement of the campus in SEM's existing efforts and creation of infrastructure to take SEM's YouFirst programs to scale.

In support of the first point of intervention, members of the team created slideshow presented at the new faculty orientation in August 2019. This presentation informed the incoming faculty and staff about the large presence of first-generation students at VCU and the various programs offered to these students. Dr. Daphne Rankin plans to continue to deliver that presentation at department and advisor meetings to reach existing faculty and staff. The team proposes that this curriculum become the foundation for a First Gen Zone training to be made available to departments, staff, and faculty university-wide.

The team also created a proposed framework for a "First Generation Network" fueled by "First Gen Ambassadors," who would be recruited through First Gen Zone Training. This network would serve as a virtual hub for strategic collaboration, sustainable engagement, expanded research partnerships, and a gateway to national prominence. Ultimately, while VCU is currently a national leader in first-generation programming, local awareness of those successes remains limited. The establishment of a university-wide network will not only raise awareness for existing programming, it will allow VCU to grow this program to scale with a minimal rise in cost.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

The Division of Strategic Enrollment Management can continue to educate faculty and staff members about the programs designed to help first-generation students through annual new faculty training and ongoing community building through the First Generation Network. Additional funding and dedicated personnel will aid SEM's efforts to increase their university presence and continue to accelerate retention and graduation rates. Infrastructure for the FirstGen Network will include:

1. FirstGen Zone training
2. YouFirst Ambassadors—faculty and staff across campus who have identified a commitment to FirstGen student success
3. A dedicated funding line for a FirstGen Faculty Research Fellow
4. Reserved annual research assistantship for a graduate researcher
5. Faculty & First Gen student research partnership through the Undergraduate Research Program [UROP]

## **FINANCING AND RESOURCES**

Full realization of the team's recommendations requires a sustainable line of resources over time. Funding would need to be dedicated to course buyouts for a faculty researcher. A dedicated Graduate Teaching Assistantship line would be held in reserve for Strategic Enrollment

Management, and office space adjacent to SEM offices would be needed to house staff, with preferred recreational space for YouFirst participants on site:

### **Project Budget**

Line Item	Description	Budget
Faculty Fellow Funding Line	Faculty course buyouts vary by unit per credit hour	\$1000
Graduate Research Assistant	Annual graduate school stipend plus tuition refund	\$18,750
UROP Research Budget		\$250

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To bring existing YouFirst programming to scale, the team has several recommendations for the team partners. First-generation students and the broader university community would benefit tremendously from increased student access to services, increased university-wide engagement, and cross-university collaboration with YouFirst programming. The team recommends expansion of partnerships through the development office to increase external support for YouFirst programming, offsetting costs for students themselves. While a successful partnership exists within the Altria Scholars program, this team believes there is capacity to extend this project for all students through partnerships with foundations and other fiscal partners in the region, particularly Capital One and the Ukrop Foundation.

To further university-wide awareness, the team proposed targeted FirstGen Zone training for faculty, staff, and advisors to increase their familiarity both with existing programs and with the particular needs and struggles of first generation students. The additional creation of a FirstGen Ambassadors program—designed to recruit engaged individuals from the FirstGen Zone trainings—will stimulate buy in university-wide, opening up channels of communication that can be developed over time.

Finally, the team believes structural university silos are an obstacle to bringing YouFirst programming to scale. The FirstGen Ambassador program can build the foundation for a research and programming hub that will grow the prominence of YouFirst programming, bringing other scholars into its work on an annual basis. Here the team recommends the establishment of resources to support a faculty fellow, a graduate research assistant, and a research mentorship project, collaborating faculty with a first-generation undergraduate on a research project through UROP. These three individuals—bridging undergraduates, graduates, and research scholars—will amplify the work done at VCU, produce new and engaging research on first-generation student experiences, and incorporate their home departments in the exciting work done at SEM.

### **FINAL PITCH**

VCU's YouFirst programming already exceeds what is available at most comparable universities, making it an excellent candidate for expansion. Thirty-three percent of VCU students are first-generation college students, who historically have lower retention and graduation rates than non-first-generation students. VCU's Division of Strategic Enrollment Management currently has several programs in place designed to help those students feel more included in the university setting, provide support with the financial aid process, and provide academic support and advising. New and existing faculty and staff need to be made aware of the current offerings.

## First Generation Student: Your Success, Our Commitment

Megan Coe | [megan.coe@vcuhealth.org](mailto:megan.coe@vcuhealth.org)  
Rebecca J Durfee | [RJDurfee@vcu.edu](mailto:RJDurfee@vcu.edu)  
Jessica Laux | [jalaux@vcu.edu](mailto:jalaux@vcu.edu)  
Milos Manic | [mmanic@vcu.edu](mailto:mmanic@vcu.edu)  
Kristin Reed | [kreed@vcu.edu](mailto:kreed@vcu.edu)  
Wei Zhang | [wzhang4@vcu.edu](mailto:wzhang4@vcu.edu)

## Intros! Meet our team.



## Our Agenda

Today's presentation...

1. Intro
2. Our Process
3. Data
4. Our Partners
5. What Exists?
6. What's Next?

## Our Process?

GEHLI Team 6  Team Social Justice League

**Increasing support and ease of accessibility of this support  
for first generation students and their families.**

## Our Process?



## What is "first generation"

A first generation college student is one whose parent(s)/legal guardian(s) have not earned a bachelor's degree.



## Our Why

Many of us are first-generation or know friends or family who are the first in their family to attend college or to complete college.

We remember the challenges and successes that come along with uncharted territory.



## Our Why

"If you want to be straight up with someone who you trust will not be too judgmental, you could own up to the struggles and mistakes that you've encountered and how you will improve upon them. **Being first-gen, families hold high expectations for you, so there can be a lot of pressure to meet those expectations and make them proud.** When you do feel that pressure, think about how much in the future you'll benefit in the long run. **When you go home and have moments of feeling unworthy, remind yourself that you are worthy. Think about your past and what you've had to overcome to get there and the obstacles that you've already surpassed.** This is just a step to reach your dreams. These rough steps will make your future challenges easier."

Going Home Blog highlighted online in YouFirst at VCU

## Quest 2025: Together We Transform

The integrated themes of Quest 2025: Together We Transform



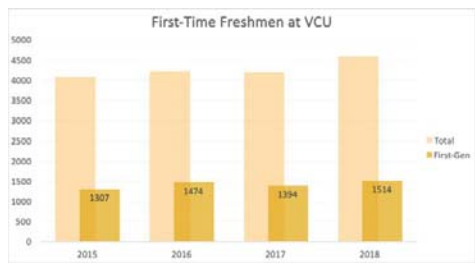
**Theme I - Student Success**  
 1.3 Enhance the university culture supporting student success, including improved retention and graduation rates

## First Generation Students ...by the numbers

## Why there was the need...

- NOVA** Northern Virginia Community College 20% (~10,500) of total students (~51,000) are first-gen (2013-2017) - TOTAL  
Source: Report No. 39-18, 2018
- MASON** 36% (~9,000) of undergraduates (~25,500) are first-gen students (2019) - TOTAL  
Source: GMU Key Facts for 2019
- UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA** 11% (418) of freshman class (~3,700) are first-gen students (2018-2019) - FRESHMAN  
Source: Daily Progress, Incoming UVA class, July 2018
- VIRGINIA TECH.** 7% increase (400) of first-gen students to total of 6,600 (2019)  
Source: VT Daily, Aug. 2019
- VCU** 33% (~1,500) of the 2017-18 freshman class (~4,600) made up of first-gen students - FRESHMAN  
Source: You First at VCU, <https://youfirst.vcu.edu/get-started/>

## VCU first-gen students





## VCU first-gen challenges

### Challenges of first-generation students (1st-gen vs. average):



- Twice as likely to dropout out of school before finishing (16% vs. 7%)
- Higher predicted academic difficulty (12% vs. 8%)
- Lower financial security (35% vs. 49%)
- Lower self-perceived acad. ability, family support, applicat. process understanding
- Higher general feelings of distress relative to college



US: 60% of non first-gen students graduate within five years, 45% of first-generation students graduate in the same time frame  
 Source: Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, 2011

## VCU first-gen strengths

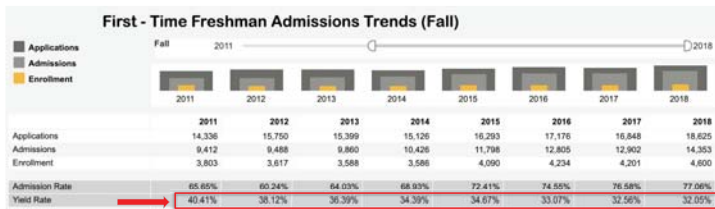
### Strengths of first-generation students (1st-gen vs. average):



- More receptive to help (38% vs. 31%)
- Higher capacity to recognize needs and accept support by VCU (4-14% higher)
  - academic assistance, counseling, career and financial guidance
- Stronger plans to work
- More likely to be financially responsible for others
- Stronger career plans, social engagement, and capacity for tolerance

## Overall challenges...

- Admission vs. yield rates (yield - actually enrolled after admitted)



## Our Partners: Meet SEM

Daphne Rankin, Ph.D.  
 Associate Vice Provost for Strategic Enrollment Management

Elizabeth Bambacus, Ph.D.  
 Student Engagement & Summer Studies Administrator



*If you have questions, need some advice or simply want to talk, please reach out to us. We are here to support you on your college journey — through the ups, downs and everything in between.*



## Our Partners: Meet SEM

Dr. Tomikia LeGrande, Ed.D.  
 Vice Provost for Strategic Enrollment Management



*"When we educate students, we prepare them to achieve their American Dream. And that's particularly true for many of the students we serve who come from backgrounds where higher education outcomes have not been modeled for them. So when they succeed, it's a tremendous advantage for them, their families, their communities, and America."*

## What Exists Already?

### Summer Scholars Program

Five-week session for incoming first-year, first-generation students

Program includes:

- New Student and Family Orientation
- 2 classes – 6 credits
- Evening study sessions with faculty members
- Scholarships and financial aid (when eligible)



## Summer Scholars

### Summer Scholars Program

Students in the Summer Scholars program will:

- Meet new and returning VCU students.
- Experience life in the residence halls.
- Become familiar with VCU's campus so students will know where to go on the first day of classes.
- Get to know Richmond through weekend excursions.
- Learn the ins and outs of college success through informational workshops like "The Science of Learning" and "Wellness in College."



## Altria Scholars

### Altria Scholars Program

- For first-generation students in engineering and business majors
- Offers progress coaching for first- and second-year students
- Need-based scholarships are provided for juniors and seniors



## TRiO

### The TRIO program offers:

- Assistance with FAFSA completion (Financial Aid forms)
- Career workshops
- Development of an Individualized Education Program
- Enhanced academic advising
- Financial counseling education
- One-on-one tutoring
- Peer mentoring
- Social and cultural enrichment activities
- Campus community service projects



## YouFirst

### YouFirst

YouFirst at VCU is a network of programs and initiatives for first-generation students that addresses academic success, social integration and family support.

The goal is to increase retention and academic success of first-generation students.

Students are encouraged to:

- Embrace their strengths
- Ask for help
- Utilize campus resources
- Connect with other first-generation students



## YouFirst

### YouFirst

- All first-generation students have access to a peer mentor who has had similar experiences
  - Parents and families can participate in the first family forum online discussion
  - A student organization meets monthly
  - The Division of Strategic Enrollment Management can connect first-generation students to resources
- <https://youfirstvcu.edu>, students can use the CONTACT US button with questions



## Student Input

### SEM asks for student feedback on programming

- Students fill out program evaluations with room for free-response comments
- Student input is instrumental in determining how the programs evolve

*"The program eliminates that feeling of being alone and connects you to amazing people and opportunities that caters to each student's personal and professional success." ~ Student evaluation*

## Pilot Project: New Faculty Training

- Spoke at a breakout session
- Three twenty-minute presentations
- Roughly 10 - 12 new faculty members each
- Invited new faculty to participate in You First activities

Daphne Rankin will continue to use this presentation at department/advisor meetings.

FirstGen Zone training...?



## VCU's Existing Successes



Designated a "First Forward" Institution by NASPA, professional association for Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education

Dr. Tomekia LeGrande testifies before congressional committee hearing on "Innovation to Improve Equity"

## Project Goal - Expand The Reach through FirstGen Zone Training

### The Goal:

- Raise awareness of the SEM's award winning- current offerings regarding first-generation students
- To expand the program by establishing a framework for a First-Generation Network.



## What the research tells us...

"First-generation students were less engaged overall and less likely to successfully integrate diverse college experiences; they perceived the college environment as less supportive and reported making less progress in their learning and intellectual development"

Gary R. Pike & George D. Kuh (2005) First- and Second-Generation College Students: A Comparison of Their Engagement and Intellectual Development, The Journal of Higher Education



"As academic advisors and administrators, we are uniquely positioned within our institutions to connect first generation students with our educational communities in ways that provide opportunities to them to be academically successful and to earn their degrees"

Darling & Smith, 2007, Academic Advising: New Insights for Teaching and Learning in the First Year

## Here's how we'll get there

Take Existing Programming to Scale



## From FirstGen Zone to YouFirst Ambassadors



## FirstGen Zone -> YouFirst Ambassadors -> YouFirst Network



## FirstGen Network Infrastructure



1. YouFirst Ambassador Reporting and Social Hub

## FirstGen Network Infrastructure



1. YouFirst Ambassador Reporting and Social Hub
2. Dedicated line of funding for FirstGen Faculty Research Fellow

## FirstGen Network Infrastructure



1. YouFirst Ambassador Reporting and Social Hub
2. Dedicated line of funding for FirstGen Faculty Research Fellow
3. Reserved annual research assistantship for graduate researcher

## FirstGen Network Infrastructure



1. YouFirst Ambassador Reporting and Social Hub
2. Dedicated line of funding for FirstGen Faculty Research Fellow
3. Reserved annual research assistantship for graduate researcher
4. Faculty Fellow & FirstGen Student Partnership through Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program

## Expanding Support Structures Works.

### Summary Observations

Primary Population	N (92.61%)	Dropout Proneness	Receptivity to Help
All	4075	7%	31%
First Gen	1241	16%	38%

"This program has been one of the main reasons I have been able to call VCU my home. It gave me a reason to stay."

- Altria Scholars Program Participant

# First Gen: Your Success, Our Commitment

Looking into the future...



# Thank you!

The Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute  
 Strategic Enrollment Management & YouFirst  
 Dr. Daphne Rankin  
 Dr. Tomekia LeGrande

# Reference material

# Why there was the need...

Our peers:

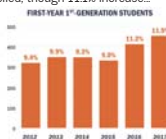
- GMU, largest public univ. in VA, 2018-19 student numbers:
  - Total enrollment: 37,316 (US campus), ug: 25,508
  - 1st time freshmen 3,711, new transfers 3,006
  - 1st gen: 1st time freshmen 21%, ug degree-seeking 36%
- NOVA (Northern VA Community College)
  - 1st gen 20% (56% female)



# Why there was the need...

Our peers:

- UVA, class of 2023
  - 1st gen 42% increase since 2012
  - Pell Grants (low income) remained same (12-13%)
  - Offers to 1st gen went to 1,113 (11.4% of total offers), 12.1% increase from last year
  - But, less than half enroll...
  - Fall 2019: 509 enrolled, though 11.1% increase...



# Why there was the need...

Our peers:

- Virginia Tech
  - 4% increase in applications of 1st gen
  - Intends to enroll 6,600 1st gen (7% increase or 400)
  - Goal: by 2022, 40% of students made up of UR, 1st gen, lower income
  - Comprehensive guide



Intends to enroll 6,600 1st gen (7% increase or 400)  
 Source

## Why there was the need...

Pavilion Research, submitted to Virginia Dept. of Education (2015)

- Survey of 48 guidance counselors (43 high schools) across VA
- VA College Advising Corps (VCAC), est. 2005
  - To address readiness issues for low income, 1st gen. UR
- No college application understanding
  - The first activity students must complete on their won by a specific date
  - Small % of guidance counselors indicating 1st gen students?

Percentages of guidance counselors indicating what parents tend not to know about the college application process.

Finances	42.3%
Need to plan ahead	28.4%
Application process	21.4%
Admissions requirements	14.3%
Ownership should be held by student	14.3%
Unreasonable expectations of school	10.7%
First generation issues	7.1%
Overestimation of child ability	7.1%
How to motivate kids	3.6%
Competitive nature	3.6%
Importance of extra-curricular	3.6%

Percentages. Categories not mutually exclusive.

Percentages of guidance counselors indicating what students tend not to know about the college application process.

Total performance in high school impacts options	43.3%
Requirement for applications-deadlines	43.3%
Finances	30.0%
Choosing right program/institution	16.7%
Rigor definition	10.0%
First generation issues	6.7%
Importance of communication in app. process	3.3%
AP/dual enrollment	3.3%
College one step toward career	3.3%

Percentages. Categories not mutually exclusive.

## Why there was the need...

Back to VCU (cont.)...



- 1st gen, academic motivation (good)

Academic Motivation Scales

Primary Population	Study Habits	Reading Interests	Verbal/Writing Confidence	Math/Science Confidence	Commitment to College	Interactions Previous Teachers
All	50.2	58.0	62.4	55.4	51.3	50.2
→ First Gen	50.2	56.2	55.5	55.1	51.6	50.0
Hispanic Women	56.1	62.6	59.3	50.2	53.2	33.0
Hispanic Men	48.3	49.7	58.6	60.5	48.8	49.9
Black Men	48.6	51.3	61.9	58.9	46.9	47.9
Black Women	52.4	58.2	62.7	51.9	54.4	50.0
Men	45.4	52.4	61.1	61.3	46.9	48.6
Undeclared	40.4	52.9	56.9	51.9	42.8	45.1
Pre-Health	57.3	55.0	57.4	56.8	58.0	51.8
Off Campus	52.7	58.0	62.8	58.9	47.6	52.5

## Why there was the need...

Back to VCU (cont.)...



- 1st gen, general coping skills (good)

General Coping Skills

Primary Population	Social Engagement	Family Support	Capacity for Tolerance	Career Plans	Financial Security
All	55.3	46.7	59.4	50.4	49.2
→ First Gen	54.9	43.7	59.7	53.6	35.3
Hispanic Women	54.9	42.7	54.8	52.9	39.3
Hispanic Men	58.5	50.1	64.4	51.6	37.5
Black Men	58.0	48.7	64.7	46.9	45.0
Black Women	58.0	47.6	58.3	57.5	39.5
Men	55.3	49.0	65.8	48.4	53.7
Undeclared	56.4	45.0	58.8	25.3	49.8
Pre-Health	56.9	49.0	62.6	64.4	43.0
Off Campus	48.0	47.8	62.5	50.6	46.6

## Why there was the need...

Back to VCU (cont.)...



- 1st gen, dropout and academic difficulty (concern)

Summary Observations

Primary Population	N (92.61%)	Dropout Proneness	Predicted Academic Difficulty	Educational Stress	Receptivity to Help
All	4075	7%	8%	23%	31%
→ First Gen	1241	16%	12%	25%	38%
Hispanic Women	247	13%	11%	21%	40%
Hispanic Men	114	16%	16%	24%	32%
Black Men	260	10%	11%	25%	45%
Black Women	594	8%	12%	20%	50%
Men	1388	9%	9%	25%	25%
Undeclared	418	14%	15%	33%	30%
Pre-Health	386	5%	7%	18%	38%
Off Campus	531	10%	6%	22%	23%

33% of the 2017-18 freshman class was made up of first-gen students!  
Source: <https://www.vcu.edu/first-gen/pep-2018/>