

FIRST GENERATION SUPPORT NETWORK OF CANADA

**Establishing a Unified Cross-Canadian Network for First
Generation Student Success**



Project Developed by: Isabella Grajczyk, Kook Hu, and Tamara Paris

Abstract

The First Generation Support Network of Canada (FGSNC) aims to create a unified, cross-Canadian solution to enhance the support and success of first-generation students in higher education. First-generation students often face unique challenges, including limited access to educational resources, cultural dislocation, and the confusion surrounding the hidden curriculum within the education system. Post-secondary institutions in Canada are uncoordinated in their efforts to support first-generation students, causing unequal experiences for these students depending on their selected institution. Some universities have robust support systems in place for first-generation students, while others have in-active student-run clubs or non-existent supports. The inconsistency in support available demonstrates one of the primary challenges in improving the experience of first-generation students. FGSNC addresses these challenges through targeted initiatives and collaborative efforts among Canadian post-secondary institutions. By leveraging successful frameworks and best practices, FGSNC seeks to provide a comprehensive support system, including mentorship programs, knowledge sharing sessions, and resource dissemination. The project will be implemented in three phases: piloting at McGill University, expanding to other Canadian institutions, and establishing a national presence. The project's ultimate goal is to foster an inclusive and equitable educational environment that empowers first-generation students to achieve their full potential and contribute to their communities.

Keywords: First-Generation Students, Canada, Higher Education, Youth Empowerment, Quality Education

Team Members:



Isabella Grajczyk is a first-generation student in her second year of an MA in Political Science at McGill University, focusing on gender and development. With a background in Education and as founder of a non-profit organization, she hopes to apply her knowledge to develop meaningful policy solutions.



Kook Hu is studying MA Geography at McGill University, focusing on digital divide, and quality education. He is the first in his family to enter middle school. After realizing his identity as a first-generation low-income student, Kook made it a personal mission to broaden the horizons for these students.



Tamara Paris is studying a Masters in Computer Science and doing research in AI ethics at McGill University. She wants to use her technical skills to help develop a more responsible world to face the challenges introduced by the new technologies.

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Introduction

First-generation students, defined as individuals whose parents did not complete a post-secondary degree, often face challenges that can impede their commencement and continuation of post-secondary education (Taylor et al., 2019; Bell & Santamaria, 2020). These challenges can include limited access to academic resources, minimal knowledge of funding opportunities, and reduced institutional support. A key barrier to their success is the hidden curriculum that exists within post-secondary institutions. The hidden curriculum refers to the “tacit rules of educational practice” (Gable, 2021, p. ix). However, many first-generation students lack awareness of these unwritten rules, making their transition to post-secondary education particularly difficult. This lack of familiarity with the hidden curriculum not only hinders their academic performance but also diminishes their sense of belonging within a university setting. Addressing these challenges is essential for fostering youth empowerment, as it ensures that all students have equitable opportunities to succeed and thrive in higher education.

Data on first-generation students in Canada is sparse and a comprehensive breakdown at individual Canadian universities is not always available. Of the data that exists, much is fairly dated, highlighting the need for a more thorough approach to understanding first-generation students in Canada. According to data gathered in 2021, the majority of students at McGill University have parents who are highly educated. Nevertheless, 13.1% of McGill students identify as first-generation, with 11.6% of undergraduates and 19.5% of graduate students being first-generation (Nycum, 2021). Chatoor et al. (2019) also noted that “in 2014 nearly one in five Canadians between the ages of 15 and 24 were first-generation students” (p. 7). Although this data is nearly a decade old and lacks the perspective of international students, it highlights that first-generation students at both McGill and in Canada are often overlooked. The evident gaps in data emphasize the need for a coordinated effort to better understand the unique challenges faced by first-generation students in order to address them.

This proposal aims to outline a strategy to enhance the support systems for first-generation students, drawing on best practices and successful frameworks from other organizations and institutions to propose an initiative that ensures inclusive and equitable educational opportunities, amplifying youth empowerment in Canada. Ultimately, this project strives to ensure that all students, regardless of background, have equitable access to the opportunities and resources necessary to thrive in higher education and beyond. In doing so, we pave the way for a brighter, more inclusive future that empowers all.

1. Identifying the Problem

1.1 Challenges Faced by First-Generation Students

There are numerous challenges that first-generation students may face as they navigate post-secondary education, including financial, academic, and social obstacles:

Financial Challenges

Research indicates that first-generation students often experience greater financial difficulties compared to their continuing-generation peers¹ (Manzoni & Streib, 2019). Financial challenges frequently compel first-generation students to take on part-time or full-time work throughout their studies, adding significant stress and time constraints (Bell & Santamaria, 2018). These competing demands can hinder their ability to participate in valuable opportunities such as study abroad programs, internships, and extracurricular activities, all of which can be crucial for their future success (Manzoni & Streib, 2019). In addition, limited financial support from parents and a lack of knowledge about scholarships and fundings opportunities further exacerbate these challenges (Manzoni & Streib, 2019). Financial strain can isolate first-generation students, making the pursuit of post-secondary education feel both inaccessible and intimidating (Bell & Santamaria, 2018). Addressing these financial barriers is essential to ensuring that first-generation students have equal access and knowledge of the full range of educational and development opportunities available to their peers.

Academic Challenges

Academic integration can be particularly challenging for first-generation students due to their often limited understanding of academic support systems compared to their continuing-generation peers. They are less likely to attend office hours, ask questions during class, and seek necessary help from professors, which can negatively impact their performance (Manzoni & Streib, 2019). As a result, first-generation students may receive lower grades, feel less prepared for academic challenges, and become less engaged in their courses (Bell & Santamaria, 2018; Taylor et al., 2019). Imposter syndrome further reinforces these academic challenges, as students may feel that they do not belong in an academically rigorous environment or lack the tools to succeed academically (Bell & Santamaria, 2018; Reed et al., 2019). As Reed et al. (2019) explain, first-generation students “have less opportunity to attain knowledge of university systems prior to entry. This lack of knowledge is reported to negatively affect their university experience” (p. 964). This sense of not belonging can undermine their confidence and motivation, making it even harder to seek out support and fully engage in their studies.

Social Challenges

First-generation students often face significant social challenges as they navigate higher education. One prominent challenge is adjusting to the more individualized culture of university life, particularly for those that come from tight-knit community environments (Bell & Santamaria, 2018). In addition, first-generation students may feel pressured to

¹ Continuing generation students are defined as students whose parents have previously completed a bachelor's degree or higher at a post-secondary institution.

“adopt a different persona for university” to better fit in with peers and professors (Bell & Santamaria, 2018, p. 4). This perceived need for code-switching can be a considerable social challenge, potentially leading to negative effects on an individual’s mental health, sense of belonging, and identity. Feelings of loneliness and isolation are common among first-generation students which can lead to increased confusion and possible conflict as they begin university (Taylor et al., 2019). These social challenges not only impact their emotional well being but can also hinder their academic performance and overall experience at university.

1.2 Uniqueness of First-Generation Students in the Canadian Context

The study of first-generation students in Canada is notably underdeveloped, which presents significant challenges for data analysis and program development. This research gap points to a larger issue with regards to the visibility and understanding of first-generation students in Canada and their unique interests and needs. With limited data comes a reduced understanding of the barriers faced by first-generation students in Canada and the inability to adequately address barriers and implement necessary support measures. The majority of North American research focuses on first-generation students in the United States, thus overlooking the unique challenges and situations that may be present in a Canadian context. According to Reed et al. (2019), “Approximately 28–36% of the Canadian population has earned a university degree and 17–30% has earned a college diploma for an overall higher education rate of between 45–66%. Dropout rates range between 8 and 20% depending on the Canadian province” (p. 967). These statistics highlight the diversity of educational attainment across Canada and the need for more localized research to better understand regional contexts and identify targeted solutions.

To address these gaps, it is important to consider several unique features of the Canadian context that impact first-generation students. These include the Indigenous population, the bilingual education system, and distinct immigration patterns. Each of these factors introduces specific challenges and opportunities that must be understood to create effective support systems in Canada.

Indigenous Population

Indigenous students in Canada face compounded challenges, as “more than half of Indigenous students are first-generation students, compared with one-third of non-Indigenous students” (Bell & Santamaria, 2018, p. 74). This disparity highlights the need for targeted support systems that address both the cultural and socio-economic barriers these students encounter. Indigenous students often face unique challenges such as limited access to educational resources, cultural dislocation, and systemic barriers within the education system. Historical and ongoing impacts of colonization, such as residential schools and intergenerational trauma, further complicate their educational experiences. (Bell & Santamaria, 2018) To effectively support Indigenous first-generation

students, it is important to provide culturally relevant curricula, foster strong community and family ties, and offer support services that incorporate Indigenous knowledge and traditions.

Bilingual Education System

Esman, M. J. (1982) points out that the official bilingualism in Canada brings concerns in equality at the national level. Canada's official bilingualism introduces layers of complexity for first-generation students, who may need to navigate educational resources and support services in both English and French. This dual-language requirement can create barriers not present in unilingual systems. For instance, first-generation students in Quebec might face additional challenges if their primary language of instruction is French, but they need to engage with resources or pursue opportunities in English. Conversely, in predominantly English-speaking provinces, Francophone students may struggle with accessing support in their preferred language. This bilingual context necessitates the development of support systems that are accessible in both languages, ensuring that language barriers do not impede academic success.

Immigration Patterns

Canada's immigration policies result in a diverse population of first-generation students, each with distinct cultural backgrounds and educational experiences. Many first-generation students are children of immigrants who may have experienced significant upheaval and adjustment challenges. These students often navigate the complexities of integrating into a new educational system while balancing cultural expectations and family responsibilities. The 'Education-Immigration Nexus' (Schinnerl & Ellermann, 2023) reveals that immigrant students may face language barriers, differences in educational systems, and the need to support their families financially. Additionally, the intersection of immigration status with other factors such as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status can exacerbate challenges.

Given the unique experiences of first-generation students in Canada, as well as other regional differences in the country, there is a significant need for tailored approaches that cannot be crafted using American data or understandings. Canadian-specific understandings of first-generation students and solutions crafted specifically for their needs are essential for their success and will contribute to a more equitable and accessible higher education system within Canada. The forthcoming project aims to bridge the gap by providing insights and recommendations that are contextually relevant and practically applicable to the Canadian higher education landscape.

1.3 Institutional Practices and Support Systems

The opportunities available to first-generation students play a key role in their empowerment and success. Institutions that foster support systems and equitable engagement policies are instrumental in uplifting these students. Research indicates that successful educational outcomes are not strictly the result of individual choices or external circumstances. Rather, equitable institutional practices are key facilitators of positive educational attainments (Bell & Santamaria, 2018). As Airini and Naepi (2018) explain, “In the past we may have asked, ‘What changes will students make to lift their university achievement rates?’ Now we ask, ‘What changes do we the researchers, instructors, institutions, policy-makers and power holders need to make to accelerate achievement by first-generation students?’” (Bell & Santamaria, p. 75). This shift in perspective highlights the collective responsibility of educational institutions to create environments that enable first-generation students to succeed.

Institutional support can be enhanced through increased community building initiatives, such as mentorship programs and learning communities. These programs work to foster a sense of belonging and provide guidance tailored to the needs and experiences of first-generation students (Guzman et al., 2022; Markle & Stelzriede, 2020). Currently, many institutions fall short in building communities and in providing instruction on healthy practices, mental health, and financial literacy (Levin, 2022). While many continuing-generation students may not require as much support, first-generation students often require additional support to thrive in these areas. However, for these initiatives to be truly effective, they must be tailored specifically for first-generation students. As Markle & Stelzriede (2020) explain, “learning communities can positively impact first-generation college students when they are intentionally designed to address first-generation experiences and identities, promote academic citizenship, and cultivate a sense of student belonging” (p. 295). As such, tailored support programs that focus on the unique needs of first-generation students are needed to improve the capabilities of institutions and ensure these students succeed both academically and personally.

First-generation student-run clubs can be a valuable tool for building community and fostering support. While institutions often provide funding and resources for these ventures, the funding can be limited, restricting the clubs’ activities and outreach potential. In addition, the busy schedules and competing interests of students can make it challenging for clubs to meet regularly and in meaningful ways. To better understand the support available for first-generation students and identify existing gaps, we will analyze the services and programs at three prominent Canadian universities: McGill University (our home institution), the University of British Columbia, and the University of Toronto.

McGill University²

At McGill University, 1st Up is a peer support club facilitated by first-generation students. The club is advertised on the McGill website and promotes informal meet-ups (McGill, 2024). However, in the 2023-2024 school year the club only held three meet-ups and no social media posts have been made since February 2024. This lack of organized programming and inactive social media presence reinforce the notion that student-run clubs can be difficult to maintain. When first-generation students require consistent community building efforts to address their unique challenges, infrequent meetings and limited schedules can be disheartening.

In addition to 1st Up, McGill University promotes the “First Gen Guide”, a concise document found on the McGill website that outlines specific resources for students. The guide provides quick summaries and links to various McGill services, including academic support, health and wellness resources, and financial and career planning. The “First Gen Guide” is a valuable tool for any student, first-generation or otherwise, as they begin their studies at McGill, helping to disseminate essential knowledge and provide the necessary tools (McGill, 2020). However, while the guide is helpful in many respects, it lacks detailed information on certain aspects of university life that first-generation students might find challenging. For example, it does not cover how to communicate effectively with professors, get involved on campus, or build a community of peers. Such skills are vital for both personal and academic success. Simply providing links to resources, while important, is not enough. First-generation students may not even know the skills that they are missing. In addition, placing the onus on the students to seek out and delve into this information on their own can create an additional barrier, especially during their first few months of their studies when they are already adjusting to a new environment.

University of British Columbia³

Similarly to McGill University, the University of British Columbia (UBC) has a student-run club that promotes peer support for first-generation students, however it remains largely inactive. At first glance, the First Generation Students Union (FGSU, 2021) at UBC appears comprehensive and impactful, with numerous resources highlighted on their website and promotion on the UBC website. Unfortunately, the FGSU has struggled to maintain momentum following the graduation of past members and has faced challenges in recruiting and retaining passionate student executives to revive the club. In 2021, the FGSU hosted the GenOne conference, a virtual event aimed at connecting first-generation students across Canada for the first ever conference of its

² For more information visit: McGill. “First Generation Student Support”. *McGill University*, 2024. <https://www.mcgill.ca/firstgeneration/1st-peer-support-group>

³ For more information visit: FGSU. “First Generation Students Union”. *FGSU*, UBC, 2021. <https://ubcfgsu.wixsite.com/home/about-genone>

kind in the country (FGSU, 2021). While the conference was an innovative initiative to connect Canadian first-generation students, it only took place in 2021 and has not been held since. In addition, the FGSU has also not posted on their Instagram account since September 2023 and it appears no new members were recruited for the 2023-2024 school year. As a result, first-generation students at UBC are not receiving the support they need and the decline in activity from FGSU highlights the challenges many student-run clubs face when engagement and interest in leadership roles diminish. This ultimately demonstrates the need for sustained institutional support and structured programs to ensure that these clubs can continue to provide essential services and community building opportunities for first-generation students.

University of Toronto⁴

The University of Toronto (U of T) has by far the most comprehensive student support services for first-generation students. The U of T's First Generation Student Engagement programming "provides connections to academic, career, wellness and many other services to foster a sense of belonging and community" (University of Toronto, 2024). Unlike McGill and UBC, U of T's first-generation student support is a part of the Student Life center and is run by staff, not students. As such, the services provided are more consistent and more funding is available for community building activities, mentorship, and resources. The First Generation Student Engagement Program offers one-on-one appointments for student support, facilitated small group discussions, and regular events to connect students with staff, librarians, and faculty members (University of Toronto, 2024). Events are offered both in person and online for U of T students, helping to facilitate some semblance of community. The only missing avenue for the First Generation Student Engagement is the lack of resources listed on their website. There is a link to access further resources for students more generally, but no specific resources designed for first-generation students. Creating and adding accessible resources would further strengthen the already robust programming offered at the U of T.

The visible disparity among some of the largest universities in Canada highlights the problem of uncoordinated efforts to empower first-generation students. With varying degrees of support and resources across different institutions, first-generation students experience inconsistent levels of assistance depending on where they attend university. This inconsistency can lead to unequal opportunities and outcomes, limiting the overall success and empowerment of first-generation students nationwide. While many universities have insufficient measures to support first-generation students, there are universities that do not have any support systems in place at all. For example both the University of Regina and the University of Winnipeg, two smaller institutions in Canada, do not have any institutional support or student club designed

⁴ For more information visit: University of Toronto. "First Generation Student Engagement". *Student Life*, 2024. <https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/program/first-generation-student-engagement/>

specifically for first-generation students. As such, a more coordinated approach is essential to ensure that all first-generation students receive the support they need to be successful, regardless of their chosen institution.

2. Problem Statement

Given the multifaceted challenges faced by first-generation students, there is a pressing need for a concrete and comprehensive national support system. The current uncoordinated efforts across Canadian institutions present a significant barrier to effectively supporting these students. There is minimal collaboration between universities, and a lack of a cohesive, overarching support system that first-generation students can rely on for essential resources, mentorship, and assistance. How might we sustainably address the financial, academic, and social challenges faced by Canadian first-generation students through institutional partnerships and localized support initiatives to ensure their empowerment and success?

3. Framework

3.1 Global Principles

This project proposal is grounded in the primary principles of Sustainable Development Goal #4, which aims to ensure “inclusive and equitable quality education” (United Nations, 2024). Although the UN goals do not explicitly call for a focus on first-generation students, the goal of providing accessible education inherently includes their needs. Targets 4.3 and 4.5 are at the core of our project and serve as inspiration and guidance through both the planning and implementation phases. Target 4.3 states, “By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university” (United Nations, 2024). This target highlights the importance of making higher education accessible to all, regardless of background, which directly aligns with the challenges faced by first-generation students. Target 4.5 further emphasizes accessibility by stating, “By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations” (United Nations, 2024). First-generation students often belong to such vulnerable groups which can impede their access to education. By aligning our project with the UN targets, we aim to address the specific needs of first-generation students in Canada. This alignment not only enhances the relevance of our project, but also contributes to the global goal of achieving inclusive and equitable education for all.

3.2 Recommendations and Best Practices

The literature suggests multiple recommendations and best practices to consider to foster first-generation student success and empowerment. Among these, mentoring stands out as a highly effective strategy. Mentoring programs that connect first-generation students with both

academic and peer mentors can create positive outcomes (Guzman et al., 2022). Research indicates that mentoring can improve “retention, graduation rates, grade point average, self-efficacy, and overall student satisfaction with college” (Guzman et al., 2022, p. 14). This highlights the transformative potential of mentoring in fostering a culture of inclusivity and support that first-generation students may not otherwise experience. Mentoring also provides a safe space for students to ask questions and gain valuable first-hand information about navigating university life. It helps to demystify the academic environment and offers personal insights that can make the transition to university smoother. For example, mentors can advise first-generation mentees on how to communicate with professors, utilize various resources on campus, and even how to balance academic and personal responsibilities.

Despite the proven benefits, many institutions still lack structured mentoring programs for first-generation students. This gap showcases the need for institutional commitment to developing and maintaining mentorship programs. Mentoring can be integral to the knowledge building that is required in university, allowing first-generation students to “process their shifts in identity” and adapt to new social contexts (Guzman et al., 2022, p. 15). Successful mentoring programs often include training for mentors, consistent meetings, integration with academic services, and regular feedback. Programs like the one offered at the University of Toronto, as well as Berkeley Connect offered at the University of California, Berkeley follow similar guidelines. Berkeley Connect, while not intended solely for first-generation students, pairs students with faculty and peer mentors, providing a structured framework for mentorship that has shown positive results in student retention and success (UC Berkeley, 2024). Implementing and expanding mentorship programs requires dedicated resources and a commitment from university leadership. However, the potential benefits for first-generation students make this investment worthwhile. Prioritizing mentoring and other supportive practices creates a more equitable and empowering environment for first-generation students.

Learning communities or knowledge sharing sessions are another vital avenue of support, designed to bring together students with similar academic ambitions and goals. These groups meet regularly to discuss strategies, share ideas, and collaborate on projects, fostering a sense of community and mutual support. For first-generation students, engaging with peers through these sessions can enhance their personal and academic development (Markle & Stelzriede, 2020). However, the effectiveness of learning communities is entirely based on their design. To truly benefit first-generation students, learning communities must be designed to address their unique experiences. This includes creating opportunities for students to form meaningful relationships and bridging any gaps that may emerge due to background or unfamiliarity with the university environment (Markle & Stelzriede, 2020). Incorporating aspects of intentionally designed learning communities or knowledge sharing sessions into our overall framework ensures that first-generation students receive targeted support and a way to share knowledge in an inclusive environment.

According to Bell and Santamaria (2018), there are ten recommendations that they suggest to help universities do more than just listen to first-generation students. These recommendations include:

1. “co-inquire and co-create with first generation students
2. highlight the experiences of first generation students and staff
3. engage with first generation students’ families and communities
4. support all students and staff to develop skills around intercultural communication and social justice
5. foster supportive environments for the development of friendships and peer support
6. develop programmes for first generation students
7. recognize the challenging conditions in which academics work
8. enact curriculum change that reflects the cultural strengths of first generation students
9. initiate and support large scale, multi-institutional initiatives
10. think beyond” (Bell & Santamaria, 2018).

These recommendations emphasize the importance of a holistic and inclusive approach to supporting first-generation students. Involving students in the creation of support systems, engaging their families and communities, and fostering an environment that supports and values diversity will enable universities to better address the unique challenges these students face.

3.3 The First Scholars Framework

The American-focused First Scholars Framework is a tool developed by the Center for First Generation Student Success, a collaboration between NASPA and the Suder Foundation. The framework covers evidence-based approaches and actionable outcomes that are intended for institutions to implement to empower and support the success of first-generation students across the United States (First Scholars, 2020). The framework covers two forms of actionable outcomes: Institution-Focused and Student-Centered (First Scholars, 2020).

The Institution-Focused Actionable Items include:

- Strategically Aligned Leadership - Ensuring university leadership is committed to providing aligned and effective support for first-generation students.
- Cross-Campus Networked Approach - Building relationships between different faculties and departments to mobilize members of the university community.
- Decision-Making Through Actionable Data - Utilizing qualitative and quantitative data directly from first-generation students to inform decision making processes.
- Demonstrate Return on Investment (ROI) - Designing initiatives that last the duration of a student’s academic career to ensure meaningful results.

- Comprehensive Communications - Focusing on creating communication methods within the university that are inclusive to first-generation students.
- Intentional Alumni and Donor Relations - Fostering strong relationships with first-generation student alumni to maintain long term support and potential donations.
- Faculty and Staff Engagement and Knowledge Building - Encouraging faculty and staff to support and engage with first-generation student initiatives.

These seven Institution-Focused Actionable Items focus on enabling university leaders and fostering collaboration between institutions to work towards a unified approach that supports first-generation students. The items also emphasize using both qualitative and quantitative data to make better decisions based on the responses of first-generation students and creating better methods of communication for knowledge dissemination and resource distribution. Lastly, engaging both first-generation alumni and faculty and staff will foster stronger institutional approaches to first-generation students and maintain support in the long term (First Scholars, 2020). The institutional items provide key guidelines for institutional collaboration, which can help us develop a unified and effective strategy to support first-generation students with proven methods that ensure our project is grounded in best practices.

The Student-Centered Actionable Items include:

- Holistic Programs to Scale - Serving as a bridge between the Institution-focused and Student-centered actionable items to ensure programs remain holistic in nature.
- Successful College Transitions - Ensuring adequate support for first-generation students during transitional years.
- Personal Development and Understanding Intersectional Identities - Engaging with intersecting identities and providing adequate opportunities for continued learning and development.
- Navigating Resources and Gaining Capital - Developing tools and resources to ensure longevity and adequate information.
- Academic Support and Success - Creating pathways and research opportunities for first-generation students.
- Campus, Community, and Global Engagement - Establishing mentorship programs and community support systems.
- Holistic Wellness - All-encompassing wellness for first-generation students.
- Career and Post-Completion Preparation - Building a strong network and preparing students for next steps.

These Student-Centered Actionable Items focus on providing recommendations and guidance for integrating, understanding, and supporting first-generation students from an institutional standpoint (First Scholars, 2020). This framework ensures that a student-centered

approach is at the forefront of our project, prioritizing the needs and perspectives of first-generation students to forge stronger, more effective solutions. Through the implementation of these actionable items, our project will be better positioned to address the challenges faced by first-generation students.

4. Project Proposal: First Generation Support Network of Canada (FGSNC)

4.1 Summary

The First Generation Support Network of Canada (FGSNC) is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to supporting and empowering first-generation students across Canada through community building efforts and institutional collaboration. FGSNC has two primary streams of operation to create a unified support network. First, FGSNC will operate as a fully-fledged not-for-profit organization that offers virtual knowledge sharing sessions, and develops and distributes necessary information and resources for first-generation students across Canada. Second, FGSNC aims to connect first-generation (first-gen) peer groups, clubs, associations, and societies across Canadian post-secondary institutions. Through these collaborative partnerships, FGSNC will facilitate a mentorship program, as well as support universities to create first-generation opportunities on campus or enhance any existing opportunities. By providing a support framework, FGSNC will improve the experiences and success of first-generation students nationwide. This project addresses the unique challenges faced by first-generation students and aims to create a unified, sustainable, and effective support system tailored to the Canadian context.

4.2 Project Overview

The First Generation Support Network of Canada (FGSNC) is an organization dedicated to empowering first-generation students across the country by providing extensive support and fostering a strong, interconnected network. FGSNC aims to facilitate conversations that connect first-generation students on a national scale, as well as develop a unified approach for post-secondary institutions to adapt to regional contexts. This dual strategy aligns with recommendations from existing literature and the First Scholars Framework, ensuring that our efforts are both evidence-based and effective. The two streams of FGSNC operations are through our cross-country objectives and collaboration with post-secondary institutions.

Cross-Country Objectives

To build a national community of first-generation students, FGSNC aims to host monthly knowledge sharing sessions on topics that will be valuable for students across Canada. These virtual sessions will ensure cross-country participation and cover a range of subjects such as time management, study skills, networking strategies, information on applying for scholarships, and resume writing. The sessions will not only provide practical knowledge but also create

opportunities for first-generation students to connect with their peers and strengthen their community ties. FGSNC will ensure that these sessions are both structured and informal, fostering deeper engagement and a comfortable atmosphere for participants. The goal of the knowledge sharing sessions is to equip participants with the tools and networks necessary for their academic and personal success.

To provide further information for first-generation students across the country, FGSNC will develop the First Generation Student Guidebook. This guidebook will offer valuable information on a wide range of topics essential for first-generation students. Similar to the knowledge sharing sessions, the guidebook will cover subjects such as budgeting, student loan information, effective study techniques, and understanding the hidden curriculum. This guidebook will be accessible on the FGSNC website and available in hard-copy format at partner universities, ensuring wide distribution and easy access for all first-generation students.

Collaboration with Post-Secondary Institutions

Collaborating with post-secondary institutions is essential for developing a robust first-generation student network. By working closely with universities and existing first-generation student clubs, we can leverage resources, expand our impact, and establish legitimacy for FGSNC, especially in its formative stages. FGSNC will support universities that lack first-generation support groups by helping them establish these groups using systematic methods and toolkits. For institutions with existing first-generation groups, we will enhance their effectiveness and integrate them into the broader national network. We will provide the necessary resources, such as the First Generation Student Guidebook, to ensure the sustainable operation of first-generation groups on campuses. This will foster unity among first-generation student groups and ensure that all students receive consistent levels of support, regardless of their university. This collaboration will lead to the development of a mentorship program in partnership with each university. The program will follow a standardized format created by FGSNC to ensure equitable implementation nationwide, while being tailored to the local context of each participating university.

Membership

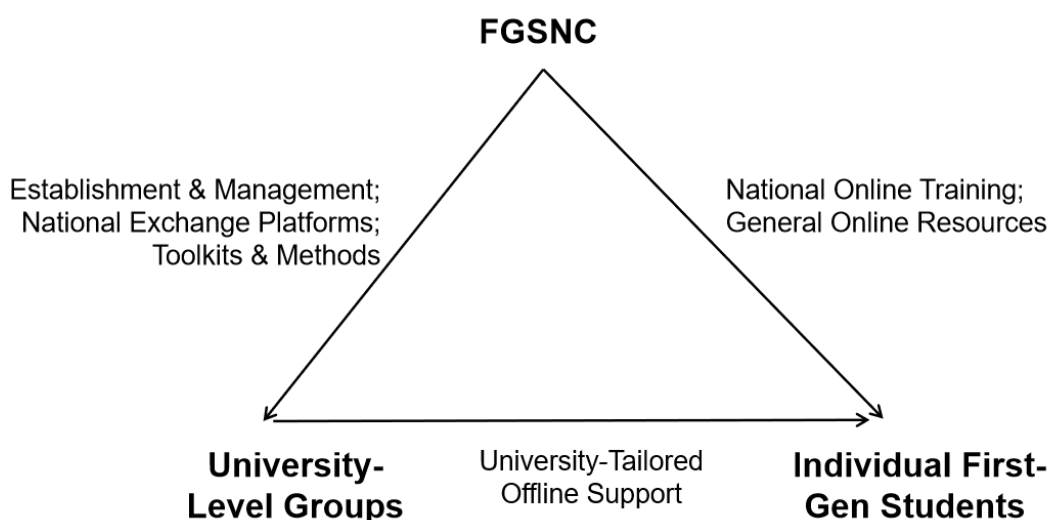
There are two branches of membership within FGSNC which include:

Institutional Members - First-gen peer groups, clubs, associations, and societies in Canadian universities are invited to join FGSNC as institutional members. Interested universities without established first-gen groups will also be invited to join as institutional members.

Individual Members - Any student self-identifying as a first-generation student will be considered an individual member of FGSNC. In addition, first-generation students participating in their university's first-generation group automatically become individual members.

Figure A presents a visualization of how FGSNC will interact with individual first-generation students and university-level groups. FGSNC will offer programming, resources, and support to both universities and individual first-generation students. In turn, university-level groups will also offer support to individual students at their respective institutions. Further explanation of each relationship can be found below.

Figure A



FGSNC and Individual First-Gen Students - FGSNC will offer national training, support, and resources tailored to the general needs of first-generation students across Canada. This will be done through virtual knowledge sharing sessions and the First Generation Student Guidebook.

FGSNC and University-Level Groups - FGSNC will provide toolkits and methods to ensure the sustainable and effective running of first-generation groups on campus. For universities lacking such groups, FGSNC will aid in their establishment. Collaboration will also occur to start a mentorship program at each member institution.

University-Level Groups and Individual First-Gen Students - University-level groups will provide training, support, and resources to first-gen students, ideally in-person, based on the specific context and unique needs of their respective universities.

4.3 Implementation Plan and Timeline

4.3.1 Implementation Plan

The implementation plan for FGSNC is structured into three strategic phases spanning from September 2024 to September 2026. This two-year timeline is designed to facilitate steady and sustainable growth to ensure that the expansion of FGSNC occurs at a manageable pace. The success and longevity of FGSNC is essential for the empowerment of first-generation students in Canada, making a well-defined implementation plan crucial. The detailed plan is as follows:

Phase 1:

Phase 1 of the implementation plan will focus on grant applications and other funding opportunities to secure the necessary resources to achieve our objectives, disseminate information, and register as a not-for-profit organization in Canada. A key component of the knowledge dissemination strategy will be the creation of the First Generation Student Guidebook. Throughout Phase 1, we will work on creating the guidebook, which will be shared in a later phase with institutional partners across Canada.

In parallel, we will begin piloting the project at McGill University. Starting with our home institution allows us to leverage our familiarity with McGill's resources and processes to introduce the concept of FGSNC on a smaller-scale. During this phase, we will establish relationships with McGill faculty and staff, as well as the 1st Up club, to collaboratively develop pilot knowledge sharing sessions for first-generation students. These sessions will address key topics such as navigating university life, identifying funding opportunities, and effectively interacting with faculty. We plan to host 2-3 pilot knowledge sharing sessions, which will provide valuable insights into the needs of first-generation students and areas for improvement. The feedback gathered from participants will be essential for refining these sessions and ensuring they meet the actual needs of students, thereby enhancing their applicability and scalability across all of Canada.

To begin preparation for the pilot project at McGill University, we conducted a survey to glean more information about first-generation and continuing-generation students on campus. Details of the survey results are attached at the end of this proposal in [Annex 1](#) for reference.

The purpose of the survey was to better understand the needs and challenges faced by first-generation students at McGill. We created this survey to identify differences between first and continuing-generation students and to invite the former group to discuss their experiences at McGill. To accomplish this, the survey consisted of demographic questions, followed by a series of Likert-style questions, and concluded with open-ended questions exclusively for those who identified as first-generation students.

Survey responses were collected from McGill students in June 2024. A total of 54 responses were received: 43 from continuing-generation students and 11 from first-generation students. The demographics of the survey are not entirely representative of the McGill student population, as there was a significant overrepresentation of female respondents and the majority of participants were Master's students. However, the demographic distributions between first-generation and continuing-generation students were relatively similar. The main differences were a higher proportion of international students, a higher proportion of PhD students, and a lower proportion of undergraduates among first-generation respondents. We also note that the sample size (53) was relatively small; therefore, although trends were observed, some results should be interpreted with caution because they are not statistically significant. The description of survey results is as follows:

(1) Support and connection:

First-generation students felt significantly more supported by McGill staff than continuing-generation students. This might be because continuing-generation students have alternative support systems, such as their families. This is confirmed by the results of Question 7, where continuing-generation students reported feeling more supported by their families. Conversely, Question 4 and Question 5 indicated that first-generation students felt more supported by their peers and professors. This need to find support and connection with their peers and McGill staff and professors is echoed in Question 3: first-generation students appeared to be more involved in campus events and activities. Furthermore, in the open-ended questions, many first-generation students described their friends and family as their primary source of support.

Despite these findings, lack of connection is one of the main challenges expressed by first-generation students in the open-ended questions: respondents highlighted a lack of support, connections, and representation within McGill, as well as a lack of connection with their parents regarding their university experience. Several respondents also mentioned feelings of loneliness. They also described their desire for more opportunities to find support and connections within McGill: for example with mentorship (from students and faculty members), networking events, or program adjustments to encourage interactions among first-generation students.

(2) Financial resources and external stress factors:

First-generation students were more likely to rely on scholarships and grants than continuing-generation students, who were more likely to receive financial support from their families. First-generation students also reported significantly higher levels of stress due to factors outside of their academic program compared to continuing-generation students. This may be due

to the additional challenges that first-generation students often face, such as coming from low-income families.

In the open-ended questions, some first-generation students expressed the need for increased financial support. This is further evidenced by their reliance on outside financial sources, which may contribute to their stress. They also expressed other external stress factors such as being in a foreign country: some first-generation students faced language barriers and had difficulties transitioning to a new culture and political environment.

Although medical problems could be another external stress factor, the medical support offered by McGill University was cited as helpful by many first-generation students (Student Health Care and Wellness Hub). One student also highlighted the support offered by therapists.

(3) Support specific to first-generation students:

While many respondents indicated in open-ended questions that they needed specific support for first-generation students, none indicated that they received such support at McGill University. As such, these survey results, although limited in some regards, are useful for the beginning stages of the FGSNC pilot at McGill University. We will be able to use this information to make informed-decisions and better serve first-generation students on campus.

Phase 2:

Phase 2 is the strategic expansion phase, during which we will aim to connect with institutions across Canada to develop strong working relationships and foster collaboration. Maintaining these connections is essential for the work that will begin in the fall of 2025, ensuring that both institutions and any existing first-generation clubs are actively involved. This phase will also focus on finalizing the First Generation Student Guidebook, with plans to disseminate both physical and virtual copies to all partner institutions.

Additionally, we will develop programming for cross-Canada implementation, working closely with other institutions to ensure all voices and regional perspectives are represented. This collaborative approach will help tailor the programming to the specific needs of first-generation students in different regions, fostering a more inclusive and effective support system. The strategic expansion phase is necessary for building a unified network that empowers first-generation students across Canada, setting the stage for successful nationwide implementation.

Phase 3:

Phase 3 consists of Canada-wide implementation, beginning with the launch of the official FGSNC website and social media accounts. These platforms will serve as comprehensive resources for first-generation students, providing access to vital information and support, regardless of their institution. The website and social media will be designed to be engaging to ensure that students can easily navigate and find the resources they need. Simultaneously, we will initiate monthly learning sessions aimed at fostering a national community of first-generation students. These sessions will offer opportunities for students to learn from experts, share their experiences, and support each other, ultimately strengthening their academic and social networks.

The mentorship component will commence at the end of Phase 3, facilitated by partner institutions to ensure compassionate and consistent support. We will develop a structured framework for the mentorship program to guarantee it is beneficial for both mentors and mentees, promoting sustained engagement and growth. By the conclusion of Phase 3, FGSNC will operate as a fully-fledged organization, continuously adapting and growing through ongoing feedback and evaluation. This phase is essential for establishing a robust support system that empowers first-generation students across Canada, ensuring they have the resources and community they need to be successful.

4.3.2 Proposed Timeline:

	Title	Timeframe	Details
<i>Phase 1</i>	McGill Pilot Project	September to December 2024	Work closely with McGill faculty, staff, first-generation student club (1st Up), and students to develop pilot knowledge sharing sessions
		September to December 2024	Apply for grants and secure necessary funding
		January to March 2025	Host 2-3 pilot knowledge sharing sessions
		March to April 2025	Refine knowledge sharing session content and begin drafting official first-generation student guidebook and other resources for institutional collaboration
<i>Phase 2</i>	Strategic Expansion	April to June 2025	Develop partnerships and collaborate with first-gen campus clubs and universities across Canada

		July to September 2025	Finalize a first-generation student guidebook
		October to December 2025	Gather additional resources and begin cross-Canada program development
<i>Phase 3</i>	Canada-Wide Implementation	January 2026	Launch official website and social media platforms for FGSNC
		January 2026	Start hosting monthly knowledge sharing sessions
		September 2026	Facilitate mentorship program in collaboration with first-generation student clubs and universities

4.4 Financial Feasibility

The financial feasibility of FGSNC is centered around maintaining a low budget while ensuring the project is effectively executed and sustainable in the long term. Based on the three phases outlined above, there are varied costs for each. An overview of the projected costs and funding strategies for each phase will follow with a total budget of \$15,000 CAD⁵ for the duration of the implementation phase (2024-2026).

	Estimated Budget	Cost Breakdown	Funding Strategy
<i>Phase 1 September 2024 - April 2025</i>	Phase 1 Total: \$5000 Price Breakdown: - Material and Supplies: \$1500 - Event Costs: \$1500 - Guidebook Development: \$2000	Material and Supplies: printing materials, workshop supplies, promotional items Event Costs: venue rental for knowledge sharing sessions, refreshments, speaker honorariums Guidebook Development: design, writing, and initial printing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Apply for grants from educational foundations - Seek sponsorship from local businesses and alumni - Conduct crowdfunding campaigns

⁵ All associated costs and prices are listed in Canadian Dollars (CAD).

<p><i>Phase 2</i> <i>April 2025 -</i> <i>December 2025</i></p>	<p>Phase 2 Total: \$5000</p> <p>Price Breakdown:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Printing and Distribution of Guidebook: \$2000 - Travel and Networking Expenses: \$2000 - Program Development: \$1000 	<p>Printing and Distribution: mass production of guidebook, distribution to partner institutions</p> <p>Travel and Networking Expenses: necessary travel expenses for meetings with institutions across Canada</p> <p>Program Development: materials necessary for piloting programs with partner institutions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expand grant applications to national funding bodies such as government grants - Engage with corporate sponsors interested in educational initiatives - Leverage financial support from partner institutions
<p><i>Phase 3</i> <i>January 2026 -</i> <i>September 2026</i></p>	<p>Phase 3 Total: \$5000</p> <p>Price Breakdown:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Website and Social Media Development \$1500 - Monthly Learning Sessions \$2000 - Mentorship Program Facilitation \$1500 	<p>Website and Social Media Development: professional development and maintenance of the FGSNC website, canva premium for social media posts, paid advertisements</p> <p>Monthly Learning Sessions: coordination, speaker fees, materials for sessions, paid advertisements</p> <p>Mentorship Program Facilitation: training and support materials for mentors and mentees</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue applying for educational and community grants - Develop long term partnerships with national educational organizations - Seek donations from philanthropic entities and private donors
<p><i>TOTAL</i></p>			

<i>September 2024 - September 2026</i>	TOTAL: \$15,000	-----	-----
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The outlined financial feasibility plan emphasizes a balanced approach to securing funds and managing expenses to ensure the successful implementation of the FGSNC project. Through strategically applying for grants, engaging corporate sponsors, and fostering relationships with partner institutions, we aim to maximize our resources to provide the needed support to first-generation students across Canada. This phased approach ensures that we can sustainably scale our efforts while maintaining a focus on the bigger picture, the empowerment and success of first-generation students.

4.5 SWOT Analysis of FGSNC

Strengths:

- A) Clear mission
 - The aim of FGSNC to empower first-generation students is clear and focuses on a specific and underserved demographic. This ensures that support remains meaningful and targeted.
- B) Detailed implementation plan
 - The three phases of the implementation plan present a clear and strategic path forward that maintains organization and systematic growth.
- C) Collaborative approach
 - Establishing partnerships with institutions and other educational organizations will ensure adequate resource sharing and enhance support.
- D) Experienced leadership team
 - Our team has a strong background in nonprofit leadership and educational experiences to facilitate the success of FGSNC.

Weaknesses:

- A) Limited funding
 - Operating on a lower budget may restrict growth and expansion on the proposed timeline.
 - Solution: to counteract the possibility of limited funding, an extended timeline can be added to ensure the sustainability of the organization. Growth can be gradual and can adapt based on funding availability and organizational capacity.
- B) Scalability challenges

- Expanding nationwide could prove to be logistically difficult and there may be pushback from certain institutions or student-run clubs.
 - Solution: Starting expansion with universities with existing first-generation student programs will create leverage and legitimacy that can then be applied to other institutions that may be more hesitant. In addition, the expected timeframe of full scalability can be increased to ensure sufficient time to develop strong relationships with partner institutions and reduce logistical challenges.
- C) Data limitations
- The limited availability of up-to-date data on first-generation students may affect some of the proposed resources and targeted solutions.
 - Solution: Once relationships with partner institutions have been developed, a standardized survey created by FGSNC can be sent out for dissemination at each university, thus ensuring data is consistent and complete.

Opportunities:

- A) Growing awareness
- Increasing awareness of the unique challenges faced by first-generation students in Canada presents an opportunity for increased advocacy and support.
- B) Digital platforms
- Utilizing digital platforms for knowledge sharing sessions and online resources will increase the reach of information and strengthen overall engagement.
- C) Partnerships
- Opportunities to collaborate with partner institutions and other educational nonprofit organizations creates room for expanding resources and influence of FGSNC.
- D) Innovative programming
- The innovative programming developed by FGSNC can set a precedent for other organizations to follow.

Threats:

- A) Funding instability
- Dependence on external grants or funding sources may become risky if funds decrease.
 - Solution: To combat funding instability, FGSNC will apply for a wide range of funding sources to diversify incoming funds and ensure that we are not reliant on only one donor or grant.
- B) Changing policies

- Changes in educational policies or government funding could affect the sustainability of FGSNC.
- Solution: Building relationships with policymakers and aligning our objectives with educational priorities will help to ensure that our initiatives at FGSNC remain relevant and supported.

C) Engagement challenges

- Maintaining consistent participation from students across Canada could be challenging in the long term.
- Solution: Developing strong partnerships with post-secondary institutions to promote FGSNC programming and services will alleviate some of the pressures of engagement issues. Implementing a strong communication strategy that includes regular updates and engaging content will also keep students informed and motivated. We will also implement feedback mechanisms to continuously adapt and improve our services based on student needs and preferences.

Conclusion

Given the unique experiences of first-generation students in Canada, it is clear that tailored approaches are necessary to adequately support this population. The First Generation Support Network of Canada (FGSNC) proposes a collaborative network of peer support groups, associations, and institutional partners that enhances the academic and social integration of first-generation students. Additionally, the FGSNC will provide national training, support, and resources to individual first-generation students. The support system includes online resources and training tailored to the specific needs of each university. Ultimately, the First Generation Support Network of Canada represents a significant step towards addressing the unique challenges faced by first-generation students. By providing an extensive support system and promoting collaboration among Canadian universities, FGSNC will empower first-generation students to achieve their full potential and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society.

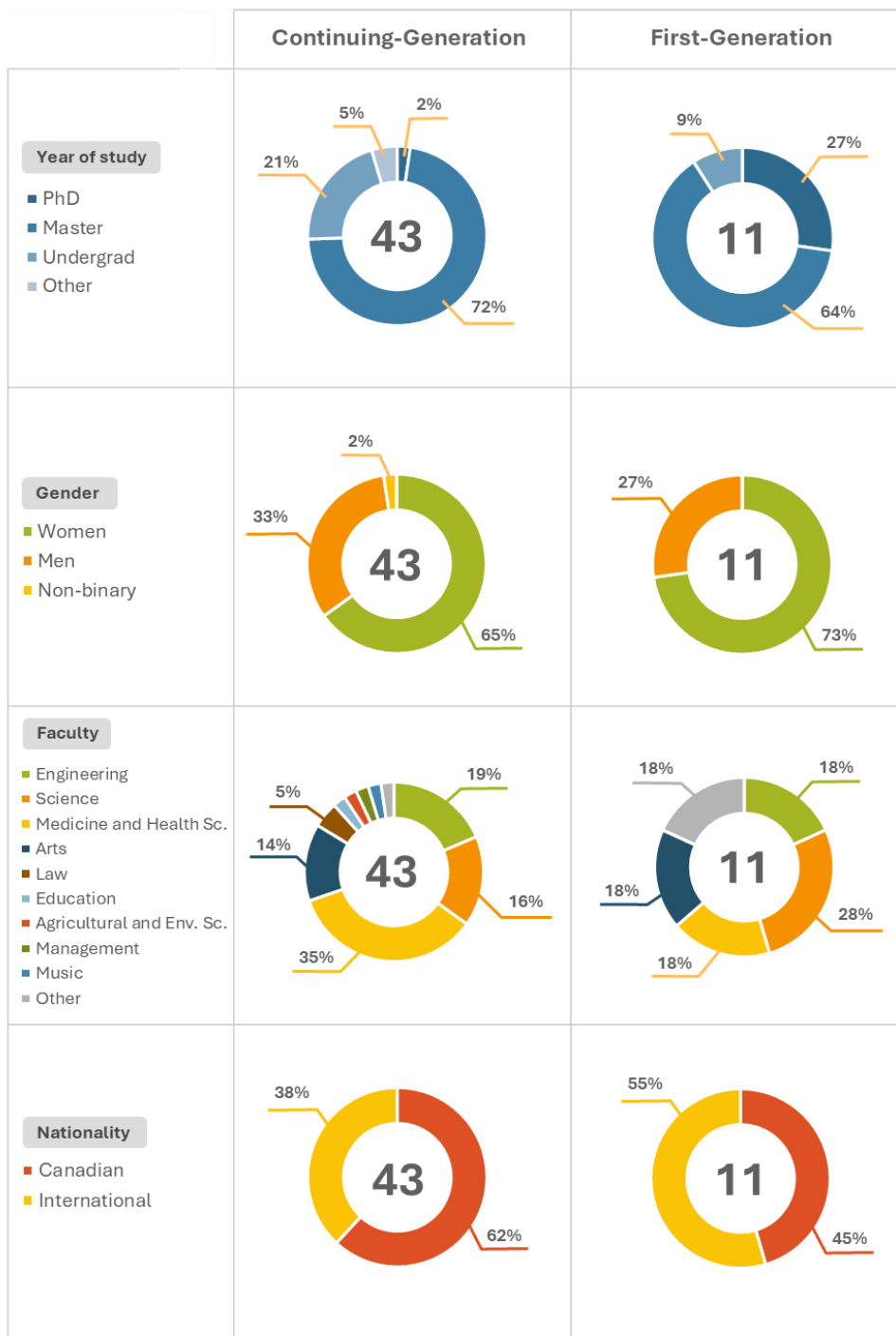
References

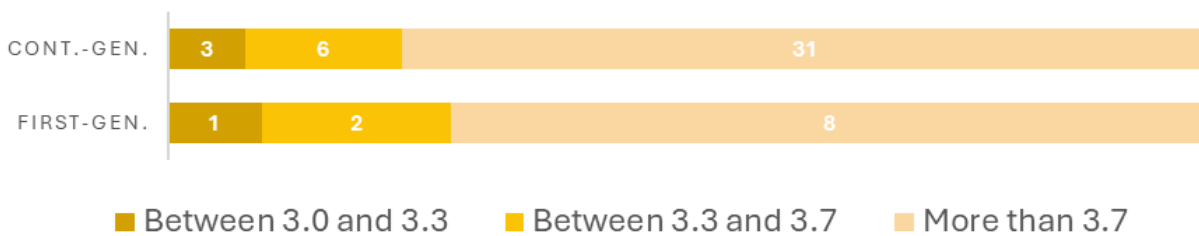
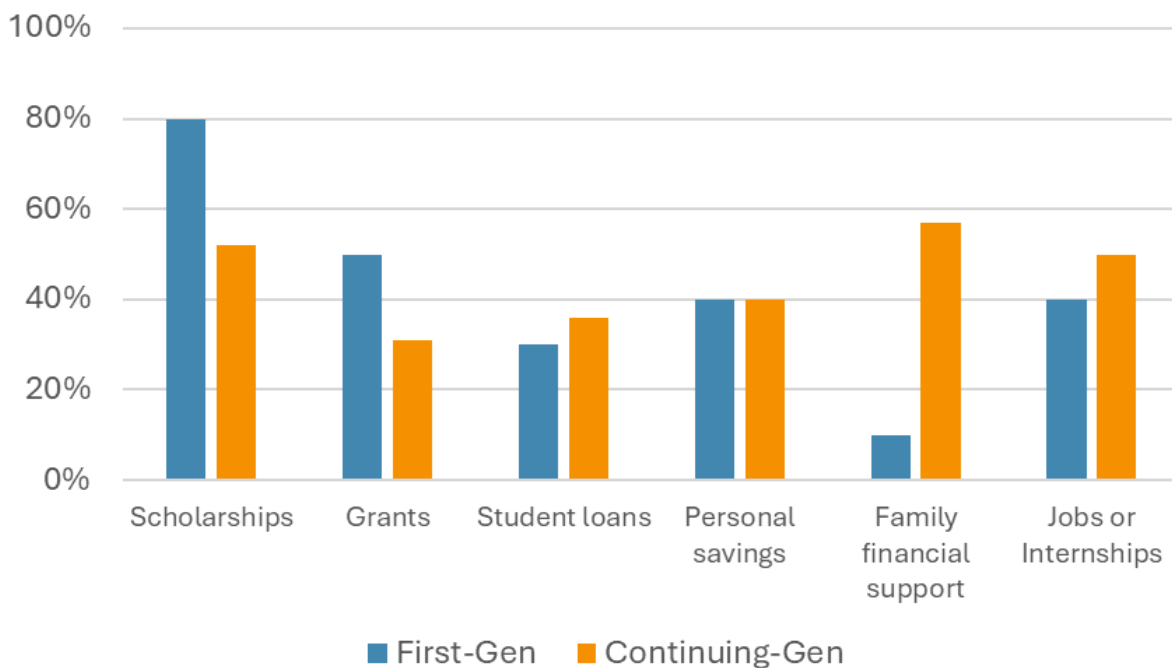
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Annex 1

Survey Result Details for First-Generation and Continuing-Generation Students at McGill University (Descriptions in Phase 1 of the proposal)





■ Strongly disagree (-2) ■ disagree (-1) ■ Neither agree nor disagree (0) ■ agree (1) ■ Strongly agree (2)

