Pioneers Straddling Two Worlds:
The First Generation Student
Experience at McGill University, Part II

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INTRODUCTION

This report examines the experiences of first generation students at McGill in light of the measures taken since last year's report on the topic. Following the release of the landmark report 'Striving to Place: The First Generation Student Experience at McGill' in January 2017, the first on the topic, McGill University has taken a range of measures to help support this particular population better, which includes a pilot buddy program and social events for Fall 2018 incoming students. To assess the effectiveness of these approaches and to move forward with effective approaches tailored to the unique needs of this population, multiple first generation students and university administrators have been interviewed. A survey was also sent to the McGill student population to assess the level of knowledge they had on this issue as well as the specific strengths and challenges of first generation students.

McGill University was found to be lacking institutional resources on many different levels to adequately support first generation university students. The current definition of a first generation university student was found to be a significant barrier for many students. Furthermore, gaps have been found within the financial, professional, academic, social, emotional realms of the first generation student experience, with additional accessibility barriers to the resources that do exist. As a result, first generations students have demonstrated resilience by independently seeking out informal support systems and connecting with community resources, while still feeling the gap left by a lack of adequate institutional resources. Specific recommendations addressing each of those realms are outlined at the end of this report.

First Generation Students: Who are they?

For many McGill students, staff, and administrators, the term "first generation" may be unfamiliar. This concept is lacking in conversation and policy on campus, as evidenced by how many students either did not have knowledge of the term or thought it referred to immigration status. So, who are first generation students?

McGill University defines a first generation student as someone who does not have any immediate family members who have graduated or who are currently enrolled in university. Therefore, a student with no prior family history of university attendance but with a sibling currently in university would not be considered first generation and would not have access to services for first

generation university students. This definition was found lacking by the majority of participants, as it excludes many people who do not benefit from having parents who have completed university, and excludes people who cannot benefit from parents who have completed higher education within a Western higher education model. For the purposes of this report, first generation students are the first generation in their family to go to university. This more comprehensive definition will be used in this report.

Why do First Generation Students Matter?

First generation students face a number of barriers in accessing and completing university that revolve around not having a family background in higher education. Participants have identified the inability of parents to give them advice related on both academic and non-academic matters that create difficulties in navigating higher education. This could mean being unaware of important things, such as course registration and knowledge about financial aid, academic unpreparedness and lack of social capital that have the effect of inhibiting the students from taking full advantage of their university experience.

While first generation students come from every corner of society, certain groups are disproportionately represented as first generation students, including low-income students, marginalized racial minorities and students with an immigrant background. These intersecting identities add an extra layer of complexity and importance to addressing the inequities first generation students face.

A Note on Intersectionality

First generation students are a very diverse group of people from a variety of backgrounds. This project explicitly examined the ways in which first generation status interacts with socioeconomic status, as the two issues are overlapping, but did not explicitly address other intersections such as race, sexual orientation or gender identity. However, many participants have independently volunteered that they felt that the climate at McGill University disfavoured discourse surrounding socioeconomic barriers, an issue with a very strong correlation to first generation status, over other types of marginalization. The majority of participants have disclosed financial challenges that they perceive to be of greater severity than their non-first generation peers during their time at university. Several participants have also independently volunteered information such as being from a working-class background, being from a rural area, being a visible minority and being from

a non-traditional family situation. All of the interviewed first generation university students who identified as a visible minority came from an immigrant urban background while all white first generation university students came from a non-immigrant rural or suburban background, with one exception. A consideration of these experiences shows that all first generation students have unique experiences and barriers that must be accounted for as SSMU and McGill work to provide first generation students with necessary resources and support.

METHODOLOGY

Investigating the Current First Generation Experience

The initial impetus for this project came from last year's report that described a lack of systemic support for and a lack of general awareness of first generation students on campus. It identified a need for increased recruitment, retention and support of first generation students at the university (Bach, 2017).

Why use Qualitative Experiences and Anecdotes?

SSMU and McGill's student body have consistently demonstrated their commitment to social justice and equity. By using student experiences and anecdotes on campus, we can nurture empathy, awareness, and action. These narratives will give insight into personal experiences and uncover what first generation students want and need. First generation students at McGill have been largely neglected by the administration, and consequently we are in a unique position to start from the ground up on support initiatives and awareness-raising initiatives with input from those who need those resources most.

Data Collection

I sent out one survey, one callout for interviews of self-identified first generation students and requests for interviews of McGill staff members involved with supporting first generation students. The survey was aimed at the entire McGill student body to gauge the knowledge level it has as a whole on first generation students, and also included additional questions for those who self-identified as first generation students. The interviews of first generation students were conducted with a goal to gain greater insights into the lived realities of first generation students

on campus. Finally, the interviews of staff were conducted with the goal of gaining greater insights into current available resources that are specifically targeted to this population.

This paper will conclude with a list of recommendations for the SSMU and McGill administration to consider as the work towards better supporting first generation students. Data collection is just the beginning, and many more initiatives will hopefully develop from this research.

RESULTS: CURRENT SITUATION OF MCGILL FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS

McGill Student Body Survey & Interviews

The student survey received 130 responses. 49.2% of those responses came from self-identified first generation students. First generation student entries represented a variety of students, from incoming U0 students, undergraduates of all levels, graduate students and alumni. This diversity resulted in varied and insightful responses. The survey was opened, actively promoted on social media during a period of a month that overlapped with final exams and still managed to receive 130 responses. The high volume of responses despite this incredibly busy time of year and winter break indicates that this is an underlying issue that many people feel strongly about but have not been able to voice properly yet.
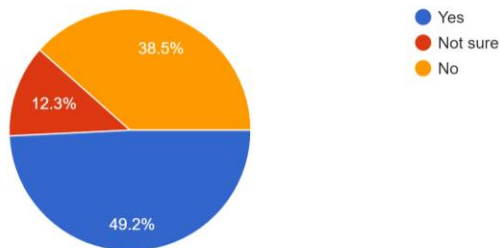
Figure 1: Proportion of Survey Respondents Who Self-Identify as First Generation University Students
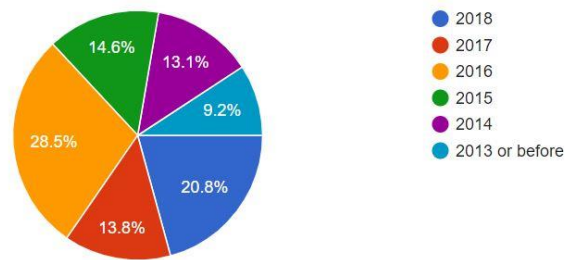
*Figure 2: Year of Entry to McGill University of Survey
Respondents*
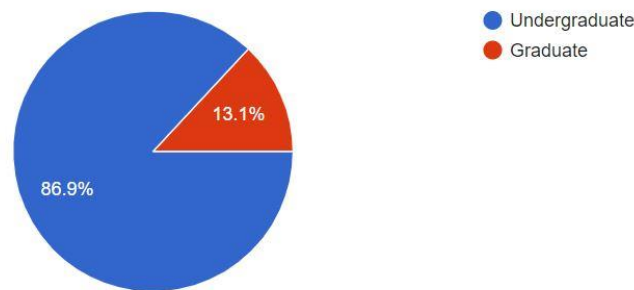
*Figure 3: Academic Degree Level at McGill University of Survey
Respondents*

Furthermore, 9 first generation students have been interviewed in depth one-on-one. They come from a variety of academic and personal backgrounds. 3 are current undergraduate students, 2 are recent bachelor's degree graduates, 2 are current graduate students who also did their undergraduate degree at McGill University, 1 is a current graduate diploma student who also did their undergraduate degree at McGill University and 1 is a current graduate student who did their undergraduate degree at another institution. All self-identified as lower-income and all but one reported financial struggles throughout their degree programs (the one student who did not is the recipient of a merit-based full-ride scholarship, but stated that without it they would have been struggling financially too). 2 self-identified as visible minorities and 7 self-identified as white. 5 self-identified as coming from rural areas, 2 self-identified as coming from suburban areas and 2 self-identified as coming from urban areas. 2 self-identified as coming from a STEM academic

background, 3 self-identified as coming from a social science academic background and 4 self-identified as coming from an interdisciplinary academic background. 3 self-identified as originating from the greater Montreal area, 1 self-identified as being a Quebecer from outside of Montreal, 4 self-identified as being out-of-province Canadians and 1 self-identified as being an international student. These demographic characteristics demonstrate that the first generation university experience is an incredibly diversified one, a factor that needs to be taken into account when designing and implement institutional support systems to serve this student population.

1. What do people know about first generation university students?

In terms of survey respondents, knowledge about first generation students on campus was quite low. Only 53.8% of survey participants indicated that they had heard of the term before and that they knew exactly what it means, with an additional 29.2% indicating that they had heard of the term before without knowing specifically of its meaning. The remaining 17% indicated that they were either unsure or had not heard of the term before. Those results indicate that while the term 'first generation student' may be vaguely familiar to the majority of the student body, specific knowledge about how that demographic is marginalized is overall lacking.
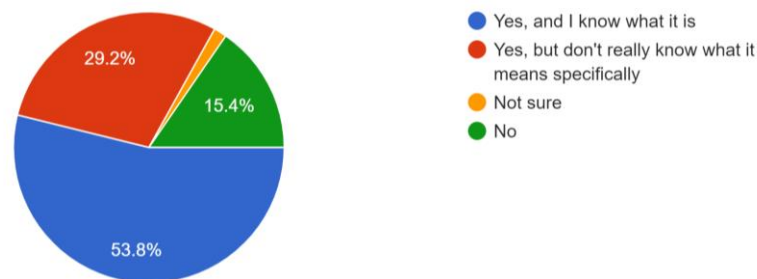
Figure 4: Proportions of Survey Respondents Who Have Varying Degrees of Knowledge of the Term First Generation University Student

Furthermore, understandings of who counts as a first generation student differ greatly among participants. The most popular definition among survey respondents, chosen by a little less than half of them, is that a first generation university students is the first person in their family to attend university. Following closely, close to a third of respondents defined a first generation university student as the first generation in their family to attend university, but not necessarily the fiirst person. The third most popular definition of a first generation student, following at a

distant 10%, is that of a person who is in the first generation in their family to graduate university, but not necessarily the first person in their family to graduate university. Rounding the last 10% of responses are students who defined a first generation student as the child of immigrant parents who is the first in their family to attend university in their adopted homeland and the first person in their family to graduate university. 4.6% of respondents said that they did not know what a first generation student was.
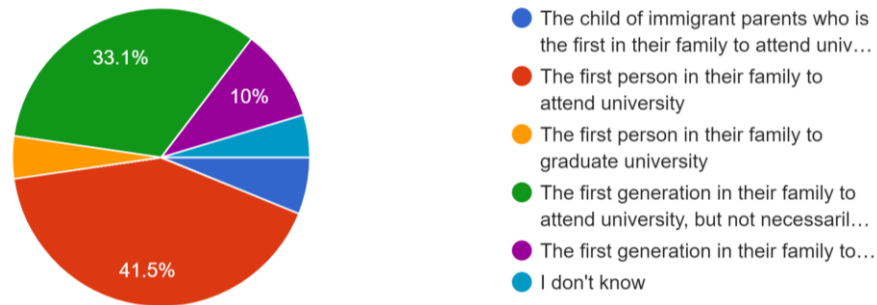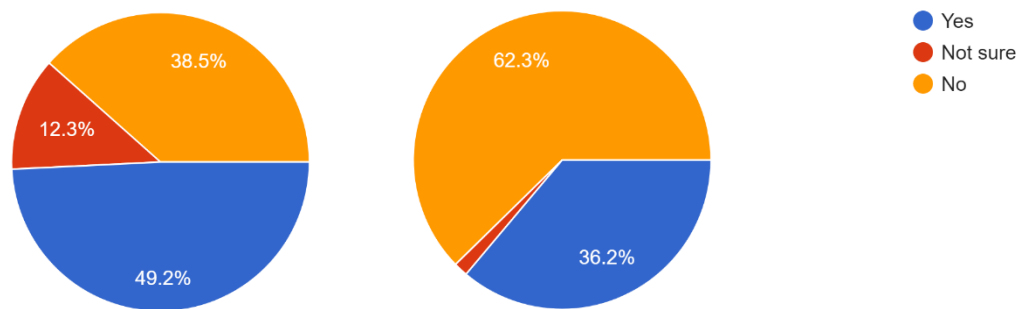

Figure 5: Proportion of Survey Respondents Who Believe in Different Definitions of a First Generation University Students

 2. McGill's Current Definition of a First Generation University Student

McGill's most up-to-date definition of a first generation university student is someone who does not have any immediate family members who have graduated or who are currently enrolled in university. Therefore, someone with no family history of university graduation or attendance but who has siblings currently enrolled in university does not qualify as a first generation university student. Furthermore, someone with no family history of university graduation or attendance but who has a parent, caregiver or guardian currently enrolled in university does not qualify as a first generation university student.

Many survey respondents who had previously self-identified as first generation university students actually do not fall under McGill's definition of the term. Only 36.2% of respondents fall under McGill's definition of a first generation university student compared to 49.2% of respondent who have self-identified as belonging to that demographic, which amounts to a 13% difference. This finding suggests that the current definition is not inclusive enough and that a significant number of students are left out, unable to access resources, services and supports that serve this demographic.

Figure 6: Comparison of Proportions of Survey Respondents Who Self-Identify as First Generation University Students (left) and Who Fit Under McGill University's Definition of a First Generation University Student (right)

Unsurprisingly, when asked about the whether or not the current definition of a first generation university student was accurate, the overwhelming majority of respondents expressed dissatisfaction by stating that it was restrictive and not inclusive enough.

2.1 Siblings and First Generation University Students

A key issue that was pointed out concerned the presence of siblings currently enrolled in university in the immediate family of a student with no prior family history of university graduation. Respondents have expressed that a sibling currently in university is not an adequate source of support for first generation in university, as they are likely to be experiencing the same challenges as the first generation university students since they come from the same generation. Here are some unedited representative responses on this issue.

> *"Two siblings have most likely experienced the same struggles and, are both likely to be unfamiliar with the experience of higher education. A sibling does not have the same effect as an influential adult figure who is a university graduate and a present member in a child's upbringing thus, I feel that giving them the same value is unfair."*

> *"This is ridiculous, just because I have a brother 1 year older than me should not exempt me from being considered a first generation student. My parents still did not graduate university and cannot provide me with the resources (financial, advice, etc...) that people*

with parents who have degrees can. I also attend university in a different province than my brother so he is not able to give me any information, not to mention that he is one year ahead of me so cannot give me advice with any kind of hindsight."

"As a first gen. university student, I had no choice but to spend my summer working three jobs whereas other students got to travel and land internships. My entire university tuition, rent, food, and bills are personally taken care of by myself. I know that when my younger brother enters university in the upcoming year, he will also have to work long hours during the summer if he wants to stay enrolled. However, it does not seem fair that he would not be able to access such resources even though we are experiencing the same financial struggles."

"I believe the definition should focus on whoever your caretakers are. If neither of your parents have been to university, they do not understand what you are going through (Even if your grandparents did, for insance)."

One respondent has even stated that it was an additional burden to have a sibling in university at the same time because their family's resources were being split between two people instead of one.

"If anything things are now harder because the little support money my parents are able to offer us is now being split between two people. [...] My sister being in university doesn't change the fact that neither of my parents attended university."

A possible way to resolve this issue is to consider the age difference between the siblings as relevant in defining a first generation university student. Some respondents said that the support the graduate sibling would be providing to the first generation university student would be equivalent to that provided by graduate parents, guardians or caregivers if they are significantly older or if they have already graduated. Here are some unedited representative responses on this issue.

"It would be more accurate to say if they had an /older/ sibling who graduated from university by the time they entered university. If both siblings are currently in university at the same time, they are still the first "generation" in their family to pursue a post-secondary degree. A year or two difference defining who is 'first' discredits the fact that

all the children were in the same boat and had to enter university in virtually the same set of conditions."

"I think the definition shoud at least be that you are not first gen if your siblings enrolled before you or preferably graduated before you got in."

"Perhaps if you are from a family where your siblings are substantially older than you (10+ years) and have graduated with a degree that has provided your family with financial and/or social benefits this definition can be applied. But in the case of the average family with children who are of similar age, I feel that the educational status of your siblings should not effect your status as a first generation student."

These responses indicate that the current exclusion of first generation university students who have sibling(s) who are currently enrolled in university is not serving them well and putting them at a disadvantage. Sibling age gap, level of accessible support and context should be taken into account in this aspect of the definition of a first generation university student.

2.2 Extended family and first generation university students

Some respondents have pointed out that the support provided by graduate extended family can somewhat mitigate the effects of having no immediate family history of prior university attendance. The closeness of the ties, the similarity of university experience (e.g. if they have attended the same school) and the geographic proximity between first generation university students and their extended family members influence how much support they receive as they navigate higher education. Here is the unedited version of what one respondent had to say about the support provided by their extended family.

"I do have a few cousins who attended University and have spoken to me about their experiences at least, albeit out of province. Members who have very close cousins/aunts/uncles who attended University in the same province/State as them wouldn't have a "first gen experience" comparatively."

Overall, the support graduate extended family can provide to the first generation university student is extremely mixed, depending on many different factors and contexts. This finding attest to the extraordinary diversity of first generation student experiences that needs to be acknowledged in a comprehensive definition of the term.

2.3 Immigration family history and first generation university students

Some respondents have pointed out that first generation university students who come from an immigrant family background ought to be counted as part of the demographic even if prior generations of their family are graduates of institutions in their home country. They have pointed out that the huge cultural and institutional gap between their family members' university experience and their own translated into the family's limited ability to support the first generation university student, despite their status as university graduate. Here are some unedited responses on this matter.

> "Also, not only does this evade the immigration factor, but it ignores the huge benefit of locality (ones parents having graduated from a university no one has heard of does not offer them the privelige of students whose parents have graduated from familiar schools- at least from familiar places), and the fact that university standards differ vastly from country-to-country, let alone school-to-school."

> "yes, except i also have in mind that first generation means first person to attend university in their family BUT also they are the first generation of a family after our parents have immigrated to this country."

> "I believe either child should be considered 'first generation' if they are born in another country, but were the first to go to University in their adopted country."

One respondent has even pointed out specific gendered cultural issues surrounding higher education that should be considered in the definition of first generation university student. As the first woman to graduate in a culture where women's education is traditionally frowned upon, she said that the experience comes with its own specific issues.

> "Some students will be the first woman in their family to go to university as well which usually comes with its own set of problems and experiences and that could be better included in the definition as, depending on their history/culture, this can be a major factor at play."

There is a strong argument to be made to push the definition of first generation university student to include students who are the first in their family to attend university in their family's adopted

country due to a significant cultural and institutional gap between the two university experiences. In particular, it is important to consider historical, cultural and social concerns specific to the context of immigrant students when drafting a comprehensive definition of first generation university student.

2.4 Degree level and first generation university students

Some survey respondents have also pointed out the importance of considering degree levels when defining what a first generation university student is. In fact, some students are the first person in their family to earn a master's degree or a doctorate degree even if they have other family members who have obtained lower university qualifications. Those students point out that being the first person in their family to pursue and advanced degree comes with its own set of issues and that this experience ought to be considered in the definition of a first generation university student. Here is an unedited survey response about this issue.

> "I usually consider myself to be a 1st generation university student because I am now getting my doctorate, and I am the first person in my family and extended family to do that. I think the gap in education level should also be taken into account."

Due to the significant difference of experience between graduate school and undergraduate school, there is a strong argument to be made to include degree level consideration in the definition of a first generation university student.

Overall, it is clear that first generation university students are a very diverse group of students who come from varied family backgrounds, family structures and prior experiences. In order to have a truly comprehensive definition of what it means to be a first generation university student, all of those considerations ought to be taken into account when drafting the definition so that no student is left behind.

3. The Experience of Being a First Generation University Student at McGill University

Being a first generation university student is a multifaceted experience that has both positive and negative elements. Survey respondents who self-identified as first generation university students have mentioned several challenges and several strengths about going through this unique university experience. It is therefore important to keep in mind that the first generation university

experience is not solely a burden and a barrier, but also a source of strength and resilience, which should be reflected in policies and measures put in place to support this demographic.

3.1 What is negative about being a first generation university student at McGill University?

Survey respondents who self-identified as first generation university students have pointed out several negative elements of their academic career. Over three quarters (75.8%) of respondents have cited a lack of family members, friends and mentors that can guide them through university life, making this lack of support the leading negative factor by far that impacted the first generation university students who have answered the survey. As this first generation survey respondent has mentioned, this lack of support can have significant ramifications for the career of first generation students.

> *"I don't have connections for an internship. I don't have a mentor to base my life goals or my path off of. I don't know anything about grad school or further education and it's effects from close family."*

Other pressing concerns expressed by the first generation respondents are difficulties of access of some opportunities (56.1%), financial struggles (47%), difficulties in navigating the administrative and logistical sides of the university bureaucracy (47%), feeling overwhelmed by their own ignorance of university (43.9%), feeling like an outsider who does not belong (40.9%) and having extra responsibilities many of their peers do not have (such as having a dependent, having a full-time job and being a caretaker for a family member) (40.9%). A lack of support and resources have also been cited as major negative factors in the first generation university student experience with 39.4% of first generation respondents saying they have no family support and 37.9% of first generation respondents saying that they feel like the resources they need to succeed are not accessible to them. 28.8% of respondents have also cited that they felt academically unprepared to navigate university. Furthermore, a significant minority of first generation university students feel other additional pressures that are specific to their first generation experience. Here are some unedited responses about those pressures.

> *"I carry the burden of being expected to get a high paying job after university to be able to support my family."*

> *"Feeling the pressure to succeed because I feel the need to be a trailblazer."*

"I have the added pressure of not being allowed to fail because I would be letting down all the future generations of my family as well as squandering the combined effort of all of them so that I would be able to have this opportunity."

"I feel the pressure of making the most out of my experience attending university and making my parents sacrifice and efforts through all these years, through immigration, to make their decisions worth it."

"Family expects me to perform excellent academically just because I was the first one to ever enter a University. I have a lot of pressure to perform well."

"Being the first in my family to attend university, I feel an extra sense of pressure to succeed that does not seem to affect most of my other peers."

"Not only is there a generation gap between my parents, I feel less understood with this added educational gap."
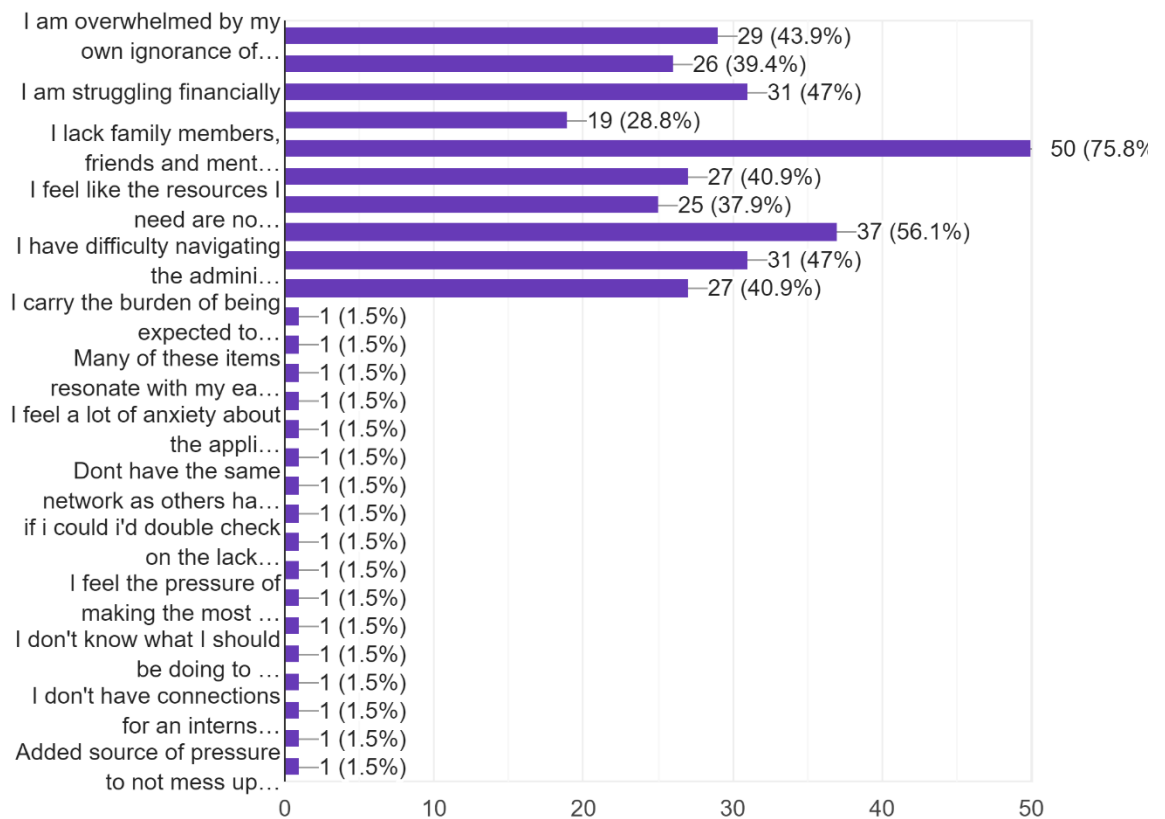
Figure 7: Proportions of first generation university students affected by individual negative factors

It is striking to note that academic unpreparedness is quite far down the list in the collection of negative factors impacting first generation university students (it is ranked as the tenth issue in the survey). This finding suggests that overall, a significant majority of first generation university students who do academically well enough to be admitted to McGill University are academically prepared to handle the courseload and that it is not one of their main concerns. Therefore, more resources, efforts and supports should be directed to non-academic issues such as mentorship, financial support and logistical support that cater to the unique challenges of first generation university students by recognizing that they often have more responsibilities, more burdens and less resources than their peers. First generation university students often make great sacrifices in pursuit of their education and the least that could be done by the university is to ensure that those sacrifices were worth it for them so as to avoid unfortunate outcomes like that of this first generation survey respondent, who is also a student-parent.

> *"I didn't get what I came for in this program. I came from Ontario, and I sacrificed my family and kids, to find an opportunity for an internship in the industry. I didn't get that. and not only that but the department just cared to accommodate the students inside the department, which was not my interest."*

More support in these practical domains, with additional socioemotional support to alleviate feelings of alienation and strong pressure, would go a long way towards alleviating the emotional burden that first generation university experience. As one first generation survey respondent puts it, it is all of those issues that are embedded in the structural components of university that make some things logistically more difficult for first generation university students and further contributes to negative feelings about their experience.

> *"professors always assume you are in the best conditions. Ei. Ask for international experience for grad. school, or require it in your undergrad, give you a week to*

complete a big homework as if you did not had to work.. overall they assume mommy and daddy pay everything and all you have to do is studying, which I would really like to be true.+ feeling like an outsider, if I could vote for it three times I would do it!"

3.2 What is positive about being a first generation university student at McGill University?

While it does come with its own sets of challenges (as outlined above), it is very important to not discuss the first generation university student experience with a language focusing on the deficits of this population of students. In fact, every single survey respondent who self-identified as a first generation university student has cited positive aspects within their first generation experience. In addition to hugely benefitting personally from higher education, these students bring unique perspectives, strengths and reserves of resilience to campus that harnessed properly, can hugely benefit the entire university community. The overwhelming majority of first generation survey respondents have cited gratitude for the opportunities their education has given them as a positive factor of their first generation student experience (86.8%). Other positive attributes that follow are pride to be the first in their family to get a higher education (79.4%), changes in their worldviews and expansion of their minds (55.9%), meetings with people they never thought they would meet otherwise (54.4%), feeling more resilient than a lot of their peers (54.4%), being strengthened by the experience (51.5%), changing for the better (50%), being more resourceful than a lot of their peers (48.5%), freedom to chart their own paths (39.7%), lack of weight of previous expectations on their shoulders (22.1%). Furthermore, some first generation survey respondents cite gaining some additional soft skills and qualities as a benefit of their university experience. Here are some unedited responses about those gains.

"more compassionate and empathetic - can incorporate this strength into my career"

"I'm better at networking because I didn't have to rely on my family's connections. I value opportunities more. I understand what hardwork and sacrifice are. I empathize with other marginalized individuals."

"My drive is stronger. The struggles of my family have motivated me beyond what others have."
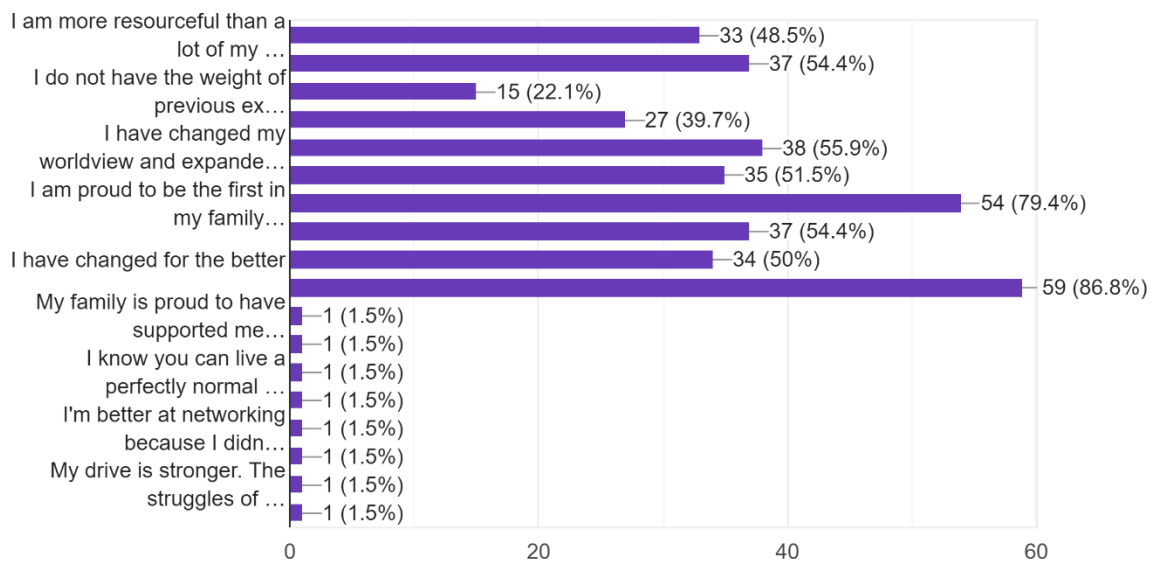
Figure 8 : Proportions of first generation university students affected by individual positive factors

First generation survey respondents express gratitude for opportunities, pride (both their own and their families), personal growth and unique strengths as benefits of the experience. In a time when student resilience seem to be in crisis in university campuses (Lythcott-Haims, 2016), the first generation university student experience stands as a direct contrast to this current reality. Therefore, it is extremely essential to recognize those positive factors that as an essential part of the first generation university experience that can enrich not only individual first generation students' lives, but also the vitality of the entire campus community.

3. Do First Generation University Students Feel Supported at McGill University?

As mentioned previously, lack of support is the leading factor impacting first generation university students negatively during their university experience. Unlike students with graduate generations of family members, first generation university students lack friends, family members and mentors that can guide them through higher education. Therefore, to ensure the success of these students, it is important that the university steps in to fill in the gaps left by this absence of support in a holistic manner. Several first generation survey responders have expressed disappointment and dissatisfaction at the current level of institutional supports. Here is a representative sample of their unedited responses.

> *"No. There's all kinds of things you should probably do like meet with professors somehow???? That if there's no one to tell you should/even can you have no idea and you miss out."*

> *"No, because there are very simple things about university that are obvious to my peers that I did not about until I got here: how to navigate academics, thinking about grad school, having family connections to academia and the industry, etc."*

> *"Absolutely not. I feel constantly overwhelmed and had no idea McGill offered any support at all for first generation students or cared to define the term. Also, as far as I am concerned I am the ONLY one here because I have met no one else in over two years. There is no community and there's a lot of pressure."*

> *"I do not feel any kind of special treatment or even consideration of first generation students whatsoever by the McGill administration, which I find to be extremely elitist. I am not surprised by this at all but I am very disappointed. We are put at a very large disadvantage right from the start as we do not have access to the resources that people with rich and educated parents have as we have to do everything ourselves without any support from parents so McGill could do a lot more to lighten the burden."*

3.1 Finances

First generation students also disproportionately come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and many first generation survey respondents have expressed dissatisfaction at the amount of financial support that they receive from the university.. Others have found financial aid applications daunting, confusing and overwhelming. Of those who have been fortunate enough to access some financial aid, they feel like there are structural disadvantages within the financial aid system that hurts students from a lower socioeconomic background due to a lack of understanding by the university of the realities of students who come from that background. Here are some unedited comments that they have made on the subject.

> *"Yes they give financial support but it's not even close to the amount I need to stay here."*

> *"Not really unfortunately. Not many people seem to be able to relate what I've gone through as a first-gen, juggling five jobs, two internships, a full time student course load, so that I can be the first student in pharmacology, a program of 400, to finish the entire undergrad in 2.5 years as an international first generation student."*

> *"I come from a family with a much lower socio-economic standing than the majority of my fellow students and support my studies through student loans and a part time job (~20 hours/week). It is evident that McGill prefers to cater to the wealthy and elite through their lack of evening and summer courses and few need-based scholarship opportunities."*

> *"No, I strongly feel like a poor (although I am from middle class), skillless, unprepared student compared to most people. Although I recognize that Mcgill is a top rank university, I think it is sad that a huge baggage of skills is required for applying to many things ie. knowledge of programs you have to pay for every month while no courses are offered at mcgill for learning it, international experience, having the best GPA (let's face it, many people cannot have the best*

gpa if they have to work 15hours a week at the very least). Personally, my parent does not really care whatsoever if I am at university or not, think scholars are rich, snobs and think they are better than others, so yeah he will not pay me anything that is not mandatory to pay. Also, the university assumes our parents will help us with things like our career, or what to do with a bachelor, or how to study efficiently, which first gen do not have a clue about. More frequent workshops but I'd prefer groups, would be good !"

"it isn't until I have to forgo an opportunity due to my background do I realize that McGill life is sometimes better suited for the wealthier."

"I'd have to know about said resources and opportunities! But most of the time financial matters hold me back when it's about opportunities."

One first generation survey respondent has also expressed dissatisfaction about the way the Financial Aid profile is worded on Minerva, as they find that it lacks sensitivity to the financial realities of many first generation students.

"I dislike questions like the Financial Aid profile on Minerva that states something along the lines of "Traditionally, parents pay for their children's tuition. Explain why this isn't your case." Well, traditionally in what sense? Traditional to whom? In the neighbourhood I grew up in, it's definitely not uncommon for folks to pay their way through school, as I am right now."

Furthermore, some interview respondents have also expressed lack of financial literacy that is intimately tied to their lower socioeconomic status as a barrier to their university experience. Many of them had never seen a huge amount of money before in their lives, let alone learned how to manage it. One interview respondent expressed their lack of awareness about the existence of financial aid programs that made serious financial mistakes that they are still paying for years after their degree. This same respondent also needed to drop out for a period during their degree due to their inability to pay for it. They are not alone. Another interview respondent expressed their family's lack of

financial management skills as a huge contributing factor to their needing to drop out from their degree for a while to work.

Therefore, to truly ensure the success of first generation university students, the university needs to provide accessible and sensitive financial support to first generation university students and holistic financial literacy skills.

3.2 Academics

Several first generation respondents have also expressed dissatisfaction with academic advising with respect to their demographic. They have expressed dislike that the responsibility of making sure their academics are going smoothly is on the student, as first generation university students often lack the knowledge about the different ways in which a degree program can operate, how it can fit with their personal goals and interests and how to best study for it. Here are some unedited responses that reflect first generation survey respondents' thoughts on academics.

> *"I don't in that I struggled in my first year academically because I didn't know how to study for university."*

> *"Academic advising is highly inadequate: usually for first generation student, a checklist isn't enough to tell them what to select for first year, and departmental advisers are often not easily reached. Although the responsibility is on the student, it would change a student's life if the University can be more pro-active and open about helping the students identify their interests, strength, weakness in choosing their major, at least make some sort of platform for the students to be advised or informed enough about the structure of the program, how it fits with the entire degree, the structure of the degree when mixed with other programs. McGill should stop advocating itself for what it offers as the response/defence to accusations made by students."*

Again, a lot of these issues seem to stem from the institution's lack of awareness of the realities of university-level academics for first generation university students who lack a family background in higher education. They cannot benefit from family advice on course registration, different program structures, study tips and picking the academic experience that would best suit their goals, talents and interests. This creates a situation where the first generation student does not even know how to begin to ask about those things, and therefore cannot be expected to simply be proactive and figure it out themselves. Some first generation university students have even expressed a lack of knowledge about the existence of advising, of the manner in which to reach advising and of the necessity of doing course registration. These comments highlight the danger of expecting implicit assumed knowledge that is uniformly distributed from a highly diverse student body.

3.3 Montrealers

One group of first generation respondents who has felt consistently neglected by the university were first generation Montrealer survey respondents. They expressed alienation from the campus community and a lack of concern from the university about their transportation needs. Those first generation commuter students, who cannot afford to move out closer to campus, feel like they are slipping through the cracks of the university. Here is some of what they have to say.

> *"I don't feel there is much first generation students at McGill or at my program who are native from Montreal, it feels a bit hard and disconnecting. I don't live on campus and that also makes me feel like there is more opportunities to connect for international or other Canadian students closer to the campus."*

> *"As a 1st generation university student (who has lived in Montreal my whole life), the university is not accommodating to transportation needs (on some days I spend over 3-4hours just commuting because I cannot afford to move out), or the fact that we have no one to go to for advice regarding applications, communicating with teachers, scholarships or making friend for that matter. Most initiative taken by McGill address students living within a few minutes of campus but leave out all*

other students. For example, it is difficult to see an academic adviser when their office hours do not coordinate with your class schedule and you have to commute for a few hours to have a 30min discussion (which generally requires cancelling work or other commitments)."

"As a first gen who grew up in montreal, I sometimes spend 3-4h a day commuting to get to school. I cannot afford to move out, despite working."

Given that 47.2% of all McGill students consider Montreal (including the greater Montreal area) to be their home (Amberg et al., 2009), such a lack of support for commuter first generation students is a huge oversight by the university. One interview respondent from the greater Montreal area has stated that they felt more comfortable accessing support outside of the university network due to their familiarity with the Montreal area. These findings suggest that if commuter students are better supported overall and that if the university is willing to collaborate with already existing community resources, it could mitigate the negative effects that first generation commuter students experience.

3.4 Career

Some first generation university students have also expressed a lack of support in navigating life beyond their degree and their professional careers. They have expressed difficulties in getting industry contacts, entering the job market and pursuing professional opportunities (such as internships), all of which are easier for students who come from a family with a prior history of graduates due to their already existing experiential knowledge and network of contacts. Here is what some first generation university respondents had to say about this issue.

"I am an immigrant looking for an opportunity to get the Canadian Experience, so I am struglling for 5 years, even though I am fluent in English and bring many years of experience from a European Country, I couldn't find myself capable to enter to Canadian Job market. Now I am overqualified, and with no job in my field of expertise. I enjoyed the part of being a student (learning new things is my passion), but I find the programs totally lacks the connection with the industry. I am a mom

with two young kids, and instead of saving for my kids tuition, I entered in dept for myself. I strongly recomend, University programs need to have close relation with the Industry, and to think more for the domestic students rather than filling the programs with international students that wants to come in Canada."

"Internship connections are hard to get."

Such findings are quite troubling, especially considering the fact that first generation university students disproportionately come from lower socioeconomic background and have to make significant financial sacrifices to further their education. For those students, it is often imperative to be able to have a financially stable career soon after graduation due to practical financial concerns (a family to support, student debt to repay, etc.) and to have a tangible return on the investment that they put in their degree. Therefore, ensuring that they start their careers on the right foot by connected them with the right people and providing them with the right tools to succeed in the workplace is a crucial step of their university experience.

3.5 Accessibility of Resources

Furthermore, even among the resources that already exist, several first generation university respondents have expressed dissatisfaction about the accessibility of those resources. Concerns expressed have included lack of advertisement, lack of awareness of specific services, logistical difficulties and lack of resources specifically explicitly targeted at first generation university students. Here is what some first generation survey respondents had to say about accessibility of resources.

> *"What resources/services/opportunities? There is nothing specifically aimed at first generation students at McGill that I am aware of."*

> *"I don't know of any resources that cater specifically to first generation students, but I do feel like the resources available, in general, do suit my needs."*

> *"They are sometimes hard to find, but I assume the existence of this survey is a sign that things might change for the better."*

"Sometimes the admin staff aren't the most helpful. It feels like oftentimes I am redirected multiple times before arriving at the appropriate service."

"I am not aware of any kinds of services for which I am eligible."

This finding is quite troubling, given that there are already so many gaps in the institutional support that first generation university students need. It is disheartening to see that the few resources that are available are difficult to access. In fact, when asked about whether they have attended McGill's First Gen Orientation event in Fall 2018 (one of the few institutional resources specifically targeted at that demographic at that time), 98.5% of first generation survey respondents have said no, the overwhelming majority citing lack of awareness that such an event existed. Others cited the inconvenient timing of the event (during orientation week) and being unable to register due to the event being already full. The few respondents who did attend had mixed responses to the event. Two survey respondents expressed positive outcomes towards the event, stating that it allowed them to meet mentors who would help them during their academic career and that it allowed them to feel more welcome at McGill University. However, one interview respondent was quite vocal about how the event made them feel stigmatized even further. They did not appreciate being handed free T-shirts captioned with their first generation status and also could not relate to the speakers at the event, whose university experience of being baby boomer first generation students felt too far removed from the current reality of being a first generation university student. Therefore, going forward, increased accessibility, increased sensitivity and targeted promotion need to be put at the forefront of future initiatives aimed to support first generation university students.

3.6 Informal and Peer Support Networks

Some first generation survey repondents have also mentioned having to turn to informal support networks due to the lack of institutional supports that could meet their needs. In some cases, they struggled for a while before realizing that their peers constituted a great resource. Here are some unedited responses of what some first generation survey respondents had to say on this particular matter.

"Not from any administrative initiatives but from upper years students."

"Not really, nothing has been done to help me through the apply process, and I was lucky to find some french people coming to, or else I couldn't be in McGill or I would have had to differ my admission."

"I did not feel supported. From registering for courses for the very first time on minerva, to discovering how I studied best, to knowing it was ok to fail a class -- and so much more; all of that was new to me. It wasn't untill i knew that I had to step up to the plate and be resourceful, as well as becoming friends with other kids who were more aware of the uni expreince that i eventually was able to thrive at McGill."

These findings highlight two important points about how to best support this demographic of students. First, it exposes a glaring gap within the university infrastructure of support for first generation university students that ought to be addressed. And secondly, it provides a potential support resource for those students. From the testimonies of those first generation students, it is clear that peer support is an extremely valuable resource that helps them. Therefore, when implement support structures to serve this demographic, this finding should be kept in mind during the design process. However, it is important to keep in mind that informal peer support is in no way a substitute to formalized institutional support and that in order to be truly inclusive of first generation university students, McGill University needs to acknowledge and accommodate their realities within its institutional structures. In fact, one first generation university survey respondent has specifically expressed dissatisfaction about this lack of institutional resources.

"a lot of the support and resources that i access are student run and i appreciate all of that. however it upsets me that mcgill uses this as a reason not to create systems of support so that way students don't have to take on additional emotional and undervalued labour because the university isn't providing active listeners or people to walk you home at night."

It seems that having complementary resources that are both student-run and university-run seems to be what first generation university students at McGill University want.

3.7 Stigma

Finally, some first generation survey respondents have pointed out that support structures need to be cognizant of the stigma that comes with this marginalized status. Some first generation university students do not feel comfortable disclosing this part of their identity to others, out of fear of being negatively stigmatized. Here is what one respondent had to say about this issue.

> *"also being a first gen is not necessarily something you would tell to everyone, so its very difficult to get the support from unfamiliar resources"*

> *"Also, having a first generation student orientation would be humiliating to go to because it would be a open display of your financial status and your family's lack of educational background."*

Therefore, sensitivity would be of the utmost importance when dealing with first generation university students. It would be unfair to place additional burdens upon this already marginalized population of students by lacking sensitivity during the process of supporting them.

4. Concluding remarks on results

Overall, the testimonies of first generation participants in this research would qualify this particular university experience as a 'cumulative experience'. Psychoanalyst Masud Kahn has coined the term 'cumulative traumas' to describe issues that build up across childhood and whose weight is not fully felt until adulthood (Kahn, 1963). The experience of being a first generation university student, while not being a trauma per se, fits into the definition of a cumulative experience. It is abundantly clear from the testimonies of the participants that this status does not stop impacting them the moment that they break the barrier of being the first in their families to enroll in higher education. In fact, participants have said that first generation status significantly affects their emotional,

academic, social, financial and experiential realities throughout their time at McGill and beyond. It is therefore important to keep in mind the cumulative nature of this particular student experience while designing programs, resources and supports to serve this community while also keeping in mind the extraordinary talents and unique perspectives that they bring to campus.

RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW CAN WE DO BETTER?

In light of those findings and with the consultation of staff members and dozens of first generation university students, the following specific recommendations have been drafted in a spirit of full awareness of the multi-dimensional first generation student experience.

1. Mentorship:
   - A dedicated mentorship program that would connect a first generation university students upon admission with a person who possess significant institutional knowledge that matches the goals of the student to help them chart their professional, academic and personal paths through university
   - A peer support group that will allow first generation university students to connect with each other, increase community and reduce alienation, receive further support

2. Financial Aid:
   - Automatic consideration for dedicated need-based bursaries for first generation university students upon admission
   - Priority in scholarship applications and job applications on campus
   - Financial literacy workshops that connects first generation university students with financial resources, the logistical side of filing out financial aid applications and healthy financial management skills targeted to the realities of lower-income students

3. Improve accessibility of resources:
    - Offer more flexible course schedules with summer and evening classes to accommodate the realities of working students and student-parents
    - Increase accessibility of resources and opportunities by eliminating financial barriers and reducing bureaucracy
    - Increase accessibility of resources by improving advertising strategies and increasing social media promotion
    - Increase accessibility of resources for commuter first generation university students by having some availabilities during the day and by collaborating with existing community resources
    - Create a dedicated first generation advisor and team who specializes in connect first generation university students to the resources they need

4. Make first generation status explicit enough to get support, discrete enough to not be further stigmatized
    - Have a system that will check first generation student status upon admission and automatically connect the student with different available resources
    - Avoid highly visible and stigmatizing ways of providing support to the student

5. Increase awareness of first generation student issues across campus
    - Increase visibility of first generation university students in empowering and non-stigmatizing ways through existing university platforms
    - Have specific information sessions about first generation university student issues
    - Highlight the strengths of first generation university students and the unique contributions they have brought to the campus community

6. Change the definition of a first generation university student that should be used across all services

- A first generation university student is a student who does not have at least one parent or guardian who has completed a four-year post-secondary degree

- A first generation university student is the first <u>generation</u> of their family to attend university, regardless of the attendance or graduation status of any other member of their family or extended family of the same generation

- A first generation university student includes students from an immigrant background who do not have a prior family history of higher education in their adopted country, regardless of their prior family history of higher education in other countries

- A student who is the first in their family to enroll in a degree level in which they have no prior family history in is considered a first generation university student

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is a need for increased support that is done with sensitivity and care for first generation university students at McGill University. This report has highlighted the extraordinarily multifaceted experiences that first generation university students both bring to campus and go through once there. It has been carefully compiled with the assistance of many university staff members, dozens of first generation university students and dozens of non-first generation university students with the ultimate aim of holistically embracing McGill University's first generation student community. Their thoughts, insights, suggestions and information have been received with utmost gratitude and thanks. This work was supported by the Students' Society of McGill University (SSMU).

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