

STRIVING TO PLACE

The First Generation Student
Experience at McGill University

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INTRODUCTION

This report examines recruitment, retention, and support strategies utilized for first generation students at McGill University, in the Canadian U15 universities, and at comparable Ivy League schools in the United States. To do so, a review of U15 universities and Ivy League schools was completed, and surveys were sent to students and external university administrators.

McGill University was found to be lacking in targeted recruitment, retention, and support strategies for first generation students, and was found to have fewer first generation students than across Canadian universities. Student survey respondents reported a lack of visibility of first generation students on campus.

Proposed recommendations include increasing specific financial aid opportunities for first generation students, developing support structures such as Wellness Recovery Action Program (WRAP) sessions and Campus Life and Engagement (CL&E) workshops, and increasing data collection by the university in order to better inform future recruitment, retention, and support strategies.

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. So, who are first generation students? What does this mean and why is it important?

Most simply defined, first generation students are the first in their family to go to university. However, this simple definition misses many other students who do not benefit from having parents who have completed post-secondary education. Student-led, first generation organizations like 1vyG have defined first generation students as those whose parents or guardians did not attend a four-year post-secondary institution, specifically a university or university-college. This more comprehensive definition will be used in this paper.

Why do First Generation Students Matter?

First generation students face a number of barriers in accessing and completing university. The most obvious is the lack of academically experienced close family members. Given that first generation students’ parents cannot give them academic advice based on direct experience within post-secondary institutions, many of these students may experience difficulties navigating higher education (1vyG, n.d.). This could mean carrying all your textbooks to the first day of class like high school students do, or not knowing to attend office hours or study unassigned practice problems at the back of the textbook.

First generation students belong to different communities, socio-economic classes, and age groups. However, certain groups are disproportionately represented as first generation students, including low-income students and marginalized racial minorities (Chen, 2005). These intersecting identities add an extra layer of complexity and importance to addressing the inequities first generation students face.



A Note on Intersectionality

The student and staff surveys did not examine the ways in which first generation status interacts with or intersects identities, such as low income or racialized people. However, several survey participants and peers independently volunteered this information. For example, one participant disclosed that they are Indigenous, and another that they are a former foster child. 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 Peer Practices

The initial impetus for this project came from 1vyG, or the inter-Ivy League first generation students group, which was formed to connect first generation students and address their unique challenges. Additionally, many Ivy League schools have recently ramped up their recruitment and support for first generation students, as is evidenced by enrolment data and student testimony at schools like Brown, Harvard, and Dartmouth (About Brown's FLiCentre, Brown University, n.d.; First Generation Students, Harvard University, n.d.; Platt, 2014). I began my research by investigating the initiatives at Harvard, Brown, and Dartmouth, and then expanded to Canada's U15 universities, in which McGill is included.

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 recruitment, retention, and support initiatives with input from those who need these initiatives most.

Data Collection

I sent out two surveys: one for McGill students, to gauge awareness of first generation students and to gather experiences from first generation students; and one for support staff and administrators at other universities, to gain greater insight into their programs and first generation student populations.

As I began this project in consultation with SSMU, they worked with Enrolment Services and the University Registrar to have a question on first generation students added to admissions forms and yield surveys. This data unfortunately has not yet been released, but will be useful in order to quantify how many first generation students are currently admitted to McGill each year.



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

THE MCGILL SITUATION

Canadian Context

I did not find a conclusive estimation for the number of first generation students in Canada. The University of British Columbia (UBC) states on their website that 30% of university students nationally are first generation. However, the university does not actually cite valid primary or secondary sources for this statistic (Farrar, Buszard, Cowin, Mathieson 2015). In a different approach, the Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC) reports the percentage of undergraduate students in Canada whose parents attended university. In 2008 the CUSC found that 79% of McGill's undergraduates have parents with at least one university degree, compared to 40% throughout other Canadian universities (Amberg et al. 2009) (Figure 1).

The CUSC's 2011 Undergraduate Student Survey provides updated statistics, albeit utilizing a more restrictive definition of first generation student as those whose "mother and father's highest level of education is high school or less." This does not account for students whose parents or guardians attended a CEGEP, college, or technical school. We can also consider students whose parents did not complete their degrees as first generation since these students, similar to those whose parents did not attend university to begin with, do not have the same access to academic guidance as a student whose parents completed their post-secondary school education.

Using this revised definition, the CUSC survey found that approximately 15% of all Canadian students are first generation (Canadian University Survey Consortium, 2011) (Table 1). Unfortunately, McGill did not participate in this survey so we are lacking comparative figures based on this new definition.

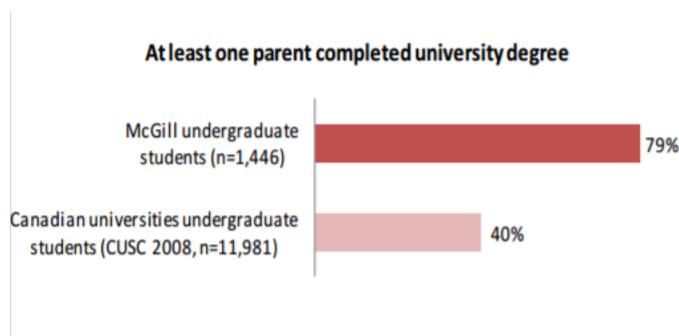


Figure 1: Educational Attainment of Parents of McGill University Undergraduate Students

Note: Reprinted from Amberg, V., Everett, J., Foster, W., & Lecky, R. (2009). *Student Demographic Survey: Final Report (Rep.)*. Retrieved October 7, 2016, from McGill University website:

www.mcgill.ca/studentlifeandlearning/files/studentlifeandlearning/final_report_1.pdf



Table 15: Parents' education Q51				
	All students (n=8,549)	Group		
		1 (n=5,667)	2 (n=1,837)	3 (n=1,045)
Mother's education				
Less than high school	8%	8%	9%	6%
High school	20%	20%	20%	19%
Some post-secondary	16%	17%	15%	14%
College, CEGEP, or technical school graduate	22%	23%	19%	20%
University or professional school graduate	25%	24%	26%	31%
Graduate degree	6%	5%	7%	6%
Other	1%	1%	1%	2%
Father's education				
Less than high school	12%	13%	12%	10%
High school	17%	16%	17%	17%
Some post-secondary	13%	14%	12%	12%
College, CEGEP, or technical school graduate	21%	23%	18%	17%
University or professional school graduate	24%	22%	27%	30%
Graduate degree	9%	8%	9%	11%
Other	1%	1%	1%	2%

Table 1: Parents' education and percent breakdown of students. Group 1 consists of universities with primarily undergraduate programs, Group 2 consists of those with both undergraduate and graduate programs, and Group 3 includes undergraduate, graduate, and often professional programs.

Note: Reprinted from *2011 Undergraduate University Student Survey (Rep.)*. (2011, June 23). Retrieved October 8, 2016, from Canadian University Survey Consortium website: www.cusc-ccre.ca/publications/CUSC_2011_UG_MasterReport.pdf

As far as McGill University is concerned, many of the support programs available for incoming and current students are aimed at the general population and first generation students can tap into them if needed. For example, the First-Year Transition Program through Campus Life and Engagement (CL&E) does not provide specific resources to first generation students, but the program is conscious of the need to provide support for first generation students, as evidenced by their advertisement for a first generation student researcher position last year.

Cara Piperni, Director of the Scholarships and Student Aid Office (SSAO) detailed many initiatives that the department has recently focused on, including setting aside funds for the bursary program; ensuring students have many opportunities to access financial aid; and providing financial literacy workshops. However, while very conscious of first generation students on campus, the initiatives from Scholarships and Student Aid also do not specifically target first generation students and only counted 334 first generation students using financial aid in the 2015-2016 school year.

SSMU does not have any programs aimed at first generation students but is interested in developing new initiatives. SSMU's first steps have included working with McGill's Enrollment Services and Data Collection to include a question on first generation status in their application form and other surveys, as well as adding first generation students to the SSMU Equity portfolio. Furthermore, by hiring me to complete this paper, SSMU is taking concrete steps to create an action plan for themselves and the university.



McGill Survey

The student survey received 22 responses. Five of those responses were incomplete, and eight completed responses came from first generation students. First generation student responses represented a variety of students, from U1s and other undergraduates to a dentistry student and alumnus. This diversity resulted in varied and insightful responses. It is important to acknowledge the difficulty of collecting voluntary data on this demographic. This survey was opened, actively promoted, and incentivized for over one month, outside of the final exam and midterm periods, yet only received 22 responses. There is a real need for the university to collect more consistent data from its entering students.

In terms of survey respondents, awareness of first generation students on campus was very low. Only 12 of the respondents reported that they were aware of first generation students on campus. Most first generation respondents felt that there were additional barriers in their McGill education and agreed that SSMU should work to better support them. Some examples included creating a student social group, lobbying the university to address the needs of first generation students, and actively reaching out to first generation students for feedback on projects.

Furthermore, all but one of the respondents identified that the university should provide support for first generation students, and all but one of these respondents felt that support in the form of financial aid from the university would be helpful. Other suggestions included targeted recruitment and mental health support initiatives.

McGill supports students who come from families with many generations of schooling... McGill posted a photo on Facebook where Suzanne Fortier was with a family during the graduation of their child. The caption mentioned how it was "so amazing" that the son graduated with 3-4 generations of McGill graduates in his family. I thought it was an unnecessary caption and disrespectful towards those who have no support whatsoever and had to attend McGill without having the help of others.

When asked if they feel welcome on campus, first generation student responses were mixed. One respondent explained that they did not feel welcome on campus given the expectation of parental post-secondary education. Another respondent explained that "Many people in [their program] are from families full of doctors and lawyers." An insightful question on the survey asked first generation students how their identity as a first generation student impacted their experience at McGill. Many of these responses identified social barriers:

It changed my relationships with others. I found others had no idea what my home life was like.

I find it hard to relate to others. I am told that others perceive me as weird. I stand out.

Spent my entire degree trying to figure out what to do/how to navigate post-secondary, instead of learning and focusing on my major.

I felt it was unfair because the students were treated differently based on their status and what their parents' jobs were.



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One response highlighted a positive experience as a first generation student. The student explained that “It made me stronger, because I had to do things for myself and be independent by necessity – which was really empowering.” This resilience is important to acknowledge. While there are barriers for first generation students, attending university and completing a degree despite the challenges is empowering and a substantial accomplishment. It should be recalled that these McGill students are meeting the same entrance and degree requirements as their peers. Therefore, in developing programming we must make sure not to assume fragility or anticipate failure but instead empower students for greater success.

PEER PRACTICES

Mentorship Programs

Mentorship programs appear to be the most utilized support initiative among U15 schools. McMaster University, the University of Ottawa, the University of Toronto, the University of Waterloo, and Western University all have mentorship programs which pair new first generation students with upper-year peers.

For example, through the University of Toronto’s *First in the Family Peer-Mentor Program*, students can be paired with a mentor, attend workshops and social events, or meet with a first generation student advisor (First in the Family Peer-Mentor Program, University of Toronto, 2015). In their response to the staff survey, the University of Toronto respondent estimated that 20 percent of its 84,000 students are first generation. The UofT Peer-Mentor program has been well received by students, who can take advantage of a range of support options, from mentoring and meeting with a learning strategist to participating skills development, leadership, and alumni events. This helps to pass on “institutional knowledge” that is necessary or helpful for success.

Financial Aid

Some schools offer dedicated financial aid for first generation students. For example, UBC has pledged to set aside some of their Centennial Entrance Scholarship Awards for underrepresented groups, including Indigenous students and first generation students (Farrar et al., 2015). The province of Ontario has created the *Ontario First Generation Bursary* for First Generation Students as part of their plan to increase access to higher education. This program is available to first generation Ontario residents registered at publicly assisted Ontario universities (Ontario First Generation Bursary, n.d.).

The University of Saskatchewan staff respondent explained that scholarships from individuals and private entities are available for first generation students at the university. The University of Saskatchewan student body is about 20 percent first generation, the lowest number out of all the province’s universities (Province of Saskatchewan Graduate Outcomes Survey 2011, 2012).



High School Recruitment Programs

Targeted recruitment strategies appeared to be lacking for many U15 schools, although several have general initiatives to encourage applicants from under-represented high schools. In one targeted program at Queen's University, eligible high school students visit the campus and hear a presentation from an upper year, first generation student (Stokes, 2014). Furthermore, participants in the program are offered an automatic scholarship should they choose to attend Queen's.

First Year Program

Dartmouth College has an extremely comprehensive, by-application program for first generation students in their freshman year. This initiative combines mentoring, advising, networking, and social activities under one umbrella and has incredible reviews and testimonials online (Platt, 2014).

First Generation Advising and Networking

Other support resources include dedicated advising and student groups. For example, Brown University has an office with a First Generation Student advisor, while all of the Ivy League schools participate in IvyG, attending conferences and facilitating connections between student communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need for a strategic approach to educational access for first generation students, from recruitment through to graduation. This can be addressed through a holistic diversity enrolment plan, including targeted admissions and recruitment efforts; improved data collection on incoming student demographics; tracking and needs assessment throughout the degree; and dedicated peer and institutional support resources. Specific recommendations include:

1. Comprehensive Data Collection

Enrolment Services and the Scholarships and Student Aid Office should collect self-identification data on first generation students. This includes through initial student applications, yield (acceptance) surveys, financial aid applications, and graduation requests, among other avenues. This information is important for informed program development, student follow-up, and recruitment statistics for future first generation students. Furthermore, this will be necessary to evaluate the success of new initiatives.

2. Targeted Recruitment

Enrolment Services should develop specific recruitment and outreach initiatives to reach first generation students. This includes a high school outreach program, similar to that at Queen's, and the creation of new pathways for accessing a McGill degree, such as streamlined entry from college programs.



3. Dedicated Bursaries

The Scholarships and Student Aid Office should create specific need-based bursaries for self-identifying first generation students. This should be well advertised to potential students as part of the recruitment strategy. Furthermore, this funding package could be tied to the outreach strategy like at Queen's or to a cohort admissions stream, depending on funding.

4. Mentorship Program

Student Services should develop a mentorship program, similar to that at the University of Toronto, through Campus Life and Engagement and the Peer Programs Network. This should integrate peer mentors in addition to academic advising and access to social events and tailored workshops.

5. Targeted Communications

Based on enhanced data collection, Student Services (e.g. Campus Life and Engagement) should directly contact first generation students with information on tailored resources including financial aid, mentorship programs, student groups, and social activities.

Outreach campaigns—particularly at orientation activities such as Discover McGill, Engage McGill, and Activities Night—would help to reach this demographic as well as increase awareness of first generation issues among all students. Specific print and promotional resources should be provided.

6. Student Mental Health Support

Counseling and Mental Health Services should develop dedicated Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) groups for students from a first generation background. Peers or professionals with lived experience should facilitate Psychoeducational and other support groups. Finally, training on first generation students should be developed by Student Services or the SEDE Office and provided to Student Services staff, floor fellows, and peer supporters.

7. Expand SSMU Equity Portfolio

The SSMU Equity portfolio should be expanded in staff and resources to support implementation of these recommendations on campus. This will help inform strategies at the student level through outreach, consultation, research, peer resources, and student advocacy. Funding could be provided from an increase to the Equity Fee or the redistribution of a portion of another fee (pending referendum approval).



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is a need for increased recruitment, retention, and support of first generation students at McGill University. The number of first generation students has not been consistently tracked outside the context of financial aid. Furthermore, the definition of first generation students is variable, leading to inconsistencies between different reports and surveys. The most inclusive definition defines first generation students as those who do not have at least one parent or guardian who has completed a four-year post-secondary degree. SSMU and the university should use this definition across all services and administrative offices.

The student survey uncovered challenging experiences of first generation students with invisibility, social isolation, and learning to navigate the university environment. Increased financial aid was the most frequently recommended support measure, followed by mentorship and social initiatives. Many other U15 and Ivy League schools are already targeting recruitment, retention, and support for first generation students through new bursaries, dedicated advising, peer mentorship, and high school outreach.

Immediate actions for the university include comprehensive data collection on first generation students, beginning with those who apply and continuing through the life cycle to track graduation rates and career success. SSMU should expand their equity portfolio in order to develop other student-led support programs and to advocate for the implementation of these recommendations. Finally, Student Services and Enrolment Services should lead the development of a university-wide strategy to enhance access and dedicated support resources for future striving students to achieve their potential.



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