

**Toward a Culture of First-Generation Student Success:  
An Analysis of Mission Statements from First-Gen Forward Institutions**

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## **Toward a Culture of First-Generation Student Success:**

### **An Analysis of Mission Statements from First-Gen Forward Institutions**

In today's higher education landscape, institutions must prioritize dynamic approaches to serving an increasingly diverse student population. Many institutions will need to address this imperative through a transformation of both culture and practice in ways that center the needs and experiences of students (McNair et al., 2016; Stokes et al., 2019). Rather than asking whether *students* are college-ready, higher education leaders should ask whether *institutions* are student-ready (McNair et al., 2016; Whitley et al., 2018). In answering this reframed question, colleges<sup>1</sup> can engage all institutional stakeholders in efforts to equitably promote student learning and improve student outcomes. Institutions can begin to shift to student-readiness by examining how their mission statement signals a commitment to students (McNair et al., 2016).

Colleges may find that they are better prepared to support students if their institutional missions are oriented toward student success. Hartley (2002) described institutional mission as a “starting point for change” (p. 11); mission is durable and responsive to external influences (Kuh et al., 2005) and can signal institutional commitments and priorities to internal and external audiences (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Meacham & Gaff, 2006). Institutions that closely align policy and practices with mission are more effective in developing programs and initiatives that enhance student learning (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). A commitment to mission can also promote inclusive participation of administrators, faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders in decision-making that leverages the assets of diverse students in designing new initiatives and promoting cultural transformation (Kuh et al., 2005; McNair et al., 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> We use *colleges* to refer broadly to institutions of higher education.

First-generation students (FGS) represent a large population of the students who may most benefit from intentional, mission-driven shifts toward student-readiness. FGS—defined here as students whose parents have not attained a college degree (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Whitley et al., 2018)—comprise more than 55% of the current undergraduate student population in the United States (RTI International, 2019), but they persist and attain degrees at lower rates than students who have at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019b). By considering the diversity of FGS’ intersectional identities in the context of a student-ready institution, colleges can implement changes intended to narrow attainment gaps and improve student outcomes. Analyzing the mission statements of institutions committed to FGS success can illuminate possible approaches to prioritizing the engagement and support of a growing majority of college students .

In 2017, NASPA and the Suder Foundation instituted the Center for First-generation Student Success (2020). The Center has since recognized two cohorts (totaling 157 colleges and universities) of First-gen Forward Institutions (FFIs) that are dedicated to promoting FGS access and success through evidence-based practices. A recent statement from the Center’s advisory board calls on educational leaders to challenge the norms and assumptions of higher education institutions in ways that advance the common good and recognize the “wealth of potential” within FGS (Accapadi et al., 2020, para. 4). Mission statements, which help to create a cohesive culture and legitimize institutional roles within society (Fugazzotto, 2009; Morphey & Hartley, 2006), can also serve as tools to assess whether and how institutions academically and socially engage students (Meacham & Gaff, 2006). Using Pike and Kuh’s (2005) conceptual model of student engagement and integration, which links student engagement and perception of campus environment to student outcomes, this study conducts a content analysis of mission statements

from FFIs in an exploration of the following research question: What common characteristics in mission statements from institutions that have expressed a commitment to serving FGS potentially signal an organizational culture oriented toward FGS success?

To address this research question, we first summarize trends and challenges in efforts to support FGS and highlight the value of considering mission statements when developing an FGS-oriented culture. We then use content analysis to identify and discuss four predominant themes found in FFI mission statements: *student learning experiences*, *community-serving*, *diversity and inclusion*, and *access and affordability*. Finally, we suggest ways in which institutions might leverage their missions to develop a culture of FGS success that acknowledges these students' unique experiences, needs, and strengths.

### **Serving First-Generation Students**

An examination of first-generation students' educational outcomes suggests that many postsecondary institutions are not addressing these students' unique needs. Within six years of enrolling in college, only 29.1% of FGS whose parents have attended some college and 19% of FGS whose parents have no more than a high school diploma have attained a bachelor's degree, compared to 58.7% of continuing-generation students (students who have at least one parent with a bachelor's degree) (NCES, 2019b).

These disparities may reflect systemic failures to understand the identities of FGS. The higher education system and even individual institutions employ different definitions of FGS, which can complicate these students' access to resources (Cataldi et al., 2018; Toutkoushian et al., 2019; Whitley et al., 2018). The challenge of defining FGS stems in part from their heterogeneity; FGS are more likely to be older, have dependents, be students of color, come from low-income families, and be veterans than continuing generation students (NCES, 2019a).

Historically, these traits have led researchers to characterize FGS as “students at academic risk” (Terenzini et al., 1996, p. 17). Engle and Tinto (2008) found that FGS were less integrated into both academic and social environments than continuing-generation students because of both background characteristics and a lack of cultural preparedness. This emphasis on what FGS students “lack”—such as cultural capital (Pascarella et al., 2004) or a sufficient mastery of the college student role (Collier & Morgan, 2008)—compared to their continuing-generation peers has characterized much of the literature on FGS students (Billson & Terry, 1982; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2012).

While this literature has sought to identify and address obstacles to FGS success and has often advocated for transformation of institutional policy and practice, it has also perpetuated deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997), which questions whether FGS can successfully integrate into the college environment and fails to acknowledge institutional barriers to success (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Deficit thinking reinforces assumptions that FGS need to be more like “traditional” college students (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), creating a binary that positions FGS as “handicapped” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 252) by their family’s limited knowledge about higher education. This false binary suggests that for FGS outcomes to improve, FGS should act more like their peers—a problematic proposition for several reasons. First, it fails to recognize FGS’ unique strengths such as family capital, through which FGS draw support from strong familial relationships (Gofen, 2007), and experiential capital, through which FGS’ life experiences help them navigate college environments (O’Shea, 2016). Second, contrasting FGS with continuing-generation students casts FGS as a homogeneous population and undercuts opportunities to understand them as richly diverse (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Whitley et al., 2018). Third, this binary reinforces a tacit implication

that students, not institutions, are responsible for their success, a key component of deficit thinking in educational research (Valencia, 1997), and that that students should assimilate to norms and practices of the dominant (White, male) culture in order to persist in college (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Jehangir, 2010).

A growing body of literature has sought to challenge deficit perspectives, recontextualizing conversations about inequitable outcomes for FGS with asset-based approaches that emphasize the diversity and strengths of FGS and shift the responsibility for student outcomes to institutions (Demetriou et al., 2017; O’Shea, 2016; Whitley et al., 2018). For example, in a qualitative study of successful FGS from low-income families, Demetriou et al. (2017) found that active involvement in the campus environment through activities, roles, and relationships helped FGS to succeed; the researchers called for institutions to cultivate dynamic mentoring relationships, provide access to high-impact practices, and clearly articulate learning challenges and objectives in order to foster positive student outcomes. Other research has drawn upon Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework to examine and affirm unique forms of capital that allow FGS to succeed in college (Mobley & Brawner, 2019; O’Shea, 2016). Shifting to an asset-based perspective encourages institutions to acknowledge and support the unique strengths and experiences of FGS, providing opportunities for academic and social engagement that center the experiences of FGS in ways that can transform institutional culture (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Jehangir, 2010).

### **Characteristics of a Success-Oriented Culture**

Leveraging mission to build a culture of success for FGS can help to address several institutional challenges to serving FGS. First, definitions of “first-generation” are not always uniform across institutional contexts, suggesting that approaches to supporting FGS may vary

(O’Shea, 2016; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Whitley et al., 2018). By refocusing on mission, institutional stakeholders can examine how a commitment to FGS aligns with institutional goals and values and can clarify or even change mission to create a more unified understanding and purpose (Kuh et al., 2005). Second, siloing—divisions between departments, offices, and services—within higher education institutions can lead to redundancy, lack of communication, and poor collaboration between extant FGS programs and services (Whitley et al., 2018), making it difficult for FGS to locate and use resources (Savoca & Bishop, 2020). A success-oriented culture helps to coordinate and make transparent the work of different divisions within an institution (Savoca & Bishop, 2020), potentially enabling more cohesive efforts to support FGS. Third, a success-oriented culture can help campuses to shift away from deficit-based language that views FGS as lacking in comparison to traditional students and can help institutional stakeholders, including students, to develop a language and concept of success (Whitley et al., 2018).

Kuh et al. (2005) identified six primary institutional traits that encourage student success at highly engaged institutions. These include an “unshakeable focus on student learning,” (p. 65); an intentional use and creation of on- and off-campus environments; and clearly communicated directions and expectations that can help students successfully navigate college. These traits foster and are enhanced by high-impact practices, engaging practices connected to student engagement and retention (Kuh, 2008; Kuh et al., 2005). Although Johnson and Stage (2018) found limited connections between high-impact practices and graduation rates, Kuh and Kinzie (2018) critiqued the study, emphasizing that for such practices to be impactful they must be effectively implemented, not just made available. Other scholars have argued that high-impact practices can support FGS success. For example, Jehangir (2010), advocated that learning

communities could bring FGS to the center of academic and social experiences, provide FGS with a cohesive experience in a siloed environment, and ultimately transform undergraduate education through the collaborative efforts of students, faculty, and staff. As institutions seek to develop a culture of success, a strong sense of mission that reflects a commitment to equitable, affordable access for students should inform policy and practice (Kuh et al., 2005; McNair et al. 2016).

### **Mission Statements as a Signal of Culture**

Institutional mission has implications for shaping an organizational culture oriented toward FGS success. Organizational culture, which illustrates how institutional stakeholders coalesce around a shared purpose (Gonzales et al., 2018; Tierney, 1988), can influence institutional identity through values and symbolism but can also reinforce power structures and normative practices that marginalize people from underrepresented groups (Gonzales et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, mission statements can help to make an institution's culture tangible in ways that connect and shape the actions of stakeholders (Fugazzotto, 2009). Institutions seeking to foster an inclusive culture of student success should ensure that their mission statements align with practices on campus (Kuh et al., 2005) and cultivate a cross-campus understanding of mission-related values that can drive equitable change (McNair et al., 2016). A clear sense of mission can energize stakeholders and provide context for unified program development and self-evaluation (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Tierney, 2002). Although there is a broad conversation in higher education about the importance of creating success-oriented cultures that benefit all students (McNair et al., 2016; Stokes et al., 2019), additional research suggests that focusing on the success of specific student populations like FGS can be particularly impactful. For example,



Kuh et al. (2005) found that Fayetteville State University drew upon their mission to provide a challenging-but-supportive learning environment to promote FGS persistence. Unique institutional missions can positively impact student engagement and outcomes (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Kuh et al., 2005), suggesting that attention to mission may help foster a culture that supports FGS.

Mission statements, however, can provide an incomplete picture of how the institution functions. These missions leave room for interpretation and could be empty rhetoric without supporting the initiatives that the mission claims to value (Maurrasse, 2001). Universities are typically siloed organizations (Savoca & Bishop, 2020), so academic units have autonomy and may not implement the mission with fidelity (Maurrasse, 2001). Furthermore, an institution's mission statement may profess certain kinds of interactions and beliefs, but that does not guarantee that this vision is enacted by administrators, staff, and faculty across an institution. Writing about how FGS find themselves isolated and marginalized on campuses, Jehangir (2010) argued that artifacts like mission statements express a commitment to values like diversity and inclusivity, but that those values often fail to manifest in institutional action. Additionally, Santa-Ramirez et al. (2020) found that FGS did not see themselves represented in mission statements and related videos, signaling to these students that they were not represented or included on campus. Mission statements should evolve along with the culture and constituency of institutions (Andrade & Lundberg, 2018), and faculty, staff, and administrators should include diverse student representatives in conversations about mission, strategic planning, and campus environment so that their perspectives are consistently represented (Kuh et al., 2005; McNair et al., 2016; Santa-Ramirez et al., 2020).

Previous research has suggested that mission statements often express institutional values that may influence how students engage in college. In a content analysis of 55 mission statements from Catholic colleges and universities, Estanek et al. (2006) found that over 90 percent of their sample described specific learning outcomes connected to the institutions' Catholic identity and suggested that these statements could be used to inform assessment grounded in institutional culture. Wilson et al. (2012) found 74 percent of their sample of 80 public higher education institutions contained references to diversity, including demographic and cultural (e.g., to inclusivity) references. However, the authors noted that most language related to diversity emphasized integrating "others" rather than inviting a "transformation" of campus culture (p. 138). These studies suggest that while mission statements can play a key role in shifting and shaping culture, they must be carefully interrogated by members of the institutional community so that normative, dominant values are not tacitly reinforced.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual model developed by Pike and Kuh (2005) through an analysis of first- and second-generation college student engagement and learning provides a useful framework for considering the links between mission, culture, and FGS success. Building on Astin's (1970) input-environment-output model of student success, Pike & Kuh contend that both students' engagement with and perceptions of their college environment are linked to and mutually influence student gains. Evidence that FGS are less likely to engage in and positively experience the college environment (Pike & Kuh, 2005) suggests that institutions should prioritize practices that address these gaps. Prior research has often advocated for FGS support that will assimilate FGS into the dominant college culture (Ward et al., 2012) or promote mastery of the college-student role (Collier & Morgan, 2008), but such proposed solutions fail to evaluate the

underlying norms and assumptions embedded within campus culture. By examining mission statements, institutional stakeholders can bring to light these assumptions as well as potential pathways for change. Mission statements can help guide institutions toward opportunities to promote student success and engagement (Meacham & Gaff, 2006) by articulating a commitment to student learning; active, collaborative pedagogies; interactions with faculty; experiences with diversity; and a supportive campus environment (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh et al., 2006). These characteristics are particularly critical for FGS, who may be less likely to engage in academic and social experiences (Pike & Kuh, 2005), and provided a foundation for our analysis of how FFI mission statements might reflect or signal a success-oriented culture that would benefit FGS.

### **Methodology**

In this study, we analyzed mission statements from the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 FFI cohorts to determine characteristics that might signal an organizational culture supportive of FGS success. FFIs represent a variety of institutional types and locations. The two cohorts contain a total of 95 public four-year, 53 private four-year, and 9 public 2-year institutions from across the United States. The institutions represented in this sample are accepted into an FFI cohort after a rigorous application process, suggesting that the interest in serving FGS is not restricted to a region or institutional type.

To gather the sample, we downloaded the lists of the 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 FFI cohorts ( $N = 157$ ) from the NASPA website. We then collected mission statements from each institution’s website. If a statement was unavailable on an institution’s “About” page or needed to be verified, we reviewed missions articulated in other institutional documents (e.g., self-studies and strategic plans). Supplementing these statements with IPEDS and College Scorecard

data, the resulting dataset included information about institutional type, Census region, and minority-serving institution status (35 FFIs are minority serving institutions).

We then conducted content analysis of the mission statements. Previous studies have used content analysis to examine college mission statements' function (Estanek et al., 2006; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Wilson et al., 2012), suggesting that this is an appropriate method for our analysis. Following the iterative technique described by Bowen (2009), we first considered key themes that signaled an institutional commitment to engaging students and developing a culture of success that could benefit FGS, using our conceptual framework of cultures of engagement for FGS (Pike & Kuh, 2005) and the types of engaging practices identified by Kuh et al. (2005) to create a list of *a priori* codes. These *a priori* codes included *academic challenge*, *active/collaborative learning*, *student-faculty interaction*, *enriching educational experiences*, and *supportive campus environment* (Kuh et al., 2005) and *college environment* (Pike & Kuh, 2005). We used these *a priori* codes to guide our first coding cycle while also including new codes that captured other ways mission statements signaled commitments to FGS success (Saldaña, 2013). After meeting to discuss our initial and emergent codes, we independently completed a second cycle of coding using the nine codes in Table 1. To increase the validity of our work, we conducted peer debriefing to ensure consistent interpretation of themes and resolve any disagreements (Spall, 1998). Finally, we organized our codes into themes for presentation and further analysis (Saldaña, 2013).

While the FFI cohorts were selected because of their unique, public commitment to fostering FGS support, the dataset is a convenience sample of institutions that applied for the designation. Additionally, although the mission statements were considered in relation to FGS, this study did not seek to determine the extent to which FFIs are using mission to create a culture

of FGS success. Mission statements are only one institutional document through which commitment to FGS can be considered; some FFIs have created FGS-specific policies and other resources that would provide additional layers of insight into how these institutions are approaching their support of FGS. Finally, the missions in this sample were written prior to the creation of the FFI designation; while some have been recently revised, others are decades old. While the themes that emerged through this analysis are in some ways universal, many of the mission statements likely do not capture evolutions in culture, leadership, student demographics, and practice that may inform how this mission is understood by institutional stakeholders.

We acknowledge that it is important to consider and recognize our positionality as researchers (Berger, 2015; Bourke, 2014). Neither author identifies as a first-generation college student, but we have worked with FGS and aspiring FGS. Catherine has supported the learning of many FGS as a first-year writing instructor and as a writing center coordinator at a four-year non-profit private university. Jake, as a former high school teacher in Title I schools, taught and helped prospective FGS navigate the college-going process. We remain passionate about serving FGS and improving their opportunities at institutions across the country.

## **Findings**

FFI mission statements had four dominant themes for FGS success: *student learning experiences*, *community-serving*, *diversity and inclusion*, and *access and affordability*. Each of these themes contains codes that emerged during qualitative analysis. Below we discuss each of these themes in order of prominence.

### **Student Learning Experiences**

Descriptions of student learning experiences, containing the codes *campus climate*, *student success*, and *student support*, constituted the most prominent theme in FFI mission

statements. Institutions combined and defined these terms in unique iterations to articulate their desired student learning experience. As illustrated below, the distinctions and relationships between these codes may suggest how FGS-serving institutions emphasize pathways to learning that encourage a success-oriented environment.

### *Campus Climate*

Institutions frequently described a commitment to making their campus supportive of students and their learning. These missions articulated approaches to creating environments that could foster student success and often invoked a sense of community. For example, Borough of Manhattan Community College defined itself as “a vibrant, pluralistic learning community committed to the intellectual and personal growth of students,” and Florida Atlantic University claimed that the university carried out its mission “within an environment that fosters inclusiveness.” Frequently, mission statements described campus environments as “student-centered”; for example, Kennesaw State University declared that the institution “[served] as a powerful example of the impact a student-centered, research-driven university education can deliver.” By emphasizing learning-focused, student-oriented, inclusive campus climates in mission statements, institutions may help to foster positive perceptions of the college environment in ways that influence student success (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Mission statements also linked student success to campus cultures informed by institutions’ religious affiliations. For example, Georgetown University’s mission stated that “the university was founded on the principle that serious and sustained discourse among people of different faiths, cultures, and beliefs promotes intellectual, ethical and spiritual understanding.” Georgetown’s mission focus on “intellectual understanding” is informed by the institution’s Catholic identity in a way that welcomes and promises to support students from ideologically

diverse backgrounds. McNair et al. (2016) suggested that campus environments that encourage development of the whole person are typically associated with religious institutions' missions but can also inform secular institutions' efforts to become oriented toward student success.

FFI mission statements frequently described their ideal campus environment as one that centers students and encourages diversity. These explicit mentions of cultivating an environment conducive to student success may reveal pathways by which institutions committed to serving FGS can help these and other students to thrive.

### *Student Support*

Expressions of student support frequently appeared in mission statements that also referenced campus climate; however, the student support code more precisely described explicit support for student learning as opposed to a broader sense of community. Descriptions of campus environments that explicitly supported students were common among these mission statements. For example, Simmons University promised a “transformative” learning experience at an institution that “has put the needs of our students first” for over a century. In other cases, references to student support identified explicit instructional techniques intended to promote student engagement and success. These techniques included “action-based” education at Michigan Technological University, innovative teaching strategies at University of Michigan–Dearborn, and “face-to-face and distance learning formats” at the University of South Carolina. Other universities, including Midwestern State University and St. Mary’s College of Maryland, mentioned supporting students through mentoring relationships with faculty; identified by Kuh et al. (2005) as an effective educational practice, student–faculty interaction has been associated with positive educational outcomes for both first-generation and continuing generation students (Kim & Sax, 2007). By embedding instructional and curricular approaches within the mission

statement, these missions create clear opportunities for institutions to align learning outcomes and educational practices with mission; such statements can also help to ensure that student learning is a critical focus for FFIs (Kuh et al., 2005). Centering a supportive educational environment can also help to signal learning pathways to students, which may help FGS more confidently navigate college (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

### *Student Success*

Many mission statements also directly stated their commitment to student success. These statements were general in some missions, such as Stanford University's commitment to "qualify its students for personal success" and Kentucky Wesleyan College's mission to prepare students to "achieve success in life."

Other institutions specifically defined and described how they measured student success. Commonly, these institutions discussed success as preparation for future leadership or for the workforce. Monmouth University "educates and prepares students to realize their potential as leaders and to become engaged citizens." Other institutions focused on the connection between career preparation and student success. For example, Metropolitan State University Denver's mission included a commitment to "high-quality, accessible, enriching education that prepares students for successful careers." These goals of leadership and career outcomes were not mutually exclusive. Texas Tech University's mission statement blended these commitments, stating that the university is "dedicated to student success by preparing learners to be ethical leaders for a diverse and globally competitive workforce."

Although mission statements that in some way define measures of or goals for student success may provide clearer guidance for institutions seeking to serve FGS, any success-oriented language can highlight success as an institutional priority and can engage stakeholders in



building a culture of success through “language that animates institutional will” (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 267).

Taken together, campus climate, student support and student success help articulate an institutional culture that is committed to promoting engagement, learning, and positive outcomes for all students. These commitments can help to orient administrators, faculty, and staff toward a culture of FGS success that understands and values FGS within that culture. These mission traits may help institutions to interrogate whether their campus environment supports FGS and may guide the development of practices and policies that promote a campus-wide commitment to FGS.

### **Community-Serving**

The *community-serving* theme includes articulations of institutions’ commitment to supporting their locality, state, or region. Seventy-five of the 82 missions coded for community-serving came from public institutions. Our operationalization of community-serving required the institution’s mission to explicitly describe a community they served. This excluded general mentions of “our community” and “public service” as well as references to only a global community.

Mission statements typically asserted support for multiple constituencies. For example, the University of Massachusetts Boston was dedicated to “serving the public good of our city, our commonwealth, our nation, and our world.” Frequently, public community-serving mission statements used language about “serving,” “enriching,” and “enhancing” these multiple constituencies. For example, the University of Kansas “first serves Kansas, then the nation, and the world,” clearly prioritizing its home state. All institutions that described themselves as their state’s “flagship” and most land, sea, or space grant institutions also articulated a commitment to

serving a community that included their state. The mission of the University of Hawai'i at Manoa was the only mission statement that included a language other than English, featuring Hawaiian words and phrases. The mission also included an intent "to serve the people of Hawai'i, and our neighbors in the Pacific and Asia"; this is the only FFI mission statement that served specific global regions.

Institutional commitments to service also encompassed local cities and regions. Florida International University's mission included a commitment to "collaborative engagement with our local and global communities" while Shippensburg University expressed a desire to "meet the needs of South Central Pennsylvania and beyond." Other institutions only acknowledged their local region. For example, Carroll Community College's mission included "serving Carroll County, Maryland."

Notably, Grambling State University, a public historically Black university, articulated "a commitment to the education of minorities in American society." Although three of the four historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) expressed a mission to serve their community, Grambling State was the only HBCU that mentioned serving "minorities." North Carolina Central University and North Carolina A&T State University both articulated a desire to improve challenges and the economic development of "North Carolina, the nation, and the world." Alabama State University, the other HBCU, included "engaging in public service" in their mission but did not link this service to a clearly defined community.

Institutions that explicitly focus on the local community may be particularly well attuned to local needs and resources, which may aid institutions in cultivating partnerships and student supports that consider the experiences of FGS, who frequently work full time and live in the community rather than on campus. While previous scholarship has suggested that living on

campus can help integrate FGS into college environments (Pike & Kuh, 2005), that solution is not always practical. Community-serving institutions may be well positioned to consider creative approaches to extending a culture of FGS success beyond the boundaries of campus.

Kuh et al. (2005) found that by engaging with their local communities, institutions were able to support community needs, including by providing educational access, as well as provide enriching educational experiences for students. Additionally, relationships between institutions and communities can help institutions to be aware of social, financial, and personal concerns that might be impacting their students and to seek community partnerships and opportunities that will help provide support (McNair et al., 2012). Mission statements that express a commitment to serving their communities may help institutions to consider the needs and experiences of FGS in a context that expands beyond the campus environment.

### **Diversity and Inclusion**

Institutions in our study also included statements expressing support for different types of diversity or inclusion. The codes of *inclusion*, *student diversity*, and *first-generation* are nested, meaning that if an institution's mission mentioned FGS, it was also coded as student diversity and inclusion.

#### ***Inclusion***

*Inclusion*, the broadest code within this theme, occurred in approximately half of the mission statements. Inclusion encompassed any mention building a diverse community, even if it was not specific. Mission statements often included general language expressing support for diversity but did not specify that their focus was student diversity. For example, Kansas State University “embraces diversity” but did not further expand on what was meant by “diversity” or how it was encouraged or celebrated in institutional contexts.

Some institutions expressed an inclusion of diverse ideas. For example, Hofstra University's mission stated that the institution was "fully committed to academic freedom." Other institutions connected notions of inclusion to people in and beyond the campus community but did not clearly demonstrate how diverse people would be included or that the inclusion encompassed diverse students. For example, Lafayette College "encourages students to examine the traditions of their own culture and those of others" although this cultural examination could be interpreted in a solely academic context rather than a broad institutional commitment to expression of diversity.

Even though these general statements of inclusivity lack context and definition that might allow them to shape a direct approach to supporting FGS, the notion of inclusion is an important foundational component in success-oriented institutional cultures (McNair et al., 2012). The presence of inclusion in mission statements may help to create a shared commitment to diverse worldviews and experiences that will allow FGS to be acknowledged and valued.

### ***Student Diversity***

Mission statements coded with *student diversity* acknowledged serving diverse student populations; however, many of these mission statements provided vague definitions of diversity. Georgia Southwestern State University, a typical example of this, stated that the university served "a diverse population of students." Other institutions maintained this vague use of "diversity" but extended it to more constituencies. For example, Boston College recognized "the important contribution a diverse student body, faculty and staff can offer." By extending diversity beyond their students to include their staff and faculty members, Boston College recognized the importance of various actors in a college to the development of students from diverse backgrounds. However, without clearly defining diversity, these missions may not guide

institutions toward a focus on FGS or other underrepresented students. This may reflect disconnect between institutions' stated and enacted missions.

Other FFIs defined what they meant by a diverse student body. For example, Salt Lake Community College sought “to provide quality higher education and lifelong learning to people of diverse cultures, abilities and ages.” This stated commitment to welcoming all, including non-traditional, students may have created opportunities for the college to address the needs of FGS. Religious institutions often included religious diversity in their mission statements. Saint Mary's College included multiple definitions of student diversity, welcoming “members from its own and other traditions, inviting them to collaborate in fulfilling the spiritual mission of the college.” Encouraging all students to play a collaborative role in actualizing mission may help Saint Mary's College to create an environment that engages FGS.

### ***First-Generation***

Within these specific mentions of diversity, three institutions (DePaul University, Pine Manor College, and University of Maryland, College Park) expressed an explicit commitment to FGS. These institutions were diverse, spanning public and private and two- and four-year schools. Two of these institutions—DePaul University and University of Maryland, College Park—had the longest mission statements in the dataset at 1,064 and over 3,000 words respectively, so their inclusion of the specific desire to serve FGS reflected a comprehensive approach to aligning the mission statement with the institutions' “living” missions (Kuh et al., 2005). These mission statements connected their desire to serve FGS with serving other minoritized student populations. The University of Maryland, College Park aimed to maintain strong graduation rates for all undergraduates while addressing “the achievement gap for African American/Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, as well as those first in family to attend

college.” Similarly, DePaul’s mission included a continued “commitment to the education of first-generation college students, especially those from the diverse cultural and ethnic groups” in the greater Chicago area. Pine Manor College, with a much shorter mission statement of 72 words, stated that “students, including those who are the first in their families to attend college...will find a home at Pine Manor College.” FGS were the only specific student population mentioned in Pine Manor College’s mission statement.

Making institutional pledges to inclusivity, student diversity, or FGS may steer institutions to better address the needs of FGS. While these themes may help institutions to think about how to include and serve FGS and through a success-oriented culture, they also serve as a reminder of the importance of having a widely shared understanding of values expressed in missions (Kuh et al., 2005; McNair et al., 2016). While it is unlikely that many institutions will rewrite their mission statements to directly express commitment to serving FGS, institutions may find it valuable to engage in dialogue about how FGS are considered in campus conceptions of inclusivity and diversity to prevent marginalization (Jehangir, 2010; Wilson et al., 2012) and ensure equitable support. Developing mission statements that move beyond general references to inclusivity and diversity through explicit mentions of FGS may also send a clear message that FGS are visible and valued and that the institution is committed to their success (Santa-Ramirez et al., 2020).

### **Access and Affordability**

The final theme reflected a commitment to student access and affordability. All but one of the mission statements reflected in this theme came from public institutions, indicating that these institutions have embedded commitments to access and affordability.

#### ***Access***

Access to higher education was a noteworthy theme in our data, particularly for public schools. Only one private school, DePaul University, clearly articulated a commitment to access for students. Unsurprisingly, five of the nine community colleges in the sample expressed clear commitments to access for students. Typical of this set was the mission of Carroll Community College, which defined itself as “a public, open admissions” institution.

Other institutions typically discussed access in tandem with other values. Predominantly, these values were related to diversity, success, or excellence. The University of Washington claimed to provide access to both “non-traditional and traditional students.” The University of South Carolina, Columbia connected access to excellent education with a mission to lead “the way in providing all students with the highest quality of education.” Finally, access to college was often tied to student success both within and beyond college. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill sought to “invest our knowledge and resources to enhance access to learning and to foster the success and prosperity of each rising generation.” Some institutions connected access to other values. The University of Texas–San Antonio’s mission stated that “As an institution of access and excellence, UTSA embraces multicultural traditions,” indicating commitment to access, excellence and diversity.

Tying multiple values to access can be both illuminating and problematic. Institutions that simultaneously discuss diversity and access may have additional structures in place to support those entwined parts of their mission. For example, the University of Washington’s explicit commitment to non-traditional students likely informs how the institution creates access to higher education opportunities. However, missions that juxtapose certain values may reinforce normative assumptions about *who* should have access. If an institution expresses a commitment to both access and excellence, the notion of excellence should be interrogated. How is excellence

defined and measured? As with diversity, mission-expressed commitments to access can help to foster a success-oriented culture, but access must be defined in ways that equitably include FGS. Institutions should consider issues of access as they seek to effectively implement policies and practices designed to ensure student success (Kuh & Kinzie, 2018; McNair et al., 2016).

### ***Affordability***

Affordability appeared in nine FFI mission statements, typically as a type of access or linked to access. The University of Virginia claimed to be defined by “Our universal dedication to excellence and affordable access.” Only one institution, University of Massachusetts Lowell, mentioned affordability without linking it to access. While most mentions of affordability were general, DePaul University, as the only private institution to discuss affordability in their mission statement, provided an explicit strategy to maintain affordability by managing its “resources effectively” to “control the costs it charges students.”

Affordability has long been recognized as a barrier to student access and success (McNair et al., 2016); the code’s limited appearance in the dataset may suggest that institutions seeking to develop a culture of FGS success may want to consider how costs impact FGS’ abilities to fully engage with available resources and persist to degree completion.

### **Institutions without Codes**

In our dataset, sixteen institutions did not contain codes or themes from our conceptual framework. All of these institutions were four-year institutions, and fourteen were private. These mission statements were often vague and shorter than average (27.5 words compared to 121.2 words). As a typical example, Texas Christian University sought to “educate individuals to think and act as ethical leaders and responsible citizens in the global community.” Although this mission discussed fostering global citizenship, it did not mention the city, state, or region and



therefore did not meet our inclusion criteria for community-serving. These FFIs without codes have committed to advancing FGS success, but further research could investigate whether this commitment is enacted through campus-wide initiatives or more siloed efforts.

### **Discussion**

These findings suggest that mission statements containing themes signaling an institutional commitment to student engagement and success may help guide unified approaches to serving FGS that reflect and extend campus priorities (Kuh et al., 2005; Kezar & Kinzie, 2005) and simultaneously help FGS to engage in and positively perceive their college environment as a pathway to college success (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Missions that describe student learning experiences such as a supportive, student-centered campus climate; targeted approaches to student learning, support, and engagement; and a commitment to student outcomes may help to guide decision-making about the types of resources and opportunities that would help to promote FGS success. Careful considerations of what is meant by broad terms like “diversity” and “access,” facilitated through open dialogue among stakeholders, can help surface tacit assumptions about *who* should have access and challenge deficit thinking about FGS and other students. In order to ensure commitments to these students are honored through policy and practice, institutions might consider revising the language of their mission statements to directly acknowledge FGS. This public acknowledgement can solidify an institutional definition of FGS and can help lead to improved student supports (Toutkoushian et al., 2019).

Missions that express a commitment to serving their local or state communities can encourage institutional stakeholders to explore opportunities for partnerships that support current and prospective students, situating the institution in a broader “ecosystem” (McNair et al., 2016)

that is more reflective of and responsive to the complex identities and experiences of FGS. As the FFI dataset used for this analysis illustrates, each institution uniquely articulates its mission to communicate its purpose to a broad audience. As institutions of higher education seek to transform in ways that will promote the success of over half of the undergraduate population, the mission statement can serve as a tool for inquiry, self-assessment, dialogue, and change. Only three of the 157 FFIs in this dataset mentioned FGS, but a majority of institutions in the sample expressed at least one component of our conceptual framework of FGS success. The omission of FGS from mission statements may foster environments where the needs of FGS are not prioritized and possibly made invisible in long-term institution-wide strategic initiatives. Institutions should consider how their mission statements explicitly and implicitly express their commitment to FGS.

Our analysis of FFI mission statements contributes to the existing body of FGS- and mission-focused research in the following ways. First, although content analysis has been used for several studies of higher education mission statements, these analyses have typically focused on mission as it relates to institutional type (e.g., Andrade & Lundberg, 2018; Estanek et al., 2006; Morphey & Hartley, 2006). In contrast, our analysis considers mission statements from institutions that have publicly committed to a shared goal of supporting FGS students. As most of the mission statements in our sample did not directly acknowledge FGS, this content analysis also helps to illuminate how FGS are often only tacitly included in mission-driven initiatives dedicated to student success. We hope that this approach suggests additional contexts in which content analysis could be a useful methodology.

Second, much of the robust literature on FGS focuses on these students' deficits in comparison to their continuing-generation peers (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). While this body

of research has played a critical role in supporting FGS, it also potentially reinforces normative assumptions that may strengthen barriers to student success and perpetuate inequitable outcomes for FGS. This analysis contributes to the growing literature that adopts an asset-oriented approach to thinking about and supporting FGS (Demetriou et al., 2017; O'Shea, 2016). Considering that FGS currently make up the majority of undergraduate students, this reframing of FGS' educational potential may help to ensure that institutions are serving the actual students enrolled. This is not to suggest that FGS are monolithic; rather, institutions must create supports that recognize the complex identities of students comprising this population in their institutional context. As institutions focus on FGS success, they will likely also need to consider the success of minoritized students, low-income students, and other student populations that have been historically underrepresented and marginalized. Thus, this study encourages institutions to center FGS in ways that emphasize not what they lack, but what they offer.

This analysis provides useful guidance for institutions seeking to support FGS. Institutions might begin this work with a critical analysis of their mission statement through discussions with institutional stakeholders, considering such questions as: How might the mission statement provide a path to fostering FGS success? How might it unintentionally create obstacles to FGS success? Are values associated with FGS widely shared/understood by community members in ways that promote collaboration and prevent siloing? Additionally, the themes we identified in our analysis are not unique to FFIs; considering how these themes intersect with the experiences of FGS at a particular institution may help to reveal opportunities through which to support FGS. As mission statements are required as part of the accreditation process, institutional stakeholders could examine their mission through these questions to assess how they signal their commitment to FGS success and how their work to support FGS

(mis)aligns with institutional mission. This self-reflection may be valuable to institutions who are not FFIs but desire to better serve FGS.

This content analysis raises important questions about how to transform higher education in order to meet the needs of today's students, more than half of whom identify as first-generation (RTI International, 2019). Content analysis is useful for generating questions and providing efficient but somewhat limited perspectives on complex topics (Bowen, 2009). Future research could include case studies exploring how FFIs utilize their mission to design and implement supports for FGS success. Surveys or interviews could examine how mission is experienced or understood by FGS and other campus stakeholders, building on the work of Santa-Ramirez et al. (2020). Finally, future research could examine mission effectiveness, considering how institutional mission is or is not understood by campus stakeholders, and how the expression of mission affects campus climate and practice.

### **Conclusion**

Institutional mission statements can serve as one site for assessing institutional commitment to student outcomes, particularly as mission statements can guide the design of institutional policies to support FGS success (Kuh et al., 2005). Institutions can engage stakeholders in public discussion of whether and how their missions intersect with their commitment to FGS success; this process can help to promote widespread, consistent understanding of core values embedded within the mission, and can help to encourage mission-driven approaches to creating a culture of FGS success (Kuh et al., 2005). This analysis of FFI mission statements helps to illuminate how institutions might leverage their unique missions, such as those that emphasize diversity, access, and student learning experiences, to coordinate and communicate campus-wide approaches to promoting a culture of FGS success.

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**Table 1***Theme Prevalence in Mission Statements of First-Gen Forward Institutions*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Student Learning Experiences</b>	100	63.7%
Campus Climate	64	39.5%
Student Support	50	31.8%
Student Success	48	30.6%
<b>Community-Serving</b>	82	52.2%
Community-Serving	82	52.2%
<b>Diversity &amp; Inclusion</b>	78	49.7%
Inclusivity	78	49.7%
Student Diversity	45	28.7%
First-Generation	3	1.9%
<b>Access &amp; Affordability</b>	29	18.5%
Access	28	17.8%
Affordability	9	5.7%
<b>No Codes</b>	16	10.2%

*Note.* There are 157 missions in our dataset.