



Advancing Equity in Graduate Education by Supporting First-Generation Students

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Access to graduate and professional education is increasingly a key determinant of social mobility, career opportunity, and economic well-being. Yet despite a 35% increase in graduate enrollment since 2015 and more than 32 million Americans holding advanced degrees, systemic gaps persist, particularly for first-generation college graduates. For example, first-gen students are 1.9 times less likely to enroll in lucrative professional doctoral degrees, and once enrolled, 1.4 times less likely to complete them. While bachelor's degrees can help level the socioeconomic playing field, advanced degrees are now where inequalities re-emerge. This widening class divide at the highest levels of education extends across professional sectors.

First-gen student challenges include entering graduate school later, pursuing master's over doctoral degrees, and taking longer to complete programs due to finances, family responsibilities, and structural deficiencies. Contributing to systemic gaps, their choices are limited by cost, location, and access to selective institutions. Meanwhile, students whose parents went to college benefit from built-in advantages like professional networks, cultural familiarity, and insider knowledge – resources that first-gen students must work harder to build on their own.

Higher education institutions, departments, and faculty members must better recognize, support, and normalize the strengths (e.g., strategic thinking, agility, tenacity) of first-gen students – ensuring that success in graduate education is not predetermined by class background. By understanding how social origin shapes access and outcomes, institutions can build policies and practices that promote a more equitable graduate education – one that increases inclusion, reduces attrition, and ultimately delivers on the promise of higher education as a vehicle for upward mobility. In doing so, we can turn graduate education from a credentialing system to a true engine for equity and transformation.

Understanding the Unequal Landscape of Graduate Education

My research makes clear that graduate education is not a neutral playing field. It reproduces class inequality through disparities in who goes, when they go, what degree they pursue, and how they experience the process. These inequities in both access and outcomes are shaped by structural inefficiencies and misalignments that disproportionately disadvantage first-gen students – resulting in delayed entry, longer times-to-degree, limited school choice, and reduced returns on investment over the life course.

My research provides empirical evidence that these challenges are not simply individual hurdles, but systemic deficiencies. First-gen students consistently demonstrate tenacity and agility, but they are still left to navigate graduate schools with inadequate support. Their experience is disproportionately shaped by inefficient structures, inadequate advising, and exclusionary academic cultures. Their success comes at a higher cost and

through greater effort than continuing-generation students.

Institutional policymakers need to understand this context not only as a matter of equity, but also efficiency and effectiveness. When systems are designed to work for those already advantaged, institutions miss the opportunity to fully leverage the talent and perspectives of first-gen students.

Aligning Graduate Education with Equity and Mobility Goals

This research exposes some of the class-based inequalities graduate education, as currently structured, reproduces. However, findings also provide a roadmap for institutional policymakers to lead meaningful change – not by “fixing” students, but by redesigning the systems around them.

The policy implications are significant. Institutions must recognize the structural – not individual – nature of these barriers. When first-gen students pursue graduate degrees, they need to navigate a system designed around the norms, resources, and timelines of continuing-generation students. As such, interventions must shift from targeting individuals toward structural change. Wide-ranging policy options include advising and admissions reform, targeted financial support, inclusive curriculum and pedagogy, and community-focused infrastructure.

Ultimately, this research demands a reframing of how institutions define readiness, success, and excellence in graduate education. By aligning structures with the diverse realities of today’s students, policymakers can ensure graduate education becomes a lever of mobility and not a gatekeeper of privilege. The recommendations below offer a framework for action across three key levels: institutions, departments/programs, and individual faculty members. By controlling different spheres of influence, each level plays a unique role in shifting to student-ready systems.

1. Institution-Level Action

Graduate studies offices, deans, and central administration can refine data practices and reimagine resource distribution:

- Make survey and program evaluation efforts more valid and reflective of students’ stage in the pipeline; disaggregate findings by first-generation status to expose structural gaps.
- Enact targeted financial aid to reduce pressure to delay entry, take on additional jobs, or choose less lucrative programs due to affordability or proximity.
- Reallocate fellowship funds to reach more students – stacking smaller awards on top of assistantships to reduce financial strain without removing students from valuable learnings of academic labor.
- Partner with Teaching and Learning Centers to incentivize evidence-based professional development for faculty teaching graduate students, and fund participating departments.

2. Department- and Program-Level Action

Departments are positioned to embed equity into both admissions and the student experience:

- Advance holistic admissions to include transparent, outreach-based recruitment, especially with local institutions and pipeline programs.

- Modify admissions policies to value non-linear and asset-based pathways.
- Build clarity around financial and academic support structures on departmental websites, including realistic depictions of assistantship funding and expectations.
- Shift from “add-on” supports to integrated structures: embed research-based mentoring, advising, and community-building into required coursework.
- Introduce a coaching model that complements faculty advising. **A coach serves as a “cultural guide” to students navigating institutions** – reducing the need for them to search widely for belonging and support.

3. Faculty-Level Action

Though prior recommendations focus on top-down structural change, faculty members can play a powerful role in reshaping the graduate experience – starting in the classroom, a sphere in which they have sole influence:

- Move beyond a growth mindset to a “grow” mindset, helping first-gen students harness their strengths (e.g., tenacity, agility, strategic thinking) in a **relationship-rich environment**.
- Collaborate on course design and sequencing, ensuring consistency and cohesion across students’ learning trajectories.
- Implement student-centered, inclusive practices – providing first-gen students valuable capital for future conversion.

By aligning structures with the lived realities of first-gen graduate students, institutions can move from passive equity commitments to active, systemic transformation. They can create **student-ready programs** that recognize and normalize first-gen students’ pathways. This work is not just possible but essential due to graduate education’s impact on lifetime earnings – with implications for student debt, wealth accumulation, and retirement. If we are serious about social mobility, we must also be serious about reforming graduate education.

Read more in Rossi, M. (2024). *(Class) matters: A mixed-method analysis of graduate and professional education by social origin and first-generation status*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Davis]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database.