

The Strengths of First-Generation College Students as Determined by participants in a facilitated discussion, “Cultivating and Capitalizing on the Strengths of First-Generation College Students” at FYE 2017.

During our session, we watched a video titled, The Science of Character (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3nT2KDAGOc>) which identifies 7 character strengths linked to success. Our group developed a list of examples of the strengths of first-gen students based on our own experiences as students and/or working with students and categorized them into the 7 strengths identified in the video (Enthusiasm, Self-Control, Curiosity, Perseverance, Optimism, Gratitude, and Social Intelligence). The work of our group is summarized below.

Enthusiasm:

- Excited and proud to be the first in their family to attend college
- Proud to have “made it” to college
- Viewing being “first gen” as a strength instead of a deficit
- Experiencing poverty and making a strong commitment for a better future
- Enthusiasm for learning
- Truthful/Openness
- Self-Invention – Higher Ed is uncharted territory, but exhilarating
- Dedication
- Belief that college will open paths to better lives
- Excited to represent their family and serve as a role model
- Example of a student whose family does not help pay for school or encourage her attendance. Regardless the student has been very enthusiastic about attending and finishing her degree. She seeks help when she needs it and stays in contact with her campus support system.

Self-Control

- Student who is African-American and from a low socioeconomic background – used self-control and time management skills to succeed.
- Student took her studies very seriously (set daily study times, coordinated study groups) because she wanted to make her family proud.
- FG students who are also working part or full time to pay for college
- Focused on “job at hand” in studying and academic work
- Goal-oriented/focused
- Cautiousness/Desire to play it safe or “get it right”
- Work hard to figure things out on their own
- Independent living skills

Curiosity

- FG students come in to college w/o expectations or experiences projected onto them. Less “when my mom went to college, she took XYZ, so I should too”
- Student example – always wants to learn more

- Creative – how to tailor resources available on campus to best support their needs
- Ask questions!
- Navigating campus culture and unfamiliar norms
- Desire to go to college to learn how to fix problems that people in their lives have – drug abuse, cancer, health issues, criminal record, etc.
- Resourcefulness – being able to seek assistance with campus resources and community programs

Perseverance/Grit

- Tenacity – many of my students have had to grow up at a young age and endure hardships that no one should experience. Despite all the obstacles they've encountered they managed to get to Duke and excel in their academics and grow as individuals.
- Student tries harder than any other student in his class but has failed 4 out of 5 exams. His 5th exam he got an A!
- Graduation despite all odds – not a statistic
- Boundary crossing
- Resourcefulness – have to figure out how to get info on their own
- Resilient
- My mom was a single mom with 3 kids. No one in my immediate family went to college. I had the drive, ambition, and passion to attend. My grandmother died in 2005. My grandfather died in 2009. My uncle died in 2006. I graduated in 2012 and my mom died in 2013. I graduated from my masters program in 2015 and applied to a Ph.D program.
- Ambitious – stepping through the doors of a college on their own and being the first in the family takes ambition. Navigating the process of applying also takes ambition.
- Student in the second week of the term had no cosigner for a loan. Her single mom couldn't help. She made a plan to go home, get a job, go to a local CC and take her last 2 gen eds. She will earn money and come back in the fall to finish!
- Bravery – trying this new thing that your support system may not understand
- Student diagnosed with a brain tumor and going through chemo who still showed up to every class. Got a perfect A+ and did great on her final presentation though she had been very physically ill minutes before.
- Determination
- Motivated
- Self-Reliance – coming from a background where family did not want to help with college or wishing the student wouldn't go for religious or economic reasons
- Hard-working
- Some of my FG students are the strongest people I have met in my life. They endure so much outside of school but still find a way to come to school every day and succeed when so many others with less severe circumstances would give up.
- Drive – even though it may be difficult, there is a drive to be successful

- Persistence
- Worker Bees
- Student wakes up at 5am to catch the bus to get to class at 8pm
- Adaptation – cultural resilience

Optimism

- Ability to look beyond their current circumstances and see possibility. College is worth it even though no one around me went to college.
- Student example was the “optimistic fighter”
- Belief that college completion will improve their job/career opportunities/prospects
- Resiliency – being able to bounce back from academic and life obstacles
- Despite setbacks, staying positive. Being proud of the small achievements and focusing on those when setbacks occur.
- Example of a DACA student who is the first to ask for help, the first to go to class, the first to apply for scholarships. She does this without knowing if she will be able to finish her college education. She is fully aware that she could be forced from her home at any time.
- Trying to provide a positive example to younger siblings
- Working to earn a college degree and live a comfortable life
- Desire to give back to society and future generations

Gratitude

- Selflessness
- My first-gen students seem more grateful for resources than other students
- Appreciation
- I have noticed that my first-gen students are especially grateful to be in school. They go out of their way to thank me for instructing them and they frequently write or journal about how thankful they are to be getting a college education.
- First-Gen Students appreciate the opportunities given to them and want to give back to those programs/mentors/people who helped them.
- Gratitude for the opportunity to attend college, for financial aid, for counselors, instructors, programs
- I receive gifts of gratitude every holiday from my students
- The student was so excited and grateful to get the scholarship and worked twice as hard as many to continue to earn the scholarship because they have wanted longer than others
- Many of the FG students I work with are so appreciative of assistance they receive/sometimes my continuing gen students appear more entitled
- Commitment to giving back
- Appreciate you being there to help even when it’s not officially your role
- Respect/appreciation for family

Social Intelligence

- Code-switching

- My student has stunning interpersonal abilities and is willing to risk emotional topics in public in a warm and accepting way
- Interesting balance of outside/inside the box thinking (expectations)
- May have life experience that provides them with immense knowledge on the complexity of social relationships and identity
- Resourceful – will ask for help from staff to figure out/navigate their experience. Usually not calling home to have mom/dad take care of problems for them
- Relationship builders
- Loyalty, guilt/pride, responsibility
- The ability to understand how to navigate “college” life and “home” life
- Fg students are kind and supportive of their peers
- Multi-generational households = ability to interact across diverse age groups

Other

- Clean slate – the absence of preconceived notions about college
- Courageous
- Humility