

## **First Generation Faculty Forum: Supporting First Generation Students and Faculty**

**Laurence Bray, Melissa Broeckelman-Post, Shannon N. Davis, Charlotte Gill, Heidi Lawrence, Millie Rivera, Courtney Adams Wooten**

Nearly 40% of Mason students are first generation college students. This group faces a unique set of challenges, particularly around understanding the implicit norms and expectations on our campus and academia generally. The discussants on this panel, all Mason faculty members, were once first-generation college students ourselves. Not only have we successfully navigated academic institutions and a pathway to the professoriate, but we recognize how our unique concerns and experiences along our journeys impact our teaching, mentoring, and advising practices. In this interactive panel, we shared some of the obstacles we faced, learned from attendees about the challenges they have experienced working with first-generation students, and collaboratively strategized ways to overcome them.

Below is a summary of these strategies, and you can see more details in our [Google Doc](#). This is a living document, so feel free to add your own ideas, and if you are a faculty member who identifies as having been a first-generation student, we would love to hear from you!

- **Make tacit knowledge implicit.** Many first-generation students struggle with understanding the difference between high school and college, such as what success looks like, what relationships you need to build to gain access to resources, and even how to handle logistical issues like registering for classes. Don't assume students will fully engage with information you put on your syllabus about registration deadlines, campus resources like CAPS and the Writing Center, etc. – talk about it in class and discuss the implications. Provide students with professional development assignments that require them to engage in actionable items and network with students and faculty. You can even explain where it's OK to fail or struggle – many students may not know the difference between formative and summative assignments.
- **Engage with and mentor first-generation students,** especially if you were one yourself! We openly discuss “who we are as a person” with our students on the first day of class and briefly share our own journey as first-generation students – especially stories of how reaching out to our professors opened up mentoring opportunities that led us to graduate school and beyond. Inviting first-generation students to check in with us can be the start of that journey. Make it *your responsibility* to open up spaces that first-generation students might not be able to see.
- **Get students thinking about grad school early.** Few, if any, of our group of “first-gen faculty” even knew grad school existed when we were undergrads. Be intentional about asking students if they have thought about grad school, encourage them to consider it, and share examples of funding mechanisms and career pathways. Your encouragement can go a long way to helping students see their own potential!
- **Support students in getting past imposter syndrome.** With no other role models in our families to help us navigate the college experience, we often felt like we didn't belong when things got tough. We didn't have any context to understand whether stressful or unfamiliar situations were a normal part of the process or whether we needed additional help. You can openly discuss imposter syndrome and the idea of being your own best advocate in class and even assign readings on the topic; share your own experiences; and connect students to other resources on campus, such as Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS).