

Tips for First-Generation College Students

Find out how one first-gen student tackled college, and how you can succeed, too.

By [Katy Hopkins](#), Staff Writer |Dec. 28, 2011, at 10:30 a.m.

The daughter of a factory worker and a stay-at-home mom, Teresa Heinz Housel became the first member of her family to go to college when she enrolled at Ohio's [Oberlin College](#) in 1990. Now, she's an associate professor of communication at [Hope College](#) in Holland, Mich., and coeditor of [*Faculty and First-Generation College Students: Bridging the Classroom Gap Together*](#).

"I knew that I wanted more than what was around me—I read about people's lives and I knew there was a lot more out there," Heinz Housel says of her high school mindset. "I was really fortunate that I had mentors locally who really reached out to me and encouraged me to go to college."

If you're a prospective first-generation college student—or the parent of one—and are in need of encouragement, too, here are some of Heinz Housel's insights and tips for tackling the pursuit of higher education:

1. What are some challenges first-generation students face at college?

It's really a different cultural experience when someone who's a first-generation student comes to college. They're not just entering a school; they're entering an academic, cultural environment that often has a lot of unspoken rules and sets of cultural mores. There might be assumptions that a student has experiences or knowledge that they might not necessarily [have] if they're coming from a first-generation background.

Among the challenges I've seen are developing study skills, how to ask questions in class, and how and where to ask for help if they need it.

2. Where can they find assistance?

One of the things that they can do is [figure out] if the university has some kind of program for first-generation students. A really helpful program recognizes that students don't just need financial assistance, but often they need social, academic, and financial support together.

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3. What kind of programming is supportive?

At Hope College, usually once a year, an etiquette class is offered where students go to a mock formal dinner. They talk about how to use certain utensils, what appropriate topics of conversation with potential employers are, what to wear—and those are really important because if a student is first-generation, they might not have parents who had professional jobs. The student might go out into the job or internship market where they're in a situation like that, so a workshop like that really helps a student manage really unfamiliar situations.

4. What are some on-campus resources that first-generation students might find particularly helpful?

It varies depending on the institution. It might be the office of student support services; it might be the multicultural education office; it might be the student life office; or even counseling services—those are the places that I would seek out support.

A lot of first-generation students don't know how to network for careers or education because they never saw that in their family growing up. By taking advantage of career services center, for example, they talk about how to network.

5. What might surprise first-generation students about the [college experience](#)?

One thing students need to realize is that when they arrive on campus, they'll have a lot of [hidden expenses](#) that they might not have expected. When I arrived at Oberlin, I had very little pocket money, and I see a lot of first-generation students in the same situation. I might have had friends that wanted to go out for a meal, and that was a real challenge to deal with situations like that. I had to use survival skills to manage my money really well.

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6. Do you have any tips for first-generation students who are trying to decide if college is right for them?

I would definitely encourage the students to read, as much as possible, the resources out there. Also, a lot of students really overlook the importance of talking to alumni ... and getting in touch with professors. I never would have thought about this as a first-generation student, but I would encourage them to get in touch with professors with any questions that they have.

7. What can parents of first-generation students do to support their college kids?

Often, the parents don't know what to do to support. It's not like they don't want to support, but if they haven't had that experience themselves, they're not sure what questions to ask or how to support. The best thing that the parents can do is be an emotional support.

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They might not understand everything the student is going through or be able to help in very tangible ways, like to be able to help the student choose classes or give feedback about what to get involved in on campus, but they can still be an emotional support, and the students know that their parents are proud of them and are behind what they're doing. That's very valuable.

8. Do you have any other advice for first-generation students?

First-generation students have survival skills. The same survival skills that enabled them to make it to college will also benefit them in college. Their experiences can be a real source of strength and pride. It took me a long time to realize that [we] should be proud of those survival skills, because there's a lot of people that don't have them.

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