

“I Had to Surpass”: Administrative Barriers that First-generation College Students of Color Face

Research Brief

The CSU Student Success Network (Network) produces periodic research briefs, which are different from our memos that can be accessed through our website [here](#).

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Introduction

More than half of the undergraduate students in the United States are first-generation college students, and the majority of these students are Students of Color.¹ First-generation college students are defined in this study as students whose parents or guardians did not attend college and therefore do not have first-hand knowledge with which to support the student in navigating college processes. These students are new to higher education and, as a result, they tend to have little or no generational knowledge surrounding college. As such, they face additional challenges in their college journeys, compared with continuing-generation students, because they must figure out how to navigate university processes on their own. Students of Color who are first-generation college students face the added challenges associated with overcoming prejudice and discrimination. Further, the CSU Graduation Initiative 2025 states that students face administrative barriers when attending college,² which may be compounded for first-generation Students of Color. This brief will identify some of the specific challenges that first-generation Students of Color described, in a recent study, as being an administrative barrier. For this brief, we define administrative barriers as nonacademic processes and protocols that students must complete to succeed in the university. The challenges that students identified fall into three overall categories: barriers with courses and majors; barriers caused by college employees and services; and barriers with financing.

Note: We acknowledge that campuses and colleagues are doing their best to serve students in this unprecedented time. We are providing this brief to identify administrative barriers faced by students and recommendations for addressing those barriers. - The Network



Background

First-generation Students of Color were selected for this research to identify and understand the administrative barriers they face intersectionally as (1) first-generation students and (2) Students of Color. In terms of the former, increasing numbers of first-generation students are enrolling in college, but their completion rates are low.³ First-generation college students are very capable of thriving academically, but many feel estranged by their new surroundings, which can affect their engagement and success.⁴ These students are also at a disadvantage because they do not have access to the information that continuing-generation college students can receive from their families. The college environment and culture include many administrative barriers that all students must successfully navigate in order to complete their college degree. Due to the issues identified above, these barriers are particularly challenging for first-generation students in achieving their educational goals.

Regarding first-generation college students who are also Students of Color, these students face additional challenges associated with prejudice and discrimination in college.^{5, 6} Historically and systemically, Students of Color were originally shut out of all colleges in the United States and are still underrepresented in higher education.^{7, 8} Therefore, generations of White students benefited from generational knowledge, whereas Students of Color could not. Colleges were built for White people and are thereby spaces of dominant White culture. First-generation Students of Color are required to navigate the vestiges of this environment when attending universities. For example, the research literature describes first-generation Students of Color as taking on the burdens of having to “reacculturate,” culture-straddle, assimilate, and subvert into the dominant college culture.^{9, 10, 11} Administrative barriers are a part of this college culture that these students must maneuver.

Despite the inequities in higher education, first-generation Students of Color are attending colleges and are doing their best to thrive. One way these students are able to overcome the hurdles they face in college is by using their community cultural wealth.¹² Community cultural wealth is a framework based on critical race theory that identifies the many forms of capital that Students of Color can rely on and exhibit to address the challenges they face.¹³ These include aspiration capital, linguistic capital, navigational capital, resistant capital, social capital, and familial capital.¹⁴ First-generation Students of Color utilize these forms of capital to adjust to the academic rigors of college. Unfortunately, they are expending these vital resources as they are forced to maneuver cultural challenges, academic rigors, and prejudice. This study identifies the administrative barriers that these students face and recommends actions to address the challenges they present.



Method

The research literature focusing on first-generation students discusses their transition from high school, academics, and social capital.^{15, 16, 17, 18} However, the specific administrative barriers that first-generation Students of Color face in college are not well documented. For this study, we interviewed first-generation Students of Color to understand what administrative barriers they report during their path to a four-year degree and their experiences with these barriers. Additionally, we wanted to know: (1) what types of capital do these students use to navigate administrative barriers?, (2) what are the effects of these administrative barriers?, and (3) what administrative barriers have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic?

To address these research questions, we recruited students through personal networks and social media at a State University. Ten students were found who fit the criteria of being a current first-generation Student of Color and were willing to participate, the majority of whom were female, in their 20s, and Latinx. We used three methodologies to answer the above questions: process mapping, interviews, and an optional focus group. Each of the participants did both the process mapping activity followed by an interview, but only a few participants attended the optional focus group.

Process mapping is a way to show steps, iterations, or phases of a process visually. The process mapping method allowed students to reflect on and illustrate their experiences in college. Every participant did three maps in whatever way they desired. This meant that they were free to use any materials, such as pen and paper or a computer. For the first map students were prompted to illustrate their process obtaining courses. Receiving advising and support was the prompt for the second map. The final maps prompt was financial support. These prompts derived from the literature review.

Following the 1-hour map activity, there was a 30-minute interview where the participants were able to talk about the experiences they illustrated. All quotes used in this brief are from these individual participant interviews, except when noted. The participants' maps and interviews supported one another and we analyzed them for barrier themes using an inductive, iterative coding approach, and deductively analyzed for cultural capital themes using a Community Cultural Wealth framework.^{19, 20} This framework highlights the skills, traits, and capital that students of color have.

Finally, an optional focus group was available to the participants who wanted to share additional information or wanted to clarify information they had already provided. Within the data, we were able to identify a few persistent themes. For example, students wrote about and discussed barriers with forms, fees, and college employees. Several barriers were identified across 30 process maps and 10 interviews. Where we share process maps and quotations in this report, all participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Limitation: We selected only one university for this study and had a very small sample size. For these reasons, my findings cannot be generalized to other State Universities. Also, only undergraduates in a four-year university were included in the sample. So, community college students and postgraduate students' barriers are not accounted for in this study.

Findings

First-generation Students of Color identified several specific challenges within the three major categories we identified in the literature: barriers with courses and majors; barriers with college employees and services; and barriers with financing.

Barriers with Courses and Majors

All of the students described course policies as being barriers, including policies associated with maximum numbers of students in classes, the sequencing of classes, and required course approvals. In particular, several students in the study said that trying to enroll in courses that were full was a burden. For example, Gabe's map says, "Some courses would fill up extremely fast and it was difficult getting the courses I need in order to continue the sequence of my major" (see Figure 1). Elaine's map states, "setback because class was full" (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Gabe's Map #1

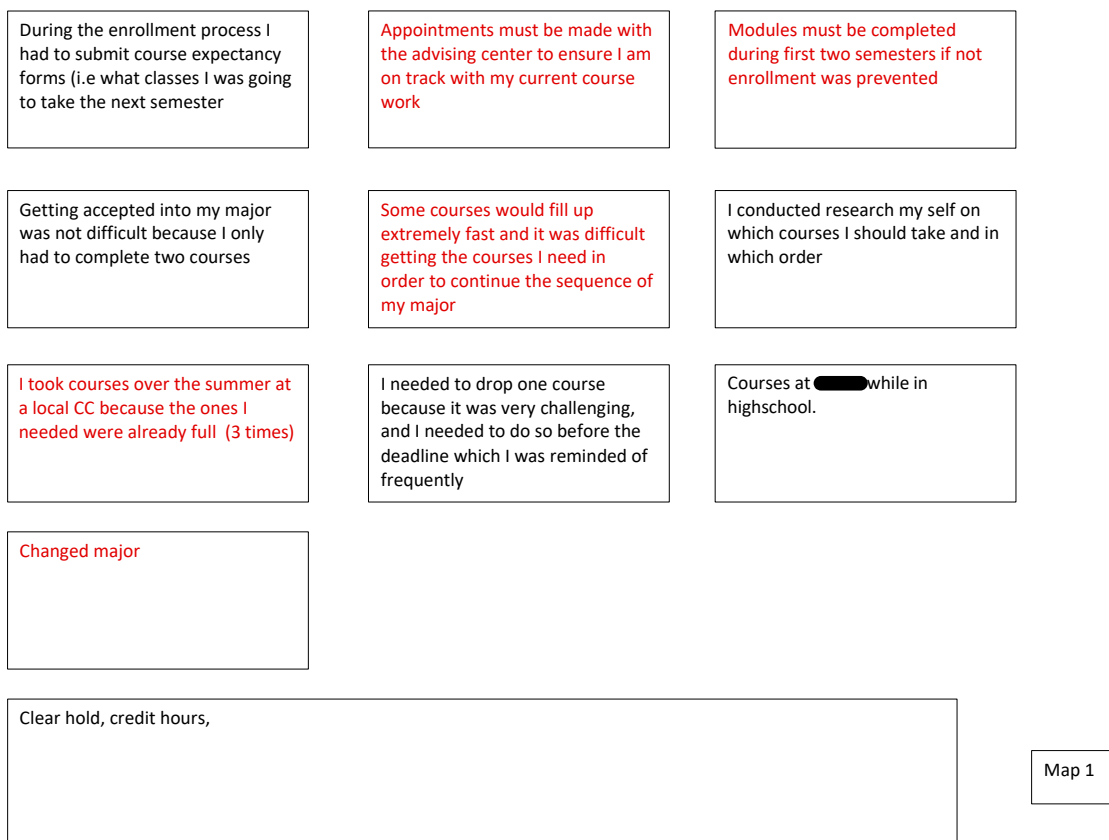
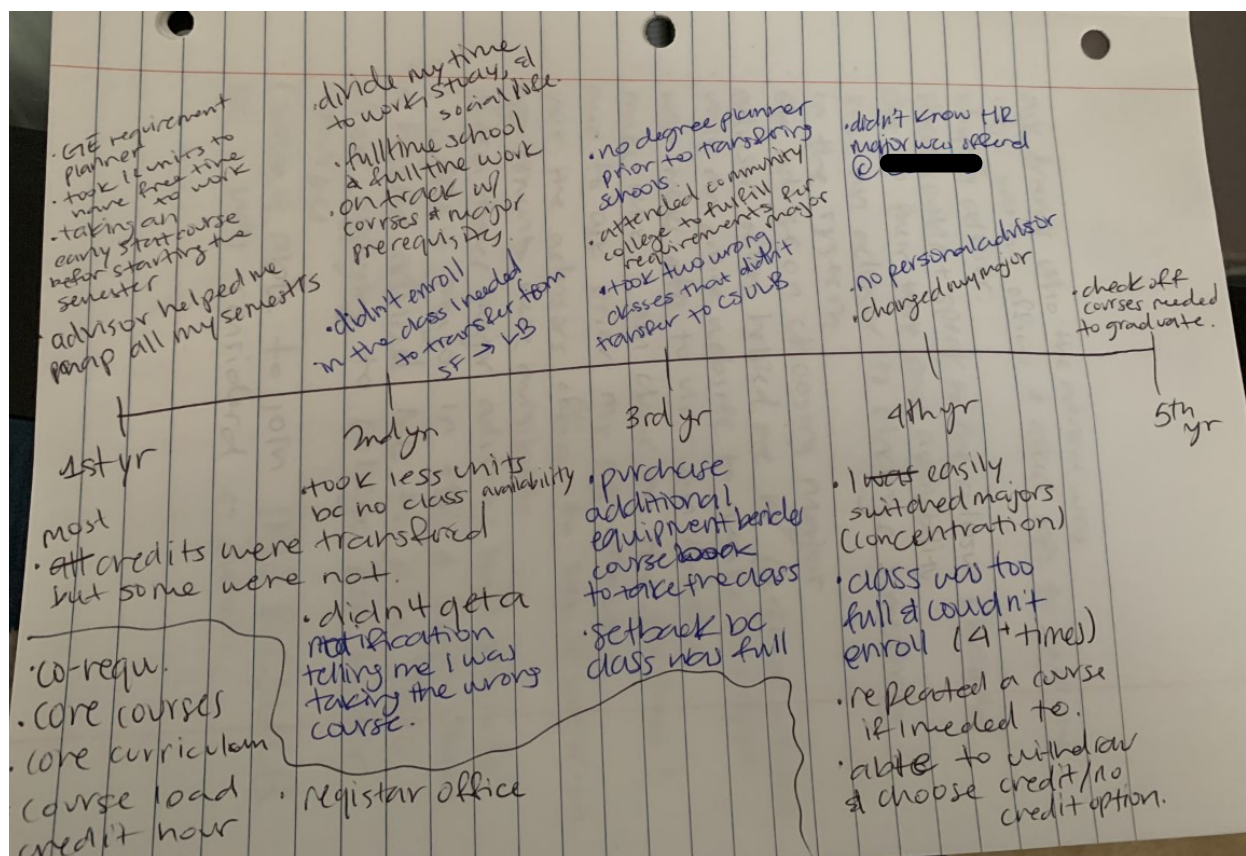



Figure 2. Elaine's Map #1



It is not these students' fault that a class is full - more students want a class than there are spaces available in that class - and yet they have to deal with the consequences of taking a less than desirable class or delaying the completion of a class. CSU campuses would like students to graduate within four years. To do so, students need to be able to enroll in their required classes.

Students also found course sequencing and prerequisites to be confusing. Participant Jessica said, "It's been kind of confusing just learning what my course requirements are, what breadth classes are." Elaine was also confused, saying, "Why couldn't I enroll into these classes if they were part of my major? But I had to wait and take other courses that I didn't need to take in order to fulfill the credit requirement." Students who looked for answers to these questions met dead ends: there were no obvious links to the information online, and staff members designated to answer their questions had very limited appointment hours or were unresponsive when students tried to contact them. Moreover, some students did not even anticipate that course sequencing might present problems; hence, they were forced to follow course policies that they do not understand. For first-generation Students of Color in particular, this kind of confusion can lead to multiple errors in taking courses that they do not need for their major, which is why this is a barrier for them.



A few interviewees also pointed to challenges that they experienced in getting courses approved for prerequisites or transferring credits. For example, two students needed their prerequisites approved from either the registration office or a professor. This was especially difficult when it came to transferring classes. For example, Daisy described it this way, “So feeling that I had already learned the stuff and deserved to get the credit, so I don’t have to retake it again.” These students spent the time and money to take a course, for it to not count towards their degree. Additionally, multiple participants described having taken the wrong classes for their major on their maps and in interviews. Elaine said, “I took business communication... which is also a requirement for my major, in order to graduate. Little did I know that I didn’t need that business communication class because it was a lower division and I need to take the upper division.” Figuring out the right course for a major was an administrative barrier that can cause setbacks in these students’ higher education journey. It can also have financial consequences, as students enroll in additional courses on top of the ones they took in error. Not only are they paying for extra courses or amassing avoidable amounts of debt to be paid back later, but they are also having to delay entry into the full-time workforce, weakening their earning potential.

Barriers with College Employees and Services

All the first-generation Students of Color in this study experienced problems obtaining information about university services. As alluded to above, they said they did not know who to talk to, did not receive enough information, or did not receive accurate information. Past research confirms how helpful advisors and staff can be for first-generation students, but the students in this study struggled to obtain a lot of the information they felt they needed.^{21, 22, 23, 24} For example, Ally said, “I didn’t know who to ask on that stuff, so I switched majors.” Similarly, Francisco did not know whom to talk to so that he could declare a major (see Figure 3). In Beth’s map #2 below, she states that she was unsure which advisor to speak to (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. Francisco's Map #1

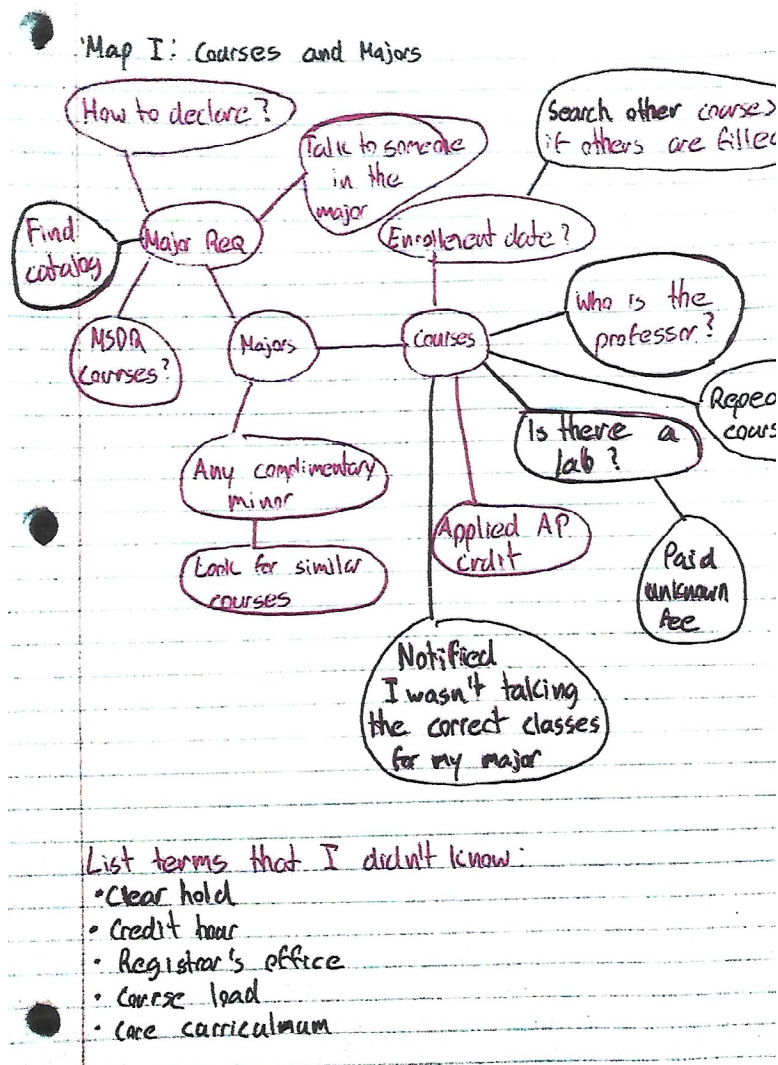
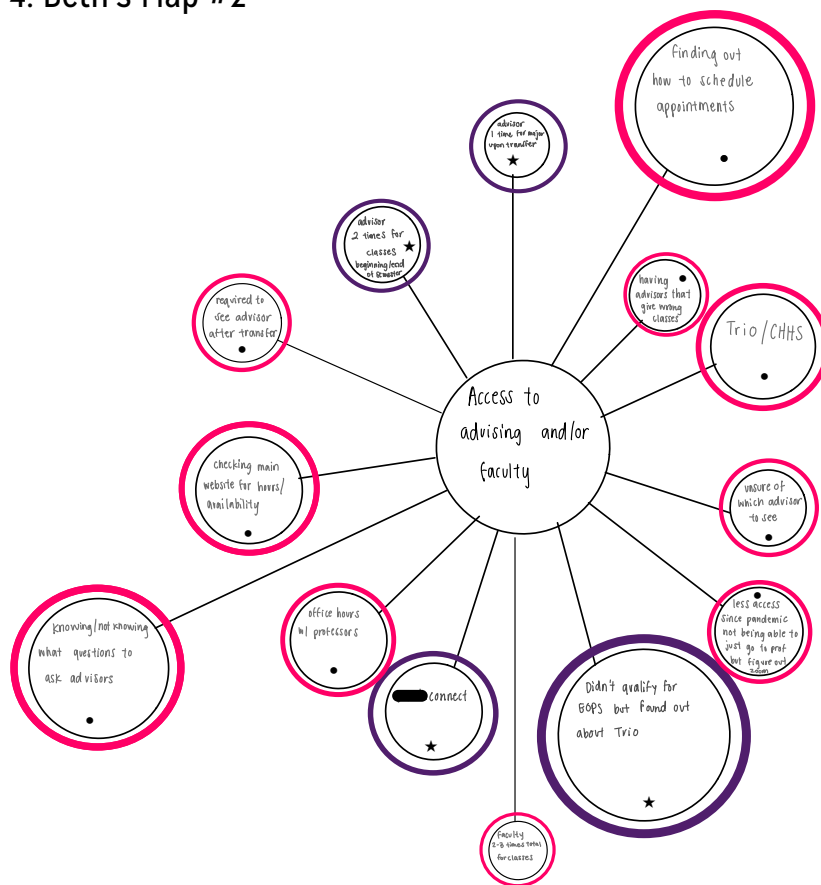


Figure 4. Beth's Map #2



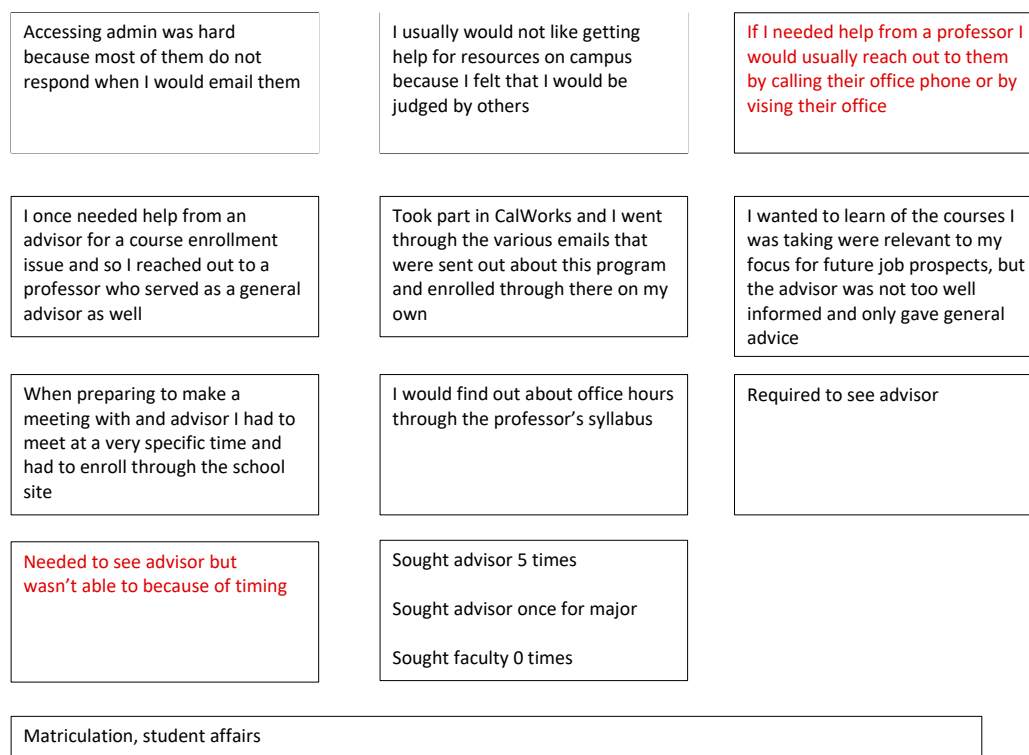
Note: The participant originally indicated barriers using a different color text, but to adhere with web content accessibility guidelines all text color had to be changed to black. Instead, we have indicated those original colors used by the circles surrounding the text. To see the original artifact, please access the thesis on [Proquest](#).

Even when these students were able to speak with someone, they often found the staff unhelpful. For instance, Daisy said, “Advisors were not very helpful in providing feedback and, yeah, often [I] just relied on student-to-student opinion.” Kate stated, “I went to speak with an advisor about it and they wouldn’t answer my question about it. They just kept bringing up timely graduation policy...” These first-generation Students of Color did not feel adequately helped or listened to in their interactions with university employees. These exchanges became so negative that a few students felt that the employees/advisors were unpleasant. For example, Ally said, “I was trying to express interests in getting more information about the program, but she [the advisor] seemed a little dismissive.” Similarly, Elaine said, “The ones [advisors] that were available were kind of rude.”

Additionally, these students were unable to get enough quality time with faculty and staff. For example, Gabe said, “I think there’s two advisors for that semester, and you had to meet with them during that specific time, but it was all really, well, for me at least inconvenient hours, because it was early in the morning, and then it would only be really tiny timeslots.” Similarly, Elaine said, “You know, they spoke to you like 15 minutes. A 15-minute meeting and that was it. So, it was really brief. It wasn’t like, you know, taking their time.” This barrier was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jessica said, “And I feel like it’s even more challenging now with COVID. When I was at [school] I could just walk into the office and ask questions.” Gabe stated on his map, “If I needed help from a professor, I would usually reach out to them by calling their office phone or by visiting their office” (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Gabe’s Map #2



Some of the processes and procedures associated with the services that colleges provide (such as access to programs and technology) also served as barriers for these students at times. Three participants said that they had been rejected for the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), even though this program is meant to help first-generation college students. Ally said that she was required to have letters of recommendation, which she neither had nor knew how to obtain. As a first-generation college student, it is common to be unfamiliar with the idea of a letter of recommendation, especially since it is not a form of paperwork required in high school. Fortunately, these students were accepted into the TRIO¹ program²⁵ instead. However, one participant had her program status threatened, stating on her map that she was “told I would be disqualified from the promise program and wouldn’t receive priority registration if I did not drop [a course] (didn’t want to drop as it was personally beneficial)” (see Figure 6).

¹ “The Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) are Federal outreach and student services programs designed to ...serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs.”



Figure 6. Kate's Map #2

Map 1 access to courses and majors: admin steps:

Trouble color

1. Took classes prior to attending [REDACTED]
 - a. Getting chicano studies matriculated into requirement
 2. Steps you took to understand requirements for the major you're interested in
 3. Getting information about completing course and major requirements.
 4. compare to educational plan
 5. searching available classes
 6. ratemyprofessor, researching professors
 7. multiple sections in shopping cart register for some classes.
 8. Couldn't get into class I wanted
 - a. Occurred 3 timesTold class was full
- Notification you weren't taking the right courses for your major
- Fall 2020: from someone in the department over email after classes had started and then by phone a month later, told I would be disqualified from the promise program and wouldn't receive priority registration if I did not drop. (didn't want to drop as it was personally beneficial)

Able to withdraw from a course without receiving a consequence

Getting information for minor requirements

Getting information to declare a minor

**Was not familiar with this process in comparison to cc as no shopping cart existed then.

If any of these were confusing to you If confusing write at bottom

Corequisites

Course load

Credit hour

Barriers with Financing

Financial aid processes were a third major administrative barrier that all the students emphasized in the study. This barrier comprised difficulties with accessing financial aid information, filling out forms, finding out about unexpected fees, and meeting deadlines. Much of the literature about first-generation college students focuses solely on the challenges of paying for college in general, but does not identify the hurdles of navigating the college financial aid system.^{26, 27, 28, 29, 30}

The first-generation Students of Color in the study said that that they were missing important information about financial aid. For example, Jessica said, "I don't know if it's just a general thing at universities, that winter break classes aren't covered by financial aid. So, I really needed this class, so I was just thinking of dropping it because I wasn't able to pay the \$888, but I ended up applying for a loan." Another student mentioned not being aware that their financial aid did not cover winter or summer semesters. All the students wrote on their process maps financial aid terms that they did not know the meaning of, including "bursar's office," "FERPA," and "award letter" (see Figures 7 and 8 for examples).

Figure 7. Francisco's Map #3

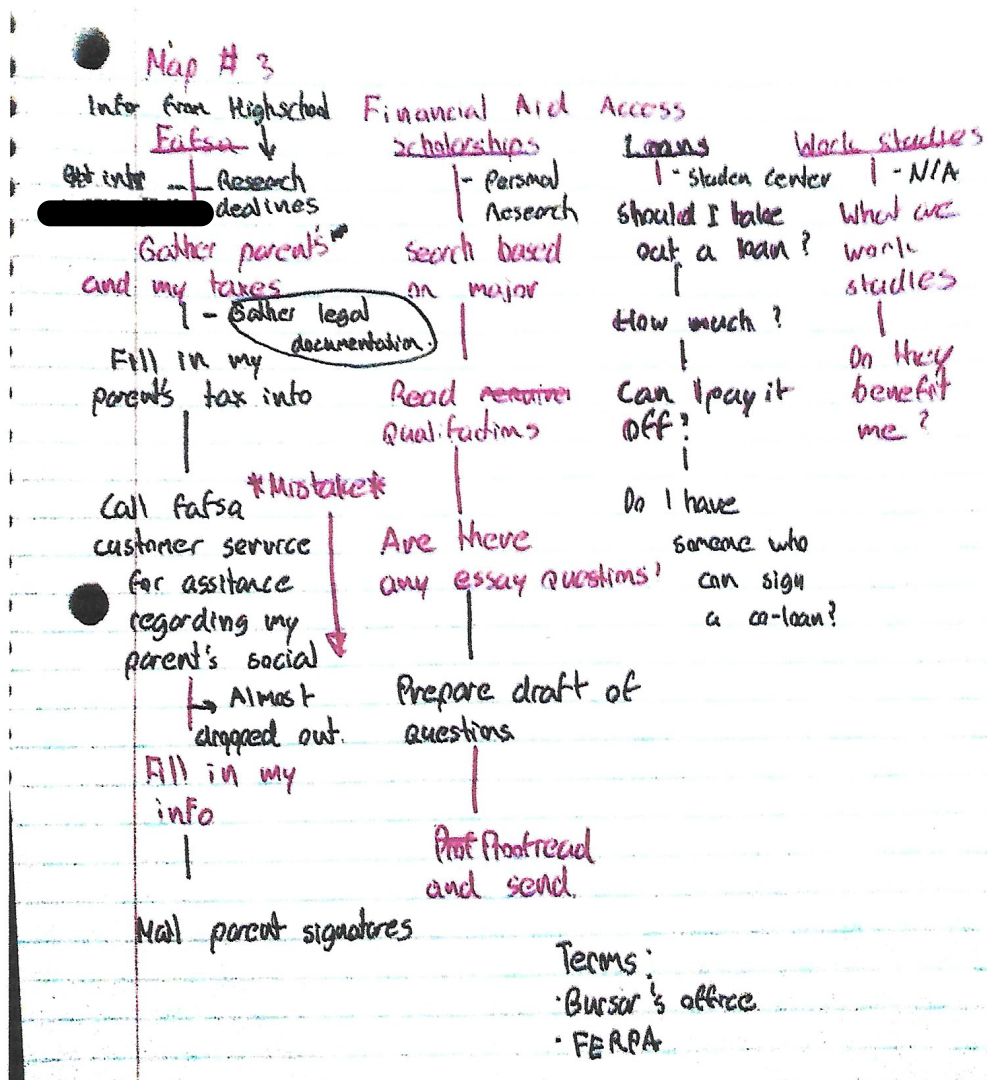
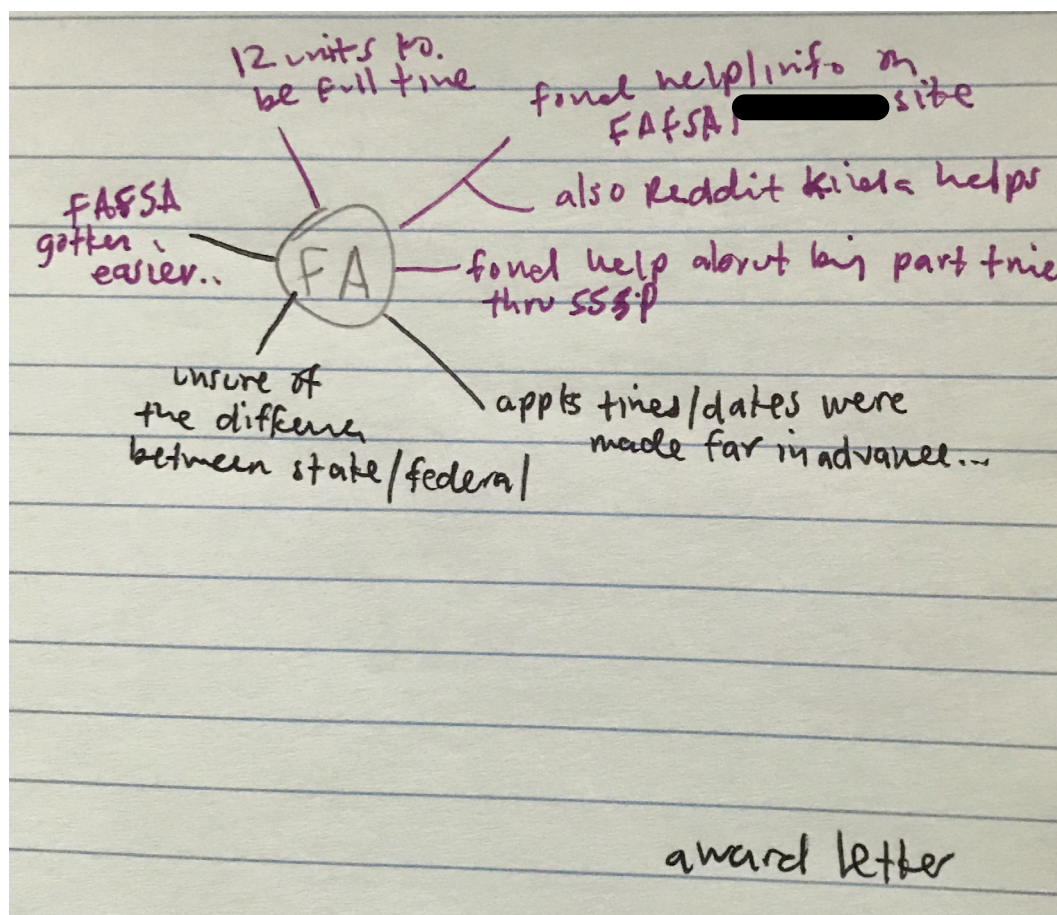


Figure 8. Ally's Map #3



These students also described challenges with filling out forms such as the dependent verification worksheet, student income verification, FAFSA application, parent income verification, and, according to Jessica, “other forms I forgot the name of.” Having to figure out tax information and obtain signatures from family members was an obstacle to their receiving financial aid. Iris said, “It was hard trying to like complete my FAFSA application when it came to providing the signatures from my parents just because my mom is the head of the household. So, she’s in charge of all of this and she forgot her username and so, we had sent signatures through mail, which even delayed more time to submit my FAFSA application.”

Students also identified timing as a problem with financial aid processes. A few students said they had missed deadlines that they did not know about and that they had received funding late, which affected their ability to stay enrolled in classes. On her map (see Figure 9), Kate stated, “Application pulled every year for verification. Received grant late due to corrections processing.”

Figure 9. Kate's Map #3

Access to financial aid:

Steps to go through to access financial aid, steps for other access of support

Forms of financial aid/ support

1. reach out to parent about tax information
 - a. wait for parent to get tax information together,
2. fill out fafsa with estimate information
3. parent turns in tax information
4. Financial aid deadlines that you needed to follow.
 - a. Turn in fafsa on time
5. Forms you had to fill out for financial aid.
 - a. Filled out household information form, filled out form on student income verification, parent income verification
6. fafsa corrections processed
7. If a loan or grant was ever late in getting to you. Was your application ever pulled for extra verification?
 - a. Application pulled every year for extra verification
 - b. Received grant late due to corrections processing

other support:

1. reach out to student pantry office
2. apply for calfresh

Ran into financial aid trouble anyway: received significantly less financial aid, fortunately tuition/classes were covered but student expenses were difficult to fulfill. Waited last minute to use textbook free trials, waited to get textbooks, reused old notebooks, worked more, borrowed money from a friend

Pieces of financial aid info I wish I knew earlier, what and when would you have liked to have known?

Dependent status if under age 24 even if financially independent | beginning of my college journey

how parents failure to file tax information can delay financial aid | beginning of my college journey

Using work study after beginning of the semester | beginning of my college journey

Pell grant is valid for 6 years | when: beginning of my college journey

Timely graduation policy and how it affects financial aid eligibility | when: transfer orientation

Bursars office

FERPA

Types of Capital Students Use to Navigate Barriers

Implicit in the process maps and interviews were the ways first-generation students of color used their various types of cultural capital – resistant, linguistic, social, familial, and aspiration – to navigate administrative barriers. Throughout the data these students talked about finding ways to get more answers, learn college terminology, get information from other students and support from family members (who do not even know the process themselves), and persist when things were clearly difficult. Below, we give examples of how students used cultural capital to navigate administrative barriers.



Resistant Capital

When these students did not get into the full classes, they looked for alternatives. When they were not given enough information from advisors, they asked dept. chairs. They did not let opposition stop them.

Linguistic Capital

Every student had terminology that they did not understand when they started going to college, but since then they have found ways to learn what these terms mean.

Social Capital

Students spoke to other students and used social media to obtain information that they needed.

Familial Capital

Family members gave their students tax information and signed as much paperwork as was needed.

Aspirational Capital

Some students did not get the program or the major they wanted, but that did not deter them from staying in college. These students have a goal to get their degree and they are still striving for that goal.

Recommendations

The administrative barriers discussed in this study are important to address because they affect the success of first-generation Students of Color. Some of the consequences of these barriers include wasted time and money, longer timeframes to complete a degree, and higher debt levels. Based on the findings, we urge faculty, staff, and administrators to consider the recommendations below to better set these students up for success. We believe taking the actions described in these recommendations will be effective because these students will not have to spend so much energy using their cultural wealth and can better focus on their educational achievement.

Forms/Paperwork

- Provide 24-hour IT service for when websites or portals malfunction.
- Accept verbal consent from students when feasible, rather than requiring signatures.
- Simplify and provide guidance for required verification forms, and eliminate when possible.
- Have courses be more easily accepted and transferable.
- Improve communication between community colleges and four-year universities when dealing with transfer students to ensure that a student's classes are transferable.
- Audit all applications and required documentation with signatures.

Information

- Provide booklets with information (e.g., list of staff members to speak to about various college processes, courses and majors information, and financial aid information) when receiving textbooks or at the front of classrooms.
- Have a user-friendly phone app with helpful information.
- Host bi-weekly info sessions for each major.



Deadlines

- Audit the many deadlines students face in colleges, both college and government deadlines (e.g., review how long it takes to process things, how many people have to approve things and why; determine if steps can be removed from the process).
- Have multiple or rolling deadlines.
- Offer a deadline forgiveness option for unforeseen problems.

Grants

- Have students accept all grants given to them (one way to do this might be to remove the “accept” or “decline” option, but automatically put the money in their student account).
- As noted above, offer flexibility in meeting grant deadlines.

University Employee Availability

- Have on-call staff (e.g., a hotline or online chat for students to call/text with questions).
- Include students in the conversations when universities are discussing course capacity, hiring, and budgeting for academic, advising, and program staff.

The table below maps these recommendation topics to the major barriers on which they were based.

Table 1. Recommendations for Removing Administrative Barriers to College Success for First-Generation Students of Color

Recommendation topics	Major Barriers		
	Barriers with Courses & Majors	Barriers with College Employees & Services	Barriers with Financing
Forms/Paperwork	X	X	X
Information	X	X	X
Deadlines	X		X
Grants			X
Employee Availability		X	



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