

What makes someone likely to be a first-gen college grad? Money.

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A new study finds that first-generation college graduates are more likely to come from families that have higher incomes and more resources than families in which neither parents nor children graduate from college.

The study highlights the challenges facing young people who want to attend college, as well as how difficult it is for individuals to move up the socioeconomic ladder.

"A [college degree](#) is often a ticket to the [middle class](#), but not everyone has the same chance to obtain one," says Anna Manzoni, first author of the study and an associate professor of sociology at North Carolina State University.

"We know that parents' education matters, as the children of college-educated parents graduate from college at higher rates than the children of parents without a bachelor's degree. What differentiates the students who become first-generation [college graduates](#) from those who don't?

"This study shows that it is mostly students whose parents have high levels of resources for their [educational background](#) who graduate from college—hardly a ringing endorsement of an open system or a meritocracy."

For the study, researchers drew on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, a nationally representative panel study that followed people in the United States from youth through adulthood. Specifically, the researchers drew on data regarding 5,752 students whose parents did not have [college degrees](#) and 3,128 students who had at least one parent with a college degree. The researchers looked at educational outcomes for the students, as well as at each student's family resources—which was based on the income and occupation of each student's parents.

The study, "Moving Away From One's Origins: Predictors of Becoming a First-Generation College Graduate and Not Becoming a Continuing-Generation Graduate," is published in *The Sociological Quarterly*. The findings were straightforward.

"First-generation college graduates are often the advantaged members of their disadvantaged class," Manzoni says. "Their parents, although did not graduate from college, are disproportionately from higher-income families, work in jobs with more authority and autonomy, have higher expectations that their children go to college, and live in higher income neighborhoods."

The study also looked at factors that might explain why some people whose parents are college graduates do not themselves graduate from college. The findings were essentially the opposite of what researchers saw among first-generation college graduates.

"Students who do not graduate from college, although their parents did, are often the most disadvantaged segment of the advantaged class," Manzoni says. "Their parents tend to have [lower income](#) and work outside the most authoritative jobs."

What's more, the researchers also found that many of the things people think contribute to a child graduating from college don't seem to have any effect.

"The study finds that it doesn't matter if parents who did not graduate from college talk to their children about school and work, or work on school projects with them," Manzoni says. "It also doesn't matter if these parents put their kids in schools with low class sizes, more experienced teachers, or in schools that have more funding. And for children of parents who have a bachelor's degree, it doesn't matter if their parents put them in schools with high achieving peers, small class sizes, and more experienced teachers."

The researchers also found that it didn't matter if students were white, Black or Hispanic if their parents had access to the same resources.

"Among other things, this study tells us that graduating first-generation college [students](#) doesn't necessarily mean that there is a level playing field," Manzoni says. "People with access to more resources have a clear advantage, regardless of their [parents'](#) educational background."

More information: Anna Manzoni et al, Moving Away from One's Origins: Predictors of Becoming a First-Generation College Graduate and Not Becoming a Continuing-Generation Graduate, *The Sociological Quarterly* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/00380253.2023.2198583](https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2023.2198583)

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