Supporting First-Generation University Students Series
PART 2: Strategies for Transparent Teaching

Engle & Tinto (2008) argue that "due to the changing demographics of the United States, we must focus our efforts on improving postsecondary access and success among those populations who have previously been underrepresented in higher education, namely low-income and minority students, many of whom will be the first in their families to go to college" (p. 2). Improving the educational outcomes of first-generation students is an important responsibility shared by faculty, staff, and administrators, and doing so means implementing pedagogical strategies that will ultimately benefit all types of students (i.e., diverse students, domestic students, international students, transfer students, and English Learners).

Clarify your expectations
In their study, Collier & Morgan (2008) found that there are often vast differences in perspectives between faculty and students on expectations for the classroom. The researchers emphasize the importance of helping first-generation student learn to master the role of being a college student. For example:

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Communicate high expectations	Communicate high expectations for all of your students, in a supportive way. For first-generation students, communicate that they belong in university and that they are capable of achieving at the highest levels.
Explain your teaching approach	Briefly explain your teaching approach (Winkelmes et al., 2016). This helps students understand what they are expected to do to succeed and how your teaching approach will help them learn.
Clarify activities	Clarify the different activities that make up your class, as well as expectations for these activities (e.g., lecture, sections, labs, office hours).
Model expectations	Model what you expect students to do so that students can perform in ways that meet your high expectations.

Make your assignments and exams more transparent and culturally inclusive
Winkelmes et al. (2016) found that providing greater transparency on assignments significantly improved academic outcomes for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students. Some strategies for increasing transparency include:

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Be explicit with your expectations	Be explicit about what you expect student to do for different assignments and how to prepare for exams. Provide outlines, study guides, and examples of strong/weak work. Check if your exam questions define the learning outcome or performance to be assessed, specify the scope of content to be covered, and use non-ambiguous, simple language. Develop and use rubrics for all your graded assignments, and share these rubrics with your students early (Stevens & Levi., 2005).
Check for bias in assignment and exam designs	Check your assignments and exams for clarity, as well as bias related to ethnicity, gender, culture, religion, class, language, or processes. Consider if an exam assumes prior cultural knowledge and/or US-specific cultural knowledge (that was not covered in class or in the content). Have a colleague or teaching assistant read and/complete the exam and provide you with feedback.

Develop students critical analysis skills	Help students understand what it means to evaluate and critique ideas. Some first-generation students may come from socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds that see criticism as a personal attack to authority. Some first-generation students may not be familiar with the academic process of evaluating and critiquing ideas that is part of the US college culture.

Apply principles of effective adult learning to your teaching

The principles of effective adult learning emphasize the value of students' prior life and non-traditional learning experiences. Stephens et al. (2015) found that participants from underrepresented backgrounds in their study that were encouraged to reflect on their experiences learned to perceive the challenges and obstacles they faced in college as sources of strength. Here are a few strategies you can implement in your own classroom:

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Emphasize learning outcomes	Winkelmes et al., 2016 suggests emphasizing the learning outcomes of your course, and explaining how specific tasks/projects are designed to help students achieve those outcomes. Be transparent in communicating the learning outcomes in your syllabus, teaching materials (e.g., lecture slides, lesson plans, etc.), and assignments.
	Have a discussion with your students about what they will know, what they will be able to do, and the types of attitudes and social/career skills that they will develop by the end of your course. Give your students time to ask questions and/or clarify your expectations. Have students write personal and career goals that they want to achieve during the term, and then have them connect those goals to the learning outcomes of your course.
Implement authentic activities and assignments	Consider designing your course around authentic assignments and practical tasks. The goal of these assignments are to help students not only understand what they are learning, but why they are learning it, and how it will apply to their work in the future. For example, inquiry- or problem-based projects provide students with opportunities to engage in the types of writing and problem-solving common in their disciplines or careers, and could allow students to interact with established members of their discipline or professionals in their career area.
	Also consider using practical projects that give students something they can take with them from your course (e.g., research they might continue in the future, documents they can use later, etc.). Focus on transferable skills that advance critical thinking and problem-solving for life outside the university.
Scaffold learning experiences	Provide structured and/or scaffolded learning experiences to help students move to more independent problem solving and learning. For example, you could provide more structure in the beginning of the course when students are less confident, and then let them take more responsibility for their learning as the term progresses.
Help students make connections between your class and their major/minor	Help students understand how your class fits into a major/minor and into students' academic and professional preparation. Collier & Morgan (2008) emphasize that first-generation students may be missing knowledge of university culture that their continuing-generation peers may already have, such as an understanding of the connections between course, majors/minors, disciplines, and career paths.
Encourage students to make use of their prior knowledge and experiences	Tap into students' prior experiences and prior knowledge and help them explore how they can apply it to the new content. First-generation students often have valuable knowledge and experience that they can apply to the classroom if invited to do so.

Adapted from: Lohman, 2015

Additional Resources
- *Q&A: Stanford's Hazel Markus*
- Grand Valley State University Resource on First Generation Students
- *First generation: Best practices for faculty. [UC Irvine]*
- *First year experience. [UCLA]*
- "I fit in neither place." Article from Zamudio-Suarez in *The Chronicle of Higher Education.*

Citation
Center for Educational Effectiveness [CEE]. (2018). Supporting First-Generation University Students Series. *Just-in-Time Teaching Resources.* Retrieved from https://cee.ucdavis.edu/JITT

References
Brazil-Cruz, L., & Martinez, S. S. (2016). The Importance of Networking and Supportive Staff for Latina/o First-Generation Students and their Families as they Transition to Higher Education. *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal, 10*(1), 129-158.

Coffman, S. (2011). A social constructionist view of issues confronting first-generation college students. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 2011*(127), 81-90.

Collier, P. J., & Morgan, D. L. (2008). "Is that paper really due today?": differences in first-generation and traditional college students' understandings of faculty expectations. *Higher Education, 55*(4), 425-446.

Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students. *Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education*. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED504448.pdf

Lohfink, M. M., & Paulsen, M. B. (2005). Comparing the determinants of persistence for first-generation and continuing-generation students. *Journal of College Student Development 46*(4), 409-428.

Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education, 75*(3), 249-284.

Stephens, N. M., Townsend, S. S., Hamedani, M. G., Destin, M., & Manzo, V. (2015). A difference-education intervention equips first-generation college students to thrive in the face of stressful college situations. *Psychological science, 26*(10), 1556-1566.

Stevens, D. D., & Levi, A. (2005). Leveling the field: Using Rubrics to achieve greater equity in teaching and grading. *Essays on Teaching Excellence: Toward the Best in the Academy, 17*(1). Retrieved from http://podnetwork.org/content/uploads/V17-N1-Stevens_Levi.pdf

Swecker, H. K., Fifolt, M., & Searby, L. (2013). Academic advising and first-generation college students: A quantitative study on student retention. *NACADA Journal, 33*(1), 46-53.

Wibrowski, C. R., Matthews, W. K., & Kitsantas, A. (2016). The role of a skills learning support program on first-generation college students' self-regulation, motivation, and academic achievement: A longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 0*(0), 1-16.

Winkelmes, M. A., Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J., & Weavil, K. H. (2016). A teaching intervention that increases underserved college students' success. *Peer Review, 18*(1/2), 31-36.