

Let's Explore Together:
Promoting Success Among
First-Generation College Students



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Promoting Success Among First-Generation Students

This discussion guide was developed by the Interactivity Foundation with the help of students who were the first in their families to attend college, parents of first-generation students, as well as faculty, administrators, counselors, and mentors who work at high schools, colleges, and non-profit organizations that serve first-generation students. Two panels met monthly over the course of 18 months to develop the initial guide, which was then tested with young people, parents, and counselors in Detroit, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., to further sharpen this resources. We invite you to participate in a facilitated discussion to explore this set of policy approaches that may help to encourage many more Americans to pursue and complete a college education. Today more than ever, everyone needs a degree or technical certification, which is now typically obtained via a community college, to earn sufficient income as to have a stable life. One may well feel that this should not be the case, and we invite you to explore that idea here, but increasingly this is the cultural norm.

First-generation students include traditional-aged students, active-duty members of the military and veterans studying with G.I. benefits, as well as adult learners completing a degree while working full-time and raising a family.

We have arranged this guide so that each of five policy ideas are presented in a two-page layout. We aspire to create an opportunity for you to explore each idea with others and for the ideas to be contrasting—thus, you may find you don't agree with all of the policy approaches. And that's fine! We have found in testing this guide that simply having this discussion will prompt young (and not so young!) people to consider taking steps to pursue a degree or to return to finish a degree—or to find ways to encourage others to do so. One group of young people in Detroit *all* moved to actively take steps to further their educations after having this discussion together: some finally started at the local community college, others visited colleges or applied for admission to a four-year university, and others signed up to take pursued technical certifications.

Each possibility includes several sections:

Thematic Questions are highlighted in yellow and include a space to write down a few thoughts in response.



Scenarios & Discussion Questions

The guide begins with a scenario that aims to engage you via a personalized narrative with this policy realm. Each subsequent possibility includes an illustrative scenario, the header for which is highlighted in orange. Discussion Questions—also in orange—are provided to help your group explore the scenario in terms of the broader policy issues it raises.

Personal Reflections: *The green boxes at the end of each scenario provide you space to consider how the possibility relates to you and your own lived experiences. Feel free to share your personal insights with one another.*

The Policy Possibilities in This Report

The possibilities in this report explore several dimensions—each with a public policy implication—of issues and concerns that relate to first-generation college students having access to colleges and universities and successfully completing advanced degree programs. While many of these concerns might relate to any student, they are “make or break” when it comes to the success of students who are the first in their families to attend college.

Possibility	Concern(s) to Which It Responds	Potential Unanticipated Consequences
Pushing the First Domino	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When college isn't a part of your family's history, one doesn't plan to attend 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging one kid in the family will often prompt younger siblings and even parents to attend
A Free or Low-Cost K-16 Education for All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many working-class people are highly suspicious of anything said to be “free” Some students will not work as hard if the schooling is free—it feels less valuable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrative and facilities budgets would likely be cut at state colleges, causing them to have to redefine/refocus their mission
Finding the Right School for You	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The wrong college creates a need to transfer. Most people will lose credits doing so, which wastes time and money 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some colleges will resent being scrutinized regarding their support of first-generation students as some are more tell than do
Helping Our Kids Thrive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents without a college background don't know how to best support their kids if they do go on to college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students whose parents didn't attend college can feel lost and unsupported—sometimes even embarrassed by their parents efforts to help/engage
Renewing the Village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many students who come from rural and working-class communities do not return to their hometown after completing college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Brain Drain” Resentment of higher education and intellectuals for “taking our kids” Student comes to feel like they have lost their home

Brushton College: Commencement 2019

As the President of Brushton College, it's my great pleasure to stand before you today to honor this year's class of graduates. Rather than having a commencement address, I thought we would honor some extraordinary students whose stories inspire us all.

Let me begin by introducing you to Anthony Davis. Anthony is known around campus as the guy with the smile. If you ever needed help getting through a bad day, Anthony was the guy to turn to. What very few people know about Anthony was that both of his parents died from drug-related incidents. He had no funds for college but was able to make it by hard work, part-time jobs, scholarships, internships, and sheer determination. The guy that always had a smile on his face is the first in his family to graduate from college but won't be the last. In the audience today are his two siblings, also students here at Brushton.



Next let me introduce Aubri. The woman you see in front of you was this morning commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Army. As a child of immigrants to America, she is fulfilling her parents' dream. Through her service in the National Guard, Aubri has been to 11 countries since she came to college. She has been taken away from campus to serve our state in weather related disasters. As the cadet leader in our ROTC program, Aubri has been designated a National Tip of the Spear graduate. That means that she is a trailblazer among her peers.

Our next honoree is not with us today. Caleb never completed high school, getting a GED instead after a series of suspensions prompted him to simply quit school. He had the highest test score of any student in the past 10 years at Brushton. Caleb won't mind me saying that he has been a pain. Caleb has always been a rebel. He has challenged our faculty in ways that are too numerous to mention. But I've never met a more innovative student in my career. The reason that he isn't here today is because he will be appearing on the TV show Shark Tank to present his latest invention.

Our next honoree is Grace, single mother of three children. Grace decided to pursue her degree while working. Another first-generation student, Grace took 8 years to complete her degree. I'm proud to say that Grace is the first non-traditional student to be named as our Valedictorian.

Before we announce the names of the other graduates, I ask you to look around the quad where you are now sitting. Those oak trees that surround the quad make this a special place in my heart. I was a groundskeeper here at Brushton. I never had the courage to go to a college until one of the faculty become my mentor. Growing up I never imagined being where I am today, but here I am. Just imagine where this class will be in the future.

Initial Reflections

What are two things that especially stood out for you as you read this story?

(1)

(2)

Did you attend college? Did you complete a 4-year degree? If so, did you complete it directly or did you take a break or breaks in your studies? Were you the first in your family to do so? If you did not attend college or stopped attending before graduating, why did you not go or not finish? If you are still in high school or middle school, did your parent(s) or caregiver(s) complete college? Why or why not? How does that affect how you think about college?

What do you hope to learn from and/or explore during this discussion?

Pushing the First Domino

A first-generation student's road to college might be thought of as a chain of dominoes.

Once the first domino is pushed, it sets off a

chain reaction. The first domino for many first-generation students is overcoming their hesitance to enroll in college. Alternatively, it might be deciding to return to pursue their studies after a bad first experience with college. There are many challenges to pushing the first domino (e.g. cultural, financial, family circumstances, self-esteem), but could we create policies that might help?

Students whose parents and other family members did not attend college tend to need some sort of push in order to consider pursuing a college degree, as it is outside of what they and the adults around them "know." Sometimes a teacher or counselor or coach might be that push. Other times it may be a peer. Could we be more systematic in giving a push to more young people by incentivizing them to experience college at a younger age?



What was your "first domino" when it came to attending college—i.e., what prompted you to pursue a college education? Or, if you didn't, why do you think you didn't consider this path? If you're still a K-12 student, what do you think could prompt you to pursue a college education, to be your first domino?

Developing an Educational Spirit

Rosie was a charming, lively junior at her small high school in a very poor community. She was also an orphan and homeless. Her mother was an opioid addict and had abandoned her. Rosie essentially lived with her classmates. A few of the families in her class agreed to give her a home, and she rotated from family to family.

Rosie was very bright and had been accepted into a local community and technical college as a high school junior. She was taking a course in math since she had maxed out what the high school had to offer. Rosie became an ambassador for getting an education beyond high school, and she would often use her "home stays" to encourage classmates and their parents to give college a try. No one was offended by this because they knew that Rosie was a genuine, caring person who wanted the best for everyone.

After Rosie's junior year, she was killed in a car accident. For her classmates, this was one of the toughest things they ever had to face. They wondered: "How can we honor Rosie's memory?"



What they decided on became a very fitting and lasting memorial. Every one of Rosie's classmates enrolled in a community college course during their senior year of high school. A few had already made plans to go to college, but most had not. Some took courses they would need in college. Others took courses that gave them a technical skill.

Just having 100% enrollment of high school students in a college classroom was remarkable in this small town. But that was just the beginning. Over one-third of Rosie's classmates went on to finish a degree. At their 5-year high school reunion, there was a celebration in honor of the dedication of Rosie's classmates. But the real tribute at the reunion was what they had started. Rosie's small high school in this poor community maintains to this day the highest rate of post-high-school educational attainment in a state where only 12% of residents complete a four-year degree.

Discussion Questions

1. When is the best time to "plant the seed" about continuing one's education post high school for first generation students?
2. How can young people—especially those who experience significant losses early in life like Anthony in the Brushton College story, or who, like Caleb, just never fit into the K-12 system? How can they transition from what they know of the high school classroom to the very different environment of the college classroom?
3. What are effective and proper roles for local, state, and federal government agencies to encourage post-high-school education?

Personal Reflections

Do you (or did you) think of yourself as "college material"? Why or why not?

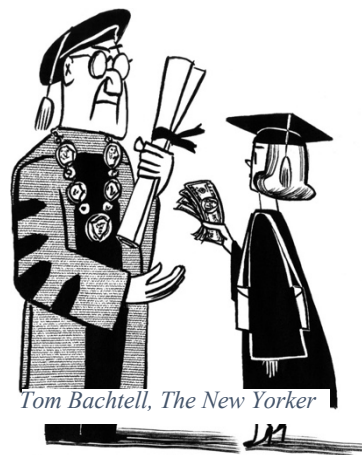
What is (or was) your greatest anxiety about pursuing a college degree?

Has anyone ever talked with you (or did anyone) about going to college—or even taking a college class during high school? How willing would you be (or were you) to listen to a peer if they were to encourage you to give college a try? Would you be (or were you) willing to take a college class during high school?

A Free or Low-Cost K-16 Education for All

Many countries consider a “basic” education to extend through grade 14-- or even 16. Why don’t we? This policy proposes that we should take the same approach, especially given the changes that technology is driving within our society, radically impacting how we live and work.

Making college much more affordable would be a boon to most families in this country, as more than two-thirds of the nation’s households earn \$100,000 or less per year. That level of income does not go very far when even in-state college tuition and fees is an average of \$10,000 per year (with room and board costing an average \$10,000 per year and books, supplies, and other necessities costing \$1,200 - \$3,200 more). Still, this would especially benefit first-generation students whose families are often under-resourced and unprepared to navigate the complexities of financing a higher education. Many of those students opt for community college or less-competitive college pathways simply because of the financial demands of

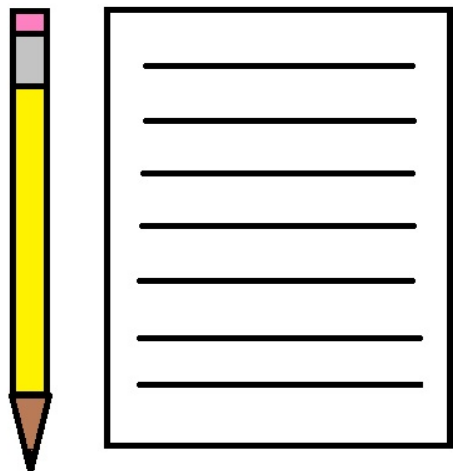


Many universities are offering free tuition, but many working people are skeptical of anything “free” as they suspect there is a catch. What approaches to making college affordable would appeal most broadly?

attending a more competitive school (at many private schools, tuition and fees alone can be as much as \$50,000 per year—which is the median income in this country).

Currently most students (and/or their parents) borrow money that, in many cases, they will repay for up to thirty years into the future. How could a single mom like Grace possibly afford that? This burden can dissuade especially first-generation students from pursuing a higher education pathway that truly matches their talents. To respond to this situation, this policy approach imagines college as a public investment, something of value to all the society, and so it shifts the burden of college funding from the individual to the society at large. Having a well-educated population is something that benefits all of us, and so everyone would share in the cost of it?

Even if you don’t think that everyone needs a traditional college education, this policy would support some sort of publicly-funded advanced or technical education.



Too Much of a Good Thing?

When a Work Ethic Undermines College Success

Susan Crocker was a first-generation college student majoring in elementary education. As the child of a single mother, she had to work part-time to help pay for college. She was very

fortunate to land a part-time position at a local day care center, where she assisted with an early reading program.

Susan excelled at her job, and the daycare center kept asking if she could add more hours to her schedule. She really needed the money so was glad to accept. She was also gaining valuable experience in classroom management. As she told her mom: "I've learned more about how to teach and manage young children on my job than I'm learning in classes."

The problem was that the job was robbing Susan of time she needed for her classes. While she was excelling in her education classes, her grades in English, social science, and

mathematics were terrible. She was in danger of losing her scholarship.

Discussion Questions

1. Since most financial aid packages do not cover the full cost of attendance, many college students (and most first-generation students) must work to pay for college. At the same time, some students from higher-income backgrounds are given more financial support than they need in the form of scholarships. How could financial support be made fairer so that all students have the support they need?
2. Should colleges have a role to play in helping students make wise decisions regarding part time jobs?
3. When and how might it be appropriate to grant academic credit for part-time work that is supportive of a student's academic major?
4. In what ways might the high cost of college impede students from taking the sorts of risks needed to get into and through a 4-year degree program?
5. In what way could making college "free" backfire?

Personal Reflections

If you attended college, how did you finance it? What implications has that had on your life? If you have not yet attended, how does the cost of college affect your willingness to pursue a higher education?

Would a "free" education make (or have made) you more likely to pursue a higher education? Why or why not? What if it allowed the government to dictate what you could study?

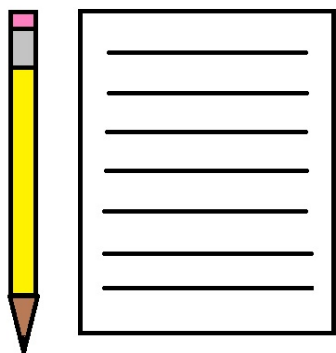
Finding the Right School for You

First-generation students and their families often know little about the ins and outs of how universities function. A consistent and reliable ranking system that would allow them to readily obtain a sense of how supportive a particular school is towards first-generation students would be invaluable. Students need

*How could colleges and universities be meaningfully "accredited" to assess their support for first-generation students? What rankings and evaluations based upon **objective measures** of how well first-generation students actually do at a school would be useful?*

to know how long it takes, on average, for first-generation students to complete a degree at that school—and how many drop out before doing so. They also need to know if first-generation students get good jobs after graduation and how much they tend to owe in student loans once they do graduate. They also need a sense of what sorts of supports the school has specifically for first-generation students (eg., mentoring, advising, academic support, paid internships, etc.).

Accreditation standards could be developed by former first-generation students who have had successful careers in a variety of fields. Similarly, accreditation visits could be performed by former first-generation students using the standards they developed. First-generation alumni would be most committed to seeing undergraduates like themselves succeed and would thus be less subject to being corrupted so that the accreditation process would remain reliable.



The Case of Yonas

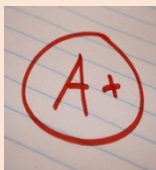
Yonas was the son of immigrants to America from Ethiopia. He was a good student in high school, but his SAT test scores didn't match his high school GPA. For this reason, he was careful in selecting a university. He was very impressed by what he read about University A's support for first-generation students, so he applied and was accepted.



What he found at University A was very different from what was promised. The special advisor for first-generation students turned out to be a 23-year old graduate student who offered no support other than to direct him to the easiest courses. The financial aid counseling he was promised turned out to be a brochure. The special tutoring services were minimal and overcrowded.

Discussion Questions

1. What acknowledgements should be provided to universities like Brushton College which have exemplary support programs for first-generation students?
2. What should the consequences be for universities that have low retention and graduation rates for low-income students using federal financial resources?
3. What (if any) role should the federal government have in assessing support for students who rely on federal financial support? Could the government serve as a vehicle for holding schools accountable? Should students who take loans to attend a school that is not providing sufficient tools for success be required to repay the loans they took if they failed to graduate or had to transfer?



Yonas did not fare well and decided to transfer to a cheaper school-- one that didn't have the academic reputation of University A. When he arrived at University B, his advisor took a very proactive approach to helping him. He took him to the financial aid office to ensure that he qualified for the maximum amount of financial aid so that the debt he took on was minimal. His advisor got him into courses where he could acquire critical skills and even made internship contacts for Yonas. He assigned a senior student to mentor Yonas through his tougher courses.

Yonas did much better. He was never a stellar student, but he worked very hard to get his degree. Yonas received a job offer from a major health care company where he advanced quickly into a senior research position.

Personal Reflections

If you finished college, did you transfer schools at all during your studies? Why or why not? How did or would you find the right school for you?

What aspects of a school do you think would be most significant to a first-generation student? If you are a first-generation grad, what about your school most helped you to succeed?



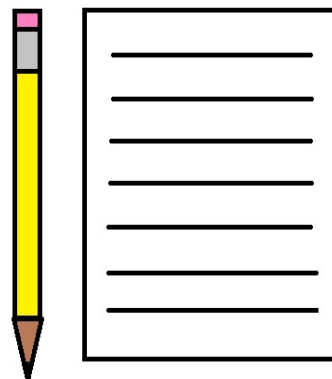
Helping Our Kids Thrive

Many first-generation parents are thrilled to see their child be accepted into a college and heading off to attend their first year, but they are often also quite anxious. Their child is heading off to a world that is

completely unknown to the parent. How can they best support their child? What role should they be playing? Engaging parents—and, really, the whole family—in that the college experience greatly increases the odds that younger siblings, cousins, and sometimes even parents will go on to attend college as well.

Some parents worry that their child will go off to college and be changed—as they surely will be. Parents wonder if they will still be able to relate to their child, or if their child will ever want to return home to live, work, and raise a family. The United States has a long tradition of both suspicion towards and reverence for intellectuals. This is the sentiment behind a good bit of our current political impasse. Many people simply do not trust really smart people to run things while others argue that modern complexity means that *only* a really well-educated person can run things like financial management or urban planning. In fact, though, massive failures such as the banking crisis of 2008 suggest that really smart people managing things in a vacuum can lead to trouble. Perhaps we, as a society, need to return to a better balance of intellectuals and practically-minded folks. Universities could be sites in which this balance could be forged.

What can universities like Bushton College do to effectively support kids like Anthony who do not have parental support?



Many institutions dismiss parents of first-generation students as unqualified to add much to the university community, but they are likely underestimating the value these parents bring. Alumni often send their own children to the school they attended, so there is often a role made for those parents. Parents who have not been to college, however, are also of great potential value to a school. They bring a different perspective, and they are great potential partners to their kids. For instance, if they are kept informed, such parents will likely do much to encourage their children to keep up with their studies and not get sidetracked by the many distractions that exist in a college setting.

Deep's Troubles

Deepak called his parents in a panic. "I just got a 25/100 on my first Calculus 2 exam." Deep's parents were at a loss as to what to do. Deep was born in America after his parents immigrated here from Pakistan. Neither of his parents had gone to college. He was first in his class in high school and was attending college on scholarships. Deep arrived in college with 24 credit hours based upon his performance in AP courses. He was able to bypass Calculus 1 based upon his AP credits.

Discussion Questions

1. What could a university do to help parents to understand how its systems work so that they could better support their children during their studies?
2. What should the proper boundaries be for parents' involvement in what their children experience as students during college?
3. If a parent is worried that their child may be suicidal or experimenting with drugs or alcohol in a dangerous way, how can a university ensure that students retain autonomy and privacy but that parents can also raise an "alarm bell" when it's needed?

As they questioned Deep, they learned that the average grade on the test was a 19/100. "Most of the problems on the test were things we never covered in class." Deep's parents weren't sure how to help him, but they suggested that he talk with the professor. The professor explained to Deep that this was a "weeder course" and that many students failed it each semester. Perhaps, the professor suggested, it means that higher math is not for you.

But Deep had always excelled at math. His parents were frustrated to be spending a lot of money only to have their son's confidence be diminished. They had no idea where to turn to help him.

Personal Reflections

If you completed college, were your parents very involved in your studies? Would you have liked them to be more involved? If you are planning to attend college, what role do you hope your parents will play?

In what ways could colleges engage first generation students and their families in a way that addresses some of the social divides in this country? What could faculty and alumni learn from people who are new to the academy?

Renewing the Village

Every politician talks about creating jobs so that our young people can stay in their communities after they graduate from college. The fact is, however, that many young people—and in particular first-generation college graduates, who tend to be very self-motivated and hard working—do not typically



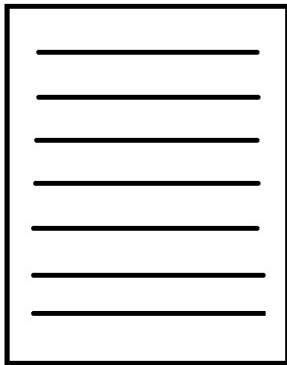
How do we incentivize the best and brightest young people in every community to want to return home to live, work, raise a family, and make a life?

want to return home after they graduate. Many first-generation students come from economically-depressed communities where there are not many work options. Still, many of these communities really need to fill critical posts: teaching jobs, nursing professionals, qualified law enforcement personnel, etc.

This possibility proposes that we promote the idea of making an investment in higher education throughout all regions of the country and that we thereby find more ways to make it possible for first-generation to return to live and work in the communities in which they grew up.

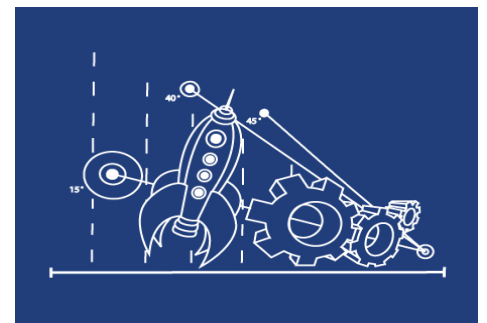
It can be hard to recruit candidates for positions in smaller, rural, or economically-challenged communities, and college-educated young people from those towns and cities could be great fits. However, the lack of social and cultural resources and the preponderance, in some cases, of drug addiction and even violence can disincentivize young people from returning. That said, were more hometown college graduates to return, it would likely create an upward trend in the socioeconomics of many of our most

troubled communities. What are some innovative ways to engage politicians and philanthropists to directly support students in these communities (and, thereby, drive community renewal and development)? How do we get the young graduates of Brushton College to want to return to their home towns to make them more successful places?



Calvert Roofing Solutions

As a soon-to-be college graduate in engineering, John Calvert had a serious decision to make. His father owned a small roofing business and wanted John to return home to help him run the business. John had offers from some great companies which he wanted to pursue where his career could take him. And there was the matter of his home town--there was nothing in Wilsonville for John. As it turned out, John didn't have a choice. His father died unexpectedly and John had to take over the business to provide for his mother and younger siblings.



As John took over the business, he soon realized that it wouldn't be around long if he could not convince others to join him. His first step was to hire a partner who he convinced to join him by giving him shares in the company. Next John and Jim (his partner) decided to refocus the business on more commercial and government jobs. To do this he needed more talented people, and that was a challenge. How

could he convince talented people to come to Wilsonville? He realized that he had to put together a human resource plan that would make Calvert Roofing Solution attractive to others.

John and Jim began to hire young people as they started college. They gave them summer jobs as project managers. This was unheard of in the roofing industry because no one gave that much authority and responsibility to young people. When the young project managers went to college, John and Jim stayed in regular contact with them through phone calls, in effect becoming professional mentors. Calvert even paid for their young project managers to become certified. No other college graduates had this credential. As the project managers returned each summer, they became more and more involved with the business. This included recruiting classmates to join the business.

As the first group of project managers began their senior year, they were given job offers at Calvert. While these weren't as high as other potential offers might be, the one thing that Calvert had that other employers couldn't offer was a work environment where they knew they were wanted and respected and where they had the professional freedom to innovate and make a difference.

Twenty years after John and Jim took over Calvert, it was recognized by the roofing trade association as the most respected roofing business in America. What began as a small family business in a town that no one wanted to live in had become the 5th largest roofing business in America.

Discussion Questions

1. What can communities learn from the success of Calvert Roofing Solutions as it applies to keeping first generation-college graduates in their communities?
2. Why is it critical that communities have a human resource development plan as part of any renewal strategy?
3. What impact might various technologies have in the evolving concept of where we live and work?

Personal Reflections

If you completed college, did you return to your home town after finishing your studies? Why or why not? Do you wish you had? If you're planning to go to college, would you want to return to your home town after graduating? Why or why not? Could anything change how you feel?

Are there many college grads in your community-- or were there in the community in which you grew up? How much of a difference does it make to have people you see every day be college grads? To what extent do you think it prompt more kids to consider going to college and to succeed in getting there?

Final Reflections

What are two surprising things you learned from or explored during this discussion?

(1)

(2)

How has this discussion impacted your consideration of yourself as “college material” and/or your decision to pursue (or return to finish) college? If you already have a degree, how would this sort of discussion have impacted your college journey were you to have had it before you began college?

What can you do to share this guide and the conversation it creates with more young people in your community or within the community in which you grew up?