

# Focus on First-Generation Students

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# About Us

The Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE) is part of Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research (CPR), a research center in the School of Education devoted to studying the student experience. In addition to LSSSE, CPR houses the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the NSSE Institute, the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), and the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE).

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## Quick Facts

### OBJECTIVES

LSSSE provides data to law schools to improve legal education and inform decisionmaking and compliance efforts, enhance student success, facilitate internal assessment and analysis, and support research.

### AUDIENCE

LSSSE's audience includes law school administrators and faculty, current and prospective law students, alumni, advisory boards, trustees, institutional researchers, accrediting organizations, and researchers studying legal education.

### PARTICIPATING LAW SCHOOLS

The 2023 LSSSE survey collected responses from over 13,000 law students at 75 law schools in Spring 2023. The law schools participating in LSSSE closely resemble ABA-approved law schools overall in terms of enrollment size and affiliation (public/private).

### SURVEY

The LSSSE survey is administered online to all students at participating law schools. Each participating student takes approximately 15-20 minutes to complete the survey.

### DATA SOURCES

LSSSE data include survey responses and comments from JD and LLM students enrolled at participating law schools.



## Foreword

As a first-generation high school and college graduate, I am so grateful to LSSSE for its attention to collecting data on first generation college students in our law schools. First-gen status correlates highly with coming from a working-class family with lower income. In an age where the pursuit of justice requires diverse perspectives, it is essential to broaden the scope of those who enter the legal profession, and the opportunities afforded to them as lawyers. Our system of justice can only be just and equitable when it is representative of the society it serves. **One of the important groups that brings much-needed experience, skills, and viewpoints to our profession is first-gen students.** Their voices can influence the direction of legal discourse and the evolution of law so that it works for the benefit of more people, especially those who have been marginalized and subordinated. Moreover, research shows that clients and other users of the justice system perceive it as more fair and equitable when they see lawyers and judges who share a similar background and similar experiences to their own. Adding more first-gen students to our profession can inspire trust and confidence in law and legal institutions.

LSSSE's collective data reveal that first-gen students in law school bring a tremendous amount of resilience, determination, and adaptability to their journey through law school. Interestingly these are all attributes that research shows has found essential to producing a good lawyer. LSSSE's data also show that first-gen students in law schools come from diverse backgrounds, often representing marginalized or underrepresented communities. In light of the Supreme Court's decision in the *Students for Fair Admissions* cases, law schools that identify first-gen students for scholarships, preference in admission, and pipeline programs may find that this group of prospective law students is one of the most diverse groups that the law school can target for recruitment.

The LSSSE data also show that first-gen students rely on student loans to a greater extent than their classmates and work for money at a higher rate than their non-first-gen counterparts, leaving less time for extracurricular pursuits. Law schools that target first-gen students for recruitment should keep this in mind by offering financial support sufficient to alleviate or at least mitigate this disparate financial burden. Finally, and not surprisingly, the data also show that first-gen students carry a greater burden when it comes to caring for someone other than themselves. Law schools need to give some thought to what they can do to provide greater support to first-gen students. Maybe that is allowing them to take one fewer course each semester in their first year of law school, allowing them to start law school earlier than the remainder of the class so that they can earn credits in the summer and not fall behind their peers, or allowing them to earn a number of credits online or in an externship in their hometown so that the burden of commuting to school is eliminated. **The more flexibility that a law school can build into its delivery of legal education, the more suitable it will be for meeting some of the challenges that first-gen students confront in law school.**

It is always my hope that I can inspire another young person in poverty by telling my story of how becoming a member of the legal profession lifted me and my family out of poverty. Each first-gen student that we enroll in law school has a story that can inspire others from similar backgrounds to aspire to the goal of being a lawyer so that with each generation, our profession better reflects the public that it serves. The legal profession is at a crossroads, and that includes legal education. We can choose to hold tight to systems and structures that maintain privilege and our image of being an exclusive club, or we can change systems and structures so that they operate more equitably. In my mind, becoming a more equitable profession will make us an even more respected profession.

# Director's Message



**Meera E. Deo** | LSSSE Director

*The Honorable Vaino Spencer Professor of Law,  
Southwestern Law School*

First-gen students are so deserving of the spotlight. Without college-educated parents to guide them through higher education, they navigate the undergraduate experience and the law school years largely on their own. LSSSE began collecting data on parental education (thereby identifying first-gen students) in 2014 and has incorporated their experiences into numerous publications since. This Report is our first to highlight the challenges and accomplishments of first-gen students.

Given existing research on first-gen students in other higher education environments, it is no surprise that LSSSE data reveal they begin law school with slightly lower academic outcomes than their peers. As a result, first-gen students are less likely to earn merit-based scholarships and more likely to take on educational loans at high levels. Significant debt, of course, has ongoing effects on not only the law school years but long into their careers as attorneys.

**First-gen students also invest considerable time and effort in their legal education.** They spend more hours studying than their non-first-gen classmates; they engage with professors and fellow students at high rates; and they are more likely than others to work “harder than [they] thought [they] could,” to meet the rigorous academic demands of law school. However, the many hours spent studying and preparing for class leave first-gen students with less time to engage in co-curricular activities (such as joining law journals or student organizations), though the networking and community building that happens at these school-sponsored events is often crucial to future career success.

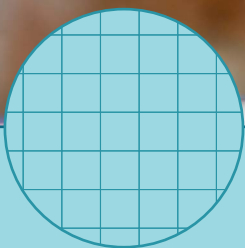
While pursuing these high academic standards, first-gen students also have numerous competing obligations. First-gen students are both more likely to work and more likely to work more hours than non-

first-gen students. They are more likely than their classmates to work not only in jobs related to the law, but also in non-law jobs, likely due to financial necessity. Higher percentages of first-gen students are simultaneously caring for dependents at home while attending law school. Perhaps because of their many other work and familial responsibilities, first-gen students are more likely to attend law school part-time than non-first-gen students.

**First-gen students comprise roughly one-quarter of current law students—a sizable but often invisible population.** They are more likely to be women and people of color (and women of color), slightly older than the average law student, and from families with fewer financial resources to support them through the law school years. Their grit, determination, and resilience are obvious and undeniable. And while they have high rates of overall law school satisfaction, administrators, professors, and classmates can do more to support first-gen students as they navigate their passage through legal education.

Many law schools now have student organizations dedicated to fostering community and support among first-gen students. With this LSSSE Annual Report, those that have not yet created those support systems now have undeniable empirical data showing how valuable those networks could be. Some bring first-gen attorneys to campus to connect current students to role models and success stories. Others maintain outline banks, host professional clothing drives, or have administrators unveil the unwritten rules, the norms and expectations, of law school. Targeted support is incredibly helpful for first-gen students who put in so much effort—at school, at work, and at home—to maximize their academic and professional outcomes. First-gen students are doing so much for themselves and for others; we can do more to support them too.





## Introduction

First-generation (first-gen) students are trailblazers for their families. They attend college without the guidance of a parent who has completed their own bachelor's degree. Decades of research show that first-gen students overcome significant challenges simply to gain access to college and invest even more to persist until degree completion.<sup>1</sup> First-gen students tend to enter higher education with fewer financial resources and less social and cultural capital than those who have at least one parent who completed a college degree.<sup>2</sup> Although first-gen students have already drawn on their resiliency and determination to adapt to college life, law school brings its own cultural norms and ways of learning that are, again, likely to be unfamiliar.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these expected challenges, few studies focus on the experiences of first-gen students in law school. In 2014, LSSSE was one of the first organizations in legal education to collect data on first-gen students by adding a survey question about parental educational and publishing results. The data LSSSE has collected shed light on how first-gen students engage with law school and how their experiences differ from those of their non-first-gen classmates.

Nearly a decade after LSSSE began collecting data on first-gen students, their experiences in law school are finally gaining much-needed attention from the broader legal education community. This Annual Report delves into their world, recognizes their struggles, and celebrates their accomplishments.

1 Ernest T. Pascarella, Christopher T. Pierson, Gregory C. Wolniak, and Patrick T. Terenzini, *First-Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes*, 75 J. HIGHER EDUC. 249 (2004).

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital*, in HANDBOOK OF THEORY AND RESEARCH FOR THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION 241 (John Richardson, ed., 1986).

3 Jesse McCain and Josipa Roksa, "It's a Strength that I Draw From," *First-Generation Background as a Cultural Resource in Law School*, J. FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT SUCCESS 71 (2023).

# Demographic Characteristics

The purpose of this Report is to gain insight into the experiences of first-gen college students who go on to attend law school. LSSSE respondents are asked to identify the highest level of education completed by either of their parents (or the people who raised them), using one of seven classifications:

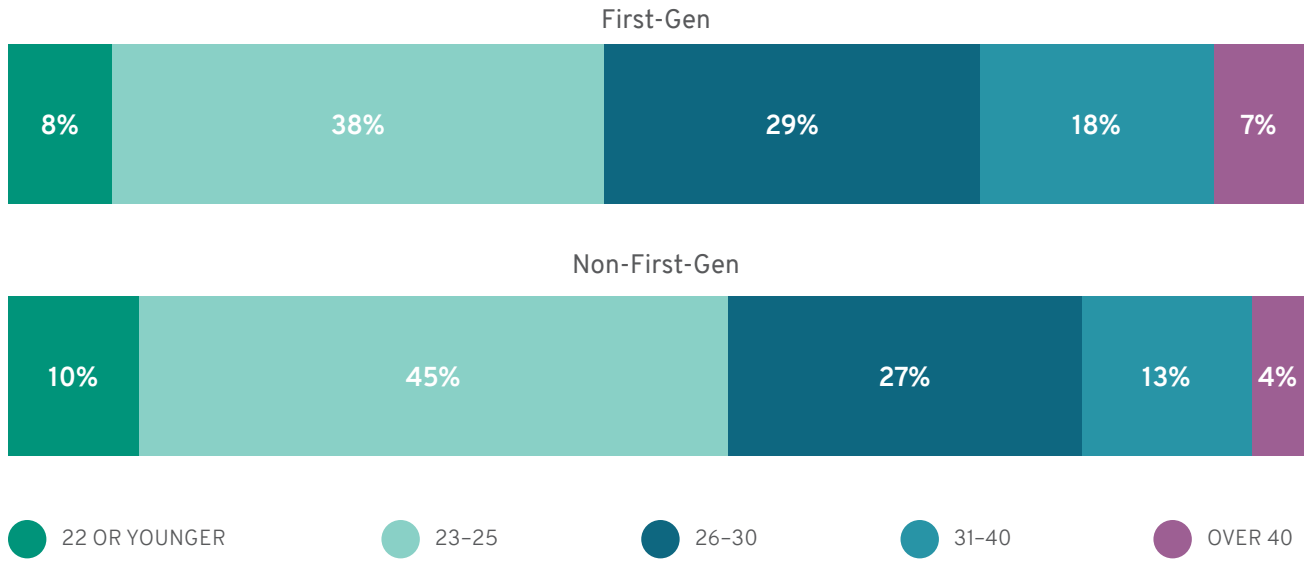
- 1 Did not finish high school
- 2 High school diploma or GED
- 3 Attended college, but did not complete undergraduate degree
- 4 Associate's degree
- 5 Bachelor's degree
- 6 Master's degree
- 7 Doctoral or professional degree (which includes a J.D.)

For LSSSE analyses, students who respond that neither parent received a bachelor's degree or higher are considered first-gen students. First-gen students comprise over one-quarter (26%) of the LSSSE respondents. First-gen students tend to be different from non-first-gen students in important ways, including race, gender, age, and a full-time focus on law school. Students of color from every racial group are more likely than White students to be first-gen. For instance, 53% of Latinx respondents and 36% of Black respondents are first-gen, compared with 21% of White respondents.

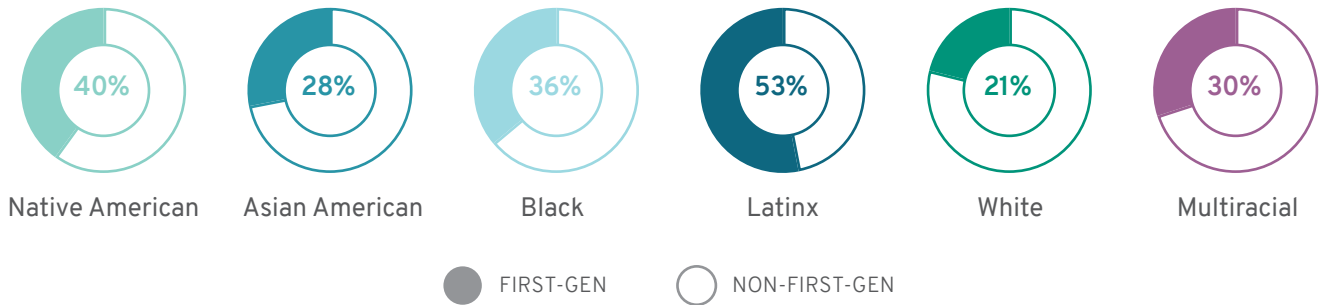
Twenty-eight percent (28%) of women are first-gen students compared to 24% of men. First-gen students also tend to be older, with 54% of first-gen students being over the age of 25 compared to 44% of non-first-gen students. Finally, while the vast majority of law students in the U.S. study on a full-time basis, first-gen students are more likely to study part-time by about 10 percentage points. Thus, in addition to their first-gen status, many of these students have other demographic differences from the average law student.



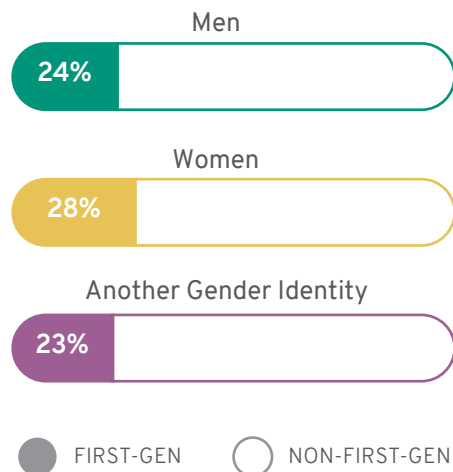
### First-Gen Students, by Age



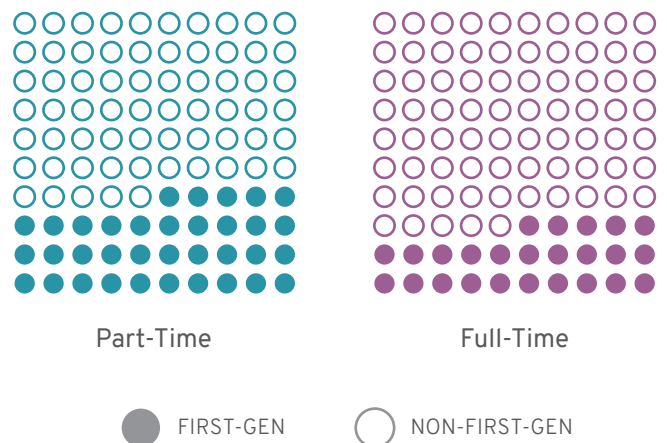
### First-Gen Students, by Race/Ethnicity



### First-Gen Students, by Gender



### First-Gen Students, by Enrollment Status

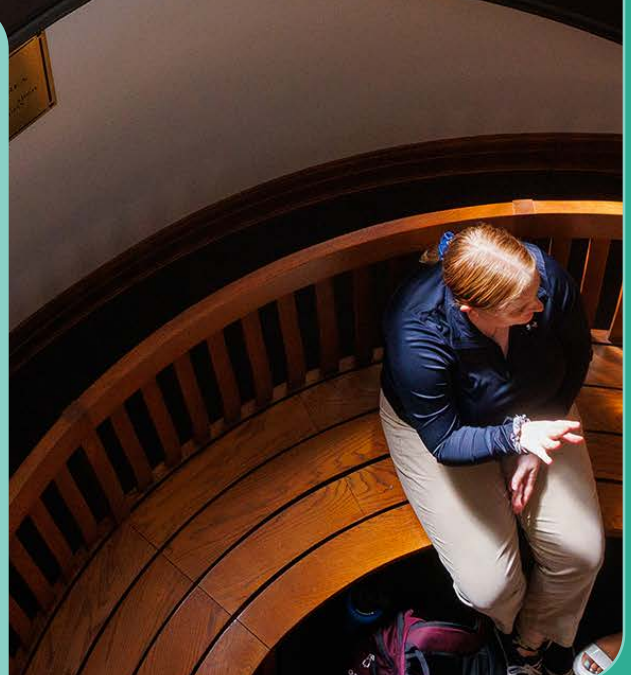






## Academic Performance

First-gen students in 2023 entered law school with lower LSAT scores than non-first-gen students, 154 compared to 157. The average undergraduate GPA was 3.35 among first-gen students and 3.44 for non-first-gen students. In law school, first-gen students report having a “B” average, compared to a “B+” average for other students. Thus, overall, first-gen academic performance is slightly below that of their classmates.



# Student Debt

Parental education is often used as a proxy for socioeconomic status. A college degree has a significant positive impact on salary and career earnings over a lifetime. On average, first-gen students come from families that earn less than the families of students with a parent who completed college. Because first-gen students enter law school with lower undergraduate GPA and LSAT scores and because higher LSAT scores result in greater success with scholarships, first-gen students are less likely to be awarded merit scholarships in law school.

As a result, first-gen students rely on student loans to a greater extent than their classmates. For instance, 24% of non-first-gen students anticipate graduating with no law school debt compared to only 12% of first-gen students. Conversely, roughly one-quarter (23%) of non-first-gen students expect to graduate with more

than \$120,000 in student debt compared to over one-third (35%) of first-gen students. Students from the same racial background nevertheless have significant debt differentials based on whether they are first-gen students, with first-gen students of color borrowing at particularly high levels.

## Expected Student Debt

\$0/NO DEBT

MORE THAN \$120,000

12%

First Gen

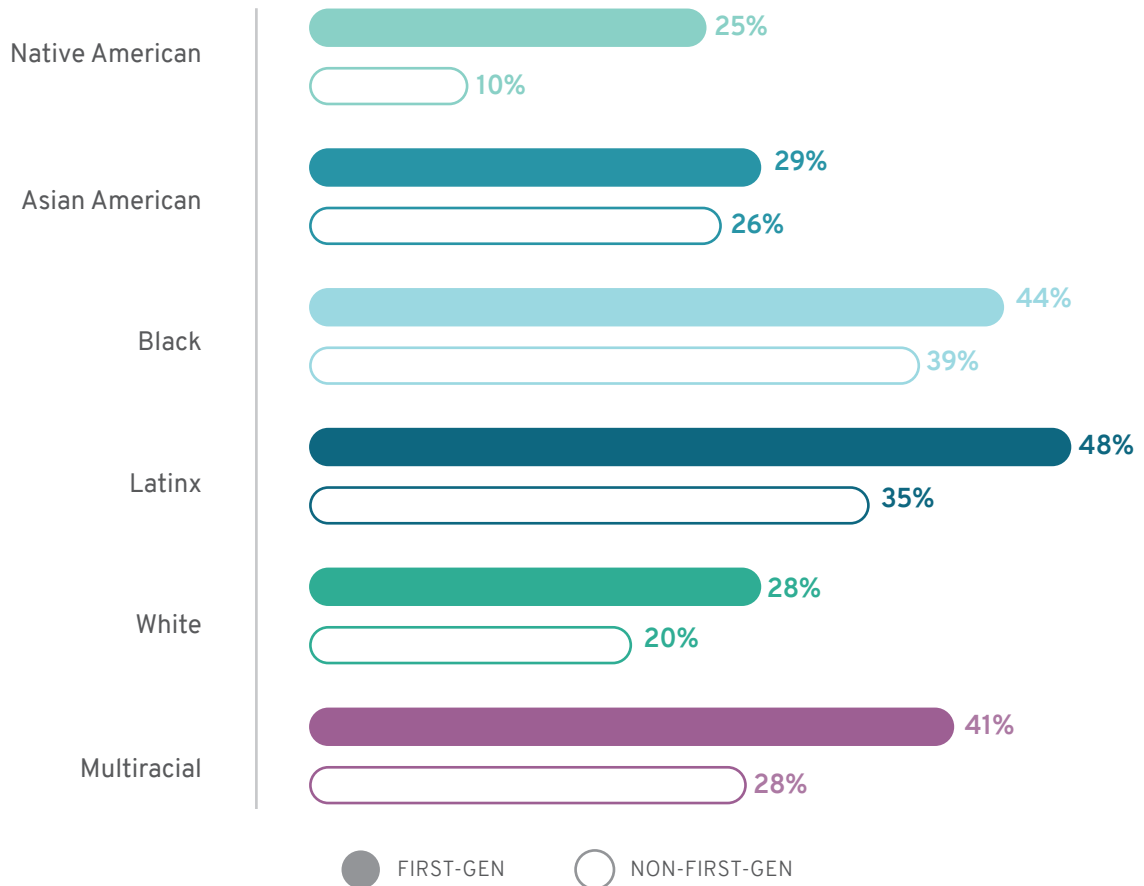
35%

24%

Non-First-Gen

23%

## Expect to Owe More Than \$120K in Student Debt

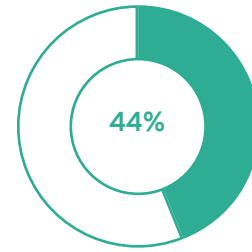


# Time Usage

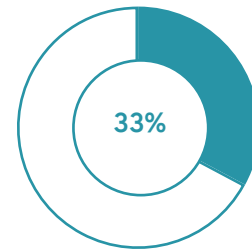
LSSE asks students to estimate the average number of hours they spend each week engaging in activities that are directly and indirectly related to the educational experience. Time usage is important because it reflects students' academic engagement and overall priorities. First-gen students are more likely to attend law school part-time, which suggests that they have complicated schedules with competing demands, rather than a sole focus on law school.

LSSE data show that high percentages of first-gen students have familial obligations as caretakers for dependents living in their household. Forty-four percent (44%) of first-gen students spend time caring for dependents, compared to 33% of non-first-gen students.

## Spend Time Caring for Dependents

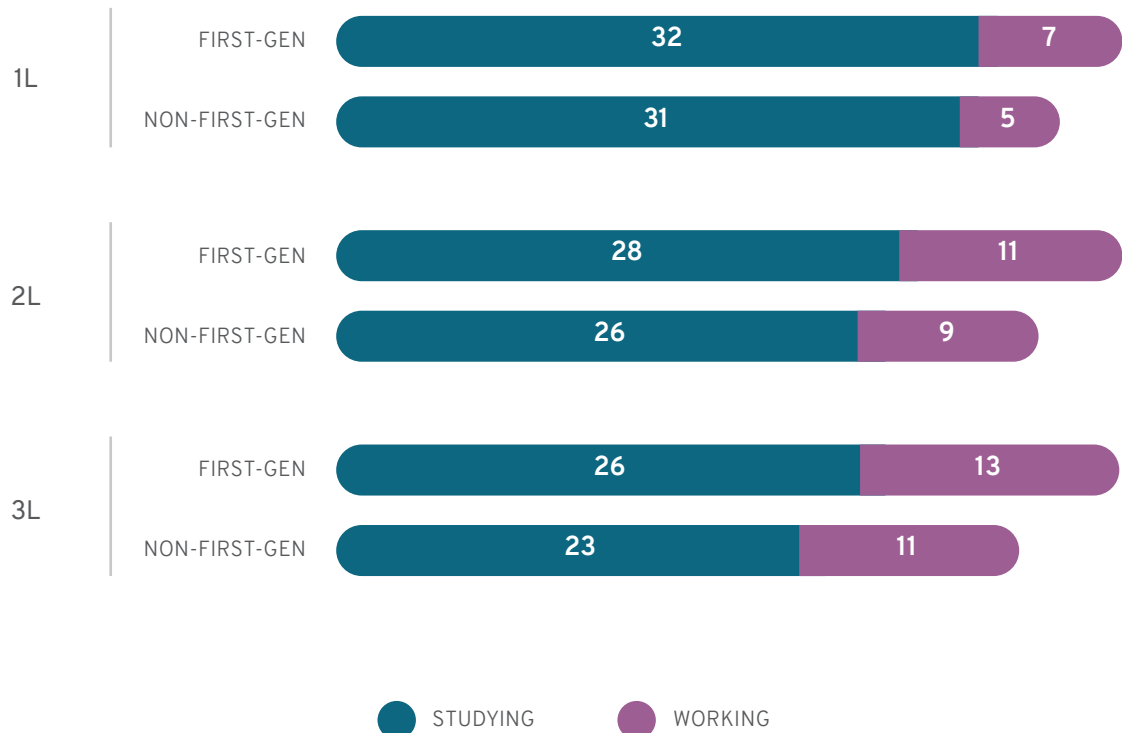


First Gen



Non-First-Gen

## Average Hours Per Week Studying and Working

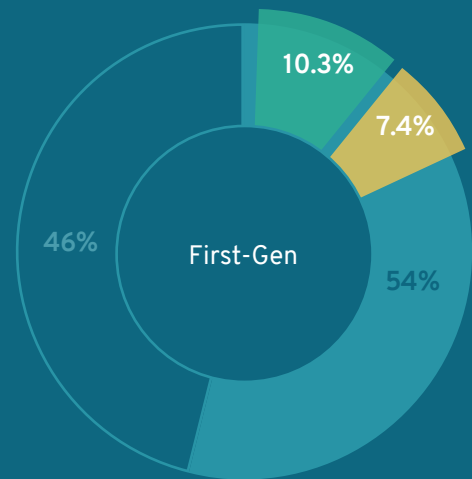
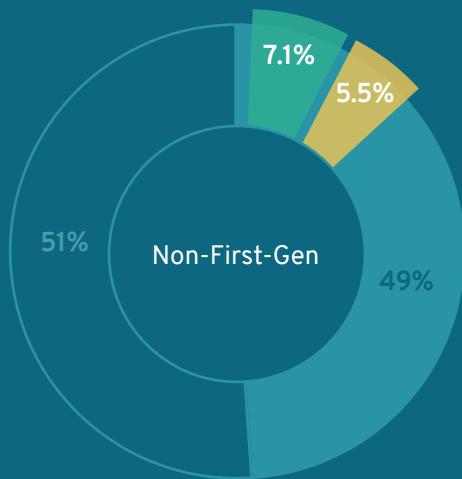


There are many reasons why a law student may choose to work— to acquire professional skills, make salient connections, or out of necessity to make ends meet. First-gen students are more likely to be employed during law school and also tend to work more hours than non-first-gen students. A full 54% of first-gen students report working, compared to 49% of non-first-gen students. Throughout law school, first-gen students average working about two hours more per week than non-first-gen students, which results in a substantial cumulative effect over the course of a year. First-gen students are also more likely to work and to

work longer hours than non-first-gen students in a job not related to the law, suggesting their decision to work is based on a financial imperative.

Despite their substantial external obligations, first-gen students do not shirk their academic responsibilities. In fact, first-gen 1Ls study one hour more every week than their non-first-gen classmates and a full three more hours per week by the time they are 3Ls. This level of continued and lasting engagement of academic pursuits along with more personal responsibilities shows an unyielding grit and determination.

### Working for Pay in Law School



● WORKING

○ NOT WORKING

● WORKING IN A LAW-RELATED JOB 21+ HRS/WK

● WORKING IN A NONLEGAL JOB 21+ HRS/WK



# Law School Engagement

LSSSE assesses the extent to which students participate in effective educational practices, including the time and effort they invest in their studies, discussions and interactions with faculty members and peers, participation in law school activities such as moot court or journals, and other educationally purposeful activities.

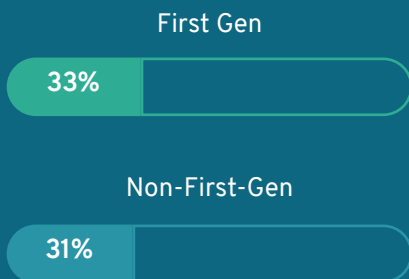
The LSSSE survey asks students how often they “worked harder than [they] thought [they] could to meet faculty members’ standards or expectations.” This question gets to the heart of how students challenge themselves academically, the effort they put forth, and how the law school sets high expectations for student performance. LSSSE data find that first-gen students are putting in quality effort to meet expectations. Sixty-three percent (63%) of first-gen students report they do so “often” or “very often,” compared to 59% of non-first-gen students.

Furthermore, first-gen students are just as engaged in academic pursuits outside of class, despite the fact that they have more responsibilities competing for their time. First-gen students work with students and faculty on group projects at equal or greater levels relative to non-first-gen students. Roughly equal percentages of first-gen students (19%) and non-first-gen students (18%) report that they frequently work with faculty members on activities other than coursework (including committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.). Likewise, 33% of first-gen (and 31% of non-first-gen) students frequently work with classmates outside of class to prepare assignments. The diligence of first-gen students is particularly impressive given their personal obligations. One third (33%) of first-gen students always come to class fully prepared despite their family duties and work schedules, the same percentage as non-first-gen students (who tend to work less and have fewer familial obligations).

## Worked Harder Than They Thought They Could To Meet Faculty Members’ Expectations



## Work with Classmates Outside of Class

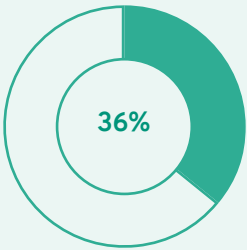


“often” or “very often”

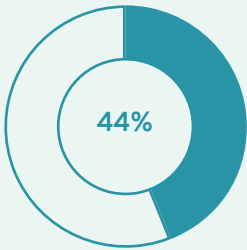
**“One third (33%) of first-gen students always come to class fully prepared despite their family duties and work schedules, the same percentage as non-first-gen students (who tend to work less and have fewer familial obligations).”**

Though first-gen students are just as engaged as their peers on a number of dimensions, they are less likely than other students to participate in many common and desirable co-curricular activities. One area that shows less engagement is participation in law school-sponsored activities. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of first-gen students report spending zero hours per week participating in law school-sponsored activities compared to 31% of non-first-gen students. The disparities relating to law journal participation are especially stark. Only 36% of first-gen students plan to be or are already a current editor of a law journal, compared to 44% of non-first-gen students. Similarly, fewer first-gen students join student organizations (71%), compared to non-first-gen students (75%). While this lack of engagement in co-curricular activities may be a product of having greater competing responsibilities in caring for dependents while working more and studying more, there could be lasting repercussions as they continue through law school and begin their professional careers.

### Law Journal Member

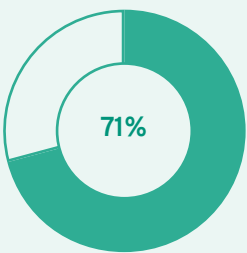


First Gen

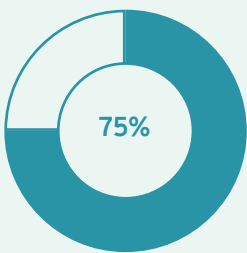


Non-First-Gen

### Student Organization Member

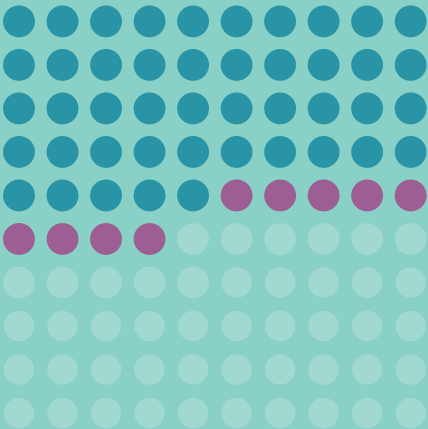


First Gen

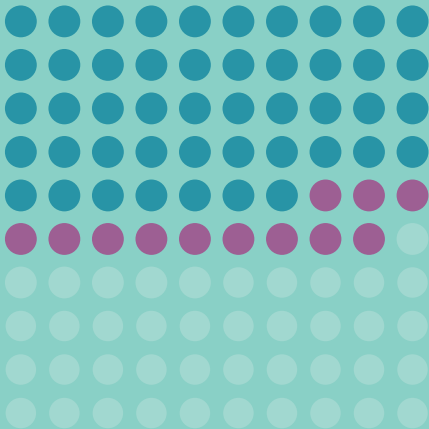


Non-First-Gen

### Participate in Law School-Sponsored Activities



First Gen



Non-First-Gen



1-5 HRS/WEEK

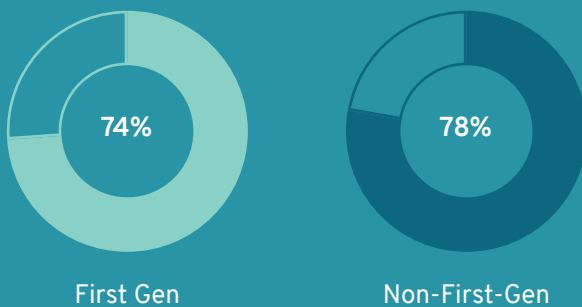


6-10 HRS/WEEK

# Satisfaction

First-gen students, like law students overall, are overwhelmingly satisfied with their law school experience. Seventy-four percent (74%) of first-gen students evaluate the educational experience at their law school as “good” or “excellent,” similar to non-first-gen students (78%). Furthermore, 77% of first-gen (and 79% of non-first-gen) students report they would choose to attend the same law school again, with the benefit of hindsight. These trends are particularly noteworthy given the increased financial risks and other sacrifices made by first-gen students to attend law school.

## Satisfaction with Law School



"good" or "excellent"





## Conclusion

First-gen students differ from their non-first-gen classmates in meaningful ways. First-gen students have more competing responsibilities, work more hours per week for pay in law-related and non-law jobs, and study more each week than non-first-gen students. These obligations add to a theme of full schedules for first-gen students, particularly given their significant investment in academics. This additional time could be particularly costly for first-gen 1L students who enter law school with a steeper learning curve than non-first-gen students, yet have greater competing responsibilities. First-gen students typically are older students, many have caretaking responsibilities, and they are more likely to come from families with fewer financial resources, necessitating working while in school. Because of these differences, first-gen students bring valuable life experiences and diverse perspectives to classroom conversations. Once they complete law school, they are also equipped to bring the fruits of their legal education back to their communities.

The hard work and determination that first-gen students bring to law school is nonetheless coupled with higher levels of debt than their non-first-generation peers. This creates an additional burden not only during law school but as they choose their first jobs as lawyers and continue their legal careers. First-gen students also are less likely to engage in co-curricular activities such as student organizations and law journals; coupled with their slightly lower academic outcomes, less engagement could also translate into missed opportunities as they enter the legal profession.

First-gen students face unique challenges and responsibilities as they navigate legal education. **Law schools should take the findings from this Annual Report, as well as their own school-specific LSSSE data, to craft targeted programs to support first-gen students.** Better supporting them personally will free up time and resources for first-gen students to devote to not only academics, but other co-curricular pursuits so they are optimally placed to thrive as they enter the legal profession.



First-gen students  
are doing so much  
for themselves  
and for others; we  
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*LSSSE Director*



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