



FAIRMONT STATE UNIVERSITY™

Office of Sponsored Programs

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SPECIAL FEATURE

Fostering Success and Belonging: First-Gen Student Success Grant

While some sponsored programs last multiple years and have outcomes and outputs that take time for the campus to see, others have more immediate impacts. The First-Generation Student Success Grant awarded through West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (WVHEPC) in August 2025 is one such project.

Since the grant was awarded, Fairmont State has established a First-Gen Student Advisory Board and even hosted the First-Gen Falcons Carnival of Belonging and Success. This program was designed to build community and a sense of belonging among first-generation students, bridge gaps in cultural capital, and connect students to resources that ultimately improve academic persistence, well-being, and post-graduation readiness.

This ongoing project is led by Lauren Pearson, the Datha & Gene Smith Program Coordinator at Fairmont State, and Janna Bredeson, Vice President of Student Affairs. Pearson and Bredeson collaborated to design a program that gave first-gen students a formal platform to provide feedback on campus policies, programs, and services, and to generate new ideas for new first-gen programming through the First-Gen Student Advisory Board as well as a series of events to acknowledge, celebrate, and inspire the first-gen community at Fairmont State.

"My hope is that this grant will raise awareness of what it means to be a first-generation student, as many don't realize that they are first-gen. It will provide resources, mentorship, and community support to help students thrive academically and personally, fostering belonging and building confidence to take on leadership and initiative so more students can access opportunities and succeed in college," shared Pearson.

The Carnival, held on November 3, 2025, featured various games such as cornhole, Plinko, and 'Falcon Pong.' Students were able to connect with their peers while getting caricatures made, their faces painted, and their fortunes told.

Approximately 130 students attended the Carnival and were able to interact with the first-gen community on campus. Other amenities students could enjoy at the Carnival included a bounce house, a photo booth, and a variety of refreshments to eat and drink as they celebrated the first-generation community at Fairmont State.

"What we are seeing now is just the first chapter. This grant has given us the momentum to design programs that first-gen students can feel immediately, while also laying the foundation for long-term support," Bredeson said. "We are committed to continually evolving to meet the needs of first-generation Falcons for years to come."

Additionally, to further celebrate the national First-Generation Week, Fairmont State hosted a Breakfast Treats & Coffee Event as well as an AI workshop hosted by Derek Nuzum, Student Success Librarian. Because Fairmont State has a high population of first-generation students, with over one thousand undergraduates being first-gen, the University makes a serious effort to acknowledge and honor those students, faculty, and staff members who were the first in their family to attend college. The funding from WVHEPC is so impactful because it provides financial support to further Fairmont State's ongoing efforts.

Other activities from this grant that will take place during the remainder of the 2025-2026 Academic Year include interactive workshops, in-person events, and a first-gen student zine. For example, Pearson plans to develop a zine, which is a self-published small booklet or magazine, in collaboration with the First-Gen Student Advisory Board. This zine will represent the writing and art of first-generation students and make it available for distribution throughout the campus community.

Pearson also plans to facilitate collaborative workshops on soft skills development and long-term planning to further first-gen achievement and retention. This will include activities such as a study skills bootcamp, resume labs, elevator pitch stations, professional headshots, and a LinkedIn

station. Students will also be able to receive lessons on time management, stress management, budgeting, and financial literacy.

Similarly, a First-Gen Peer Mentors network will be launched by this grant which will provide first-gen students with mentors they can relate to and receive guidance from. The First-Gen Peer Mentors will also develop leadership skills, communication skills, and a commitment to supporting their peers through this mentorship program.

The culminating event of the grant will be a Carnival of Cultures Celebration and Recognition Night which will blend celebration with reflection by presenting certificates and recognition to first-gen student leaders and ally awards for faculty and staff who have made an impact upon the first-gen campus community.

"In creating these events, we wanted something that would truly stand out--an experience students would be excited to attend, remember, and feel proud to be part of. We envisioned a celebration that was vibrant, meaningful, and unmistakably centered on the first-generation community," said Pearson. "I'm so thankful to my colleague, Dawn Blankenship, and my student manager, Franki Shumate, whose hard work and support made this vision a reality."

While this grant from WVHEPC will officially end in August 2026, Fairmont State plans to maintain the long-term infrastructure for first-gen support this project creates by continuing the First-Gen Student Advisory Board and First-Gen Peer Mentors programs. These programs will be sustained through existing departmental budgets and ongoing funding through University budget allocations and donor contributions. Additionally, some of these first-gen initiatives will be integrated into annual student engagement activities.

If you would like to learn more about initiatives that support first-generation students on campus, contact firstgenfalcons@fairmontstate.edu or add @firstgenfalcons_fairmontstate on Instagram.

SPECIAL NOTE:

Any grant application, proposal, or request for external funding must be reviewed and approved **prior to submission** through an internal process managed by the Office of Sponsored Programs. Please *visit our website* for more information and to access the required forms which facilitate the internal review and approval process.



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