



FAIRMONT STATE UNIVERSITY™

Office of Sponsored Programs

January 16, 2025



SPECIAL FEATURE

First-Generation Student Success at Fairmont State University

WVHEPC Grant Enables First-Generation Student Success

In our first communication of 2025, the Office of Sponsored Programs would like to highlight the transformative work being done to enable first-generation student success at Fairmont State University.

Fairmont State boasts a large population of first-generation students, who are the first individuals in their family to attend college or university and whose parents have not obtained a four-year college degree. According to the 2023-2024 enrollment data from the Office of Institutional Research, 42.02% of the University's student body is

first-generation. Additionally, many current Fairmont State employees and alums are first-generation including President Davis and OSP's very own Christy Burner, Amantha Cole, and Isabella Tennant.

Given the prevalence of first-generation students on campus, and the challenges these students often face including lack of familiarity, finances, and family support, programs providing necessary resources and acknowledgement are essential. Recently, Justin Rader, Ed.D., and Keith Gipson set out to develop a program that does just that.

Justin Rader, Director of Student Involvement and Leadership, and Keith Gipson, Manager of Student Support/Outreach Enrollment Services, collaborated to receive a First-Generation Student Success Grant from the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (WVHEPC). The WVHEPC develops and oversees a public policy agenda for West Virginia's four-year colleges and universities, providing support for institutions and students. Common areas of concern for the WVHEPC include academic affairs, administrative services, finance and facilities, financial aid, health services, human resources, legal services, policy and planning, science and research, and student affairs.

Once awarded in July 2024, the WVHEPC grant funded a celebration week of events, workshops, and activities highlighting the achievements and challenges of first-generation students, as well as an advocacy campaign to showcase inspirational testimonials from first-generation Fairmont State faculty, staff, students, and alumni.

The First-Generation Celebration 2024 was held in November and included a success showcase, a message to first-gen students from President Davis, a coffee/tea bar, and a roundtable discussion on self-confidence and resilience. The celebration culminated in a First-Generation Picnic on the Falcon Center Quad.

"First-generation college students embody the spirit of resilience, turning challenges into opportunities. Celebrating their journey honors not just their accomplishments but the grit and determination that fuel their progress," explained Rader.

During the week-long event, students were able to connect with other first-generation students, hear personal testimonies, and develop fellowship with the University community. Multiple departments and facilities on campus collaborated to make these opportunities possible, including the Ruth Ann Musick Library and the Turley Center.

Social media marketing for the events highlights the first-generation advocacy that motivated Rader and Gipson in their grant writing process. First-generation students are described as vital, diverse, and resilient in the Facebook posts that announced the week-long celebration. Video interviews were conducted with President Davis and various alumni, showcasing the broad range of first-generation

success on campus.

"Our campus and alumni really stepped up and showed their support for the first-generation population that are currently attending Fairmont State University. It was encouraging to see the support that was poured out over the week," Rader shared.

Ultimately, Rader and Gipson hoped to establish a week-long celebration and awareness campaign; provide advocacy, support, and resources; and foster a supportive community environment for first-generation students. Encouraging the success and retention of first-generation students, and all students at Fairmont State, is the goal of many University employees; grants like the First-Generation Student Success Grant simply make those goals more accessible.

Beyond the initial 2024 celebration, future events are in development, including first-generation celebrations in the Spring 2025 term. The University plans to collaborate with the Fairmont State Foundation to continue supporting first-generation programming to sustain these initiatives beyond the grant period.

Any Fairmont State faculty or staff interested in encouraging a sense of community, student retention, and awareness of first-generation students should feel free to contact Dr. Justin Rader at justin.rader@fairmontstate.edu. Even though the initial event has ended, first-generation advocacy at Fairmont State will continue far beyond the scope of this grant.

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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