

Meeting the Challenges of First-Generation College Students

By John Kelly, President, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida

As the fall semester approaches, I look forward to welcoming thousands of bright young minds to Florida Atlantic University. At FAU, like at many universities across the country, the number of first-generation college students has rapidly expanded, and we are very proud of this at FAU.

However, an alarming number of these students do not graduate. In many cases, it is not that the students are incapable of completing their studies. Rather, many simply lack the necessary resources to acclimate to college life or do not have access to a support system necessary to help them overcome roadblocks.

America's colleges and universities need to do a better job of providing first-generation students with the tools they need to complete their studies, or we risk losing many of our most talented high school graduates.

What can be done to steer them through these uncertain times?

The ability to graduate without overwhelming debt is a key element. A scholarship program that covers on-campus housing and books, along with tuition, will help achieve that goal.

Just as important is a roadmap to success and mentors who can support and guide the students along the way. I am pleased to share that FAU does this through our Kelly/Strul Emerging Scholars Program, which launched in 2017. From their acceptance into the university through to graduation, every student in the program follows an established path to help ensure they can be successful.

This path is a 17-step guide to college success that begins with university acceptance and the award of a scholarship, and continues through graduation preparation and encouragement to give back by staying involved in the program after graduation, whether with contributions of talent or through financial support.

Along the way, the path provides an orientation to college life, financial literacy training, campus housing guidance, a required learning strategies and human development course, professional advising, and lots of focused mentoring support. It's a college roadmap that has proven to be successful, and one that could be adopted by all colleges and universities in whatever format is most suited to the institution and its student population.

Solid financial support is critical in getting students into college. However, if they are to successfully complete their studies, most students need a roadmap to navigate the learning experience.

Until every student has these guarantees, we'll continue losing many of our best and brightest students, and America will be the worse for it.

