

What factors influence first-generation student retention?

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Executive Summary

Composite data from higher education institutions reveals first-generation students, in general, are more likely to drop out of school compared to their non-first-generation peers. Therefore, it is important to explore the issue of first-generation student retention and factors that may influence retention among this population. NAIA institutions retain first-generation student-athletes at a slightly higher level than the overall average retention rate among NAIA student-athletes (63% compared to 62%). Five sports comprise relatively large shares of first-generation student-athletes: football (19% of all athletes are first-generation), baseball (12%), men's soccer (8%), women's soccer (8%), and softball (8%). Four out of these five sports retain first-generation student-athletes at a slightly higher rate compared to their non-first-generation peers. Football is the only sport among these five that demonstrated a slight decrease (2%) in first-generation student-athlete retention compared to non-first-generation student-athletes.

Practical Considerations:

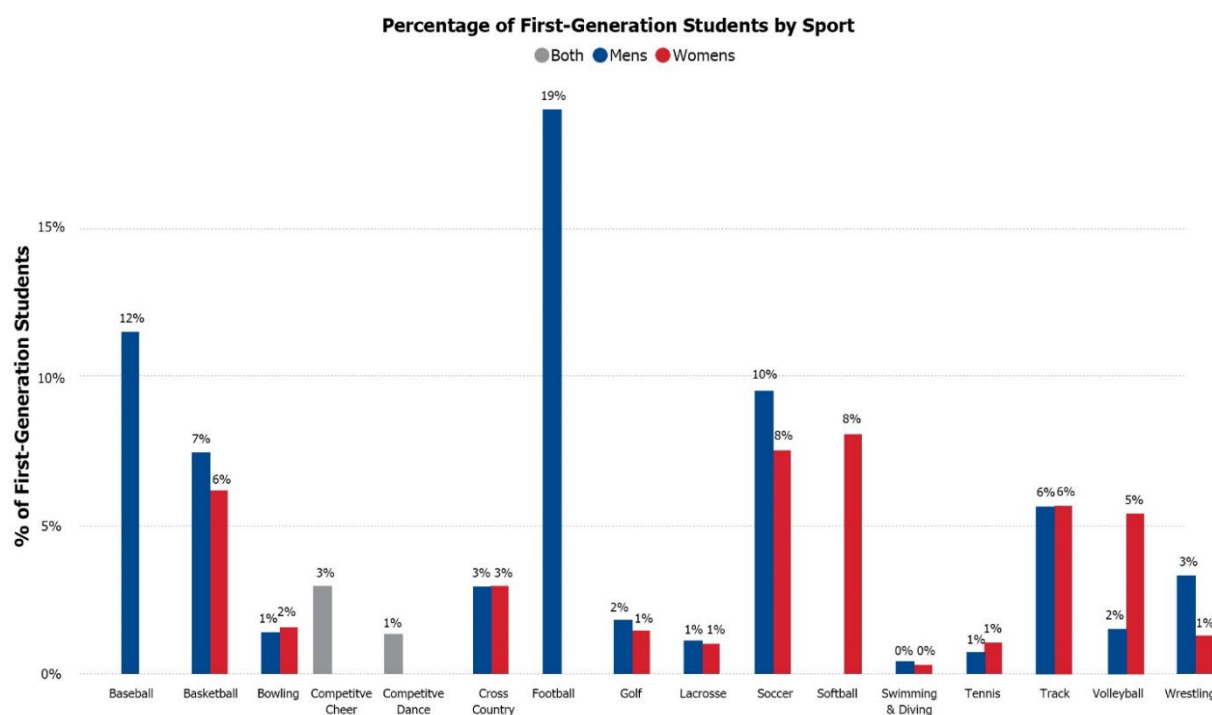
- ▼ How do you value first-generation student retention at your institution? What types of programs or initiatives have you put in place to facilitate higher retention among first-generation students?
- ▼ Most sports see higher retention rates among first-generation students compared to non-first-generation students. Does your institution follow this trend? Which sports can you focus on to improve first-generation student retention?
- ▼ As you're considering new sports for your institution, what sports may be attractive to first-generation students? Are these sports also the ones that retain first-generation students at higher rates?
- ▼ National trends show first-generation students, when compared to non-first-generation students, receive about the same amount of academic aid, much less athletic aid, and more need-based, work study, and other aid. Is this the case at your institution? Is this an appropriate mix of financial aid types for first-generation students? Why or why not?

An important population to consider when discussing retention within higher education is first-generation students, defined as individuals whose parent(s) did not complete a four-year college degree. This research brief explores factors surrounding the retention of first-generation student-athletes at NAIA institutions.

Using data from the 2020-2021 academic year, this brief looks at retention rates by sport for first-generation students, examines retention differences between this population and non-first-generation students, and explores the influence of cost of attendance (COA) discount rates and financial aid types on first-generation student retention.

First-generation students are predominantly non-white, come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and are often the first in their families to navigate complex issues such as the college admissions process, applying for financial aid, and completing college-level coursework¹. These issues can feel overwhelming to first-generation students and contribute to this population being more than twice as likely to leave school within three years after enrollment compared to non-first-generation students².

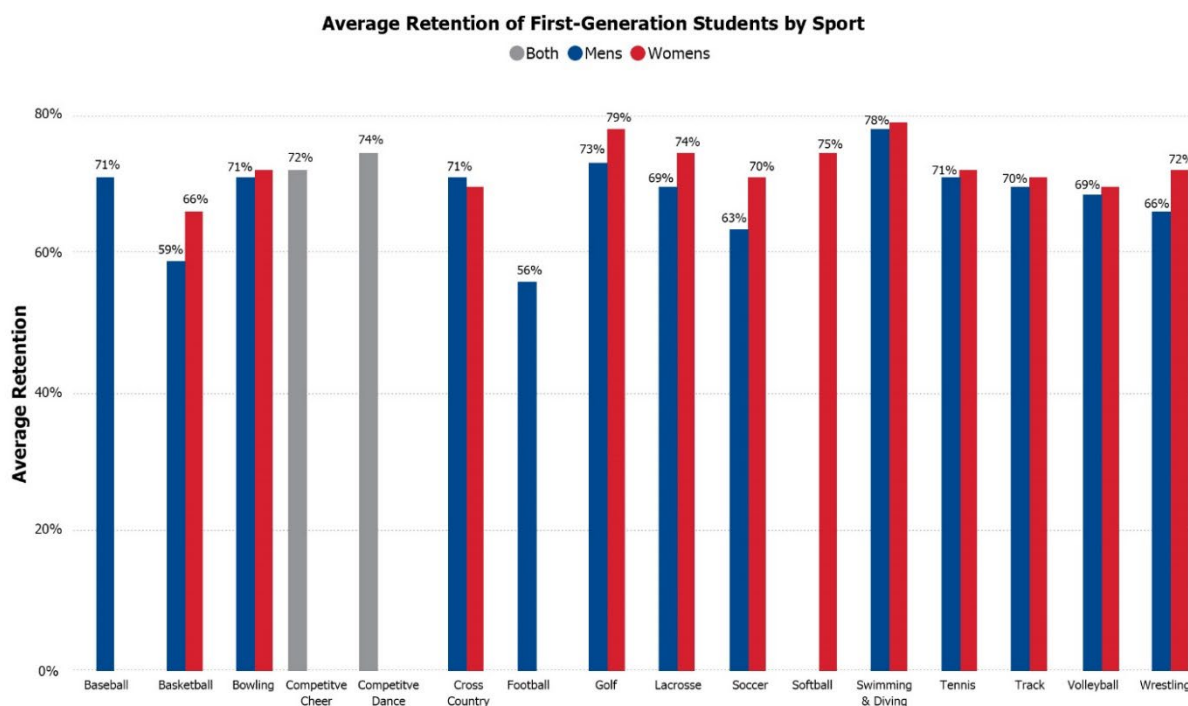
Looking at first-generation students on sport rosters at NAIA institutions revealed football had the highest percentage of first-generation students at 19%. Other sports with 10% or greater first-generation students include baseball (12%) and men's soccer (10%). On the opposite end of the spectrum, men's and women's swimming & diving each had less than 1% of first-generation students on rosters. The chart below displays the percentage of first-generation students on rosters for each sport.



The overall average retention rate for first-generation student-athletes among NAIA institutions was 63%, slightly higher than the overall average retention rate among all NAIA student-athletes (62%). First-generation student retention rates by sport, regardless of gender, ranged from 75% (softball) to 56% (football). In addition to softball, eight other sports had retention rates at or above 70%.



Similar to overall retention among NAIA student-athletes, women's sports (68%) retained at a higher rate than men's sports (62%). The chart below shows that a majority (10 of 11) of sports that compete in both men's and women's divisions show a higher retention rate for women.



A comparison of retention rates between first-generation and non-first-generation students presents some interesting findings. Out of 16 sports analyzed, regardless of gender, 10 sports witnessed a higher retention rate for first-generation students. The largest difference occurred within competitive cheer, where first-generation students were retained at an 11.15% higher rate compared to their non-first-generation peers.

In terms of sports where non-first-generation students had higher retention rates, swimming & diving (4.69% higher retention for non-first-generation students) provided the largest difference. Both women's and men's sports saw similar retention rates when comparing first-generation to non-first-generation students, with first-generation students displaying a retention rate just slightly higher (less than 1%) compared to their peers.

The tables below outline retention rates for first-generation students, non-first-generation students, and the retention rate difference between the two groups for all men's and women's sports.



Sport	Gender	First-Generation Retention	Non-First-Generation Retention	Retention Difference
Competitive Cheer	Both	72.24%	61.09%	11.15%
Swimming & Diving	Men's	77.53%	72.21%	5.33%
Competitive Dance	Both	74.47%	69.26%	5.21%
Wrestling	Men's	65.59%	60.49%	5.10%
Cross Country	Men's	70.82%	67.01%	3.82%
Tennis	Men's	70.55%	68.57%	1.98%
Baseball	Men's	70.65%	69.19%	1.46%
Track	Men's	70.04%	68.91%	1.13%
Basketball	Men's	58.81%	57.77%	1.05%
Bowling	Men's	70.71%	70.35%	0.36%
Lacrosse	Men's	69.16%	68.81%	0.35%
Soccer	Men's	63.20%	63.02%	0.18%
Golf	Men's	72.70%	73.52%	-0.82%
Football	Men's	55.81%	57.81%	-2.00%
Volleyball	Men's	68.51%	71.42%	-2.92%

Sport	Gender	First-Generation Retention	Non-First-Generation Retention	Retention Difference
Competitive Cheer	Both	72.24%	61.09%	11.15%
Competitive Dance	Both	74.47%	69.26%	5.21%
Golf	Women's	78.52%	75.31%	3.21%
Wrestling	Women's	72.16%	69.93%	2.23%
Softball	Women's	74.74%	73.12%	1.62%
Volleyball	Women's	69.64%	68.10%	1.55%
Soccer	Women's	70.21%	69.76%	0.45%
Tennis	Women's	71.92%	72.38%	-0.45%
Lacrosse	Women's	74.04%	75.12%	-1.08%
Track	Women's	71.54%	72.64%	-1.11%
Basketball	Women's	66.11%	68.15%	-2.05%
Cross Country	Women's	70.03%	72.42%	-2.39%
Bowling	Women's	71.59%	74.67%	-3.08%
Swimming & Diving	Women's	77.96%	81.85%	-3.89%

Overall, average COA discount rates for first-generation students (45.81%) are comparable to those for non-first-generation students (45.95%). Five sports provided an average COA discount rate greater than 50% for its first-generation student-athletes: women's basketball (55.27%), men's tennis (52.77%), women's golf (52.52%), women's tennis (51.80%), and men's basketball (50.56%). Three of these sports (men's tennis, women's golf, and women's tennis) also had an average first-generation student retention rate above 70%. Therefore, there does appear to be a connection between COA discount rate and retention rate among first-generation students at NAIA institutions.



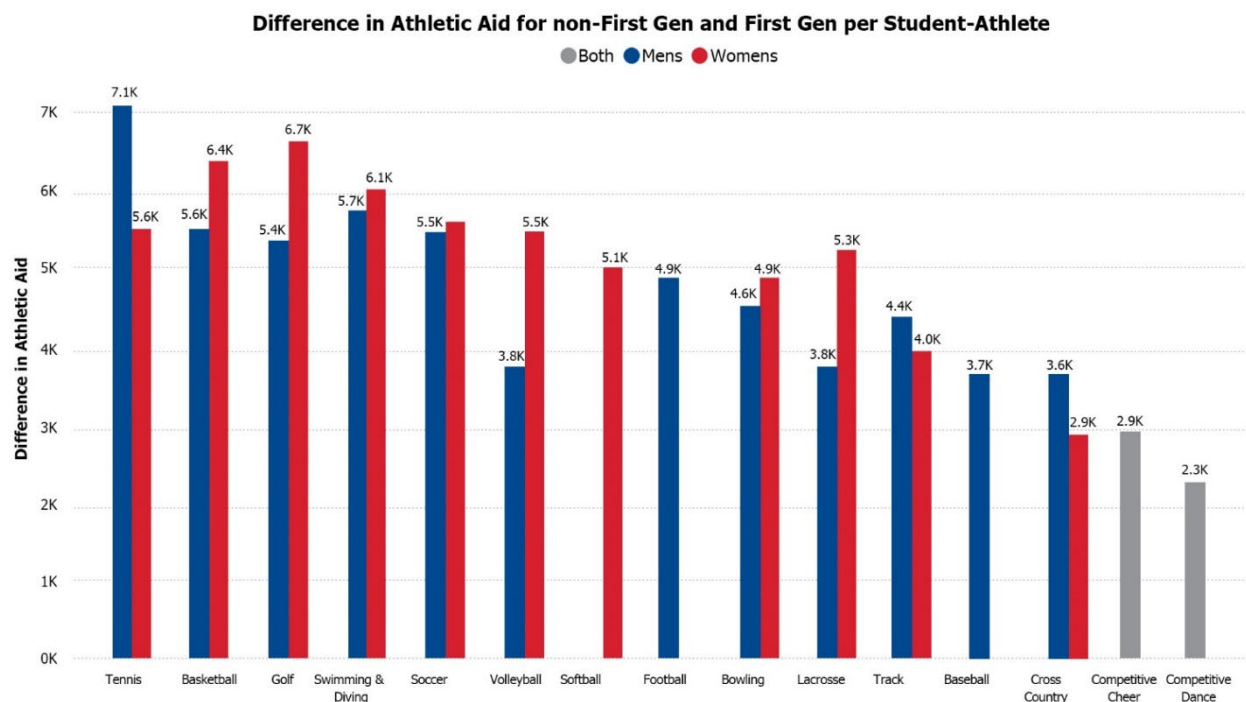
As with COA discount rates, there are comparable amounts of financial aid offered to first-generation students (average financial aid amount = \$25,434) and non-first-generation students (\$25,406). However, the table presented below outlines some differences regarding the disbursement of financial aid types between these two populations.

The average amount of academic aid provided to a non-first-generation student (\$10,292) was approximately 7.5% higher than the average amount of academic aid provided to first-generation students (\$9,519). However, the average amount of athletic aid provided to non-first-generation students was almost double that given to first-generation students. Non-first-generation students were awarded an average of \$14,341 across all sports, while a first-generation student was awarded an average of \$7,841 across all sports.

Sport	Gender	First-Generation Students			Non-First-Generation Students		
		Total Financial Aid	Athletic Aid	Academic Aid	Total Financial Aid	Athletic Aid	Academic Aid
Baseball	Men's	\$20,436	\$7,380	\$7,080	\$19,948	\$11,056	\$7,477
Basketball	Men's	\$20,328	\$8,769	\$5,552	\$22,767	\$14,319	\$6,827
Basketball	Women's	\$24,353	\$9,422	\$7,895	\$25,863	\$15,796	\$8,613
Bowling	Men's	\$22,801	\$6,726	\$9,406	\$23,867	\$11,291	\$10,742
Bowling	Women's	\$25,035	\$6,656	\$11,615	\$24,655	\$11,510	\$10,954
Competitive Cheer	Both	\$22,627	\$6,048	\$10,887	\$20,994	\$8,906	\$10,904
Competitive Dance	Both	\$24,322	\$5,664	\$13,851	\$24,222	\$8,006	\$14,448
Cross Country	Men's	\$13,148	\$7,561	\$8,254	\$14,659	\$11,199	\$10,645
Cross Country	Women's	\$15,560	\$8,084	\$10,743	\$14,611	\$10,974	\$10,815
Football	Men's	\$23,971	\$9,018	\$7,106	\$24,203	\$13,875	\$8,729
Golf	Men's	\$21,449	\$7,549	\$8,465	\$24,350	\$12,920	\$9,725
Golf	Women's	\$27,267	\$7,953	\$11,722	\$28,340	\$14,622	\$11,622
Lacrosse	Men's	\$28,793	\$9,753	\$6,467	\$25,321	\$13,542	\$10,056
Lacrosse	Women's	\$26,747	\$8,891	\$8,816	\$27,516	\$14,141	\$12,083
Soccer	Men's	\$21,141	\$7,767	\$6,730	\$23,996	\$13,275	\$8,291
Soccer	Women's	\$24,051	\$7,257	\$9,623	\$25,152	\$12,875	\$9,989
Softball	Women's	\$24,301	\$7,381	\$9,723	\$24,277	\$12,456	\$9,865
Swimming & Diving	Men's	\$29,907	\$9,211	\$14,122	\$27,397	\$14,956	\$9,522
Swimming & Diving	Women's	\$22,222	\$6,982	\$9,850	\$28,228	\$13,035	\$12,234
Tennis	Men's	\$26,229	\$9,721	\$11,436	\$27,578	\$16,842	\$9,469
Tennis	Women's	\$24,015	\$9,501	\$8,376	\$27,636	\$15,071	\$11,033
Track	Men's	\$19,112	\$7,674	\$9,374	\$18,823	\$12,067	\$10,190
Track	Women's	\$22,369	\$7,933	\$11,823	\$20,807	\$11,952	\$12,086
Volleyball	Men's	\$29,907	\$9,425	\$9,592	\$23,066	\$13,198	\$7,718
Volleyball	Women's	\$23,061	\$7,545	\$9,318	\$24,566	\$13,060	\$10,181
Wrestling	Men's	\$25,411	\$9,753	\$7,731	\$23,187	\$13,841	\$7,886
Wrestling	Women's	\$21,923	\$9,237	\$5,920	\$19,390	\$12,855	\$4,688



The following chart visualizes the differences in athletic aid granted to non-first-generation students compared to first-generation students for each sport.



Given the similar levels of overall financial aid offered to both groups, the similar levels of academic aid offered, and these large differences in athletic aid, it is apparent that NAIA institutions are leveraging other financial aid types (work study aid, student need-based aid, and other aid) at much higher rates for first-generation students compared to non-first-generation students.

This research provides an initial examination of average retention and financial aid offerings for first-generation students. It will be important to continue this research in this area as it will allow NAIA institutional leadership to monitor trends and develop initiatives that positively affect retention among this important population of students.



Notes:

¹Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (February 2021). Factsheets: First-Generation Students. <https://pnpi.org/first-generation-students/>.

²Cataldi, E.F., Bennett, C.T., & Chen, X. (February 2018). First Generation Students: College Access, Persistence, and Post-bachelor's Outcomes. U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018421.pdf>.

ROA retention data used in this research included 240 NAIA institutions for the 2020-2021 academic year and 70 NAIA institutions for the 2019-2020 academic year.

Retention Rate = [Returning Students / (Total Students – Graduates)] x 100%

COA Discount Rate = (Financial Aid / Tuition Cost) x 100%

Key Takeaways:

- ▼ Rosters for football (19%), baseball (12%), and men's soccer (10%) contain more than 10% of first-generation students.
- ▼ The retention rate among first-generation students (63%) is similar to the overall retention rate for all student-athletes at NAIA institutions (62%).
- ▼ Women's sports (68%) have a higher retention rate compared to men's sports (62%) for first-generation students.
- ▼ The majority of sports (10 out of 16) witnessed a higher retention rate for first-generation students compared to non-first-generation students.
- ▼ Five sports provided a COA discount rate of 50% or higher for first-generation students. Three of these sports also had a retention rate greater than 70%.
- ▼ The average amount of overall financial aid and academic aid provided to students was similar among first-generation and non-first-generation populations. However, non-first-generation students received almost twice as much athletic aid compared to first-generation students.