

Study Finds Graduation Gap for First-Generation Students, Regardless of Preparation

By [DAVID GLENN](#)

Seattle

First-generation college students are less likely than their peers to earn degrees, even when differences in high-school preparation have been taken into account, according to a College Board analysis of more than 1.1 million student records.

The study, which was presented on Tuesday at the annual conference of the Association for Institutional Research here, examined the fates of SAT-takers who had graduated from high school in 1999. The College Board worked with the National Student Clearinghouse to compile data about the students' college records. The clearinghouse was established in 1994 to facilitate student financial-aid applications, but it is increasingly being used as a source of large-scale data for education research.

The College Board found that first-generation students—defined as students whose parents had not completed a bachelor's or an associate degree—were, by every measure, less likely than their peers to finish college.

Among students who enrolled in four-year colleges, for example, the first-generation students had a graduation rate of 44.9 percent, while the rate for non-first-generation students was 59 percent. Among students who enrolled in two-year institutions, first-generation students were significantly less likely to persist into a second year. (A [2005 report](#) from the U.S. Department of Education found similar patterns.)

Strikingly, the College Board's study found that the graduation gap existed across all levels of the high-school-preparation spectrum.

Among students whose high schools offered highly rigorous course work, first-generation college students had a college-graduation rate of 58.6 percent, while non-first-generation students had a 69.3-percent graduation rate. Among students whose SAT scores were 1500 or higher, first-generation college students had a 65.1-percent graduation rate, while non-first-generation students had a 72.7-percent rate. Among students with high-school grade-point-averages of 4.0 or higher, first-generation college students had a 63.6-percent graduation rate, while non-first-generation students had a 71.6-percent rate.

Andrew Wiley, executive director for research and analysis at the College Board, suggested that the graduation gap might be related to financial obstacles, as first-generation students are much more likely

to come from low-income households. The gap might also be driven in part by institutional characteristics, he said, because first-generation students are more likely to enroll in colleges with low graduation rates.

The study is not yet available online.

[Copyright](#) © 2008 by [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)