

### Abstract

First-generation college students (FGCS) in nursing education face unique challenges that can impact their academic journey and mental well-being. These challenges include financial strain, potential lack of academic socialization, and limited familial guidance. This poster looks at evidence-based strategies from peer-reviewed nursing literature to identify best practices that support FGCS success. Through a literature review, four primary areas of intervention emerged: mentorship, sense of belonging, cultural competency, and leadership development. Highlighting the alignment with Quinnipiac University's Sawhney Leadership Program, the findings advocate for structured, inclusive practices that affirm FGCS identities while improving retention and engagement.

### Introduction

First-generation college students (FGCS) face unique barriers in higher education, such as limited familial academic experience, financial strain, and a lack of sense of belonging. These challenges are especially evident in rigorous and high-stakes disciplines like nursing. Studies highlight the correlation between perceived belonging and the mental well-being of FGCS, indicating that institutional supports are critical for retention and success (Wood et al., 2014). Early connection is fundamental in retention. Our university has resources but as a department we hold a responsibility to expand our programming to support students.

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### Methods

A literature review was conducted utilizing databases including PubMed, SpringerLink, and CINAHL. Keywords included "first-generation nursing students," "mentorship," "sense of belonging," and "academic support." Studies were included if they offered evidence-based strategies in nursing or higher education for FGCS.

Meetings with Quinnipiac University's Office of Inclusive Excellence rendered information regarding university-wide initiatives that provide support and leadership development for first-generation students. One such initiative is the Sawhney Leadership Program, which is designed to equip underrepresented students—including first-generation college students—with the leadership skills, academic guidance, and mentorship needed to thrive in their fields. This year-long, cohort-based experience engages students through workshops, retreats, and community-building opportunities that foster confidence, empowerment, and a sense of belonging across the university campus



### Limitations

Current literature is limited in its nursing-specific focus on First-generation college students. Many studies center on broader higher education contexts or qualitative experiences rather than measurable outcomes. There is a lot of variation in defining "first-generation" and differences in institutional structures may limit generalizability.

### Next Steps

**Early Identification:** Identify incoming first-generation students at the point of nursing program entry to offer proactive support. This can be done through orientation, initial campus visits, surveys for incoming students.

**Structured Mentorship & Programming:** Establish an early-year support program including mentorship, academic guidance, and leadership skill-building. Continue collaborative work with the Office of Inclusive Excellence for support in developing programs.

**Leadership Pathways:** By junior year, nominate students for formal leadership opportunities such as the Sawhney Leadership Program to further develop and support to graduation.

**Cross-Campus Collaboration:** Encourage engagement with campus-wide resources such as the Office of Inclusive Excellence, even for students based primarily on North Haven campus.

**Community Building:** Foster a culture of belonging by integrating first-gen-specific events into the School of Nursing's student life.

### Conclusions

**Mentorship:** Establishing structured, intentional mentoring relationships enhances professional identity and academic achievement (Pop et al., 2022).

**Belonging:** A strong sense of community directly supports mental health and engagement (Wood et al., 2014).

**Cultural Competency:** Inclusive and affirming educational environments improve satisfaction and persistence (Barra et al., 2024).

**Leadership Initiatives:** Programs like the Sawhney Leadership Program support personal growth and inclusive community building.

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## Belonging, Becoming, and Building: Elevating First-Generation Students in Nursing Education

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### Biography

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Goetti Francois is a dedicated psychiatric nurse practitioner and full-time faculty member at Quinnipiac University's School of Nursing. A proud first-generation Haitian-American herself, Goetti brings a culturally responsive and trauma-informed lens to every space she enters—whether in clinical practice, the classroom, or community advocacy.

She earned her MSN with a concentration in gender and sexual health justice from Yale University. She also holds bachelor's degrees in Nursing and Sociology from the University of Connecticut. Passionate about mental health equity, Goetti works to empower future nurses and clinicians to be agents of change. Her teaching fosters critical thinking, cultural humility, and leadership rooted in social justice.

Goetti's scholarly interests include global mental health, first-generation student mentorship, and integrative wellness. She is currently teaching in both the master's level and undergraduate level at QU.

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