For Travis Cameron, starting college last fall was a daunting experience. As the first in his family to attend college, he received encouragement from his parents and grandparents—with whom he lives—but none of them had the experience to offer the support he needed to navigate the application process, financial aid and the basics of campus life.

Now a sophomore at Missouri State University, Cameron enrolled in the university’s required first-year experience course, GEP 101, opting for a section designated for first generation students who were undecided on their major. The course focused on topics such as financial aid, career services, what to expect in classes and how to work with academic advisors. The professor also helped Cameron assess his interests and strengths to select a major. He chose philosophy.

“As a first generation student and being undecided on a major, you feel like you’re in a free-fall,” says Cameron, from El Dorado Springs, Missouri. “Going into college, I had no expectations or ideas of what things might be like. This class helped my transition to the setting, and a lot of the activities we did in class gave me the opportunity to become familiar with the services on campus.”
Cameron is among about 30 percent of undergraduates in the U.S. who are first in their families to attend college. This population of students—many of whom come from low-income and underrepresented populations—face financial, academic and social challenges that may become obstacles for completing their education.

At Missouri State, where first generation students comprise about 37 percent of the entire student body, the course Cameron took seems to be making a difference: The retention rate between fall 2014 and fall 2015 for students enrolled in the first generation-designated GEP 101 sections was around 72 percent, compared to a 75 percent rate for all other GEP students. For students in the same comparison group (first generation students enrolled in dedicated GEP 101 sections), the retention rate is on track to hit around 83 percent for the period between fall 2015 to fall 2016.

Cameron, who attended a small high school in a small town, also appreciated the small class size of the GEP 101 course, which allowed him to establish deeper connections with his classmates and professor.

“I’m a rather shy person, but the GEP class was small enough that I was able to get to know my professor,” says Cameron, who’s gotten involved in a men’s chorus on campus. “My professor was a big source of support throughout my first year.”

Opportunities for All

AASCU’s Opportunities for All national messaging campaign touches on the benefits first generation students stand to gain from pursuing a degree from one of America’s nearly 420 public state colleges and universities (SCUs). These institutions offer a high-quality, accessible and cost-effective educational option for an increasingly diverse student population. SCUs are dedicated to fulfilling America’s promise to make higher education available to anyone who is willing to work hard to be successful.

AASCU also is piloting an initiative, Re-Imagining the First Year, to promote success for all students—particularly those who have been historically underserved by higher education: low income, first generation and students of color. Supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and USA Funds, AASCU has established a coalition of 44 member institutions that will work together for three years to develop innovative programs and strategies to enhance the first-year experience for students and boost their chances for success.

As the grandson of farmworkers from Mexico and first in his family to graduate from a university, Fresno State University President Joseph Castro has a special compassion for first generation students. At his university, first generation students comprise more than 70 percent of the student body. He believes it’s important to rally the community behind these students.

“My personal experience makes me especially sensitive to our first generation students’ needs,” says Castro. “My parents could tell me that they loved me and that they believed in me and that they wanted me to succeed—and all of that mattered. But at the same time, they didn’t know how to navigate the system. I did much of that on my own, or I found teachers, counselors and friends who helped me. At Fresno State, our mission is to educate and empower all of our students to be successful. In order to do that, we need to meet them where
they are in terms of what they bring to the table and what personal assets and needs they might have.”

Planting the Seeds
Many first generation students enter college unprepared for the rigors of college work, so they may end up taking remedial courses, especially in writing and math. Sometimes the best interventions begin at the K-12 level. Fresno State, for example, partners with the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium to offer College Next! Bootcamp. This leadership training program for high school students provides information about college life, financial aid and scholarships.

Last summer, Fresno State also opened the Dream Outreach Center to facilitate accessibility to a college education for undocumented high school students. The center provides help with applying to college, financial aid and scholarships, as well as coaching for personal and social challenges. The center also gives information to the school staff about admissions and financial aid policies, and state and federal regulations related to undocumented students.

Central Michigan University (CMU) partners with American Promise Schools to ensure that academically promising students from two charter public high schools in Detroit have the financial means to attend college. While the students are still in high school, CMU provides leadership training and academic coaching. Once they enroll at CMU, they receive ongoing success coaching by CMU staff, as well as from local coaches in their hometowns. Students receive a combination of scholarships, grants and work-study opportunities to help meet their financial needs.

Meeting Financial Needs
First generation students typically enter college with significant financial needs. The University of Nebraska, Omaha (UNO) offers several scholarship programs focused on first generation, low-income students and those from underrepresented groups. The Goodrich Scholarship Program, for example, covers full tuition for the recipients, who participate in a specialized two-year writing-intensive and humanities and social science core curriculum. A similar program, the Thompson Learning Community, supports students through the Susan T. Buffett Foundation Scholarship, providing support for the transition to college life through mentoring, social activities and academic support. The Dreamer’s Pathway Scholars Program, funded by a private UNO donor, offers 50 full scholarships for undocumented students—those whose parents brought them to the U.S. as children—from the Omaha metro area. This support is critical, as these students aren’t eligible for state or federal funding.

These efforts have outstanding results: Over the past four years, UNO’s first and second year retention rate has increased from around 60 percent to nearly 80 percent, according to Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Jonathan Benjamin-Alvarado, who estimates that about 2,000 students are on full scholarships through the Goodrich Program and the Thompson Learning Community.

“All of that programming, advising, counseling, mentoring and modeling has been successful,” says Benjamin-Alvarado. “We know that when we apply that touch to students and have the means of monitoring their success from semester to semester, that it’s going to significantly raise their chances of graduating successfully from the university.”

Missouri State offers dedicated FGS (first generation students) Scholarship Workshops to help them apply for donor-funded scholarships available at the university. Counselors provide assistance with the applications and essays. The university also provided 500 free downloads of the Scholly app, a scholarship search tool developed by a Missouri State alumnus, for first generation students in their first and second years at MSU.

Support on Campus
Adjusting to campus life can be difficult for any new student. But for a first generation student—who doesn’t have the benefit of wisdom from relatives with college—the added challenges can be overwhelming. Many first generation students don’t have realistic expectations of campus life. They may find it difficult to navigate campus services and resources, or to understand policies and procedures. Many find it difficult to ask for help. Additionally, first generation students often may feel torn between meeting academic goals and attending to family needs. Some might skip class, for example, to provide childcare for younger siblings if needed.

Once first generation students arrive on campus, many AASCU institutions provide special services and resources to help them succeed. Missouri State starts with SOAR, the Student Orientation and Registration program. A special session for the parents and families of first generation students offers tips on how to support students and shares information about the campus culture, what a student’s typical day might look like and what stresses they might face. The Office of New Student
and Family Programs also keeps parents and families updated on services, programs or events through multiple channels of communication, including a Family Connection blog and social media.

Fresno State’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) provides access for students from historically underrepresented populations, including first generation, who have potential for academic success. The EOP addresses their challenges and guides them through the college experience, including financial aid, academic and career counseling. There are more than 1,600 EOP students on campus, all of whom are assigned to a peer mentor who works with them.

“Whatever they need, the EOP can be a home base for them,” says Maxine McDonald. “Through the sense of community that we establish with that group, the EOP establishes the type of environment that allows students to get ahead of some of the problems they’ve had in life that may interfere with their ability to perform academically.”

CMU offers dedicated success coaching to help students with issues such as testing anxiety, study skills and effective note taking, goal setting and time management. Students can begin working with a coach from the time they are admitted and have paid a deposit (virtual coaching via Skype).

“We are the GPS system for students and their success,” says Jason Bentley, chief of staff for CMU’s Enrollment and Student Services and director of the Office of Student Success. “They tell us where they want to go, and we help them find the routes to get there. When we nudge and encourage and follow up with the students in a holistic way, they are more likely to succeed.”

Social development also is important, and providing opportunities for first generation students to meet each other helps eliminate the feeling of being alone. At the University of North Georgia, the Trailblazers club was created three years ago to provide a support system for this population of students. The club focuses on their academic and social needs through weekly meetings, workshops and social events, including regular “capture the flag” competitions and an annual chili cook-off. Additionally, the club hosts monthly workshops, called College Boot Camp, giving students an opportunity to hear from university faculty or staff about services that promote academic success such as financial aid, tutoring and advising.

“It’s so important for our students to know about the opportunities and resources we have on campus that they might need to use,” says Robert Robinson, director of multicultural student affairs. “We want to help them understand that education is a pathway to a better life.”

Paving the Way to Success

For institutions that want to ramp up their efforts to serve first generation students, McDonald recommends “digging into the data.” Learn about the characteristics of first generation students on campus and talk to the students about what they need. Study best practices, she adds, and talk to folks at other institutions with similar student profiles.

“We have implemented many best practices, but we are always fine-tuning,” she says.

Rachelle Darabi, associate provost of student development and public affairs at Missouri State, recommends bringing together a group of interested and dedicated faculty, staff and students to brainstorm on the best ways to support first generation students. She also advises higher education leaders to embrace these students and the many talents and capabilities they bring to their campuses.

“When we talk about first generation students, we tend to think of their deficits—the lack of academic preparation, the lack of finances, the lack of cultural capital—but I’ve found through working with them that there’s a sense of resilience and pride that they have,” says Darabi, who also was a first generation student. “Overall, with these students, I’ve found that there’s a sense of ‘We can do this.’ At Missouri State, we work hard not to let our programs come out of a deficit model. We’re trying to make these efforts positive for them.”

“My parents could tell me that they loved me and that they believed in me and that they wanted me to succeed—and all of that mattered. But at the same time, they didn’t know how to navigate the system. I did much of that on my own, or I found teachers, counselors and friends who helped me.” — Joseph Castro

Karen Doss Bowman is an independent writer and editor based in Bridgewater, Va.
Growing up in Western Pennsylvania, I had limited exposure to peers who were taught to “remain on the right path.” The majority of my friends came from households of blue-collar, paycheck-to-paycheck folks. Some families remained adamant about academics, and others raised their children to do what they could to pitch-in around the house. I was always interested in sports as a child, but the unorthodox dynamic of my household made it difficult to pursue my interests. My parents were divorced, didn’t make loads of money like my friends’ parents did, never really got along well enough to unify together as one, and never conveyed the importance of a great education. Instead, they insisted that I learn to help out with groceries and bills. Like most normal students in high school, I dreamt one day of becoming a college graduate: a quintessential productive member of society, who would suffer from no from financial problems—unlike some of my family members.

I began to realize that I was responsible for my own academic prosperity and success. I planned to pursue my associate degree from a local community college, and then transfer to Indiana University of Pennsylvania to earn my bachelor’s degree. Knowing this was my plan, during the beginning of my senior year of high school, I began to crave “healthier,” more focused people to surround myself with: people who challenged me, supported me, and had aspirations similar to mine.

As my senior year dwindled down, many of my peers were getting accepted into expensive division 1 universities. I, on the other hand, was working with the limited resources I had to fund education after high school. During my final weeks of high school, I received a healthy amount of federal and state financial aid, and was all set to move to another county to attend the local community college. During my two years there, I learned a lot. I loved being exposed to other motivated, ambitious students who had big dreams and big shoes to fill, and couldn’t wait to spend some time at a relatively large university.

After graduating from the community college, I enrolled in Indiana University of Pennsylvania’s Communications Media and Psychology track. One of my first impressions of IUP was how diverse and motivated the students were, and how many opportunities IUP offered. During my first month there, I met some of my best friends, and learned of many areas of study that I could pursue. I had no idea how a state-funded university worked, and was surprised to discover how many organizations, clubs, associations and resources were available to students.

This summer, I had the honor of interning at AASCU in their communications division. In this role I was responsible for finding articles that were used to update AASCU’s homepage; curating a photo library of AASCU member institution photos and logos; editing submissions for AASCU’s First Generation Voices initiative; and writing press releases. I also shadowed my coworkers and learned some of the software systems they use, including the Adobe Creative Suite. I recognize that not everyone has access to such software, and I am so glad I had the opportunity to use it. I’m also thankful for the AASCU staff, particularly the communications team—they were helpful, kind, and always there for me when I had a question.

As I complete my undergraduate education, I am so grateful for my time and what I learned at IUP. I look forward to a career in public relations and advertising, and with the skills, opportunities and support given to me by IUP, I know I’m ready to take on the real world.

Joe Zulick is a senior at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he will graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Communications Media and Psychology.