



Mentoring First-Generation Students at USC

A guide for faculty, staff, graduate, and upper class students who mentor a first-gen student in order to help them navigate the college experience.



First-Generation Center
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Contents

- Welcome 1
- Program Goals 2
- Confidentiality 2
- Definitions 2
- Program Expectations 3
- Risk Management 4
- Getting Started 4
- First-Gen Module 5
- Group Activity Ideas 5
- Free Group Activities On and Off-Campus 7
- Successful Mentoring Tips 9
- Keeping in Touch with Your Cocky Crew 9
- Unresponsive Mentee(s) 10
- Referrals 10
- Campus Resources 10
- Reference List 11



Welcome

Thank you for dedicating your time to mentoring first-generation (first-gen) college students! Your commitment to this important group will be incredibly fulfilling. Mentors in other programs have found immense pride and satisfaction in their mentoring connections, describing them as mutually beneficial. We are confident you will experience similar satisfaction and personal growth in your journey with your mentees.



First-gen students may encounter various challenges in their first year, from finding classrooms to adjusting to new roommates. However, they also face unique obstacles like feelings of isolation and navigating unfamiliar college terminology (O'Connor, 2024). Research shows students who have a faculty or staff member who cares about them as individuals are more likely to feel connected to their alma mater and thrive (Mateson & Clark, 2020).

As a mentor, you will be one of their first campus relationships, helping them feel seen and supported. Your simple gestures—acknowledging them by name, offering encouragement, and building rapport help to ease their transition. By explaining higher education jargon and processes, you empower your mentees and help them navigate the college environment.

In this guide you will find mentoring tips and resources to aid you as you begin your mentoring journey. Do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions.

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Program Goals

Through promotion of student support services, advocacy for the unique strengths of first-generation students, and through comprehensive programming, the FGC's mentoring program creates pathways for first generation students to successfully navigate their progress towards graduation by connecting them to partners on campus and in the community at large.

Confidentiality

A good mentoring relationship requires trust. You should discuss your role as a mentor and what information you can and cannot keep confidential. Let students know they are free to share confidential information with you, but **you are required by law to report certain things**. It is critical to report the following information:

1. If a student confides they are the **victim of sexual, emotional, or physical abuse**, you **must report the prohibited conduct to the Title IX office**.
2. If you feel any student is at risk to harming themselves or others, **report your concern to the Student Care and Outreach Team**.

Definitions

First-Generation Student (FGS)

Any individual whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree.

Mentor

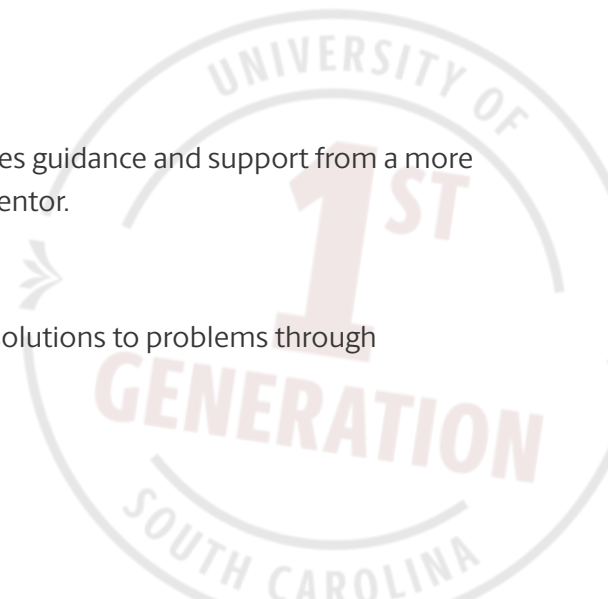
"A knowledgeable person who provides guidance, support, and advice to another person. Mentors share personal insight related to shared experiences, and constructive feedback. Mentors assist mentees with setting and meeting goals while developing a trusting and respectful relationship with their mentee." -Suzanne Sutton, Ph.D., RN, CNE

First-Gen Mentee

A first-gen mentee is a first-generation student who receives guidance and support from a more experienced and/or knowledgeable person, known as a mentor.

Social Capital

The potential of individuals to secure benefits and invent solutions to problems through membership in social networks.



Cocky Crew

A Cocky Crew provides support to a small group of first-gen college students through one-on-one meetings and small group activities, increasing the first-gen student's social capital on campus. A small group typically consisting of:

- 1 faculty member
- 1 staff member
- 1 graduate student
- 1-3 upper class students
- 4-6 mentees

Cocky Crew Lead

A Cocky Crew Lead is a team member plans group activities for the crew. Each semester, the lead will collect and share mentor feedback monthly to the First-Gen Center.

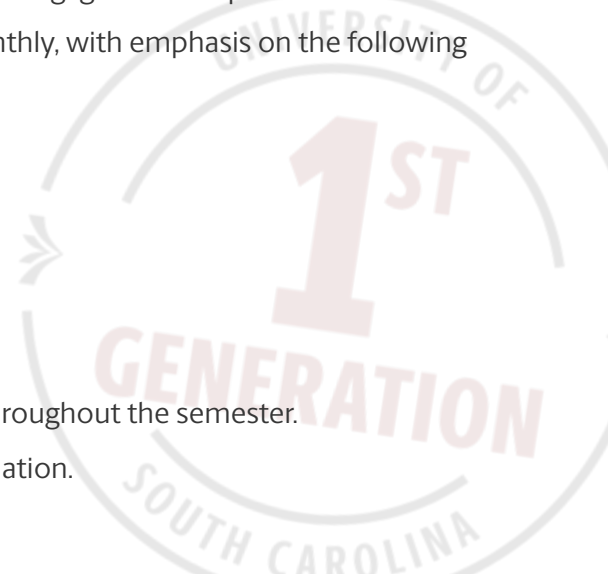
Carolina Circle

A large group consisting of two (2) or more Cocky Crews, with the purpose to celebrate accomplishments and to further grow students' social capital on campus.

Program Expectations

Mentors will dedicate approximately three (3) hours a month to mentoring activities, including:

- One (1) monthly meeting or social activity with your Cocky Crew.
- One-on-one meeting with each assigned mentee each month for approximately 30 minutes (phone calls, in-person meeting, coffee chats, etc.).
- Communicate regularly with your mentees. In addition to sending them meeting reminders, consider sending them encouraging messages throughout the semester.
- Discuss and share opportunities for students to become engaged on campus each month.
- Share and discuss campus resources with students monthly, with emphasis on the following high-impact practices:
 - Research
 - Education Abroad
 - Service Learning
 - Internships
- Offer consistent support and availability.
- Provide the Cocky Crew Lead with feedback monthly throughout the semester.
- All mentors will complete an end of year program evaluation.



Risk Management

The Office of Enterprise Risk Management and Insurance assists in identifying, assessing, and controlling risks associated with university-related activities.

Liability Insurance

As university employees, faculty and staff are covered under the University's general tort liability policy. In addition, student mentors (undergraduate and graduate) are covered as volunteers for the program.

Transportation

The First-Gen Center's policy does not permit mentors to transport students in their personal vehicle.

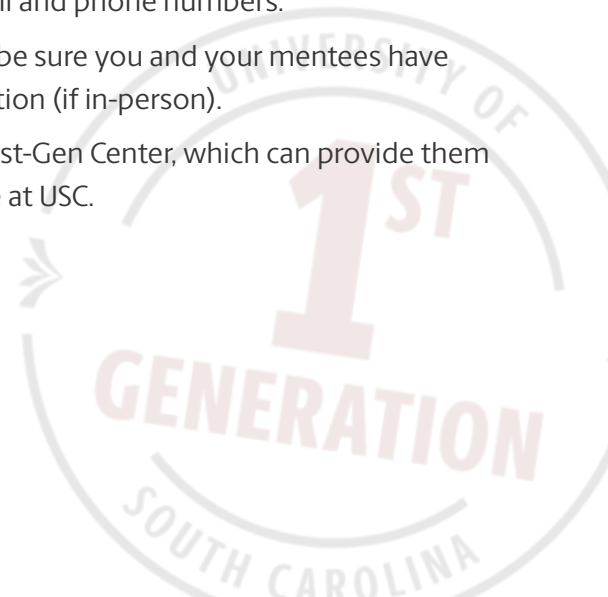
Students may drive themselves to an off-campus mentoring activity. However, **a waiver should be signed** and placed on file with the First-Gen Center prior to the event.

Getting Started

The Cocky Crew Lead will set up an introductory meeting or activity for their Cocky Crew within the first two weeks of September. Remember if you are meeting in a public location for the first time, be sure your mentees know how to identify you, and that you have exchanged contact information in case last-minute problems arise.

- At your first meeting, talk about why you are involved with the First-Gen program. Share openly, as you will be setting the tone for future communication within your relationship with the mentees. Let mentees know who their primary mentor will be for upcoming one-on-one meetings.
- Establish an informal, but mutually respectful, rapport.
- Learn about your mentees via open-ended questions (background, interests, fears, challenges). Allow opportunities for questions and be sure you're both spending some time talking.
- Exchange complete contact information, including email and phone numbers.
- At the end of each meeting, plan for your next contact; be sure you and your mentees have input about the type of meeting, the date, and the location (if in-person).
- Encourage your mentees to stay connected with the First-Gen Center, which can provide them with additional resources and support during their time at USC.

(Adopted from the Harvard First Generation Mentoring Guide)



First-Gen Module

Review the module, [Supporting First-generation College Students: Best Practices for Engaging Faculty & Staff by First-Gen Forward](#), to gain a comprehensive overview of first-generation students and how each of us can support them as individuals, as well as through our institution and the mentoring program.

Group Activity Ideas

Icebreakers and Community Building

Consider using a fun icebreaker before each group meeting. The following list of icebreakers should be given 15 to 30 minutes to facilitate so you can get to know one another:

- **Name Aerobics**

This quick icebreaker is a fun and interactive way to learn everyone's name. The group stands in a circle facing each other. Choose a person to start by introducing themselves by doing an action for each syllable of their name. The entire group repeats the name and motions. This continues until everyone has introduced themselves.

- **Name Game**

Everyone sits in a circle. One person starts by using an adjective starting with the same letter as their first name, followed by their first name, for example Smiling Silvia, Hilarious Hank. The next person repeats the adjective and first name of the first person, and then adds their own. Continue around the circle, with the last person having to repeat all the names in order and adding their own.

- **Three of a Kind**

In this icebreaker, everyone will find three people that they share something in common with—such as their hair color, a place they are from, somewhere they would like to visit, or a sport they play/have played in the past. Each person will walk around the room, asking probing questions of others to understand their backgrounds.

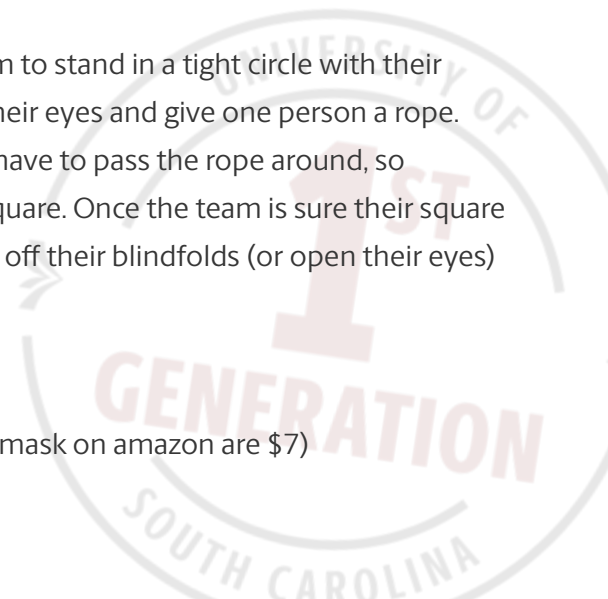
- **Perfect Square**

Divide your team into groups of four to six and ask them to stand in a tight circle with their group. Ask everyone to blindfold themselves or close their eyes and give one person a rope. Without looking at what they're doing, the teams now have to pass the rope around, so everyone holds a piece of it and then forms a perfect square. Once the team is sure their square is perfect, they can lay the rope down on the floor, take off their blindfolds (or open their eyes) and see how well they did.

- **What is needed:**

- Rope (estimated cost varies)

- Blindfolds (not 100% needed)(10 pack of sleeping mask on amazon are \$7)



- **Shipwrecked**

The premise of the game is that you're stranded on a deserted island and only have 25 minutes to secure survival items off the sinking ship. Place items like water bottles, matches, food, etc., in the "shipwreck area." You can also print pictures on index cards to make things a bit easier. The quantity of each item should be limited, with some items having more than others (more water than food, fewer tarps than teams, more knives than ropes, etc.). Divide your team into groups of two or more if it's a large team). Once the clock starts, they must gather as many items as they deem worthy from the shipwreck and rank them in order of importance. Since the items are limited (some more than others), the teams will not only have to prioritize the items within their own group of people but also negotiate, trade, and exchange items with other teams.

- **What is needed:**

- Items for survive (\$30 depends on the items picked out and the amount)
 - pictures of items (t.copper printing black only 0.15c a side)
 - index cards with items names on them (around \$2)
 - (any of these will work for the game to work)

- **Salt and Pepper**

You'll need a list of things that go well together like salt and pepper, left sock and right sock, day and night, peanut butter and jelly, or yin and yang. Write these words on individual pieces of paper and tape one sheet of paper on every team member's back. Ask your team to mingle and find out what's written on their back by asking questions that can only be answered with yes or no (e.g., "Am I sweet? Do you wear me? Am I cold?"). Once the participants discover their identity, they must find their match!

- **What is needed:**

- Tape
 - Pen
 - Paper

- **Paper Plane**

You only need paper for this game. Split your team into groups of two to four and hand out card stock. Give each team 10–15 minutes to come up with the best long-distance paper plane design (they're allowed to do research on their phones or computers) and a name for their airline. When the paper planes are done, have a competition in long hallway or outside to see which plane flies the farthest.

- **Flip it Over**

Lay a towel, blanket, or sheet on the floor and ask your teammates to stand on it. The goal is to flip the piece over without stepping off or touching the ground outside the fabric. You can make the challenge more difficult by adding more people to the team or using a smaller sheet.

- **Human Knot**

Standing in a circle, group members reach across to connect hands with different people. The group then tries to unravel the "human knot" by unthreading their bodies without letting go of each other people's hands.

Links to additional game ideas

- [23 Best Icebreaker Games](#)
- [Getting-to-Know-You Icebreaker Games](#)

Free Group Activities On and Off-Campus

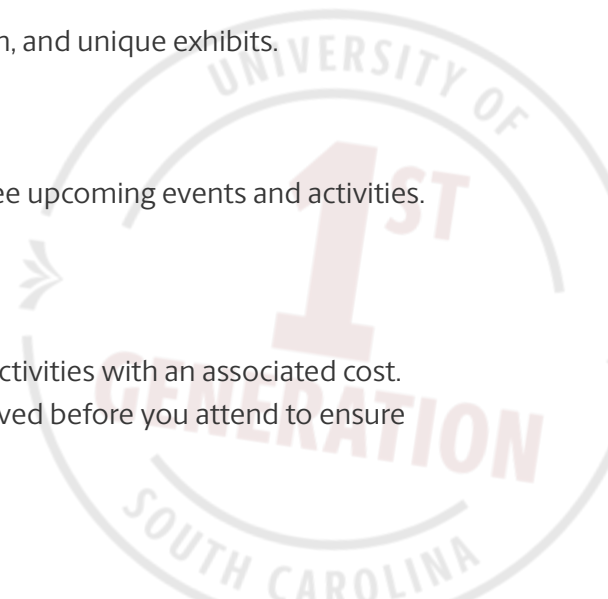
- [Gamecock Entertainment Activities](#)
Free on and off-campus activities for students, faculty, and staff with USC ID card.
- [Anne Frank Center](#)
Learn about the life of Anne Frank.
- [Columbia Museum of Art](#)
Admission is free the first Sunday of each month.
- [Cooking Workshops](#)
Two-hour workshops lead by registered dietitians.
- [Find dates for Fall festivals and events around Columbia](#)
Cola Daily is a great resource for local events.
- **Host a game night at First-Gen Center in Maxcy**
Reserve the multipurpose room, bring some board games or cards to enjoy a relaxed, fun-filled night.
- [Historic House Tours](#)
Free admission for Richland & Lexington County residents on the third Sunday of the month. Registration is required.
- [Attend a USC Library Exhibit](#)
Featured exhibits change throughout the year.
- [McMaster Art Gallery](#)
Featured exhibits change throughout the year.
- [Melton Observatory](#)
Stargaze on Mondays!
- [Attend Music Recitals](#)
Free ear candy from faculty and student musicians!
- [C.A.L.M. Oasis Space](#)
All are welcome for meditation, prayer, and reflection.
- [Owens Field](#)
Enjoy some fresh air with a game of frisbee or soccer, and take a break for a picnic lunch!
- **Picnic on the Horseshoe**



- **[Public Lectures](#)**
There are a variety of lectures throughout the year, so check back frequently.
- **[Richland Library Events](#)**
USC students are eligible for a free library card. Richland Library has studios and maker spaces, and lots of other free activities.
- **[Riverfront Park](#)**
The original waterworks for City of Columbia, Riverfront Park is the site of the world's first electrically operated textile mill, and the oldest hydroelectric plant in the state – and it's still operating!
- **[Saluda River Walk](#)**
Paved walkways and a boardwalk overlook Saluda River and rapids - which is a great location to observe nature!
- **[Sign up for Service Saturdays with USC](#)**
A monthly service day where volunteers can choose from a range of service sites.
- **[Soda City Market](#)**
Food, trinkets, artwork, music, and many more vendor stalls to check out!
- **[South Carolina Library](#)**
First free-standing library and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- **[Sustainable Carolina Garden](#)**
Student-run urban garden and agribusiness; education tours and an outdoor classroom you can reserve; volunteer opportunities throughout part of the year.
- **[Timmerman Trail](#)**
This popular walking and biking trail is located on the outskirts of Cayce and follows the west side of Congaree Creek. The concrete trail is suitable for pedestrians, bicycles, strollers, wheelchairs and roller skates.
- **[Host a USC Scavenger Hunt](#)**
Help students learn more about USC in a fun, engaging way!
- **[W. Gordon Belser Arboretum](#)**
A cool nature preserve with a waterfall, botanical garden, and unique exhibits.
- **[West Columbia Riverwalk](#)**
A great trail for bird watching!
- Check **[the University's events calendar](#)** frequently to see upcoming events and activities.

Paying for activities

We request you check with the First-Gen Center before planning activities with an associated cost. There are limited funds available, and the activities must be approved before you attend to ensure reimbursement.



First-Come First-Served Group Opportunities

The First-Gen Center will assist in organizing some group social opportunities each semester. These are intended to serve as an option for one or more groups (Cocky Crews) to do together. Each opportunity will be first-come, first-served and will require sign-up by the Cocky Crew lead. Depending on space and availability some of the events may combine two or more Cocky Crews to form a Carolina Circle activity.

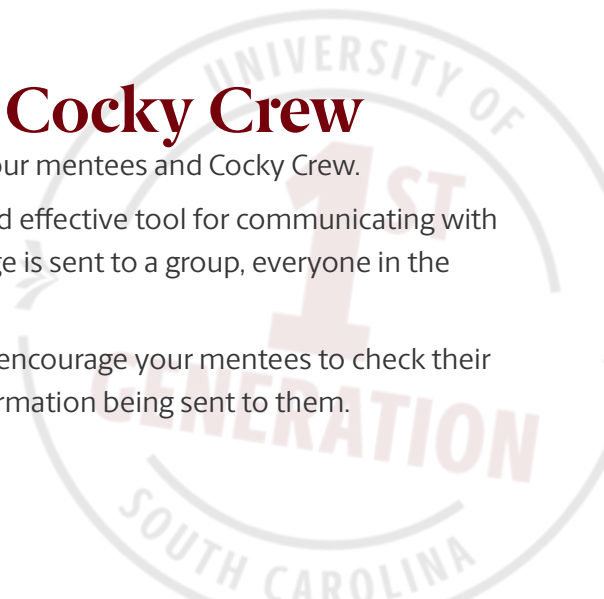
Successful Mentoring Tips

- Stay positive!
- Share your own story.
- Create a safe space (there are no stupid questions here).
- Do not make assumptions – explain everything; even if you think most people know what you are talking about, some might not. For example, using words such as Bursar’s office, explain that the primary function of the Bursar’s office is to manage financial matters.
- Allow time for questions and provide options for how students ask questions. Some students will not be comfortable asking questions in front of their peers. Provide a means for submitting questions anonymously such as writing questions on an index card.
- Be a good listener and make no assumptions. Each mentee has a unique set of needs.
- Reinforce your mentees’ sense of belonging in the USC community, through affirmations and use of encouraging words.
- Offer practical advice based on your mentees’ questions and your own experience.
- Learn about and share the resources at USC, as applicable to your mentees’ requests.
- Be consistently available and be a positive part of your mentees’ life.
- Some mentors assist mentees in finding internships or summer job positions, whether it is helping to guide a mentee to job resources or connecting them with contacts. However, there is no obligation for a mentor to do so.

Keeping in Touch with Your Cocky Crew

GroupMe and USC email are great ways of staying connected to your mentees and Cocky Crew.

- [GroupMe](#) is a free group messaging app. It is an easy and effective tool for communicating with those in a mentoring group. Remember, when a message is sent to a group, everyone in the group can see and respond to it.
- USC Email is used to convey formal information. Please encourage your mentees to check their USC email daily to ensure they are not missing vital information being sent to them.



Unresponsive Mentee(s)

The best way to ensure your mentees are staying connected is to reach out to them early and often. Set expectations related to responses during your first meeting.

- If you send an email or a message to the group via GroupMe and you require a response, be sure to explicitly state your request for a response. Not all students will respond unless they know that you want them to.
- Be sure to contact Melissa Kupfer (kupferm@email.sc.edu) if mentees do not respond to your attempts to reach them after you have sent them two or more messages. Please allow at least three (3) business days for students to respond to an email message, or a GroupMe message. Remember if you want the students to reply to a message, you must let them know. Otherwise students may think the message is for informational purposes.

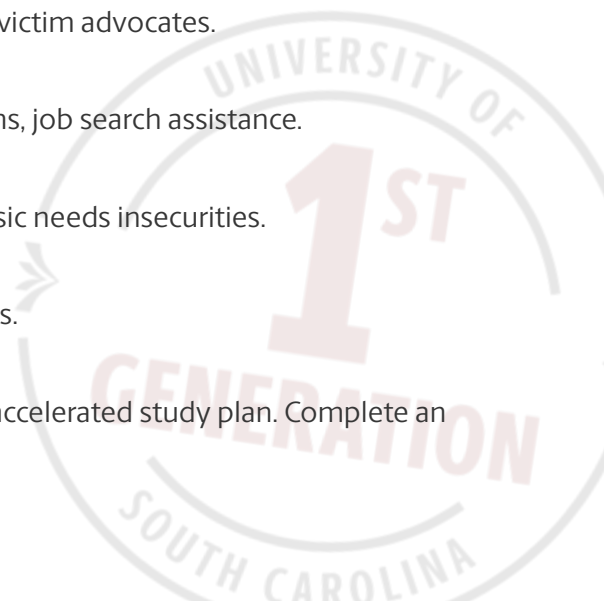
Referrals

There may be times when a mentee is struggling with a challenging health or emotional situation which necessitates referral to an experienced medical professional. [By making a referral to the appropriate office](#), you are providing the student with the best opportunity to resolve their issue.

Campus Resources

There are resources on campus to assist students. Take time to review the list below to familiarize yourself with these resources.

- [Campus Recreation](#)
Intramural sports, group exercise, outdoor recreation, including adventure trips, gear rentals, bike repair
- [Campus Safety-USC PD](#)
USC law enforcement provide safety services as well as victim advocates.
- [Career Center](#)
Career exploration, resume and cover letter consultations, job search assistance.
- [CommUnity Shop](#)
Provides holistic support to individuals experiencing basic needs insecurities.
- [First-Gen Center](#)
Central hub to connect students to on campus resources.
- [Graduation and Retention Network](#)
Request summer and winter session classes. Create an accelerated study plan. Complete an interdisciplinary certificate.



- **[Mental Health Resources](#)**
Counseling and Psychiatry, 24-Hour and Online Support, Mindfulness Programs, Suicide Prevention.
- **[National Fellowships and Scholar Programs Office](#)**
Assistance identifying and applying for fellowships.
- **[Office of Student Advocacy](#)**
Assistance with requesting an excused absence and navigating university-related problems and concerns.
- **[Office of Undergraduate Research](#)**
Great opportunities to connect with a research mentor and receive funds for research activities.
- **[Sexual Assault or Interpersonal Violence](#)**
Free, accessible, inclusive, and confidential support to survivors of interpersonal violence, sexual assault, harassment, stalking and relationship violence.
- **[Student Care and Outreach Team](#)**
Referrals related to student's health, well-being, or safety.
- **[Student Disability Resource Center](#)**
Academic accommodations, including alternative testing, meal plan modifications, housing accommodations.
- **[Student Health and Well-Being](#)**
Provides medical, mental health services, as well as wellness resources.
- **[Student Success Center](#)**
Tutoring, supplemental instruction, writing and study skills support; money management.
- **[University Advising Center](#)**
Undergraduate academic advising support and coaching.

Reference List

[Harvard First Generation Mentoring Program: Best Practices Guide](#) (2016)

[Improve student outcomes by building caring faculty relationships](#) (2020), Matson, T. & Clark J.

[Transforming the first-generation college student experience](#) (2024, April 19), O'Connor, M. (Ed.), EAB

