

# Working group on low-income and first-generation students at Carleton

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## Executive summary

**Charge:** Review the challenges and opportunities facing low-income and first-generation (LIFG) students at Carleton and provide recommendations on how to best improve experiences and outcomes.

**Sources of data:**

- a survey of LIFG students (160 students)
- four focus groups with LIFG students (33 students)
- comparisons of LIFG & non-LIFG responses on the CIRP Freshman Survey and COFHE senior survey
- conversations with Carleton's Interfaith Social Action group, the Community, Equity, & Diversity Initiative action team for faculty diversity training, and the Career Center
- review of programs that serve LIFG students at our peer institutions

**Main findings and recommendations:**

<b>Entering Carleton</b>	<b>Being at Carleton</b>	<b>Preparing to leave Carleton</b>
Challenges: Insufficient academic preparation & culture shock	Challenges: Financial and cultural stressors	Challenges: Limited experience and financial literacy
Opportunities: We recommend additional programming for and about LIFG students at New Student Week, a mentorship program for LIFG students, and more information about the transition.	Opportunities: We recommend increased transparency about available resources via a centralized source and more social support from regularly offered sessions for LIFG students.	Opportunities: We recommend creating greater awareness of and support for career-relevant experiences while at Carleton.

## Introduction

The working group was created by Dean of Students Carolyn Livingston to review the challenges and opportunities facing low-income and first-generation (LIFG) students at Carleton and to provide recommendations on how to best improve experiences and outcomes. We were asked to conduct an environmental scan of Carleton's current practices and processes, evaluate programs in place at other institutions, and gather community feedback. This document details our findings and recommendations to the Dean of Students office.

### **Process:**

To collect information about LIFG experiences at Carleton, we wrote and administered a survey for LIFG students at Carleton that generated responses from 160 students, conducted 4 focus groups with 33 students total, compared the responses of LIFG students to the general Carleton population on the CIRP Freshman Survey and COFHE Senior Survey, and reviewed post-graduation plans of LIFG students relative to non-LIFG students. We had conversations with other relevant campus organizations and people, including representatives from the Interfaith Social Action group, the Community, Equity, & Diversity Initiative action team for faculty diversity training, and the Career Center. We also reviewed the programs that serve LIFG students at peer institutions. The recommendations we describe below are based on our synthesis of these sources of data.

### **General recommendations:**

*Importance of opting-in.* When we solicited student feedback on potential programs that Carleton could implement, they stressed the importance of students being able to opt-in to the programs. Students pointed out that LIFG status is not generally a point of pride the way membership in other minority groups may be. Many students cited stigma associated with being LIFG and were concerned about programs that would make them feel “singled-out” or “shamed” by their group identity. Therefore, we recommend that any new programs be optional rather than required of students.

*Acknowledging varied needs.* In both the survey and the focus groups, students regularly mentioned that LIFG students are an extremely varied group and their needs are very individual. For example, the needs of a first-generation student from an affluent background who attended a college prep high school are very different from a low-income, first generation student with weak high school preparation and little family involvement. In addition, many students identify as LI or FG, but not both. The heterogenous nature of this group makes it more difficult to create programs that will serve all its members. Any new programs should acknowledge these varied needs and make it clear when the programs are advertised how and who they are expected to help.

We divided our work into three sections: challenges and opportunities associated with **entering Carleton**, **being at Carleton**, and **preparing to leave Carleton**.

## Entering Carleton

The transition to college poses particular challenges for LIFG students, who described feeling socially and academically unprepared for Carleton. In addition to the typical challenges associated with starting college, students described “culture shock” at entering a new community and reported significant personal challenges associated with being in such an academically rigorous setting.

### **Challenge: Insufficient academic preparation & culture shock**

LIFG students reported feeling unprepared to start Carleton, both socially and academically. Many say their high schools were small or under-resourced (having, for example, few AP courses available). Often they feel they don’t write as well or have as much background knowledge as their classmates. Many described struggling with long readings and unfamiliar vocabulary in classes. Based on self-report responses on the first-year CIRP survey to questions about academic ability, intellectual self-confidence, and desire to achieve, only 33% of LIFG students had a “high” self concept, relative to 57% of non-LIFG students. This suggests that LIFG students are starting Carleton at an academic disadvantage, relative to non-LIFG students. Although many describe being very eager to start at Carleton, it may be demoralizing as they realize the reality of the challenge they are beginning.

Students also reported feeling unprepared for the culture of Carleton. Many reported feeling unsure or uncomfortable about cultivating relationships with professors, building social networks, and seeking out assistance from campus offices. Coupled with the fact that students seem to underestimate the number of other students at Carleton in similar situations, this culture shock can be isolating and distressing.

### **Opportunity: Greater support during transition**

In our review of our peer institutions, we noted that some schools offered pre-orientation programs for LIFG students (akin to international orientation), student or faculty mentors who are/were LIFG themselves, discussion groups, and easily-accessible information online that is tailored for the needs of LIFG students. These programs may help to prepare students for the cultural change of entering Carleton and logistical details associated with entry.

*Pre-orientation.* Grinell, Lake Forest, and Williams College offer pre-orientation programs for LIFG students that include sessions for students and their families before the other first-year students arrive on campus. When we discussed this kind of program with Carleton students, there was a very mixed response. A few students were enthusiastic and thought such a program would be helpful in easing their transition; many others were concerned about starting their college experience by emphasizing the ways they are different from their peers. Some students mentioned that international student orientation may have the effect of creating international student cliques and were concerned that a LIFG pre-orientation would have the same consequences. When we surveyed students about whether they would take part in a LIFG pre-orientation program, 37% said they would be “very likely” to participate, 35% said “somewhat likely” and 29% said “not likely.” Students also stressed the financial burden of leaving a job early to attend pre-orientation and suggested it was not a good fit for Carleton.

*NSW programming.* An alternative to a dedicated, additional pre-orientation may be an optional session for LIFG students during New Student Week. This could include an overview of resources available to LIFG

students and advice from more senior LIFG students about things that were helpful to them when they entered Carleton. Many students reported that their LIFG status made them feel isolated, so an early opportunity to meet other students in a similar situation may be helpful during the transition.

In addition to an NSW session specifically for LIFG students, we also recommend NSW programming emphasizing the socioeconomic diversity at Carleton for all students. Recent research<sup>1</sup> suggests that difference-education interventions (in which students learn about the challenges and strengths of different social-class backgrounds) provides numerous academic and psychosocial outcome benefits for both LIFG and non-LIFG students. Thus, these types of programs may be beneficial for all students during NSW.

*Mentorship.* Some students reported that disclosing their first-generation status to their academic advisor was very helpful, but others found that the advisor was sympathetic but not helpful in directing the student to resources. Hamilton, Lake Forest, and Middlebury offer faculty or student mentors who were or are LIFG students. These mentors could offer social support, guidance about available resources, and help with logistical issues. Some students mentioned that they cannot get informed help or advice from their parents, the way students from professional families often do; mentors may help to serve this role. Carleton students were generally positive about mentorship programs. When asked whether they would have participated in a student mentorship program, 49% said they would be “very likely” to, 30% said “somewhat likely” and 20% said “not likely.” The responses for faculty mentors were even more positive, with 61% reporting they would have been “very likely” to participate, 24% saying “somewhat likely” and 15% saying “not likely.” Students indicated it would be particularly helpful to have contact with the mentor before they arrived at Carleton. Some students noted that they may have been more likely to apply for programs like TRIO in the summer before their first year at Carleton if they had more guidance.

*More accessible information.* Students reported that it would have been helpful to have more materials available to students before they arrived at Carleton, including information on how to choose classes, what materials are necessary to furnish a dorm room, how to complete paperwork associated with scholarships of the FAFSA, and what to expect when they arrived. Materials should also be available to parents about how to support their children and the kinds of issues they are likely to face. These materials should be available in multiple languages for parents who may not speak English. A website specifically for LIFG students on the New Students page could serve this role.

## Being at Carleton

Students may feel lucky to be here, and proud of being here. Their families and communities are often proud of them, and may have very high expectations for academic performance and post-college outcomes. The students may feel very ambitious and driven, very focused on working hard on their studies. This can set them apart from some of their peers, who like to party and say they want to “enjoy college.” In addition, students reported stress about money and feeling socially isolated while at Carleton.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephens, N. M., Hamedani, M. G., & Destin, M. (2013). Closing the social class achievement gap: A diversity education intervention improves the academic performance of first-generation college students and the college transition for all students. *Psychological Science*, 25, 943-953. doi:10.1177/0956797613518349

### **Challenge: Financial stressors**

A recurring theme in our conversations with students was the additional stressors associated with being LIFG. Although the students were very vocal about their gratitude for generous financial aid and, for those involved in TRIO, the support it offers, they still describe struggling financially. They report constant worries about money: fear of rising tuition, concern about accumulating debt, health insurance costs, or fear of losing a scholarship if their grades aren't high enough. Some work jobs on- and off-campus well over ten hours per week, which makes it hard to concentrate on their studies or get enough sleep. They also mentioned struggling with costs associated with Carleton that aren't covered by scholarships, such as transportation home, books, art supplies, lab snacks, OCS programs, and social opportunities.

### **Challenge: Cultural stressors**

In addition to financial stressors, our LIFG students face social and cultural stressors associated with being LIFG. They mentioned the pressure of being their parents' "retirement plan," the social discomfort of having to explain to peers that they can't afford to go out to eat or travel over break, and feeling like a "charity case" when assistance is offered. Students may feel more constrained in their choices of major and classes, given the pressures they feel to support their families after graduation. They may feel even more concerned about grades than non-LIFG students if a scholarship is at stake. In addition, they have time-consuming obligations from their LIFG status such as paperwork related to scholarships and FAFSA.

Students repeatedly mentioned feeling isolated and alone as a result of their LIFG status and expect that most other students will not understand those feelings. They report being unable to share their concerns with their families who may not have the resources to visit and have trouble understanding the liberal arts experience and challenges associated with Carleton. Students in the survey described feeling grateful for SHAC, but wishing that there were someone there who better understood the needs of LIFG students. Students may try to hide their LIFG status from their classmates, who may be clueless or tactless about how to respond when they hear about working-class parents, etc. A few may have parents in prison, and/or have no long-term "home" location. Even though students themselves may be proud of being here, being LIFG is not a public source of pride, the way membership in a racial or ethnic group might be.

Students may find it difficult to make friends while hiding aspects of their own backgrounds and are aware of having fewer possessions than other students. Their ability to participate in typical social activities is likely to be limited by a lack of funds for things like food, clothes, and transportation. They may be struck by how unaware of money and class their wealthier peers are, and may be offended by how others take their own wealth for granted, by the student culture of complaining about dining hall food, or by how Carleton students are stereotyped in the town. Some feel alienated when other students talk about expensive experiences like vacations in Europe, especially if the tone of these conversations seems to assume that everyone does these things.

### **Opportunity: Greater transparency about available resources**

LIFG students seem to be grateful for and willing to make use of the well-advertised resources on campus (math skills center, faculty office hours, writing center). However, the most consistent request we heard from our students was for greater transparency about all the resources available to them. In our conversations with academic departments and campus office, we learned that there are funds available to defray the costs of art supplies, music lessons, internships, and club sports. However, students consistently reported that these

resources are hard to find and apply for, that there is “red tape” involved in getting them, and that students have to go out of their way to access the resources. For example, information about funds to help cover the costs of art classes are not given to students until they enroll and attend the first class, so students who are deterred by the costs associated with them may not even enroll and find out about the help available. Carleton’s Interfaith Social Action organization has compiled an excellent list of available resources<sup>2</sup> and we recommend this list be expanded and made widely available to students and faculty advisors. We also recommend making the resources more easily to access (e.g., a form to fill out online, rather than a statement like “contact X for more information”). An added benefit of making these resources more transparent may be to help improve students’ perception about the climate toward socioeconomic diversity at Carleton, which has consequences for students’ motivation and self-concept.<sup>3</sup>

Students also requested that information about the costs associated with classes (such as required equipment or software, printing of posters for presentations, magazine subscriptions, and art supplies) be available to them earlier in the registration process. In most cases, the extent of the costs (and information about support) isn’t clear until students have already enrolled in the class. More advanced warning, such as detailed information about costs listed in the course catalog, would help students make decisions about which courses to take and look for ways to help defray the costs associated with them.

### **Opportunity: More social support**

In the survey, many students commented on how wonderful TRIO has been and enabled them to “connect to other low-income students” and to “feel less alone.” Students who are not involved in the program commented that they wish they were for the sense of community. We found that in the focus groups, as students were sharing their experiences with us, they were also informing one another about available resources. One student noted that she had been at Carleton for four years and had never been in a group discussion with other LIFG students. They were all very surprised how many LIFG students are on campus, given their impressions that everyone else comes from more affluent backgrounds. The students suggested that more opportunities to talk with other LIFG students would be helpful, both for helping give advice and support, and for creating community.

Williams<sup>4</sup> and Colorado College<sup>5</sup> offer regular, informal meetings throughout the term to address specific needs of first generation students. A similar program at Carleton could start when students arrive and continue throughout their college career. Faculty or experienced LIFG students could lead the sessions and help provide information on navigating relationships with professors, making use of campus resources, preparing for life after Carleton, looking for summer positions, and others.

### **Opportunity: Greater awareness about LIFG students for non-LIFG students, faculty, and staff**

In our evaluation of the available resources on campus, we spoke with Andrea Nixon who led focus groups (with LIFG students, among others) for the Community, Equity and Diversity Initiative action team for Faculty Diversity Training. We were glad to hear that this group is exploring possibilities for training faculty to be more aware of the challenges facing LIFG students. This may include being aware of costs when

<sup>2</sup> [https://apps.carleton.edu/newstudents/assets/Beyond\\_Financial\\_Aid\\_With\\_Contact.pdf](https://apps.carleton.edu/newstudents/assets/Beyond_Financial_Aid_With_Contact.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Browman, A. S., & Destin, M. (2015). The effects of a warm or chilly climate toward socioeconomic diversity on academic motivation and self-concept. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 42, 172–187. doi:10.1177/0146167215619379

<sup>4</sup> <http://dean.williams.edu/first-generation-students/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/offices/omisold/for-parents/first-generation-program.html>

choosing texts, putting books on reserve at the library, and being sensitive about asking students about lives outside of Carleton. In addition, NSW programming emphasizing class differences may help to make students more aware about the socioeconomic diversity on campus.

## Preparing to leave Carleton

To help understand how LIFG students are feeling when they prepare to leave Carleton, we assessed the responses on the Spring 2014 Senior Survey of LIFG (N = 49) and non-LIFG students (N = 292). In most respects measured by this survey, LIFG students were not different from non-LIFG students. The similarities include levels of overall satisfaction, satisfaction with most academic experiences and most aspects of campus life, interactions with the Career Center and with faculty advisers, self-reported skill improvements, and the importance of most life goals. However, LIFG students showed lower levels of satisfaction with opportunities of personal growth, the climate for ethnic/racial minorities, sense of community on campus, financial aid services, and student employment programs. They were also less likely to report that they would “encourage a student like you” to attend Carleton. Our hope is that the programs described above may help to alleviate some of these differences between LIFG and non-LIFG students.

### **Challenges: Limited experience & financial literacy**

In the focus groups, some students mentioned having had trouble securing internships or other relevant experience during the summer and breaks because they instead had to take jobs to earn money. In the survey, one student indicated that some fellowships are difficult to access because they may be earmarked for historically underrepresented groups, so white LIFG students don’t have access to them.

Several also mentioned that although they had heard about their peers finding opportunities through family connections, they were not able to take advantage of those benefits. Students may also have less social/cultural capital when seeking out jobs.

### **Opportunity: Greater support for experiences during breaks**

Several students mentioned that the Career Center had helped them secure funding for unpaid summer internships. Increasing the number and visibility of these opportunities may help students graduate from Carleton better prepared to seek out career opportunities. One student also mentioned that LIFG alumni advice would be helpful.

## Conclusions

Our LIFG students reported feeling very grateful for the opportunities that Carleton affords them and the financial support they receive to come here. Students had many positive things to say about the existing resources on campus, and provided insightful suggestions about what may be improved. Our hope is that greater transparency and outreach about the help available and additional social support will supplement the existing resources and improve the experiences of LIFG students at Carleton.