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UWO First Scholars program provides hundreds of first-gen students mentoring, skill-building

Written by University of Wisconsin Oshkosh News Bureau

Aiden Funk’s mother had him when she was 19. As a single mother of two boys, she put aside her own dreams for college, the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh (UWO) junior and first-generation college student said.

“Our whole life, our mom was telling us that she was going to put us through college,” Funk said.

With the support of a federal academic program generating future scholars, coupled with financial support channeled through UWO and the university’s new focus on first-generation students’ success, Funk has realized his mom’s dream.

The junior student from Racine, majoring in physical education, is one of 420 UWO students who receive support from the federally funded TRIO Student Support Services program (First-gen students meeting certain criteria are eligible to apply for TRIO services.) And Funk is now a peer mentor for the program.

“School never really was for me,” he said. “I never thought I would make it this far, honestly. I’m proud of myself and the investment that I made.”

Funk’s success story is the latest resulting from UWO’s efforts to bolster support for first-generation students. A new initiative—the First Scholars program–links more than 3,000 self-identified first-generation students to various support services, volunteer faculty mentors and staff to help navigate college for retention and graduation.

Funk said TRIO helped him not only manage his academics but also better command a budget and afford college.

“Coming to college you see that big price tag and when I saw that I thought, ‘Man, how am I going to pay for all of this?’” Funk said. “(TRIO advisors) stepped in; they helped me apply for scholarships and grants and made a budget plan with me.”

**Offering support, services**

The First Scholars program is part of First-Gen Forward, a national organization that partners with the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and focuses on providing support and services to all first-generation students.

“UW Oshkosh has an array of existing services for our first-generation student success,” said Byron Adams, director of the Center for Student Success and Belonging. “The First Scholars Program hopes to add to the already excellent services being provided by creating a climate at UWO where first-gen student success is at the forefront of all our student outreach and retention efforts.”

Among the services for First Scholars include the following:

* One-on-one and group mentoring/coaching from faculty and academic staff.
* High-impact educational practices (learning communities, first-gen celebration efforts, first-gen advocate speakers, student success workshops, skill-building seminars, financial literacy, leadership development and yearly outreach and communication regarding trends and best practices for advancing first-gen student success).
* Connection with TRIO McNair Scholars Program, TRIO Student Support Services, Tri-Alpha First-Gen Honors Society and the UWO First-Gen Student Organization.

**Forging their path**

More than 40% of students at UWO are first-generation college students, meaning their parents did not attend college. That equates to 3,200 to 3,500 students each year at the institution.

In 2022, the retention rate of UWO first-gen students was approximately 8% behind non-first gen students, and second-to-third- year retention was behind by over 16%.

Jason Herman, academic adviser for TRIO Student Support Services, said the First Scholars program is designed to provide first-gen students with the resources they need to flourish academically. And he noted first-gen students face challenges different from non-first gen students.

“You basically have to reprogram what it means to be a student once you come to college,” Herman said. “If you don’t have parents helping you out with that, how do you learn that? That’s how the First Scholars program will help students.”

Jessica Spanbauer, Director of the Center for Academic Resources and volunteer team lead for First Scholars, said that as a first-generation college student herself, she understands the challenges that first-gen students face.

“Because I have done a lot of reflection on my own experience as an undergraduate student … you realize that you don’t know what you don’t know,” Spanbauer said. “That was me as an undergrad … I didn’t seek out help when I should have.”

Spanbauer said the goal of First Scholars is to teach students that there are services available to help them navigate college.

“It’s about being able to get them to feel confident in themselves as a student so that they can be successful,” she said.

**“Do college together”**

Madelyn Blaser, a junior majoring in human services leadership, said her challenges as a first-gen student were numerous, including ‘figuring out how to do college, what it looks like to pay for college, understanding financial aid and where to find support from people who have experienced college.”

Now in her third year, Blaser, of Janesville, encourages first-generation students new to UW Oshkosh to take advantage of programs like TRIO and First Scholars.

“Yes, college can be stressful and seem scary at moments, but you are not alone,” she said. “Connect with others who are first-generation students and staff. Do college together with each other. Remember you don’t have to do college alone.”