

Aggie Firsts: A Culture of Excellence
Texas A&M University's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) – Executive Summary

During its most recent strategic planning process, six priorities were identified to guide Texas A&M University over the next decade (*Decade of Excellence, Vision 2020 – 2030*). **Enhancing transformational education and student success** underscores the university's commitment to student success. Identified strategies to achieve this priority include promoting a sense of belonging through a coordinated first year experience, connecting students to support services and co-curricular opportunities, enhancing early engagement with students to prevent enrollment interruptions, leveraging ongoing programs and developing additional support structures, and eliminating disparities in retention and graduation rates across ethnic, first generation status, and socioeconomic strata. A review of student achievement metrics reenforced the need for dedicated attention to reducing achievement disparities among specific populations of students. As a result, the QEP entitled ***Aggie Firsts: A Culture of Excellence***, seeks to achieve three outcomes: (1) decrease academic achievement disparities for first-time-in-college (FTIC) first-generation students; (2) increase first-year retention rates among full-time FTIC first-generation students to 95%; and (3) increase four-year graduation rates among full-time FTIC first-generation students to 65%. The intended outcomes for academic achievement specifically are a decrease in the DFQ rate and an increase in term and overall GPA for FTIC first-generation students. First-generation students from low-income households or those from historically underserved populations (HUS) are of particular interest given they often struggle the most to excel both academically and socially. In addition, the QEP focuses primarily on first-generation students' first two years at Texas A&M given the critical role these years play in laying the foundation for students' success.

Literature related to student success among first-generation students highlights three contributing factors to the identified outcomes: **academic engagement** (i.e., a student's participation in learning behaviors and activities that promote academic achievement), **social engagement** (a student's participation in a range of social activities to form meaningful relationships, build community, and strengthen social connectedness), and **sense of belonging** (a student's ability to authentically participate in academic and social activities resulting in positive associations). The literature also underscores unique challenges often experienced by first-generation students, particularly HUS students or those from lower-income households, that may hinder their success. These include financial burdens, lower confidence in their ability to succeed, weaker academic preparation, or reticence to seek help. Texas A&M has developed an array of resources and programs, many available to all students but designed specifically to support first-generation students. ***Aggie Firsts*** will examine the impact of six such programs: (1) early intervention and "high touch" academic advising strategies facilitated through an online student success platform and related app (Navigate); (2) *Hullabaloo U*, a first-year experience recently introduced for all incoming students; (3) *Gen1 LLC*, a living learning community for participants in a scholarship program (Regents' Scholars) targeting first-generation students from low-income households; (4) on-campus high impact learning experiences for second year Regents' Scholars; (5) the recently launched Math Learning Center; and (6) *Aggies Thrive*, a program designed to give undergraduates who otherwise would be suspended based on academic deficiencies in their first year, or who may have otherwise decided not to return, a second chance.

Over the course of ***Aggie Firsts***, a variety of sources of data will be used to monitor progress on the outcomes, the impact of the targeted programs, and the role of academic engagement, social engagement, and sense of belonging on student success. These data include academic achievement data (available in the student information system), survey data, participation data, and feedback solicited through focus groups and faculty and staff forums. The combined results from these data will be used to guide priority setting for target interventions and to inform the development of new resources and support services or the expansion of similar resources and services to reduce academic disparities and achieve the identified outcomes related to academic achievement, first-year retention, and graduation rates.