

Evaluation University Pioneers Community  
2022-2023



## **How the UP-Community can Foster a Sense of Belonging and Connection Between First-Generation College Students**

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The aim of this document is to evaluate the current goals and actions undertaken by the University Pioneers Community (UP-Community) at Utrecht University. This evaluation will first summarize what the UP-Community is and what it has done so far, including future goals for the organization. It will then argue the legitimacy of such a program and the relevance of the goals and objectives put in place. The three pillars of support that have been instituted by the UP-Community will be expanded upon within the context of how they are relevant to a community for first-generation students, and how each pillar and corresponding intervention planned works to actively target the overall goal and five sub-objectives identified in the project plan. This will include using supporting theory and literature. The sub-objectives and pillars will be further substantiated through the experiences shared by FGCS at Utrecht University through feedback surveys and in-depth interviews with the researcher. Participant responses will be used to delve deeper into the appropriateness of the goals, sub-objectives, and pillars of approach selected by the project leader. After assessing the current project plan, participant's experience and feedback will be discussed and used as evidence to examine how well the current program direction is aligned with participant's reported needs. Finally, participant's reported needs will then be used to inform specific recommendations for how the UP-Community and Utrecht University as a whole can continue to best serve the needs of FGCS.

Consequently, a few recommendations are drawn from this evaluation:

- I. Identifying First-Generation Student from Application Process Onwards
- II. Expand Entry Criteria and Establish Student Office
- III. Establish Student Office and Student Association for FGCS
- IV. Direct Line of Contact to Resolve Questions and Issues
- V. UU and FGCS Office Implement a Welcome Guide and University Introduction

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# **1. Introduction to the University Pioneers Community**

## **a. Program Description**

Navigating the university system can be a daunting task for any student, filled with highs and lows, though the intensity of these struggles and triumphs vary greatly, due in part to the identities students hold and the resources they have available to them. During these trying times, students seek guidance from parents and families about how to navigate and survive university (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). For students who are among the first in their families to attend university, or first-generation college students (FGCS), this creates disadvantages in comparison to their continuing education peers. Parents who have successfully navigated university themselves are able to offer first-hand advice and considerable financial support to their children (Nicholas & Islas, 2016). In contrast, FGCS often go without this personalized guidance and are more likely to struggle financially, as well as face additional barriers such as lower rates of matriculation, report lacking a sense of belonging, and are more likely to suffer from imposter syndrome, both of which relate to the fact that FGCS are less likely to feel at home in the university setting (Peteet et al., 2015). Issues such as these contribute to FGCS ultimate decision to drop out of university (Leest et al., 2022). Therefore, the University Pioneers Community (UP-Community) has been established to target FGCS and foster a sense of belonging and community, ensuring that FGCS are able to feel engaged with and at home in higher education. Thus, the UP-Community was formed, and “distinguishes itself by offering first-generation students a community consisting of UU students and staff, as well as role models from outside the UU, all of whom are or have been first-generation students. The UP-Community build’s on U-talent’s UP program, which prepares future first-generation high school students for their transition to college and reduces the likelihood of dropping out in the first year.”

## **b. Target Group**

As established in the project plan, “The direct target group of this project are first-generation students whose parent(s)/caregiver(s) have not studied at an HBO or university. Both Dutch and international students are eligible for the program. So there is still room for students who have siblings, grandparents or other relatives who have attended higher education to participate in the program. This flexible terminology is used to create as open a community as possible.”

## **c. Purpose Statement and Approach**

The overall purpose of the UP-Community, as stated in the project plan, “Is to mitigate the landing process of first-generation students and create a community of students, mentors and ambassadors, which will give this group of students a way within Utrecht University and increase their sense of home at the university.”

To ensure a smooth landing process, the following sub-objectives have been formulated:

1. Make university feel like home
2. Create a community for first-generation students
3. Increase study and student success of first-generation students
4. Discuss unwritten rules that prevail within the university culture
5. Highlight the strength of first-generation students as a connector

To successfully work toward the overall goal and sub-objectives, the UP-Community has strategized three pillars of support to engage stakeholders (1) mentoring, (2) talent development, and (3) hidden curriculum. Each pillar has been assigned a dimension and corresponding intervention:

1. **Mentoring:** The focus of mentoring is at the personal level, intervening with assistance and guidance which allows students to be paired with a mentor who will guide them through university.
2. **Talent Development:** Talent development is undertaken through the educational context to inspire and educate students which includes events such as cross-faculty theme nights, workshops, and symposiums where ambassadors educate, inspire, and support FGCS in developing their talents.
3. **Hidden Curriculum:** Pursuing the hidden curriculum is done at the community level by creating awareness. This involves the discussion of the unwritten rules that exist within the university community, such as values and beliefs that are conveyed in both the lecture halls and social environments.

## **2. Summary of Current Information about the University Pioneers Community**

### **a. Funding, Events Organized and Current Collaboration**

Currently, the University Pioneers is funded by the money coming from the National Education Program (NPO). In 2021, the NPO and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science provided additional funding to minimize the adverse effects of the Coronavirus crisis in education, to ensure that students who have been particularly disadvantaged by COVID-19 were receiving much needed support. The funding allocated to this project is €56,000 until 31/12/2023. This money is used for the salary expenses of the project leader and a student-assistant.

Events and activities hosted by the UP-Community have been summarized in the annex (see Appendix A), including direct feedback from students about several events. Since the UP-Community began in February 2023, events and activities have included attending the bachelor's open day, a social night with members, as well as several talks and events co-organized with university wide programming, such as This is UU Week, Honors Community Day, and Wellbeing Week.

## **b. Current Progress on Intended Results and Future Directions**

Included here are the intended results for the UP-Community, summarizing the progress made as of June 2023. The UP-Community aims to achieve the following results by the end of the first semester of academic year 2023-2024:

- At least 100 first-generation students gaining knowledge and sharing experience through UP-Community
  - Current: 67 first-generation students enrolled as UP-Community members
- At least 40 mentors/ambassadors are active as first-generation experts and role model
  - Current: 20 working experts and role models involved, with an additional 10 still studying
- At least 10 stakeholders who influence first-generation students (high school mentors or deans, college and university student advisors or teachers, researchers or professors) were reached
  - Current: Stakeholders include the University Council, Faculty Council Humanities, EDI Office, DIS Project Team (Diversity Selection Team), Student Affairs Office, Honors Community, Careers Office, Giving Back (Amsterdam Project First-Gen), Tune In (Amsterdam Applied Sciences First Gen project), Law Student Association (JSVU), First Generation Fund, Student Advisors, Baanbrekers (University of Amsterdam First Gen project), Advisory Group UP-Community (UU Staff involved with UP-Community strategy)
- At least one meeting per teaching period by ambassadors as referred to in H2.2, e.g. theme nights, workshops or panel discussions (i.e. a minimum of four per academic year)
  - Current: UP-Community Launch Event Introduction Discussion with Members, Iftar Dinner, Panel Discussion on Imposter Syndrome and Honors Community Diversity Workshop.

The UP-Community is continuously working to meet the intended results outlined above through efforts to increase visibility and awareness on campus and by actively growing the number of members, mentors, and ambassadors involved.

## **3. Purpose of the Study / Needs Assessment**

As the UP-Community has only been active for four months, it is not currently possible to fully evaluate the impact or effectiveness the organization has had on the FGCS community at Utrecht University. Therefore, the overarching goal and five sub-objectives, as well as the approach pillars and planned interventions stated in the project plan will be evaluated in terms of how well they align with the current literature surrounding the sense of belonging and needs of FGCS. Additionally, FGCS were interviewed to obtain further feedback on the current goals of the UP-Community and what they would like to see from the UP-Community going forward.

To explore how the UP-Community can best serve the needs of first-generation college students at Utrecht university, a research question was developed from the existing literature:

*In what ways can the University Pioneers Community facilitate the educational, social and practical needs of first-generation college students at Utrecht University?*

## 4. Summary of Methods

To investigate the research question, a qualitative approach was undertaken consisting of semi-structured interviews with 13 FGCS at Utrecht University between March and April of 2023 (See Appendix B for full methods). The study focused on FGCS from their own perspective, both positive and negative, and asked them to reflect on their experiences at university and sense of belonging as a FGCS at UU. They were asked to reflect on the current goals of the UP-Community and share anything they would like to change or add in the future. Additionally, participants were asked about specific forms of support they would like to receive and the support they had received as students, such as that from parents, as the interviews were also used for the researcher’s thesis. Within the broader research project, the definition of a first-generation student was more extensive than that of the definition currently used by the UP-Community. The researcher’s definition included students whose parents completed an HBO education, as well as students whose parents studied at HBO or university, but did not complete their degrees. While recruiting participants, the researcher allowed participants whose parent(s) had HBO degrees, as several stated they were lower degrees that would not be a part of the bachelor-master system in place today.

## 5. Results

### a. Participant Demographics

Table 1. Individual Participant Demographic Information

Participants	Age	Gender	Study Level	Nationality per Tuition Rate	Highest Level of Parental Education
Angela	29	Female	Master	EU/EEA/Swiss	Some College
Aniek	18	Female	Bachelor	Dutch	HBO
Eliza	22	Female	Bachelor	EU/EEA/Swiss	High School
Gwen	24	Female	Master	Non-EU/EEA	High School
Hannah	24	Female	Master	Non-EU/EEA	HBO*

Lara	22	Female	Master	Dutch	Primary School
Lee	30	Male	Master	Non-EU/EEA	High School
Lina	22	Female	Master	EU/EEA/Swiss	Bachelor's**
Maja	19	Female	Bachelor	EU/EEA/Swiss	High School
Marlou	22	Female	Bachelor	Dutch	HBO/Some College
Sarah	21	Female	Bachelor	Dutch	HBO
Willem	23	Male	Master	Non-EU/EEA	Middle School
Wouter	26	Male	Master	Dutch	MBO/Some College

\* HBO completed by stepfather/legal guardian

\*\* Mother completed degree after Lina did so

In total, 13 participants were interviewed including 8 UP-Community members and 5 non-members. All participants attended Utrecht University during the 2022-2023 academic year, with 12 students enrolled at the time of interview and one student who had paused their master's education after completing the first term of the academic year. In total, 5 bachelor's students and 8 master's students were interviewed, with participants ranging in age from 18-30, with a mean age of 23. Of the 5 bachelors students, all but one was in their first year of study. To protect the anonymity of participants, identifying information such as home country has been omitted and generalized to fit one of three options based on the tuition fees paid: Dutch, EU/EEA/Swiss student, or non-EU/EEA student. A distinction was made between EU/EEA/Swiss and non-EU international students as this difference was mentioned by several participants, who felt there was a significant divide in experience, especially in terms of finances due to the increased rate of tuition for non-EU international students.

**b. Sub-Objectives Alignment to First-Generation Student Needs**

Here, the research question is answered within the framework of the five sub-objectives outlined by the UP-Community, which are divided into their own separate chapters. Chapters are expanded upon to explain how each of these sub-objectives works towards answering the research question with the help of the pillars and interventions established. Each chapter includes how FGCS spoke of these goals and whether they reported them being aligned with their needs. Finally, chapters then dive into what the UP-Community is actively doing and planning to meet their goals. After



thoroughly examining how the pillars and sub-objectives will work to increase a sense of belonging for FGCS, additional recommendations will be given based on participant feedback.

### **Sub-Objective 1: Ensure First-Generation Students Feel at Home at University**

The first sub-objective of the UP-Community is to ensure FGCS are able to feel at home while attending university. Compared to their non-FGCS peers, FGCS report lower ratings of sense of belonging at university (Stebleton et al. 2014). A lack of sense of belonging is linked to student attrition, with FGCS considered a high-risk group to withdraw from study (O’Keeffe, 2013). Thus, this highlights the importance of ensuring that FGCS feel at home at university and report a sense of belonging. However, as Hausmann et al. (2007) found in their study with first-year university students, the early social experiences and social support received were initially better determinants for levels of sense of belonging than demographic characteristics. This suggests the importance of making sure FGCS form a connection to the university and their peers as soon as their education begins, ideally being integrated into the UP-Community as soon as they enroll at Utrecht University as a student’s sense of belonging exists already at the start of the academic year.

In conversations with FGCS, participants struggled with their sense of belonging at Utrecht University, and many reported that while they did feel like they belonged at university academically, that they did not feel they belonged socially. Participants rarely stated their FGCS status alone as the reason for their lack of a sense of belonging, but stated instead that it was a factor, along with other identities they held such as being low-income, from rural areas, racial or ethnic minorities, or international students. Several students reported they struggled to feel a sense of belonging due to the distance they had to travel to Utrecht, making it difficult to participate in social activities that took place on weekends or evenings, which was consistent with the research from Stebleton et al. (2014). Lara, who lived at home while completing her degree explained:

“If you don't have parents who give you money monthly to live in some student housing and that kind of stuff .... that makes a barrier to have that normal Dutch student life.”

As Lara mentioned, both housing and finance were a barrier to her sense of belonging, which was reported by many other students who stated they struggled to afford to attend social events with student and study associations and even more casual get-togethers with peers.

To ensure that FGCS feel at home at university, the UP-Community works to foster a sense of belonging by helping FGCS to feel engaged within the community. While all of the activities planned by the UP-Community contribute to increasing the sense of belonging among FGCS, one way in which they are doing this by offering mentoring, which gives FGCS someone who they can go to for practical and social questions and guidance. The advice and experiences shared by the mentor can help FGCS feel more at home at university as they come to understand that they are not alone in this experience and that finding your way through university and feeling a sense of belonging are issues that nearly all FGCS grapple with. Other activities include monthly

informal meetings, organizing activities with themes that match the experiences of FGCS, and workshops that emphasize to FGCS that they do belong at university.

Additionally, the UP-Community has been designed around the understanding that students are in charge, and that everyone may be different and therefore have different needs they would like met through the community. This way, members can specifically pick and choose the resources they need to make the most of their experience in the community. To increase accessibility, the UP-Community has focused on the voluntariness of the program by making membership free, with no obligation to attend events or meetings, welcoming all students who fall under the first-generation definition. Additionally, staff and alumni are invited to contribute as guest speakers, role models and mentors. By keeping the membership obligation free and flexible, the UP-Community allows FGCS to pick and choose what they need to feel more at home at university.

The issues stated by students regarding their lack of sense of belonging due to their distance from the university emphasizes the importance of why FGCS need guidance from a mentor who can inform them of the importance of living on or near the campus while they study. Several participants reported their sense of belonging and connection to the university was strengthened after they moved closer to Utrecht and were then able to socialize outside more regularly of lectures with their peers, though this is a lesson that they had to learn for themselves. This is why the UP-Community plans the majority of their activities, including informal monthly meetings, on weekdays after classes to increase the accessibility for those who do not live on campus. Moving forward, continuing to build strong relationships with mentors who can guide FGCS through university will continue to be beneficial as these mentors can help to alleviate potential issues FGCS face.

### **Sub-Objective 2: Create a Community for First-Generation Students**

As the name implies, the UP-Community is focused on creating a community at Utrecht University for FGCS. Building a community that is exclusively centered around the needs of FGCS is necessary as research has shown that having access to people with shared backgrounds and experiences positively influences reported sense of belonging and validates students' backgrounds and identities (Museus & Chang, 2021). The focus on community can have additional benefits for FGCS as they are more likely to come from collectivist communities and struggle more with the individualistic culture that persists in higher education (Stephens et al. 2012). More collectivist and community-based campus environments that increase FGCS's sense of validation in turn increase reported sense of belonging (Museus & Change, 2021). Thus, the community focus of the University Pioneers can help to connect FGCS and validate their experiences which will not only help FGCS feel more at home at university but also decrease the likelihood of attrition.

From interviews with participants, the main takeaway identified was that FGCS crave a sense of connection and community. This was consistent across both bachelor's and master's students though it appeared more important to first-year bachelor's students, many of whom had struggled to make friends and find student or study associations they fit in with, as they were still

finding their way at university. Several participants, such as Sarah emphasized “the connection,” they hoped to gain by joining the UP-Community, listing that as a main motive for joining. Maja described how she “would like to honestly meet a person who has been through it all,” discussing how hearing from those further along in their education such as master’s students would be beneficial to her to see that even though they have faced struggles and set-backs as FGCS that they have still been able to persist, noting that she believed that would be motivational.

The desire for community was consistent with the message that students reported that they lacked a sense of connection with their peers, wishing that they had found other students from similar backgrounds as themselves. As Lina described:

“I think if I had a network of other people that were having the same struggles as I was and we could just talk about that [...] So I think basically the emotional support in general for students from different backgrounds rather than Dutch.”

Students such as Lina reported that they struggled to find a sense of connection and community due to language barriers, while others struggled more with financial barriers that limited their ability to bond and connect with peers who often did not understand why they always needed to work or could not afford a weekend trip away. This signaled that while FGCS would like access to mentors and figures to look up to, they also need the community provided by the University Pioneers to find peers they can relate with.

The majority of all events and activities planned by the University Pioneers contribute to building a community for FGCS as they work to better inform and connect members. While there were efforts in place at Utrecht University to promote diversity through various Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) programs, there was no university wide support to target FGCS. Until the creation of the UP-Community, the only resources for FGCS varied between faculties with programs such as Opmaat, which belonged to the Faculty of Social Sciences. Having university wide support for FGCS is essential as FGCS make up a large sum of all students in the Netherlands, comprising 33 percent of all graduates nationwide in 2020-2021 (CBS, 2023). By creating one, universal program, the UP-Community ensures that all FGCS at Utrecht University have access to the same level of support and resources and that they are all able to come together within the community. Again, membership within the UP-Community is without obligation and free of change, which increases accessibility to all FGCS.

By providing FGCS with a community where they can meet peers with similar backgrounds, the UP-Community can assist in increasing FGCS’s sense of belonging, which in turn will also help them fulfill their first sub-objective of making university feel more like home. As the UP-Community continues to grow, the free programming and social events will help connect FGCS and assist them to building meaningful connections with their peers. However, as many students mentioned missing out on the experiences their peers had access to, such as weekend and city trips, as the UP-Community expands they should consider how to organize larger events that make opportunities such as this more affordable to FGCS. Additionally, the opportunity for the

UP-Community to continue collaborating with other organizations and events hosted by the UU will continue spreading awareness and recruiting new members while (co)hosting a diverse array of events.

### **Sub-Objective 3: Increase Study and Student Success of First-Generation Students**

As stated previously, focusing on the study and student success of FGCS is important as FGCS are less likely than their non-FGCS peers to graduate, as they are more likely to struggle academically and underperform in comparison to their peers. At the structural level, one reason for this is the proposed cultural mismatch between the interdependent norms prevalent in the working-class backgrounds FGCS most often come from, in comparison to the middle-class independent norms that prevail at university. As Stephens et al. (2012) found, representing the university culture as interdependent to FGCS through being part of a community eliminated the performance gap between FGCS and non-FGCS. By building a community that helps FGCS feel at home and thus increases their sense of belonging, the UP-Community can work to increase persistence among FGCS, which ultimately results in better study and student success (Museus & Change, 2021). Other programming that has shown to be beneficial to promote the study success of FGCS includes acclimating students to the university environment and helping them to develop personal relationships, as well as raising their aspirations for university, all of which the UP-Community is actively working to do (Engle et al., 2006).

In interviews, participants described the ways in which they struggled academically and several offered examples of issues they would like to have had more support with or see changed in the future. For the FGCS who came from the lower high school paths and first attended HBO, MBO, or completed an apprenticeship, FGCS reported that they struggled the most with the reading, writing, and research skills needed to succeed at university, explaining that their previous education had not adequately prepared them for university and that there was very little introduction to this when their programs began, as Wouter described:

“But there are no like real course on writing, you’re just thrown in the deep end and just pump out essays and papers.”

While Wouter further explained how his motivation and discipline led him to persist and develop his writing skills on his own, his story highlights why students from lower-education backgrounds may need additional support to achieve academic success and make it to graduation.

While some students focused mainly on academic skills, others voiced that they would have liked more career and professional support when it came to understanding how to write a CV or cover letter, as they found their peers were often able to go to their parents for such support. While participants noted that resources such as the Skills Lab exist, the support they desired went beyond that of an advisor and was more about mentorship that could supplement the guidance they were lacking from their parents, focusing on the personalization of the support. When discussing

the support, he would have liked to receive, Willem discussed the support a friend received from her mother:

“It was also very personalized to her, like we could have a first-generation office helping us but I don’t think it would have been as personalized, like a family member doing it for you.”

Willem felt as if his non-FGCS peer had a much easier time applying for graduate programs and scholarships because her mother was able to invest a lot of time into researching and making a list of scholarships she could apply for, something Willem would have liked for himself, but felt like going to an advisor would not have given him this level of individualization.

There are many ways that the UP-Community aims to increase the study and student success for FGCS, such as through career orientation and workshops and by softening their landing and helping them find their way at university. One example of how this is done is through mentoring, as pairing FGCS with mentors gives students additional support and a personal contact who can answer questions the FGCS might have as they find their way through university. Another way the UP-Community focuses on developing student success is through talent development. This is done through having ambassadors educate and inspire FGCS through events such as career orientation, guest speaking, theme nights, and through the media. In this way, FGCS can look up to the ambassadors and mentors as role models and see what they can aspire to, in addition to having access to the network of all UP-Community ambassadors.

As participants described, they would have liked a more thorough introduction to the skills needed to succeed in their programs. While the UP-Community is already partnering with resources such as the Skills Lab to host CV workshops that are tailored specifically to the needs of FGCS, more permanent programming should be developed in the long-term to assist FGCS and those who worked their way up to university through lower-education paths. For instance, an ‘Introduction to College Composition’ course that could address some of the reading, writing, and research skills that FGCS reported they felt deficient in could be beneficial. This is something that could also be considered within each faculty, and that the UP-Community could serve to advise the development of, as ultimately this responsibility should fall to faculties or the UU to support the academic needs of students. Additionally, the UP-Community should also consider how FGCS want personalized support and how that might require mentors to receive additional training on how they can work to get to know their mentees so that they can give the best advice possible when it comes to individual support needs. Overall, the UP-Community can strengthen this sub-objective in the future by continuing to address the study support needs discussed by FGCS.

#### **Sub-Objective 4: Discuss Unwritten Rules that Prevail Within the University Culture**

Without first-hand experience from their parents, many FGCS struggle to navigate the university culture. Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) illustrate this, reporting FGCS struggled to adapt to what they called the unwritten cultural rules of university, explaining that their working-class

upbringings often did not match what was now expected of them at university. This hidden curriculum is navigable for many non-FGCS students, as they often come from well-resourced families who possess the social and cultural capital to ‘push’ their students through university, with advice about how to talk to professors or what to do when students receive a poor grade (Nichols & Islas, 2016). From their interviews with FGCS, researchers concluded that universities should reach out early to make sure FGCS feel a sense of belonging and understand how to navigate the university culture (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016) which highlights the importance of the UP-Community in addressing the unwritten rules of university to positively impact FGCS.

When asked about their experiences as FGCS, many discussed the unwritten rules or hidden curriculum. Often, participants reported that they felt just as intelligent as their non-FGCS peers, but felt they lacked the systematic and institutional knowledge needed to navigate university. As Angela described:

“I think probably knowing about the structures behind that would have helped. So for example... knowing that those other people got their skills not from being naturally more clever, but from having a better support system.”

Many participants echoed similar thoughts, that they realized later into their degrees that their peers were not necessarily more intelligent, but were often just better equipped with the knowledge needed to successfully navigate the university system.

For Aniek, she discussed how she often looked up terminology others used so that she would know what they were talking about, and she suggested that she would like to see a better introduction to university:

“Maybe.... a rule book or a video explaining how everything works and how other people experience things and what the different options are so you don't have to find it yourself.”

Aniek’s mention of a rule book was common by participants, as they would have liked to see information all in one place as well as more information about how things are done at university.

Discussing the unwritten rules draws directly from the third pillar, hidden curriculum. This pillar works to inform not only FGCS about the unwritten rules and hidden curriculum they might experience, but also targets those outside of the community through an awareness campaign. Explaining the hidden curriculum will clear up unwritten rules and make university more accessible for FGCS as they will feel more comfortable within the university culture. Additionally, having a mentor can help FGCS understand the unwritten rules, as a mentor will provide FGCS with insight about how to navigate the university culture. By demystifying university, the UP-Community will be able to help the FGCS community at Utrecht University feel more at home.

Regarding the idea of a rule book or videos mentioned by participants, the UP-Community is already working to compile a ‘university user manual’ that will assist first year FGCS with the tips and tricks about how to navigate different aspects of university. This will be a beneficial

resource as students will have access to a depth of materials, all neatly compiled in one place and tailored to the specific needs FGCS might have. Additionally, one way that the UP-Community can work to improve this area is through reaching students when they first enroll at Utrecht University and explaining how the FGCS experience might be different from that of non-FGCS. One suggestion to do this is through Studielink. Currently, applicants to UU can indicate in Studielink that they would like to receive more information about certain support and faculties available at UU, such as studying with a disability. To target more FGCS during the application process, adding an option to receive more information about studying as a first-generation student would be beneficial to increase visibility and reach FGCS. Thus, by reaching FGCS when they initially enroll, the UP-Community can attempt to mitigate the cultural mismatching experienced by FGCS before it happens.

### **Sub-Objective 5: Highlight the Strength of First-Generation Students as a Connector**

The final sub-objective of the UP-Community is to highlight the strength of FGCS as a connector. This means linking the unique position FGCS have between their networks at university and those they have from home. Most often, to address the needs of FGCS, universities and researchers take a deficit-based approach which posits that because the parents of FGCS did not attend higher education, they are lacking an essential component for success (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021), therefore placing the responsibility to adapt onto the FGCS, instead of the institution adapting to serve the needs of a diverse student population (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Again, this is problematic as it assumes that FGCS are deficient in social and cultural capital and that they have not learned the appropriate behaviors necessary to navigate higher education because their parents have been unable to transfer this knowledge to them (Nicholas & Islas, 2016). However, it is important to view FGCS instead as assets to the university institution and consider that while they may need additional support, they bring unique and diverse experiences and perspectives into the world of academia, thereby breaking the university ‘bubble’.

While this message was not discussed by all participants, many recognized their own strengths as individuals who had experience coming from lower-education upbringings while now obtaining higher-education themselves. Some participants specifically discussed desires for social mobility while others discussed an appreciation for their more working-class backgrounds and how this gave them a broader perspective of society. As Wouter said,

“So, your biggest advantage being a first-generation student is that you have this connection with this class of people that most people have never even really talked to.”

Often, participants reported that their non-FGCS peers, as well as lecturers and tutors were out of touch with the needs of FGCS and those from lower-education or working-class backgrounds. Participants also noted the importance of bringing their backgrounds and perspectives into the world of academia, as Wouter continued:

“Because when they talk about the lower-class people, it is very simplistic way. Sometimes I just want to scream that you have no idea what you’re talking about. You're this professor, but you have no idea who these people are.

While Wouter was describing the stereotypes he felt those from higher educated backgrounds held, he also stated that this way of thinking often led FGCS to conceal this identity. This emphasizes that the perspectives of FGCS are needed, but that they might not be comfortable sharing if they do not feel their opinion or experience will be appreciated or valued, or that sharing their FGCS identity could lead to further ostracism from peers or professors.

As participants identified experiences that left them feeling like outsiders within the university culture, they often reported they did not fit in at home anymore either. As Eliza explained:

“I feel like it's two different types of me. Because there at home, when I go back home, it's still the same me, who was in high school. I mean this is how they see me. But when I come here, I'm someone different. I feel like I have two different lives.”

Feeling caught between two worlds was a common feeling identified by participants as they did not naturally relate to the university culture, but often could no longer relate to what their lives back home had been either, finding their parents often were more interested in what Wouter described as “chit-chat,” than the more complex topics they had learned while at university. In this way, nearly all participants discussed how they struggled to adapt to the social and conversational norms within academia, as they found adapting to this language helped them fit in at university but blackballed them or was of no interest within their home worlds with family and friends.

The UP-Community aims to highlight the strength of FGCS as a connector by expanding upon the third pillar of hidden curriculum and creating awareness. Here, FGCS are able to connect to both their home world and their university world to break the university bubble. Programing such as theme nights, also allows for further explanation and discussion of FGCS as connectors. Mentors can assist FGCS with this as well, by explaining their experience and detailing how FGCS can create connections between their home and university environments. Overall, the UP-Community supports FGCS as a connector in two ways. Firstly, to support students who feel they have one foot in their ‘home world’ and one foot in the ‘academic world’, while secondly raising awareness when it comes to the much-needed perspective FGCS bring with them to diversify and break the bubble within the predominant university culture. By viewing FGCS as assets, their insights and ability to adapt will lead to more inclusive research and education to create future professionals who have the knowledge to serve a diverse society.

As the UP-Community continues to grow, one way they can work to highlight the strengths of FGCS as connectors is by creating information for or finding a way to include parents. This should start by helping FGCS navigate their home world and the connections they have to it.



Among participants, many struggled to have meaningful conversations with their parents about what they studied or what they were doing while at university. As Eliza said:

“when I go home, sometimes I feel triggered because I feel like they don't know how to talk to me and they just trigger me, you know?”

Participants felt like even when their parents did show interest, they discussed topics or tried to resolve issues in ways that were not helpful. Due to this, it would be beneficial to develop programming to consider how the parents of FGCS can work to interact and support their students in meaningful ways. Conversely, programming could also target FGCS to teach them how to navigate instances where their parents or families are uninterested in their studies or academic goals, and how they can still maintain meaningful relationships to their home world even when their families are less enthusiastic about their education, mitigating the feelings of distance this can cause for many FGCS (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016).

### **c. Future Recommendations from First-Generation Student Interviews**

Through a thorough examination of the UP-Community's project plan and interviews with FGCS, five recommendations have been proposed for how the UP-Community may adjust going forward to better serve the needs of FGCS. While the recommendations formulated below are designed firstly to benefit FGCS at Utrecht University, several, such as providing more thorough orientation programs, may benefit the entire student population. As such, the recommendations below target how Utrecht University as an institution can further support the UP-Community and the needs of all FGCS enrolled, as the responsibility of supporting FGCS throughout all aspects of their university careers ultimately falls to Utrecht University.

#### **I. Identifying First-Generation Student from Application Process Onwards**

Firstly, the UP-Community and Utrecht University can work together to implement a system to identify FGCS and ensure that all incoming students are aware of the UP-Community and the services and resources it provides. More support from the university would be beneficial to assist the UP-Community in recruiting a larger number of members. While the UP-Community is a new organization, students reported they would have liked access to such resources sooner. As Lina said:

“But if we're talking about the university itself, as an instructor, I think there is actually missing something like this organization because I never heard of it until you brought it [up] and if they would have made it clear [during] my application process [...] it would have made my university life way easier and better.”

Lina discussed how she had not realized she was a FGCS until it was pointed out to her and felt it would have been helpful to have resources available to her beginning when she first

applied. As stated previously, one way to do this is to allow applicants to indicate that they are FGCS and that they would like to receive more information about studying at Utrecht University as a FGCS, which would ultimately provide an email containing information about the UP-Community and any other relevant resources.

## **II. Expand Entry Criteria and Establish Student Office**

The language used to describe and define first-generation college students varies drastically between institutions and researchers. Besides the issues this causes for academic research, this creates confusion for FGCS themselves. For instance, many students take the term ‘first in the family’ literally, and will write themselves off as not being FGCS if a sibling or cousin has already gone to university. While focusing on the language might seem like a benign issue on the surface, what it boils down to is much more than this. If students do not identify with the definition, it is unlikely that they will seek out support and services that could be beneficial to their success.

In interviews with FGS, this was evident, as several reported that they had never considered themselves first-generation students until being directly asked about it by the researcher, or in Sarah’s case, had re-read the membership criteria multiple times to convince herself she was included, as she explained:

“Because I read it a second time I already came across the community a first time and I ignored it because it clearly said first-generation.”

Examples such as Sarah exemplify why it is therefore important that the language be clear and inclusive so that all first-generation students understand that they are eligible for support. Future research should therefore consider what students consider to be the most inclusive.

Additionally, there is also significant overlap between FGCS and low-income students, though not all FGCS are low-income and not all low-income students are FGCS. This is why some universities have created programs for first-generation and/or low-income students, such as the First-Generation College and Low-Income Student Center at the University of Pennsylvania or the First Generation and/or Low-Income Student Success Center at Stanford University (Sharpe, 2017).

In interviews, some students used first-generation and low-income interchangeably, while others argued it was much more nuanced than that. For instance, international students often stated that while they were not considered low-income in their home countries, they were in the Netherlands, or vice-versa, as international students and those with a migrant background found they were stereotyped as being wealthy or poor depending on their background, emphasizing further that context is very important, and that assumptions should not be made solely based on one identity. By creating a program that covers both FGCS and/or low-income students, the intersectionality of FGCS can better be addressed. Having an UP-Community office dedicated to the needs of FGCS and/or low-income students will allow for these students to have advising that is tailored to their unique needs, which several participants addressed when they felt like their

tutors and study advisors were not conscious of the problems first-generation and/or low-income students face. To more fully focus on intersectionality, the first-generation and/or low-income student office can collaborate with diverse student organizations such as Insan, an Islamic student association, or Anteros, an LGBTQIA+ student association at Utrecht University. Events such as this will not only attract new members to the UP-Community but allow existing members additional space to draw on all of the diverse identities they have, as participants discussed that being a FGCS was often not the most important aspect of their identity, but only a piece of it.

### **III. Establish Student Office and Student Association for FGCS**

Based on literature and the needs identified by FGCS, Utrecht University should aim to embed the UP-Community within the university structure by providing them with an office, while also ensuring there is a student-led level to the community as well. By having both areas covered, the enthusiastic student leaders within the UP-Community will be able to branch off and focus on the community aspect that students are looking for when it comes to attending social events and building connections with peers they can relate to. Still, FGCS have many academic and support needs that would be better addressed if the UP-Community continued to have wider university support. For instance, many universities have an office dedicated to the needs of FGCS. Here, FGCS would have their own advisor who they are able to schedule an appointment with, email with questions, or stop-by and chat with during open-hours. This advisor would serve to answer questions and offer advice in a way that is more relevant to the needs of FGCS, as they would be a former FGCS themselves. The office established for FGCS may then take the role of planning events such as pairing students with mentors and planning talks and professional career events, while the student level of the organization may plan social events and more informal, casual events to promote a sense of connection and community among students.

### **IV. Direct Line of Contact to Resolve Questions and Issues**

Through interviews with FGCS, participants reported wanting support for a wide range of issues, from practical matters such as housing, bank accounts and visas, to academic support that ensured that they were adequately prepared to excel academically, and that they were not at a disadvantage due to their first-generation status. While participants were determined and resourceful, they frequently struggled to find the right people to contact when they had questions. As Hannah described:

“There's too many people and no one really knows who's helping who and what the right thing to do is.”

Even when she was actively seeking support, she still found it difficult to contact the right offices or individuals. By establishing an UP-Community office for FGCS, an advisor can be appointed who will be able to answer many of the questions FGCS have or refer students to the correct resource if needed. Having an advisor who was a FGCS themselves and is aware of the unique

struggles faced by FGCS would be beneficial to alleviating the stress FGCS reported when it came to having their questions answered.

#### **V. UU and FGCS Office Implement a Welcome Guide and University Introduction**

Lastly, several students said they would like to see something like a Welcome Guide for students which would contain information about topics such as housing, BSN numbers, maps of the university, and online tools such as Blackboard. This guide would also contain information about who to contact for each specific issue, including contacts for Dutch, EU/EEA, and non-EU students, how to contact, such as by email or phone, and when to contact as some offices have limited staffing hours. Repeatedly, students mentioned that these resources exist, but they are not in one place, and students really struggle to find everything, or it is a massive time constraint for them to do so after spending weeks emailing different offices or departments to resolve a question. As stated above, this is where having an advisor who was a FGCS themselves and works to meet with FGCS would be beneficial as well.

In interviews, participants also spoke of their experience with the orientation to the university, feeling as if it did not adequately prepare them to navigate the university like they had hoped. When asked why she joined the UP-Community, Aniek explained:

“In the beginning of the year and before, especially before I started I didn't know what to expect and where to participate and get information so I thought that it was a good idea to get like a manual to know where to go.”

For Aniek, a more thorough Welcome Guide would have been beneficial as she first adjusted to life at university. Other participants, especially those who worked their way through the lower education tracks up to university, wished they would have had more of an introduction to the university structure and the skills needed such as academic reading and writing, which they felt they had not gained through their previous education. This put students at a disadvantage as they had to teach themselves many of the skills they were expected to have already had.

To resolve this, Utrecht University should expand its orientation to ensure all incoming students are adequately prepared by providing an introduction to the different resources available as well as what will be expected of students. This issue is not exclusive to the FGCS community, as students who are not FGCS, but worked their way up from lower tracks, or international students who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of the Dutch education system would benefit from more information as well. As such, this is one area for the University to consider how the unique identities of its students converge to create unique needs that cannot all be met by programs such as the UP-Community alone.

## **6. Conclusion**

In summary, the University Pioneers Community is a vital organization that will be beneficial to serving first-generation students at Utrecht University. The goals and approaches taken by this organization are rooted in literature and experience to assist FGCS. However, there are still areas for improvement within the organization, such as working to meet the needs expressed by FGCS by providing more social and community events and working to ensure the goals put in place match the specific needs brought forward by FGCS. Additionally, Utrecht University needs to do more as an institution to support the needs of its FGCS by working more closely with the UP-Community and establishing an UP-Community office dedicated to FGCS. Finally, the UP-Community is only in its first year and continued time and effort as an established organization at Utrecht University will help to shape it further to best serve the needs of all first-generation students.

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## **Annex**

### **Appendix A**

#### ***University Pioneers Community Launch***

On Thursday, February 9th, 2023 the University Pioneers Community was officially launched with a presentation by project leader Chahida Bouhamou. The presentation followed with guest speakers Ismail Aghzanay and Myrte Spaargaren. The focus of the event was on the role a teacher has when it comes to either motivating or demotivating (future) FGCS. Both Aghzanay and Spaargaren mentioned during their talks the impact their teachers had. Aghzanay himself is now a teacher and Spaargaren discussed how she felt seen when a teacher acknowledged the he was once a FGCS himself.

#### ***Bachelor's Open Day***

On Saturday, March 11th, 2023 the UP-Community attended the Bachelor's Open Day by setting up an information booth to connect with prospective first-generation students considering attending Utrecht University. Project leader Chahida Bouhamou and several student assistants were able to meet with students and their parents to discuss their questions and concerns and offer information about studying as a first-generation student at Utrecht University.

#### ***UP-Community Introduction Meeting***

On Wednesday, April 12th, 2023 the UP-Community kicked-off with an introductory meeting with student members in The Vagant. Project leader Chahida Bouhamou shared her story with members, explaining the long and winding road she had to take through the Dutch education system to receive her masters degree, an experience which many members could relate to as they formed their own paths. Through this meeting, a mixture of bachelor's and master's students as well as PhD candidates were able to learn more about the goals of the UP-Community and share more about their personal experiences as first-generation students. Members were also able to share what sort of support they would like to see for first-generation students in the future.

#### ***Iftar Dinner - This is UU Week***

On Tuesday, April 18th, 2023, in coordination with This is UU Week, the UP-Community hosted an iftar meal at Parnassos Cultural Center. The evening began with project leader Chahida Bouhamou sharing the meaning behind an iftar and its significance as the fasting meal in Ramadan, as well as her personal reflections about the meaning. Attendees were then entertained by comedians Sjoerd Scott and Rogier Bak, who played to the diverse Dutch and international audience until sunset, when the fast was broken by the Moroccan cuisine catered by Cuzina. The iftar dinner allowed students from diverse religious and cultural identities to connect with each other, and attendees shared that the event helped them to meet new people and create new friendships. For those who ordinarily partake in iftar, the event helped to connect students with

more peers in their community and allowed them to share a piece of their identity with peers who were attending their first iftar that evening.

At this event, participants could fill out cards with questions to provide the UP-Community with feedback. The first question was *Why are you here tonight?* Participants gave varied responses, such as “free food”, while some focused on the iftar itself while others attended the event primarily to “socialize”, and some came for both, as one attendee said, “to meet new friends and celebrate iftar together.” The final question was *What is your takeaway from tonight?* For the most part, participants responses discussed friendship, with one attendee responding, “new friends” while another wrote “lovely time with lovely people.” As one student summarized, “there is much more to connect over than I/we’ve been taught.”

### ***Inclusivity vs. Exclusivity - Honors Community Day***

On Wednesday, May 10th, 2023 as part of the Honors Community Day, UP-Community project leader Chahida Bouhamou hosted the session ‘Inclusivity vs. Exclusivity’, which aimed to discuss with honors staff to what extent should we aspire to make the honors programs as inclusive as possible and is that actually possible? The session dove into how inclusive the honors programs could be and how non-honors students perceive the programs, while offering insight into the possible exclusionary mechanisms, the perception students have of honors education and to what extent there is room to make honors education more inclusive.

### ***Imposter Syndrome Panel - Wellbeing Week***

On Thursday, May 11th, 2023, as part of the Wellbeing Week at UU, a panel conversation with experts discussed why people suffer from Imposter Syndrome and offered tips and tricks to mitigate this issue. The Panel included Milio van der Kamp, lecturer of the year for the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and author of the book ‘Maybe You Should Aim a Little Bit Lower.’ As a former FGCS, Milio is familiar with the obstacles that come with studying at university when you are a pioneer and because of this, he founded the Baanbrekers program within the Interdisciplinary Social Science program at UvA. Dr. Annerieke Oosterwegel, an assistant professor within the field of developmental psychology attended the panel as well. She has done research on the mechanisms and development of barometric self-esteem instability in children and adolescents aged 4 years and older. She is also the coordinator of the tutoring within the psychology program.

The panel also included two student members, one of which was Anneloes Krul, who is a student assessor and thus a member of the executive board of Utrecht University and deals with the policy and vision of Utrecht University on a daily basis. She is a first-generation Sociology student with experience in participation at the UU and is an intersectional queer activist who is active within extinction rebellion. The final panel member was Joost van Woerkom, an assessor at the Faculty of Geosciences. Joost is a master student in Marine Sciences and part of the Ocean Cleanup organization as an intern. As a FGCS, Joost has been part of the First-Generation Fund



as an ambassador from an early stage onward. He cares deeply about the neurodiverse community, as he experienced many barriers within this himself.

### ***Informal Social Event***

On Thursday, June 1st, 2023, the UP-Community hosted an informal social evening with students in the Science Park. At this meeting, new members were welcomed, and ideas were proposed and discussed for future events.

## **Appendix B**

### **Methods**

#### **Design and Procedures**

To investigate the research question, qualitative approach was undertaken, consisting of semi-structured interviews that included a script and prompts, but were not fixed to allow each participants the freedom to describe their unique individual experiences and detail the service and resources they would like to see provided by the UP-Community (Mohajan, 2018). The study focused on FGCS experiences from their own perspective, both positive and negative, and asked them to reflect on their experiences at university and sense of belonging as a FGCS at Utrecht University. Additionally, participants were asked about specific forms of support they would like to receive and the support they had received as students, such as that from parents and peers.

#### **Participants and Recruitment**

Participants were initially recruited through their membership in the University Pioneers Community through Utrecht University during the second term of the 2022-2023 academic year. Members received an email inviting them to share their experience through an semi-structured interview with the researcher. Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling after several rounds of recruitment within the UP-Community did not supply the desired number of participants.

Within the research, the definition of a first-generation student was broader than that of the definition currently used by the UP-Community. The researcher's definition included students whose parents completed a HBO education, as well as students whose parents studied at HBO or university, but did not complete their degrees. The logic for differentiating HBO from research universities was simple, as HBO degree programs are most often described as practical and profession focused, whereas the degree programs offered by Utrecht University are significantly more theoretical and take a more academic orientation.

#### **Variables of Interest and Operationalization**

The interviews began with general demographic questions, such as the age and study program of the participant, so that the researcher was able to get a better grasp of the student's background and build rapport. The interviews then flowed through several topics of focus. First, for this

research and rolling program evaluation, questions focused on the participants' overall experiences as FGCS at Utrecht University and their thoughts about the UP-Community, including initial experiences and motivations for joining. For non-members, participants were informed of the goals and purpose of the UP-Community, and asked to think about whether or not this is an organization they would consider joining or that they would find beneficial as a FGCS. Questions then moved to participants' sense of belonging as FGCS, as well as the support systems students had utilized and were provided with by their parents and family.

### **Data Analysis**

With the consent of participants, all interviews were audio recorded. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim securely by the researcher with the assistance of Microsoft Word Dictation and Transcription. An intelligent transcription of each interview was then created to exclude filler words and clean up grammar. Transcripts were then imported to QSR NVIVO and analyzed and coded to examine participants' answers to identify patterns in the data, which developed into themes relevant to the research question and the experiences of FGS (Mohajan, 2018).

### **Ethical Aspects**

This study has obtained ethical approval through the Utrecht University Faculty Ethics Review Board. All methods used were approved before conducting any research. Participants gave informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. All data collected has been stored safely and securely in accordance with all applicable guidelines.