

FIRST-GENERATION HBCU STUDENT STARTER GUIDE

Start Strong. Learn the System. Build the Network You Did Not Inherit.

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Being first-generation does not mean you are less prepared to succeed. It often means you are learning a system your family has not had to navigate before.

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A Note to First-Generation HBCU Students

You do not have to know everything on day one. You do need a plan for learning what you do not know.

I arrived at Jackson State University at 17 as a first-generation student from a single-parent home. I had completed my own financial aid incorrectly and had not applied for housing. I did not have a family playbook for how college worked. What mattered was that my HBCU helped me learn the system instead of treating what I did not know as proof that I did not belong.

That experience stayed with me. I later helped my two younger sisters complete FAFSA. All three of us earned college degrees, and the knowledge continued into the next generation.

The first generation changes the starting point for the next.

Use this guide to begin building your own college playbook. It is designed to help you identify the people, offices, questions, habits, and early actions that can make college easier to navigate.

What this free guide will help you do:

- Know the questions to ask before a problem occurs.
- Identify the campus offices that can help you.
- Create a simple first-30-days plan.
- Understand basic financial-aid questions you should track.
- Build a five-person support circle.
- Start thinking about career development early.
- Create a simple documentation habit for important college matters.

One thing I want college to make possible for me, my family, or my community:

10 Questions Every First-Generation HBCU Student Should Ask

1. Who is my academic advisor, and how often should I meet with them?
2. What requirements must I complete to keep my financial aid and scholarships?
3. Where do I go if my financial aid, registration, housing, or student account has a problem?
4. How do I read my degree audit and know whether I am on track to graduate?
5. What tutoring, writing, math, academic coaching, or TRIO services are available?
6. How do I use professor office hours and build relationships with faculty?
7. Where can I find paid internships, fellowships, work-study, research, and career opportunities?
8. What emergency financial help is available if I have an unexpected expense?
9. What counseling, wellness, accessibility, or disability-support services are available?
10. If an answer or decision does not make sense, what is the written process for asking for review or appeal?

Do not wait for a crisis to learn who can help you.

Your First 30 Days Checklist

The goal is not to do everything at once. The goal is to make sure you are visible, informed, and connected.

- ☐ Confirm your class schedule, tuition balance, financial-aid status, and any account holds.
- ☐ Meet your academic advisor and ask how to read your degree audit.
- ☐ Locate Financial Aid, Student Accounts/Bursar, Registrar, Career Services, tutoring, counseling, accessibility services, and the library.
- ☐ Introduce yourself to at least one professor during office hours.
- ☐ Create folders for financial aid, academics, scholarships, housing, career documents, and important emails.
- ☐ Create or update a resume, even if you think you have little experience.
- ☐ Join at least one organization where you can build skills, serve, lead, or connect professionally.
- ☐ Identify five people who can become part of your support circle.
- ☐ Block two 30-minute periods each week for scholarship and internship searches.
- ☐ Put every academic, financial-aid, scholarship, registration, and housing deadline on your calendar.
- ☐ Visit Career Services before senior year. Earlier is better.
- ☐ Ask at least one upperclass student or alum what they wish they had known during their first year.

The three actions I will complete first:

Know Your Campus Before You Need Your Campus

Office	Why I May Need It	Contact / Location
Academic Advisor	Degree plan, course selection, academic progress	
Financial Aid	FAFSA, grants, loans, aid requirements, verification	
Student Accounts / Bursar	Balances, billing, payment plans, refunds	
Registrar	Registration, transcripts, records, graduation requirements	
Career Services	Resume, internships, career fairs, interviews, employers	
Tutoring / Academic Support	Tutoring, study support, writing or math help	
Counseling / Wellness	Mental health, stress, adjustment, referrals	
Accessibility / Disability Services	Approved accommodations and access support	
TRIO / Student Support Services	Eligible first-generation and low-income student support	
Dean of Students / Student Affairs	Student concerns, support, campus resources	

A resource you cannot find, understand, or access is not yet a resource you can use. Learn the system early.

Financial Aid Questions to Track

Financial aid is not a one-time task. It is something you monitor throughout the year.

- ☐ Has my FAFSA been received and processed?
- ☐ Does the school need additional documents or verification from me?
- ☐ What grants, scholarships, work-study, or loans are included in my award?
- ☐ What is my remaining balance after aid is applied?
- ☐ What requirements must I meet to renew each scholarship?
- ☐ What is Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP), and how is it measured here?
- ☐ What happens to my aid if I drop or withdraw from a class?
- ☐ When are refunds issued, and what should I do if a refund is delayed?
- ☐ Are there institutional emergency grants or hardship funds?
- ☐ If my family finances changed, is there a process to request a professional judgment or financial-aid review?

My next financial-aid deadline:

The question I still need answered:

Save every financial-aid notice, award letter, submitted form, confirmation, screenshot, and important email.

Build Your Five-Person Support Circle

Do not try to navigate college with only one source of help.

Role	What They Can Help With	Name	Next Contact
Academic Guide	Professor, advisor, tutor, or academic coach		
Campus Navigator	Staff member who understands how the institution works		
Career Connector	Career counselor, employer contact, mentor, or alum		
Peer Guide	Upperclass student or classmate who shares useful information		
Personal Anchor	Family member, friend, faith/community support, or trusted person		

How to build the network you did not inherit:

- Introduce yourself instead of waiting to be noticed.
- Attend office hours and campus events even when you do not know anyone.
- Ask how someone found an opportunity instead of assuming it was unavailable to you.
- Follow up after meeting people. Relationships grow through repeated contact.
- Share useful information with other students. Networking should not become gatekeeping.

You do not need universal acceptance. You need people who help you learn, grow, and move forward.

Document Important College Matters

Good documentation protects you when information changes, deadlines are disputed, or a problem needs to be reviewed.

Create a simple habit: after an important conversation, write down who you spoke with, the date, what you asked, what you were told, and what happens next.

Keep copies of:

- Financial-aid notices and award letters
- Scholarship terms and renewal requirements
- Registration confirmations and degree audits
- Housing correspondence
- Submitted forms and confirmation numbers
- Screenshots of portal errors or account holds
- Important emails with advisors, faculty, and staff
- Internship, employment, and career documents

Quick Documentation Log

Date	Person / Office	Issue or Question	Next Step

Self-advocacy is not being difficult. It is knowing your question, keeping your records, following the process, and asking for review when necessary.

Start Career Development Before Senior Year

Your degree matters. So does what you do while earning it.

Career development should begin early enough for you to explore, change direction, build experience, and develop relationships before graduation.

- ☐ Create a resume during your first year and update it each semester.
- ☐ Use Career Services for resume reviews, mock interviews, career fairs, and employer connections.
- ☐ Research occupations and compare duties, skills, education, outlook, and typical pathways.
- ☐ Prioritize paid internships, fellowships, apprenticeships, research, work-study, and work-based learning when unpaid experiences are not financially realistic.
- ☐ Build relationships with alumni and professionals in fields you are considering.
- ☐ Track the skills you are developing through classes, jobs, leadership, service, and student organizations.

One career or occupation I want to research:

One experience I want to pursue this academic year:

One person or organization I can contact to learn more:

Do not wait until graduation to begin building the career you want after graduation.

Keep Going: From Starter Guide to Full Success System

This free guide is designed to help you start asking better questions and building stronger habits. The full First-Generation HBCU Student Success Workbook + Resource Guide goes much deeper with planning tools, worksheets, trackers, scenarios, career research, self-advocacy tools, financial-aid and scholarship planning, semester reviews, family communication exercises, and a curated national resource directory.

FULL 35-PAGE WORKBOOK + RESOURCE GUIDE

Student access pricing:

- Regular price: \$24.99
- First-generation student price: \$15
- First-generation + low-income student access price: \$10
- The \$10 access price is offered on the honor system. No proof of financial hardship is required.
- Each purchase includes a printable PDF and an interactive fillable PDF.

To purchase: Email charlottejones@austinconsultingsvcs.com with “First-Generation HBCU Workbook” in the subject line and indicate which student pricing option applies.

Workshops, presentations, and institutional options

Austin Consulting & Career Services also offers workshops and presentations on first-generation college navigation, financial-aid awareness, career exploration and readiness, networking and mentorship, self-advocacy, campus-resource navigation, and first-generation HBCU student success.

Workshop inquiries: charlottejones@austinconsultingsvcs.com | Subject: Workshop Inquiry

Learn it. Use it. Pass it on. First-generation success is even more powerful when it changes what the next generation knows before they arrive.

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Educational resource only. Financial-aid, scholarship, program, and institutional requirements can change. Always verify current requirements with the responsible institution or program.