First Graduate Strategic Plan FY21-24

Executive Summary

At First Graduate, we know that college degrees don’t guarantee success in life, but studies continue to overwhelmingly show their value to individuals, families and society. Not only do college graduates earn substantially higher incomes, they are far more likely to enjoy secure jobs with better healthcare and retirement benefits, to volunteer in their communities, donate to charity and demonstrate a host of other socially positive behaviors.

In families where no one has ever studied beyond high school, a student’s successful completion of college is more than cause for celebration. It’s a momentous, life-altering event in that family’s history.

First Graduate helps San Francisco students become the first in their families to earn college degrees. Our students are largely immigrants or children of immigrants facing economic and often cultural challenges. Bright and eager to excel in their education and eventually their careers, they need the sorts of long-term support their peers with more advantages receive to become, and remain, competitive high school and college candidates. Later, they need that same support to become the talented professionals that San Francisco businesses need to build stronger, more dynamic companies.

Investing in our students bears a huge dividend for them, their families and society as a whole: a confident college graduate, prepared for the kind of career in modern America that can lift an entire family out of poverty in a single generation.

Our long-term vision is to reach the almost 2000 students/year in the SFUSD who could become first generation college graduates, and offer them, and their parents, the opportunity for a better future.

In order to build toward that vision, this strategic plan will focus on three growth Pillars that will direct our work for the next three years (FY21-24), each with an associated goal and set of objectives. These Pillars will ensure our programming is as effective as possible before we scale, and lay the foundation for us to expand successfully into additional middle schools in the future.

Pillar 1: Grow Impact

- Goal: More deeply engage students and families in quality programs from middle school through to early career, and retain students year after year, so that more of them graduate from college and go on to pursue careers meaningful to them.
- Objectives
  - Strengthen Parent/Family Programming
  - Strengthen and Grow Corporate Partnerships
  - Strengthen and Grow Community Partnerships
  - Strengthen College to Career Programming

Our Students. Our Future. #OurSanFrancisco.
Pillar 2: Strengthen Team

- **Goal:** Improve the effectiveness and capacity of our staff and board by enhancing talent engagement, retention and collaboration, and adding key roles to our team, so that we can better serve First Graduate Students.
- **Objectives**
  - Improve Staff Retention
  - Increase Staff, Board and Associate Board Collaboration
  - Grow Staff Capacity
  - Grow Board Capacity

Pillar 3: Grow Funding

- **Goal:** Raise the funding/revenue required to support First Graduate’s plans for growing impact over the next three years, plus additional reserves for reinvestment and growth into additional middle schools in the future, so that we can set ourselves up to achieve our long-term vision.
- **Objectives**
  - Hire an effective Director of Development
  - Build and Implement a Multi-Channel Financial Strategy
  - Increase Board Fundraising

Our founder, philanthropist Anne-Eve Hazen, had the vision to seed the creation of a non-profit organization dedicated to making an impact in college access and success for low-income students in San Francisco. Anaflor (Smith) Graham soon joined her, and in 2002 a new program launched, serving 24 eighth graders from two San Francisco middle schools. The challenge was great, but clear — to provide guidance for aspiring first-generation college graduates that would replicate the advantages enjoyed by students with college educated and higher resourced families.

We have built upon this foundation, and now combine high-touch and high-tech solutions to coach our students and communicate with their parents and guardians. Our students’ success rate is outstanding—75% of our students graduate college in 4-6 years, compared the national average of 11% for first-generation college students.

The arc of our program is long—we recruit students in sixth grade (currently from two middle schools: James Denman and Everett) who begin their journey with us during the summer through a partnership with Aim High (an award-winning summer program and collaborating nonprofit). We not only focus on academic success to make our students competitive with their more advantaged peers; we also expose them to career opportunities from middle school on, through visits to local companies, career speakers, access to paid internships, and more. Our newest program, LaunchPad, provides college seniors and recent alumni with career workshops that include resume building, LinkedIn profile creation, navigating interviews, and negotiating salaries.

We seek to expand our footprint in San Francisco by serving more students and parents, developing best practices that can serve students beyond our cohort, increasing our partnership with local youth-serving organizations, and developing college and career readiness resources that may be utilized by other nonprofits and schools.

**A New Generation of Graduates**
As we look forward to a new cohort of college graduates this coming year, we are working to shift the culture in San Francisco to one that encourages every child to think about college as a possible future. The need is greater than ever. As one of our donors and honorees has said, “Every child deserves what you want for a child that you love.”

The challenges First Graduate seeks to address in this strategic plan include:

- Increasing our impact on our students and in the community
- Building a sustainable organization - with team and financial sustainability
- Transitioning our work after the pandemic
- Supporting students in attaining their college degrees in a post-pandemic world while maintaining the relationship continuum with students from sixth grade through college graduation and employing talent eager to give back to their community
- Building and retaining a strong team (staff, board, and volunteers) to deliver the greatest impact on our first-generation students who are striving to attain their college degrees and transition into their early careers
- Securing the funds necessary to grow the organization while providing the most effective coaching to First Graduate’s students and families

**First Graduate’s Focus**

First Graduate’s work is focused on the vision, mission, values and reason for being detailed below, which were affirmed during the process of creating this strategic plan. Our vision describes the future we would create if First Graduate achieved all its goals, and our mission describes the work we are doing every day to drive toward our vision. Our reason for being describes the specific impact our organization is positioned to make that no other comparable organization can make in quite the same way. Finally, our values are the guiding principles that drive the behavior and decision making of our team, board, and volunteers. Together, these elements form a filter through which every decision we make and every action we take must pass. During the course of this three year strategic plan, our vision, mission, values, and reason for being are the North Star against which we weigh decisions so that we stay focused and do more good for the young people we serve.

**Vision**

Imagine a city where every child has an equal opportunity for college access and success. Imagine that First Graduate provides the means by which this can happen. This is our vision - to establish a college-going tradition for every family in San Francisco, for those children who seek to pursue that path.

While we have come far as an organization in 20 years, we have not yet scaled to the point where we can fulfill this long-term vision, and we are not likely to in the next three to five years. However, this Strategic Plan will lay the foundation necessary to make this vision a reality in the future by strengthening our position as a mature, growing organization.

In the longer term, our vision includes:
- Coaching 2000 students per year
- Having a full-fledged career component that would help our students/alumni find next careers after their first jobs

**A New Generation of Graduates**
• Taking our students on college visits to Southern California every year
• Visiting our college students on their campuses yearly
• Hosting thank-you events for donors and volunteers
• Paying staff at the top of the wage scale so that they can continue to work and live in San Francisco and the Bay Area
• Restoring our matching contribution to our 403(b) plan
• Giving staff year-end bonuses and raises
• Earning income by training District faculty to help first-gen students get to college successfully
• Initiating a program for parents of first generation students who want to go back to school themselves
• Having a business model and mindset that enables us to elevate constraints into leverage
• Having a staff, board, and associate board that reflects our student population and community

One lesson learned since 2019 is that the future is unpredictable. Our job is to be resilient, to anticipate possibilities, be responsive to opportunities, and focus on our strengths so that we can outperform expectations.

Mission

Our mission is to help students become the first in their families to graduate from college ready to pursue careers that are meaningful to them.

Values

• Empathy - We strive to recognize and understand the perspectives, feelings and lived experiences of others, including and especially those most different from ourselves, and give one another grace.

• Community - We believe in the value of healthy, lasting relationships between our staff, board, students, families, and do our part to contribute to the communities we are part of.

• Resilience - We are passionate and tireless in pursuit of our mission to help students become the first in their families to graduate from college, and persevere through all obstacles.

• Accountability - We hold ourselves and one another responsible for ensuring First Graduate maximizes its impact, and we do what we say we will do.

• Learning - We treat challenges as learning opportunities, and continually evolve to meet the needs of the students we work with based on what we learn.

• Justice and Equity - We affirm the dignity and worth of each member of our community, while recognizing and working to combat the structural forces (such as racism) that have harmed some groups while benefiting others.

• Student-Centricity - We center the voices, priorities and wellbeing of the students and families we work with in every decision we make and every action we take.

A New Generation of Graduates
Reason for Being

First Graduate is the organization that leverages the power of long-term, continuous relationships to unlock equitable access to college and career success for San Francisco students.

Only First Graduate makes a 12 plus-year commitment to work with San Francisco students who will be the first in their families to graduate from college, beginning the summer after 6th grade and continuing through early career and beyond.

We do this because we know access to quality education is an opportunity gap for first-generation students, not an achievement gap, and we are committed to helping to close it.

Research

First Graduate has informed this strategic plan with a wide body of research that was also reviewed by and augmented by our strategic planning consultants at Prosper Strategies. Key research inputs included:

- Stakeholder surveys, which included parents, alumni, current students, donors and partners.
- A competitive assessment and opportunity analysis with YCore
- An iCAT survey to assess First Graduate’s organizational capacity to implement its programs and achieve its mission.
- A staff survey to inform strategic planning
- Organization and stakeholder assessment worksheets
- Review of relevant materials such as past strategic plans, board bylaws, program descriptions, marketing and fundraising plans, financials, case for support etc.

Key findings can be accessed here. (see slides 19 & 20)

First Graduate’s Approach Over the Next Three Years

Over the next three years, the top-level key results we are driving toward include:

- Increase the college graduation rate for students from 75% (current) in six years to 85% (10% increase)
- Increase the percentage of college graduates who are hired into their fields of choice, or have started graduate school, by 15% (baseline needs to be established)
- Increase staff and board engagement to 100% from where it is now (baseline needs to be taken)
- Secure the resources needed to carry out First Graduate’s goals while maintaining a healthy reserve by increasing revenue to $3.5 million/year by June 30, 2024
- Support at least 500 students/year by 2023, and grow to support 800 students/year by 2026.

First Graduate has arrived at the three Pillars listed in the executive summary to provide focus for this strategic plan as we work toward those top-level key results. These Pillars were decided upon through a series of six planning sessions with board and staff members in August and September 2021. They came out of a collaborative SWOT analysis and brainstorming about the big, strategic questions First Graduate will need to answer over the next 3 years. Those questions were organized into themes, or potential Pillars, and the potential Pillars were then analyzed and prioritized by the strategic planning committee using a tool called the Eisenhower Matrix. The remainder of this
strategic plan document details each Pillar through an exploration of its associated goals, objectives, key results and action plans.