

Outlining

Project FirstGen

Being the first in the family to pursue higher education is a major social transition for many young Filipinos. It can be an alienating experience to navigate campus life without a built-in roadmap leading to significant hurdles for FirstGen students to gain and retain educational access.

Access to higher education is often understood in economic terms. While livelihood support is important to increase educational equity, it struggles to sufficiently address challenging social dimensions of FirstGen (FG) students. Strengthening their sense of belonging, participation, and orientation in Iloilo City is at the core of Project FirstGen.

First-generation students are the first in their family to pursue higher education.

Gaining insights into higher education access for FG students in the Philippines is challenged by the lack of statistical tracking of their enrollment and graduation rates. Capturing economic factors that are often indicative of FG students, the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II) showcased that less than 2% of all 4Ps SHS graduates continued to enroll in higher education since 2024. International studies demonstrate that FG students are not only less likely to enroll, they also struggle more in attaining good grades, have higher drop-out rates, participate less in extra-curricular activities and build fewer relationships with their peers. Despite comprehensive economic support in Germany, being the first in the family to study is still the most dominant factor determining academic participation and success. Only 20% of German FG students attain their bachelor degree in comparison to 80% of students from an academic household.

Project FirstGen seeks out partnerships with HEIs to **appraise**, **pilot**, and **establish** a civil society organization (CSO) dedicated to addressing the social dimension of higher education equity in Iloilo City. It aims at implementing context-sensitive and partner-based projects including capacity-building, peer-mentoring, and reflection sessions. By cooperating to implement PFG's comprehensive Roadmap, local HEIs can demonstrate their dedication to increase higher education equity in Iloilo City.

Sources: https://edcom2.gov.ph/media/2026/01/EDCOM-II_Y03_National-Education-Plan.pdf | <https://inequality.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Markus-paper-1.pdf> | <https://hochschulbildungsreport.de/fokusthemen/arbeiterkinder>

Why Equity Matters

Equitable access to higher education strengthens socio-economic mobility and expands social cohesion, which are key to eradicating poverty and increasing civic participation in the Philippines. It is a crucial component of both the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) and the Philippine National Education Plan 2026-35 (KPA 5). By partnering with HEIs in Iloilo City, PFG aims at addressing the needs of those Filipinos who are among the most challenged in fulfilling their higher education potential.



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Project FirstGen

Roadmap 2026

Addressing the social dimension of FG students in Iloilo City requires a structured process centering learning and relationship-building. This Roadmap showcases three phases to be implemented in 2026, which establish Project FirstGen as a local CSO dedicated to higher education equity.

The **Appraisal Phase** aims at identifying needs and challenges anchored in the social dimension of local FG students. In addition, relevant HEI staff will be engaged to identify their experiences in case they work with those students. This presents an opportunity to build relationships and identify a focal person for each HEI.

The Roadmap follows a partner-based and context-sensitive approach that places the needs of FG students at its center.

Willing partner institutions are then invited to cooperate in **piloting** capacity-building sessions for committed local FG students. The sessions intend to strengthen the students' understanding of mentoring tools through reflection and experimentation. They will also be introduced to the concept of higher education equity and how it relates to their social dimension as FG students.

Building on previous learnings and the initial mentor cohort, PFG shall be **established** as a local CSO. Its board shall be co-founded with interested HEI partners. As a registered organization, PFG can seek funding and formalize partnerships to develop a FirstGen mentoring pool that allows for a sustainable cycle of mentoring by FG students for FG students. Further projects to increase higher education equity in Iloilo City shall be explored as well.



About Timo

Before becoming an independent development practitioner, Timo worked in the Philippine-German civil society and government sector for more than five years. He partnered with HEIs and government agencies in Germany, the Philippines, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste to co-develop curricula and advocacy initiatives. As a FirstGen student himself, his commitment is to strive towards higher education equity for FG students in Iloilo City.



South-to-South Learning Exchange in Iligan City, Philippines, 2024. Implemented in cooperation between the German Development Agency (GIZ) and Mindanao State University - Iligan Institute of Technology



Phase 1: Appraising

PFG is centered around the needs and challenges of FG students. To gain deeper insights into their everyday experiences, the **Appraisal Phase** employs qualitative data gathering methods that will encourage them to share their reflections. It also invites HEI staff to provide their insights.

The Appraisal Phase initiates the learning process that will continue throughout PFG's Roadmap and beyond. It explores the social dimension in which FG students navigate higher education and their individual challenges. Adding an institutional lens, relevant HEI staff are engaged to identify their approaches to address those challenges. Working in partnership with both groups will build initial relationships and provide insights about their specific contexts.

Qualitative data-gathering will employ participatory methods encouraging participants to share their reflections and experiences either individually or collectively.

Participatory methods are of particular relevance to build an environment where participants feel genuinely heard rather than surveyed. The interviews or focus group discussions will be semi-structured through guiding questions, providing space for free-flowing conversations in which individual reflections and experience are centered

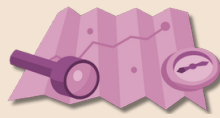
The Appraisal Phase will produce a briefer that synthesizes the experiences of FG students navigating higher education alongside the perspectives of HEI staff who encounter these realities institutionally. By drawing insights from both groups, the briefer identifies needs, challenges, and opportunities shaping PFG's future approach and projects. Results of the Appraisal Phase will be shared with partnering HEIs.



Ethical Considerations

Informed consent will be obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation remains voluntary, participants may withdraw at any time. No personal information beyond age, gender, current semester and affiliated HEI will be collected. Anonymity is maintained through pseudonyms. Audio recordings will be deleted after transcription and validation. While the appraisal poses minimal risk, contact details for counseling services (if available) will be provided. The appraisal phase will follow all necessary HEI regulations.





Phase 2: Piloting

Building on the Appraisal Phase, PFG invites committed FG students and HEI partners to be an active part in capacity-building sessions. There, FG students reflect on their experiences, explore mentoring tools, and deepen their understanding of higher education equity.

The challenging social dimension that FG students experience impacts their sense of belonging, participation, and academic orientation. This shapes how FG students progress throughout their educational journeys and their capacity to develop their own academic roadmaps. Peer mentoring addresses this gap by transforming their own social experiences into an opportunity to support others with a similar background.

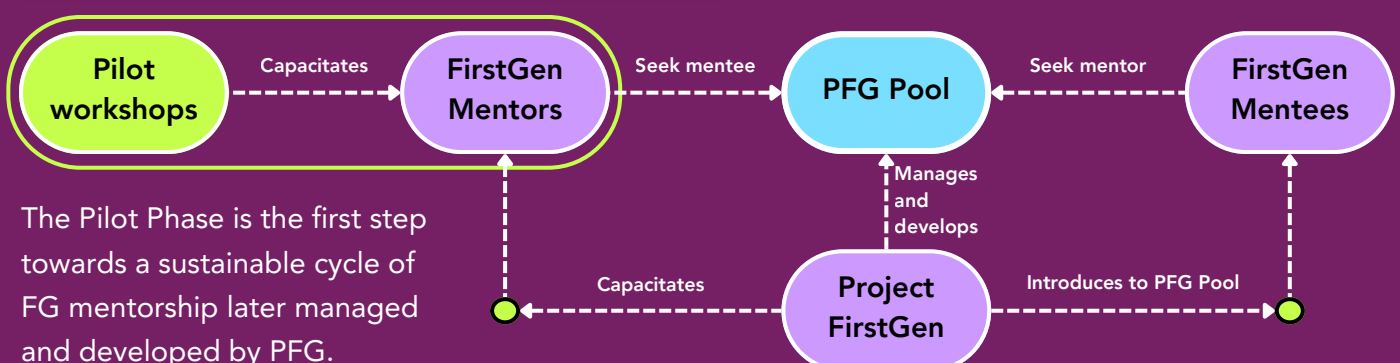
The pilot phase explores participatory activities that capacitate FG students in mentoring tools and encourage them to reflect on their individual and collective experiences.

The **Pilot Phase** introduces a first cohort of FG students to peer mentoring tools across multiple sessions. Through participatory workshops and roleplays, participants reflect on their own experiences as FG students and explore how these connect to their future mentorship and the concept of higher education equity. Furthermore, the sessions will provide the participants with mentoring tools tailored to that shared context. They are encouraged to experiment with the tools in roleplays to strengthen their capacities in mentoring other FG students. HEI focal persons are invited to be partners in developing and facilitating the sessions to include their expertise and share learnings.

This phase serves two goals: First, it capacitates a first cohort of FG students to employ mentoring tools grounded in their individual reflection and understanding of higher education equity. This cohort will enable PFG's first longer-term project aiming to develop a sustainable mentoring cycle where FG student mentees can later become mentors themselves and link to other students through a managed mentoring pool. The second goal is to identify lessons and challenges drawn from working together with FG students, which will shape PFG's approach to complement existing HEI support mechanisms.

Wisdom JP, Morrow CD, Greene J, Stone S, Domskey S, Heiser D. Perspectives of Mentors on Mentoring: A Scoping Review of Benefits and Challenges. Clin Teach. 2025.

From Pilot to PFG Pool





Phase 3: Establishing

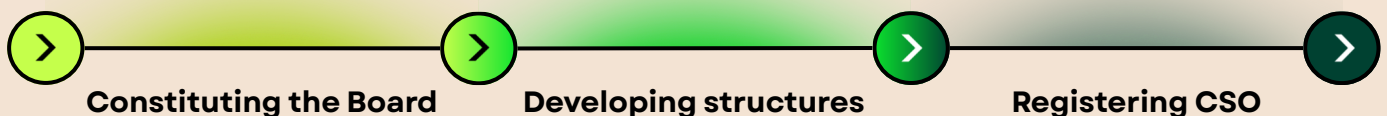
The **Establishing Phase** formalizes Project FirstGen as a civil society organization in Iloilo City, grounded in the relationships, learnings, and first mentor cohort developed throughout the Roadmap. It invites both HEI partners and FG students to participate in its founding.

As a registered CSO, PFG can operate across campuses, working with FG students in Iloilo City as a whole. Its board will consist of stakeholders from HEIs, the local civil society sector, and FG students themselves, ensuring a context-sensitive perspective on crucial decisions. This structure also enables PFG to formalize partnerships and seek national and international funding to expand the mentoring pool and develop further projects.



Partnering HEIs can benefit greatly from their involvement in this phase. As founding members of the first CSO in Iloilo City that addresses FG students, they can publicly demonstrate their commitment to higher education equity, which is a key priority area of EDCOM II's National Education Plan. By providing a focal person to PFG's board, their voices and interests directly shape the organization's development. Participation also signals institutional investment in innovative, participatory, and context-sensitive approaches to engage FG students with impact.

Most importantly, establishing a CSO recognizes the need of long-term support, exchange, and capacity-building to sufficiently address the social dimension of FG students. As a CSO, PFG can strive to become a trusted partner strengthening their sense of belonging and participation across campuses. By that, it complements HEIs' existing mechanisms to support FG students in becoming successful graduates and student leaders, reinforcing their commitment to higher education equity in Iloilo City.



Digital Outreach

PFG will employ digital outreach tools including learning resources and a blog that addresses concerns and realities of FG students. Content on the website will be dispersed on various social media channels to reach FG students in the digital sphere encouraging them to become active.

