



First-Generation Student Representation in Saint Mary's University, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya: Insights from AY 2023–2024

Understanding the profile of first-generation college students—those whose parents have not completed tertiary education—offers valuable insights into institutional inclusivity and access. In the context of Nueva Vizcaya and its surrounding provinces in Region II, where socioeconomic disparities and geographic limitations often shape educational choices, tracking the presence of first-generation learners becomes especially relevant.

Table 1 provides a snapshot of first-generation student representation across academic programs at Saint Mary's University for the 2023–2024 academic year (A.Y.). It highlights enrollment figures, gender distribution, and percentage shares, serving as a springboard for deeper analysis into patterns of access, generational shifts, and potential areas for support and outreach.

Table 1.

Percentage of First-Generation Students for A.Y. 2023-2024

School and Enrollment Figure	Students starting a Degree (First Year)			First Generation Students		Total	% of First Gen.
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female		
School of Accountancy and Business (1,023)	84	194	278	0	1	1	0.35
School of Engineering, Architecture and Information Technology (1,392)	308	175	483	3	0	3	0.62
School of Health and Natural Sciences (1,995)	167	678	845	0	2	2	0.23
School of Teacher Education and Humanities (884)	117	167	284	1	6	1	0.35
Total (5,294)	676	1214	1890	4	9	13	0.68

Enrollment data from SMU for the A.Y. 2023–2024 reveals a notably low representation of first-generation college students. Of the 5,294 enrollees and 1,890 students starting a degree, only 13 - equivalent to 0.68% - identified as first-generation, meaning they are the first in their families to pursue tertiary education. This figure invites a deeper reflection on access, equity, and educational pathways in the Province of Nueva Vizcaya and across Region II.

Program-level analysis reveals that the School of Teacher Education and Humanities hosts the highest concentration of first-generation students, indicating that socially oriented disciplines may be more appealing to students with strong community ties or aspirations to



uplift their families. In contrast, the School of Accountancy and Business, despite its large enrollment, has only one first-generation student (0.35%), while Engineering and Health Sciences programs show similarly low proportions.

Gender dynamics also play a role, where nine of the 13 first-generation students are female. This trend may reflect both opportunity and resilience - women from non-college-educated families may be more likely to pursue higher education as a pathway to social mobility, despite financial or cultural constraints.

However, the low overall percentage of first-generation students in this private institution may not necessarily reflect a lack of interest or qualification. It more likely points to a pattern of financial self-selection. In Nueva Vizcaya and nearby provinces, such as Quirino, Isabela, and Cagayan, many students from low-income families opt to enroll in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), including Nueva Vizcaya State University (NVSU), Quirino State University, and Isabela State University. These institutions offer free tuition under the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (RA 10931), making them more accessible to first-generation learners. In contrast, private institutions—even those with scholarship programs—often present financial hurdles due to higher tuition, miscellaneous fees, and living expenses.

Generational shifts also may help explain the data. Today's college students - largely Generation Z - are children of Generation X and older Millennials, many of whom benefited from expanded access to higher education in the early 2000s. In Region II, the growth of SUCs and increased government support over the past two decades have enabled more parents to complete college, resulting in fewer students who qualify as first-generation. In this light, the low percentage may also reflect intergenerational progress, where college education is increasingly becoming a family norm rather than a pioneering achievement.

The foregoing insights may offer valuable considerations for institutional planning and stakeholder dialogue. One area that warrants further exploration is the potential to expand scholarship opportunities and financial aid for first-generation students. While SUCs have become the default choice for many students due to free tuition, it might be worth considering how government subsidies, private sponsorships, or institutional aid could be enhanced to make private higher education a more viable and attractive option. Partnerships with local government units, alumni networks, NGOs, and regional development councils could be valuable avenues to mobilize resources and create more inclusive pathways for first-generation students.

Additionally, programs in teacher education and the humanities, which appear to attract a relatively higher share of first-generation students, might serve as models for inclusive practice. These programs could be further studied to understand the factors that contribute to their accessibility and appeal, and whether similar strategies could be adapted for use across other disciplines.

It may also be beneficial to enhance community-based outreach and engagement, particularly with public high schools in Bayombong, Solano, Bambang, and surrounding municipalities. Building relationships with guidance counselors, barangay leaders, and parent associations could help surface potential first-generation applicants who might otherwise be unaware of or hesitant to pursue private higher education.



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Finally, while the low percentage of first-generation students may reflect financial barriers, it may also signal intergenerational educational progress—a positive development in itself. As more parents in Region II attain college degrees, their children are no longer considered first-generation, indicating a broader shift in educational attainment across families. Recognizing and documenting these intergenerational gains could be a meaningful way to celebrate the long-term impact of regional education efforts.


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