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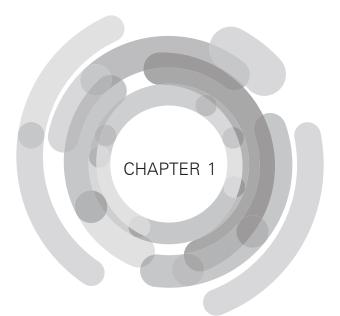
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CHAPTER 1

First-Generation Students and Libraries:
Beyond the Deficit Narrative

Anne Jumonville Graf

Introduction

Much has been made of the challenges first-generation (FG) students face as they begin their college experience; graduation and retention rates are lower than for other students,[1] anxiety about the adjustment to college life is higher,[2] and studies of their experiences and performance in the first year reinforce a narrative of struggle, obstacles, and barriers.[3,4] Colleges and universities have responded to these findings by offering additional support and programming specifically for FG students. These efforts can be read in two ways. On one hand, they suggest that institutions of higher education are increasingly aware of the diverse needs of their students; on the other hand, institutional anxiety about retention and reputation simmers under the surface, suggesting that the attention and resources devoted to FG students are also shaped by institutional needs.

What are the implications of this tension for libraries? As professionals eager to meet user needs, how can librarians support FG students' success and

see them for more than their perceived disadvantages? This chapter begins with an overview of the literature on FG students' experiences, challenges, and outcomes. It then contrasts these approaches with critiques of the "first-generation" category itself. Next, existing literature on FG students' library use and information-seeking habits are examined in relation to both approaches. Finally, the author suggests ways in which libraries can recognize and respond to FG students more holistically than a deficit-focused approach generally permits.

About First-Generation (FG) Students

In the North American context, "first-generation college student" typically refers to a student whose parents never attended college, or attended but did not graduate. Toutkoushian, Stollberg, and Slaton provide a helpful review of the impact different definitions might have for associated educational outcomes.[5] In the United States, so Ward, Siegel, and Davenport note, "the FG student concept was initially used as an administrative designation to demonstrate student eligibility for federally-funded outreach programs for disadvantaged students."[6] As "retention" came to replace "access" as a major concern of higher education in the 1990s, FG students became a growing field of study, as they are not only less likely to enroll in postsecondary education but also less likely to graduate.[7] Currently, the US Department of Education's "College Scorecard" includes the retention of FG students as a metric of institutional success, further cementing the visibility of this group as a specific population in higher education.[8] Colleges and universities are invested not only in the success of FG students for the students' benefit but also because their categorization as a particular group now defines the institution's success.

Scholarly literature on FG college students has grown accordingly. This chapter is not intended to serve as a comprehensive review; instead, it highlights different approaches to understanding FG students that hold particular relevance for libraries. As such, seminal articles that provide a nationally representative picture of FG students form the basis for sections focusing on demographics and outcomes. A selection of methodologically diverse articles published in the last fifteen years highlights a range of FG student experiences and institutional approaches, with a particular focus on library use and information seeking. In keeping with the author's intention to look beyond a deficit narrative, increased attention is given to the emerging critical conversation about the "first-generation" category.

Studies using nationally representative data provide the most generalizable picture of FG students, even as the exact makeup of a particular institution's FG students will vary considerably by type of institution (two- or four-year), its selectivity, geographic location, and other factors. According

to the latest US Department of Education Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), in 2012, 31 percent of all students enrolled in postsecondary institutions were the children of parents who had not gone to college, a category representing 37 percent of students enrolling at a two-year institution and 22 percent of those starting at a four-year institution.[9] Demographically, FG students are more likely than non-FG students to be low-income, older than twenty-four, and Hispanic.[10] They are also more likely to be female,[11] working while attending school, have dependents, attend school part-time, and to enroll at two-year versus four-year institutions.[12]

Themes in Literature on First-Generation Students

College Experiences and Outcomes

Many researchers have focused on FG students' pre-college and transition-to-college experiences as well as on the effects of college experiences on persistence and achievement. Even when controlling for potential response bias by gender, ethnicity, and institution type, Terenzini et al. found that FG students, beyond their demographic profile, have several other characteristics in common. For instance, compared to non-FG students, FG students in their first year score lower on critical thinking tests, have lower degree aspirations, spend less time studying, are less likely to perceive faculty as concerned about teaching and students, and report receiving less family encouragement for attending college.[13] They are also less likely than similarly qualified, non-FG peers to attend selective institutions and more likely to need additional time to complete their degrees and to report experiences of discrimination in college.[14,15] As the Terenzini et al. study only followed FG students through their first year of college, Pascarella et al. conducted another study based on the National Study of Student Learning data, which followed students through their second and third years of college. Pascarella et al.'s study contained several additional findings: in examining the connections between FG students' experiences of college and college outcomes, the authors found that this student group was less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and had fewer non-academic peer interactions because FG students were more likely to live off-campus and work during college.[16] McConnell offers an important qualifier about the connection between these characteristics and retention. While FG students may score lower on certain measures of academic success, those who leave school tend to do so because of the challenges of balancing school, home, and work,[17] suggesting a broader view is necessary for understanding and helping these students.

Socialization, Acculturation, and Institutional Support

How FG students experience the culture of college matters for their persistence and retention. As Terenzini et al. note, increased "exposure to college," or how often students experience the culture, people, and institution of higher education, is beneficial for FG students' critical-thinking development. Yet, the recommendation of spending more time in school is difficult to achieve for a population that is more likely to spend time working or caring for dependents. To this end, Terenzini et al. also suggest "financial aid for part-time students, more opportunities for on-campus work, and… the importance of enrolling for more [credit] hours"[18] in order to facilitate more time on campus. Cognizant of the limitations of FG students' time, McConnell also suggests focusing on strategies that improve their classroom experiences, such as learning (but not living-learning) communities and sound teaching methodologies.[19] More detail on the roles of instructors and peer interactions are addressed specifically in the context of FG students' library and information use.

Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, and Leonard examined an alternative approach popular at many four-year universities: living-learning communities. These communities perform a social integration function and support students academically. The authors concluded from their study that "successful transitions… bridge the student's home environment with the collegiate environment and are critical, primarily in the student's first year of study,"[20] a finding that is supported by other researchers of the field.[21,22] One feature of living-learning communities that appears significant for FG students is the *perception* of positive peer support and affirmation of FG students' experiences on their success, more so than any particular number of actual peer interactions.[23]

Home and Family: Barriers or Supports?

Developing a sense of belonging in the cultural and social life of higher education is a major theme in FG literature focused on interventions and supports, presumably because it affects academic performance.[24] Research has focused on how institutions can help FG students compensate for a perceived lack of college-related cultural capital[25,26] and examined the effects of students' home and family cultures.[27] Here, the literature proves to be contradictory. Davis offers a thorough account of the many ways FG students' families affect the college-going student. The sentiment of family members may range from supportive to ambivalent, enthusiastic to discouraging, and sometimes all of the

above at different times in the student's college career. As a result, students may feel disconnected from their family, guilty about leaving, or burdened by the pressure of being "the first."[28] Despite his acknowledgement of the potentially supportive role of FG students' family and friends, Davis emphasizes the need for institutions to counteract the more "negative" impacts of FG students' families, stating that "FG college students need help from the institution to resist the pressure exerted by family members, friends, and the familiar to return to the home culture without a four-year degree."[29]

The pertinent literature has approached the issue of cultural capital from a different perspective as well, focusing on what FG students' home and family cultures can provide. For instance, Nuñez examined the experiences of FG women of color as they transitioned into college, finding that while FG students' parents may not have had the cultural capital of college know-how, they still offered FG students a crucial source of emotional support.[30] However, Nuñez does not see this type of emotional support as sufficient for all aspects of FG student success, highlighting the importance of peer-advising networks and the need for meaningful relationships between FG students and faculty.[31] Yet, the treatment of FG students' home communities in a positive light marks a difference in Nuñez's understanding of their impact on FG students' success. Studies by Tsai, and Carolan-Silva and J. Reyes also support this interpretation.[32,33] In their study of eight Latino FG students, Carolan-Silva and J. Reyes examined how FG students' parents can be a strong source of support. As the authors write, "The primary source of aspiration development and motivation to pursue higher education for these students were family and peers," even as family and peer knowledge about college life was incomplete.[34]

Critiques of "First-Generation" as a Category

Beyond characteristics of FG students and analyses of particular support structures, sociological critiques of the conceptualization and operationalization of the FG label form a more recent piece of the FG literature. Building on the themes of family support, O'Shea uses Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework to ask, "What if first-in-family students' perspectives and experiences of university were discussed from a strengths perspective?"[35] While this concept still treats FG students as exceptions in the higher education environment, it provides a way to understand the net-positive capital of FG students in a number of categories beyond the perceived "lack" of informational and social capital about college life. As this offers a concrete way to move beyond a narrative of deficits, more attention is devoted to summarizing this piece.

O'Shea notes the importance and utility of Yosso's categories of *familial*, *aspirational, and resistant* capital for FG students (though note, hers is an

Australian context). Familial capital has been described above in the positive ways in which FG students rely on and draw support from their families. Aspirational capital "provides the basis for a culture of possibility,"[36] or FG students and their families' ability to imagine a different life path, making it a strength that should be recognized. Aspirant capital can draw from a sense of resistance, termed resistant capital, where strength operates as "a form of resistance to the status quo" (i.e., entrenched economic, racial, and gender inequalities) in which FG students actively recognize and resist the narrative that they are unlikely to succeed in college and university life. Finally, O'Shea notes a new form of capital not included in Yosso's framework: *experiential* capital. In her study, the experience of overcoming struggles and knowing their own strengths helped students—particularly older, female FG students—face new challenges in the college environment.[37]

Critiques of Educational Institutions and Values

Spiegler and Bednarek's review of the international literature turns the lens on the institution itself by arguing that the "deficits" of FG students are seen as such because institutions of higher education have entrenched concepts of what students should know and how they should be; if the diversity of student experiences was the starting point, FG students may have very different campus experiences.[38] They conclude that instead of offering special programs for FG students to make them more like non-FG students, "in the long run, a more sustainable approach would be to change the educational system in such a way that successful participation depends less on conditions that lie outside the system."[39] Stephens et al. provide an example, noting that higher education currently prioritizes independence, whereas the cultures of some FG students emphasize interdependence, stating that if interdependence were a more explicit value and outcome of higher education, FG students would be less at a disadvantage.[40]

A final critical read on the perpetuation of FG identity comes from Wildhagen, who examined the benefits of this label to the institution. As she writes, "the contemporary discourse of the FG college student could in part serve to rescue the view of higher education as a route toward upward mobility among disadvantaged students."[41] In a post-recession era, when the promise of higher education as an assured route toward economic success is in question, the FG narrative of upward mobility provides a familiar and reassuring narrative to sell to tuition-paying students and their families. In addition, Wildhagen argues that the creation and reinforcement of the FG category allow institutions to assimilate and redefine students not only as proud members of their college or university but also loyal graduates who will later give back.[42]

FG Students' Prior Library Use

In the library literature on FG students, relatively little has been written that follows this critical conversation. Later, this chapter offers recommendations that attempt to integrate Spiegler, Bednarek, and Wildhagen's critiques, but first, it is worthwhile to note the work that libraries have already done in recognizing FG students. Tyckoson's analysis of FG students summarizes the challenges attributed to FG students across the literature and offers many ways libraries can provide support.[43] Tyckoson's study participants were either especially high or low library users, leading him to conclude they are therefore either much *more* or much *less* likely to have the background knowledge necessary to make use of a university library.[44] The question of preparation is also addressed by Haras, Lopez, and Ferry in their study of Latino students described as "Generation 1.5," in reference to the language spoken at home versus in school and the immigration status of their parents.[45] As these authors point out, "Generation 1.5 students often grow up without academic skills in their first language" and with varying experiences of libraries and information literacy development throughout their K-12 education,[46] similar to first-generation students. Haras et al. found that despite the differences between school, public, and college libraries, there is a "pipeline effect" for these students: their use [or lack thereof] of libraries informed their information literacy development throughout their schooling, from K-12 into college.[47] Although these students are not necessarily the first in their families to go to college, the "pipeline" effect described in this study is still an important one for libraries to consider.

The Library as Microcosm of the University

Libraries are often described as "an academic symbol of higher education,"[48] but what implications does this have for FG students' experience of the library? Reports by Project Information Literacy,[49] Brinkman, Gibson, and Presnell,[50] and Logan and Pickard[51] have stated that many first-year students are intimidated by the size and scope of an academic library. Additionally, Logan and Pickard, in their interviews with eighteen FG students at the University of Illinois-Chicago, discovered that some FG college students preferred to continue using the more familiar, and often smaller, high school library.[52] For Brinkman et al.'s interviewees at Miami University, the library was not only difficult to navigate but hard to be in for any prolonged period of time because it was too noisy, too big, and the information needed was difficult to find.[53] Additionally, Brinkman et al.'s interviews revealed that the high levels of confusion and library anxiety might underscore and compound broader college anxieties. In a revealing anecdote, Brinkman et al. describe a student asking

a librarian for a book that turned out to be housed in the science library, located in another building on campus. The student felt he had "failed" in not knowing about the existence of the science library and was too overwhelmed to ask the librarian for its exact location. While this may seem like an isolated incident of merely not knowing the layout of the campus, to the student, it "was simply another example of how he was failing to succeed on campus."[54]

As such conclusions risk re-inscribing a deficit narrative of FG students, Neurohr's 2017 dissertation, titled "First-Generation Undergraduate Library Users: Experiences and Perceptions of the Library as Place," offers a refreshing alternative. Her FG study participants self-identified as *frequent* library users for whom the library served as an important source of meaning and support. Notably, these students had completed at least three semesters of coursework at the time of the study, giving them time to develop a strong relationship with the library.[55] Her study participants valued specific library resources, such as printers and laptops for checkout, as well as particular building attributes, such as comfortable chairs, natural light, and quiet spaces.[56] Furthermore, the students' attachment to the library as place also strengthened their connection to their academic pursuits and their place in a community of learners, thus providing a form of cultural capital.[57] Like any small, qualitative study, Neurohr's findings cannot be generalized to all FG students; however, when read in context with other studies of FG students' library use and perception, it provides evidence of an alternative to the dominant narrative of deficit and struggle.

Help-Seeking, Self-Stigma, and Stereotype Threat

Fear of failure as it relates to library help-seeking may be illuminated by other reasons FG students avoid seeking assistance. In a review titled, "Psychosocial Reasons Why Patrons Avoid Seeking Help from Librarians," Black highlights FG students as a group that may be susceptible to stereotype threat: the notion that "members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists can fear being reduced to that stereotype."[58] Winograd and Rust further explore FG students' reluctance to seek help through what they term "self-stigma in help-seeking." This concept refers to "the thinking process in which negative self-judgments or fears of negative judgments from others are triggered when academic help-seeking is considered," e.g., fearing that if help is sought and challenges remain, the person may be truly unable to do the work asked of them.[59] While Winograd and Rust's study confirmed that the fear of fulfilling a stereotype contributed to self-stigma for help-seeking, they also found that "the less students associated academic help-seeking with feelings

of inadequacy and inferiority, the more aware they were of academic support services and how to access them."[60] Therefore, to normalize help-seeking behaviors and support services, Winogard and Rust suggest that academic support should be promoted to both FG and non-FG students and presented as a regular part of any student's educational development.[61] This may be especially important for FG students enrolled in online courses; according to Williams and Hellman, seeking help is an important self-regulatory behavior, and self-regulation is important for success in online learning but also lower in FG students. Therefore, orientations to online courses should emphasize and normalize the importance of seeking and using academic support structures.[62]

People as Sources in FG Students' Information-Seeking

In a study on information-seeking and academic advising, Torres et al. examined Latino FG students' information-seeking behavior, finding that their studied population was more likely to use peers and trusted contacts for information versus formal advisors.[63] Perceived peer support (classmates and friends) has been found to be important for FG students in multiple studies,[64-66] although at the same time, some studies have shown that FG students may be reliant on faculty and staff to help create connections among peers.[67] Carolan-Silva and Reyes also note the importance of peers as sources of information, recognizing that peers can be a broad and diverse group that can have differing roles or sources of information.[68]

In comparing FG students' reliance on instructors and teaching assistants versus librarians, Logan and Pickard note the advantage of instructors and teaching assistants because of "convenience and familiarity,"[69] even as FG students come in to college less likely to perceive faculty as concerned about students and teaching.[70] Torres et al. echo and expand on this point in examining FG Latino students' willingness to use official advisors as information sources; only when those relationships were marked by trust did students consider them priority sources—markers of authority, and even expertise, were not sufficient in and of themselves.[71]

While Tsai's study participants were aware of library resources but by many only used when required,[72] there is evidence that this behavior may change over the course of FG students' college careers. Logan and Pickard's pair of studies allow for the comparison of first-year FG students' research skills to that of senior FG students. Although first-year FG students in Logan and Pickard's study were less likely to turn to librarians for help, senior FG students were more likely to recognize the roles of librarians as

part of their academic support system.[73] This conclusion, in conjunction with Pascarella et al.'s study of FG students in their second and third years, offers an important message to librarians and educators: even as FG students may come to college less prepared for the challenges of higher education, experiences in college (academic and otherwise) make a big difference in their performance in later years, and especially so where academic activities, peer interactions, and some forms of extracurricular involvement are concerned.[74] Neurohr's work also indicates that spending time in the library can lead to feelings of community, belonging, and purpose in academic pursuits.[75]

Libraries, Bridge Programs, and Institutional Integration

Library studies about bridge programs for other categories of at-risk students are also relevant. While not focused on FG students explicitly, four recent studies discuss library outreach, instruction, and programming for diverse and at-risk populations via Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP), which often include FG students.[76–79] Fleming-May, Mays, and Radom, in keeping with the retention-focused institutional approach to FG students, integrated library instruction into a summer bridge program that sought not only to teach information literacy skills but also "decrease library anxiety, and… connect students with librarians."[80] They also sought to situate their work within broader university measures to support at-risk students.[81] In a similar effort, Barnhart and Stanfield ask, "Does credit-bearing library instruction during STP [summer transition program] lead to an increase in RPG [retention, progression, and graduation]?"[82] The authors further comment on the importance of integration with larger organizational bodies, such as student affairs. Barnhart and Stanfield caution that such efforts must still fit the library's mission.[83] This advice is somewhat complicated by Meyers-Martin and Lampert, whose work with EOP programs focused on online outreach. In suggesting that librarians serve as mentors to EOP students, they specifically suggest that "librarians and library staff can attend EOP functions even when these functions are *not* library-related to build relationships and familiarity," and that these relationships can be extended online (italics added).[84] Hsieh, McManimon, and Yang provide a final example of integration across campus units, noting the importance of faculty-librarian collaborations in successful information literacy instruction. As they write, EOP students are no different than other students in requiring ongoing information literacy instruction beyond one or two sessions, which requires ongoing

collaborations between librarians and faculty beyond transition to college and early college courses.[85]

Conclusion and Recommendations for Librarians

Students whose parents did not attend college represent almost one-third of all students starting college today.[86] Yet research shows that FG students are less likely than their counterparts to succeed on several measurements of college success. These include traditional metrics such as GPA, test scores, and completing a degree program within a certain timeframe, and more subtle factors, such as participation in extracurricular activities, successful navigation of university organizational structures, and the ability and willingness to seek help from support services.[87,88] The reasons for the discrepancies between FG and non-FG students in these areas are varied. They include lack of cultural capital related to college life, responsibilities outside of school, such as work and caring for dependents, narrowly-defined institutional expectations of success, and susceptibility to stereotype threat, achievement guilt, and imposter syndrome in higher-education settings.[89–92] Despite these challenges, there are many ways colleges and universities can support FG students' success. Based on the research reviewed, three themes emerge as potential avenues for librarians serving FG students. These are described below.

Learning, Listening, and Valuing

It is critically important to remember that FG students are a diverse group and it is therefore necessary to take into account the type of institution and other features of the overall FG student population before developing new library support services. Neurohr's suggestion for libraries is to seek to understand how their own students, especially FG, view and value the library and to work from that perspective.[93] In addition to learning about the students, it is important to actively listen to them, encourage their voices and perspectives, and use library spaces to represent issues and concerns of importance to FG students. In this way, libraries can help their parent institutions to better reflect the diverse reality of their students' lives instead of assuming a single, "ideal" student type. For instance, Cuthbertson, Trask, and Monson created an assignment in which FG students interviewed each other about their transition into college and subsequently added these interviews to the university archives. In this way, the participating librarians

recognized FG students as people with stories to contribute, not only needs to be met.[94]

Normalizing Help-Seeking and Diversifying Authority

At the same time, if the academic expectations of a particular institution do mean that some students are more likely to struggle than others, those students deserve additional support. One strategy for librarians may be to let go of the notion of themselves as the primary source of help for certain tasks. FG students, like many students, turn to peers for help. Thus, strong information literacy education for all students increases the chances that FG students and their peers will be able to give sound advice on matters such as using the library and conducting research. Additionally, Winograd and Rust recommend "creating opportunities for academically successful peer mentors to disclose their own academic help-seeking experiences."[95] Outreach to parents and families, in recognition of FG student's strong social ties to their own communities, may also be beneficial and a source of learning for librarians and parents alike. Finally, in addition to working with peer and family networks, librarians seeking to support FG students should actively pursue and earn their trust; leading with expertise does not necessarily create relationships. Caring about students and giving them reasons to connect can be more valuable, even if building these relationships may seem outside of traditional librarian duties.

Promoting Alternative Narratives

Academic libraries reflect the values and cultures of their institutions and are often described as the "heart" of the university. However, being described as such can also mean that libraries function as a microcosm of all that is unfamiliar about the college and university ecosystem and serve as an unwitting reminder and embodiment of FG students' fears about their status as imposters in an unfamiliar culture. While one approach in supporting FG students is for libraries to be interpreters and de-mystifiers of "academic code," another is to imagine the library as a site of alternative narratives in the service of broader inclusion by providing access to information, not just about dominant groups and the status quo but also the stories and experiences of marginalized groups and voices. Though this can be a challenge in today's heavily assessment-oriented culture, with most libraries eager to align themselves with their institution's mission in order to secure funding and recognition, libraries should not sacrifice the opportunity to challenge

underlying institutional narratives that may not be reflective of all students' needs, experiences, and strengths. In this case, the narrative about FG students' deficits is one that deserves critical attention. FG students certainly deserve support, but they also have much to offer in return. Libraries can serve both FG students and their institutions by valuing relationships, normalizing support services for all students, and responding to the diversity of student experiences in higher education today.

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