Breaking down barriers: Serving the first-generation student in today's academic library

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Description
As colleges, universities, and academic libraries work to adapt their student recruitment, retention, and support services to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, one group of students merits special attention: first-generation college students. This program presents the results of research into the challenges first-generation students face in transitioning to college and initial recommendations for the design of academic library services to support these students’ academic success.

Disciplines
Library and Information Science

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As library deans, we increasingly find ourselves engaged in conversations within our universities about student success and retention. One focus of these conversations is on groups of students who may need extra attention in order to ensure that they successfully complete their degree programs. First generation students are one such group: these students face the challenge of navigating academic culture with no familial history or knowledge that they can draw on for support. In order to ensure that library services and resources are helping students navigate their academic requirements—not presenting a barrier to their success like other institutional structures or processes—we wanted to examine what first generation students need, and whether libraries are equipped to help meet those needs. Which leads us to the research we are sharing today...
Before we dive into what we did, and what we found, we thought it would be helpful to provide a little context as to why we think this is so important for libraries to be designing services to meet the needs of first-generation students...
As we discuss first gen demographics, it’s important to acknowledge that these students are not a monolith (in terms of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, etc)...but there are certain trends that are worth paying attention to and that can give us a VERY general picture of these students, as well as an idea of just what a significant part of the US undergraduate population first generation students are and will continue to be...
For anyone who follows higher education trends, it has become clear that the undergraduate student population will become increasingly diverse over the next two decades.

As these projections from the Western Interstate Commission show, the number of white students graduating from public high schools in the US will decline over the next 20 years, while the number of Latinx and Asian/Pacific Islander students will grow.
With this increase in the diversity of high school graduates, particularly with the increase in Latinx students, the number of first generation students applying to college is likely to increase. For example, this chart shows that it is unlikely the parents of the growing number of Latinx high school graduates will have attained a bachelor’s degree, as only 16% of Latinx adults in the US have done so through 2015. This is a clear indicator that many Latinx high school graduates will be first generation students if they pursue a college degree.
In addition to preparing historically white institutions to serve an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse population of first-generation students, we must also be prepared to serve students who are at a socioeconomic disadvantage...

While not all first-generation college students come from families with low family income, it is clear from this data that as family income decreases, it is less likely that a student’s parents will have attended college themselves.
The fact that first-generation students are more likely to be from low-income families is not in itself problematic. However, for those students from low income backgrounds, there is a demonstrated disadvantage when striving for academic success:

This 2011 study from the Pell Institute shows that low-income, first-generation students were the least likely to have attained a bachelor’s degree in 6 years, and the most likely to have dropped out.

This finding is supported by a 2015 report from the National Center for Education Statistics that shows that high school students with families who had high socioeconomic status were more than twice as likely to attain a bachelor’s degree as were students from families with low socioeconomic status.

Again, while all first-generation students are not the same, these trends indicate that colleges and universities will continue to matriculate increasingly diverse classes--and that those classes will bring with them increasing numbers of first-generation students who will face both cultural and financial challenges, among others, as they adapt to college.
As the central hub for academic support and peer collaboration on many campuses, academic libraries have a unique opportunity--and a responsibility--to determine how we can help first-generation students be successful.

We decided to investigate what services libraries are currently providing for first-gen students, and whether they align with the identified needs of this population--with the ultimate goal of developing recommendations for services and resources libraries can provide for first gen students.
There is little existing research on library services for first generation students, and what literature does exist tends to rely on either small, qualitative studies with a handful of students or on slightly larger samples from individual institutions.

We wanted to gather a broader perspective, so we decided to reach out to high school college counselors through a qualitative survey. Because each counselor is likely to have worked with a range of first-generation students, we anticipated that their insights into the needs, challenges, and barriers for these students could provide a general overview of first generation needs that would not be limited to a single institution or to a few students’ experiences.

Through our research, we also wanted to identify whether there is a difference between the perceptions of those who help prepare students for college (the college counselors) and the services and resources academic libraries currently offer to meet the needs of first-generation students. In other words: **Do the services and resources we offer align with the needs identified by those who have already worked with these students? And, if not, what services and resources could we be offering instead?**
In order to gather information about the predicted needs of first-generation students, as well as the current services offered by academic libraries for these students, we conducted two surveys - one of high school college counselors and one of academic libraries.

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<tr>
<th>High School College Counselors</th>
<th>Academic Libraries</th>
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<tr>
<td>Survey of counselors at U.S. high schools regarding experiences with first-generation students</td>
<td>Survey of academic libraries in the United States regarding current services for first-generation students</td>
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COUNSELOR SURVEY

Predictions of first-generation student needs
We emailed 300 college counselors a survey invitation, using the selection method described, and ultimately received 78 complete responses. In the next few slides, we will go through some of the questions we asked and the main themes we saw in the responses. Along with basic demographic information, the survey included several open-ended questions that allowed counselors to enter narrative responses.

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<th>METHODOLOGY</th>
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<td>○ Conducted a purposive sample of <em>National Association for College Admission Counseling</em> members (institutional secondary school members in the US)</td>
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<td>○ 300 institutions selected, with random selections made from within all 50 states</td>
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<td>○ Individually emailed the college/guidance counselor at each school</td>
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<td>○ 78 complete responses (26% response rate)</td>
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First, we asked the counselors to comment on the challenges they perceive first-generation students will face in college and to report on the concerns that students themselves have shared.

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<th>CHALLENGES &amp; CONCERNS: Questions</th>
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<td>What challenges do you feel these students will face as they transition to college?</td>
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<td>What concerns have these students shared with you about attending college?</td>
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We imported our data into nVivo and used open coding to analyze the responses to these two questions and develop five themes that most commonly occurred in the responses, related to challenges first gen students would face when transitioning to college and concerns that these students have expressed.

Within these five themes, three areas of challenge/concern were the most prevalent (highlighted in red), and we’ve pulled out a few quotes from the counselors that are indicative of the responses in those themes. When we developed our recommendations for library services, which we will share after discussing the survey results, we did consider all five of these themes.
35% of counselor respondents mentioned Financial concerns as central to the challenges students would face in the transition to college.

“We have more intentional conversations about cost of attendance as parents may not be a knowledgeable/experienced resource regarding financial aid, student loans, etc.”
Financial issues were also central to the responses to the question about what concerns students themselves had expressed to college counselors - 73% of counselors identified financial concerns as a primary issue for first gen students.

**CONCERNS: FINANCIAL**

[73% - 53/73]

“*What gets discussed most, are financial concerns.*”

“*Not understanding the financial aid process; concerns about "hidden costs"; i.e., technology costs, sorority/fraternity fees. They don’t always know what to be worried about, but they sometimes feel generally disoriented.*”

Financial issues were also central to the responses to the question about what concerns students themselves had expressed to college counselors - 73% of counselors identified financial concerns as a primary issue for first gen students.
We defined Navigating College as “basic knowledge of how to navigate academic and organizational requirements,” 40% of counselors identified Navigating College as a central challenge for first gen students transitioning to college.

"I feel they will struggle with the 'how' of college; finding resources and making connections in the different departments that will help them in different ways (i.e. health services, academic advising, financial questions, tutoring, etc)."
We defined the Home/Family theme as “Homesickness and pressure from family.’ Counselors identified Home/Family as another major concern expressed by first gen students themselves, with 30% of counselors mentioning it.

**CONCERNS: HOME/FAMILY**

[30% - 22/73]

“The concerns tend to center around separation from parents and other formal and informal support providers, but these issues often go unmentioned.”

“Not sure if family will allow them to go away from family”
Another major category of questions that we asked counselors were focused on the kinds of support that first gen students would need, both in transitioning to college and once they were in college.

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<th><strong>STUDENT SUPPORT: Questions</strong></th>
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<td>○ Starting college can be challenging – what types of institutional support from the college or university do you think would help first-generation students with this transition?</td>
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<tr>
<td>○ Once these students are in college, what kinds of support would help these students succeed in their coursework?</td>
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Using the same open coding process as with the earlier questions, we identified these three themes as the most commonly occurring across responses to these two questions.

As before, we've pulled out a few quotes from the counselors that represent the responses in these themes.

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<th>STUDENT SUPPORT: Common Themes</th>
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<td><strong>Mentoring &amp; Advising</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Regular professional advising and peer mentoring from faculty/staff and/or peers who understand first generation challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tutoring</strong></td>
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<td>Targeted academic support</td>
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63% of respondents mentioned mentoring and advising as a support system needed for first gen in their transition to college. Comments in this category included the need for peer mentors and mentors and advisors that were caring points of contact within the institution.

“Close advising as to expectations. Lay out the scope and sequence of their academic requirements. How to effectively use what seems to be a lot of free time.”
Just under a quarter of counselor respondents indicated that it would be important for students to receive support in navigating college including how to prepare for and complete academic requirements, as well as more organizational processes such as financial aid.

**SUPPORT: NAVIGATING COLLEGE**

[22% - 14/63]

“Basic organization and study skills work and help with understanding the scope of projects.”

“[…] something built in to explain how office hours work, how syllabi work, and navigating their portal for all things related to registration/payments/self-service, etc.”
And finally, while general mentoring and advising were recommended as necessary supports, 27% of the counselor respondents specifically mentioned that academic tutoring should be provided to assist first gen students.

“Tutors who are also mentors, online tutors who can work and answer Qs at night (like from 6-10pm).”
Concurrent with our counselor survey, we also surveyed academic libraries about their current services for first gen students.
Our library survey was conducted in two phases: the first round of surveys was a random sample of institutions to try to ensure we had some examples from each institution type, and the second round of surveys was sent to two listservs to try to increase the number of responses and examples of services to first-generation students.

For our initial survey, an email invitation with the survey link was sent to the library dean or director of each randomly selected institution.

### Methodology

**Phase 1**
- Online survey sent to random sample of 100 institutions across Carnegie classification for all U.S. 4-year institutions
- Received 47 responses (47% response rate)

**Phase 2**
- Open distribution to two listservs (ILI-L, newdirmentor-L)
- Received 12 responses
In our survey, we asked whether the library had designed any services specifically for first-generation students—and, if not, whether they were considering doing so?

Although the result of these surveys cannot be combined into a generalizable sample, we found that 19 out of the 59 total responding libraries were currently offering services to first gen students while the remaining 40 (67%) were not.

However, many libraries also volunteered information about services that, while not specifically designed for first-generation students, they believed would benefit these students.
Of those who have developed first gen services, the most common are instruction programs, usually in conjunction with university-run first gen efforts. Libraries also report outreach targeted at first gen students to raise awareness of library services and textbook programs aimed at reducing the cost of course texts. In some cases, this outreach starts with area high schools, helping bridge the gap to college for first generation students.

These quotes are representative of the responses we received from libraries about their first-generation-related activities.

### ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: First-Generation Services

“A librarian teaches a section of a course for first generation students that is a college-prep course. It covers lots of topics about college readiness and is coordinated through another department at the university.”

“We buy textbooks for course reserves. We organize donated textbooks to give away to financial aid students. We teach workshops on how to borrow textbooks instead of buying them.”

“We haven’t developed any services specifically for this population perse, but many of our services do in fact help first generation students. For example. Our Outreach Librarian does extensive outreach to community K-12 schools, and we give many tours and instruction sessions to these students.”
As we compared the data identified in the counselor survey with the responses to the library survey, we found that some, but not all, of the themes from the counselor data were addressed in either existing general library programs or those specifically for first-generation students.

While libraries are helping first gen students in the areas of academic knowledge, navigating college, and financial considerations, we did not find as much evidence of programs for the social & cultural, home & family, or mentoring & advising themes that we saw in the counselor data.
Using all six themes, those addressed by existing library services and those that are not, we have created recommendations for libraries looking to enhance their service to first gen students.

In this section, we have combined recommendations from our surveys, both counselor and library, from our review of library, education, and psychology literature, and from our own ideas based on what we’ve learned.

In these recommendations, we are both trying to suggest specific services for first-generation students and also identify ways in which current, traditional library services, which could be functioning as barriers to use of libraries by these students, could be improved.

We believe that the recommendations coming out of this work, while made with first-generation students in mind, should benefit ALL students and make library services more accessible for them and ultimately make students more successful.
The first area of interest is academic support for first gen students, something that is already at the core of our current library services profile - we already create liaison programs to different departments, focus on information literacy instruction, and work to make sure the campus and community understand the services the library has to offer. The next step is extending this to liaison and personal librarian programs specifically for first gen students, as well as endeavoring to integrate information literacy instruction into existing first gen programs.

Additionally, our research showed that peer assistance is often a crucial academic support, especially for students who did not have parents who attended college. Incorporating group work into library instruction contributes to building solid peer relationships that can help these students understand academic work.

For libraries interested in going even further, we have identified some more resource-intensive activities as “extended services”. In this area, we first recommend bringing academic support services into the library. Recent research has indicated that student engagement with library services improves academic performance and even student retention. By bringing additional support services into the library, we both increase their visibility and make it more likely that students using them will also avail themselves of library resources. It can also create opportunities for improved coordination; for example, an opportunity to cross-train student library employees and peer tutors. Finally, incorporating transparent design into library instruction may make expectations and criteria for evaluation clearer for students who are not familiar with academic culture.

[https://www.unlv.edu/provost/transparency](https://www.unlv.edu/provost/transparency)
Our next area of recommendations addresses first gen students’ need for social and cultural adaptation and acceptance. As first gen students may have only experienced public/high school libraries that are much smaller and easier to navigate, working to create a friendly and welcoming environment can help establish the library as an inclusive place on campus. For example, in our counselor survey, one respondent recommended that libraries “Create a proactively friendly atmosphere. Groups of people behind a counter/desk could intimidate. Making eye contact is often a simple way to encourage engagement.” Part of creating an inclusive environment is ensuring that library services and messaging are clear and intuitive (similar to the idea of transparent instruction), and don’t create anxiety in students who may already feel like imposters on campus.

A key component of creating this environment is making sure library employees understand how to welcome students from diverse backgrounds. One of the only recent studies on first gen students in libraries *When the helicopters are silent: The information seeking strategies of first-generation college students*, provides some good practical recommendations, including that: “Building empathy in public service librarians for the particular challenges that first-generation students may face can help bridge the information gap and alleviate students’ anxiety.” As a more intensive learning experience for library employees, consider ethnographic field trips to public/high school libraries to get an idea of what students have experienced as the “library”, and what differences/potential barriers there might be in the way academic libraries are set up.
While the library will never be a substitute for a student’s family, some of our preceding recommendations can begin to address issues related to students’ home and family-related concerns, which is our next area of interest.

In our data, counselors shared that students anticipated being homesick and both students and counselors were concerned about the inability of families to advise them on college life. For students who need a place to feel at home, an inclusive and welcoming environment can make the library a safe haven for them.

Beyond that, educating parents about the academic library through various forms of outreach can help parents understand the support systems available for their student. Making families aware of and comfortable with the library as a space, a resource, and an academic home for their student can become an asset in retaining these students: at critical junctures when their children encounter academic challenges, instead of encouraging the student to come home (a common experience shared in the literature), parents may be more likely to encourage the student to make use of the resources that they know about and trust.

Example libguides for parents: (http://libguides.tulane.edu/parents https://libguides.library.kent.edu/t2c)
While it is useful to ensure that parents and families are aware of, and comfortable with, the resources available to their first gen student, it is even more important that students themselves know how to navigate the structures and resources of a college campus.

Counselors in our survey expressed significant concern that first gen students would not know where to go to find resources that they need in college. Our entry-level recommendations are focused on ways to make sure these students understand how the library can support them as soon as they start college, including working with first gen orientations and admissions offices to show the library as a clear and prominent part of the college experience.

Although it is important for library staff to be actively involved in outreach to first gen students, it may be just as important to create an environment in which students can informally learn from one another. In a 2016 dissertation that studied first generation students’ perceptions of the library as place, the author noted that: “Seeing fellow students studying or doing academic work in the library spaces matters for first-generation students who [...] may not have personal family models about how to become a student.” The author went on to observe that “being around peers who are doing academic work supports their own behavior toward academic work.”

By designing facilities that make study spaces more immediately prominent and accessible, libraries can make it easier for students to both easily identify spaces they can use and also observe other students using those spaces.

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<th>RECOMMENDATIONS: Navigating College</th>
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<td><strong>Entry Level Services</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Ensure that orientations and bridge programs include the library and basic tips on using library space and resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Work with admissions office on campus tour script to understand how library is portrayed and shown</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Ensure that library tours include opportunities for students to see other students studying/using the space as models for library use</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Extended Services</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Co-locating services to provide easy access to tutoring, writing, and other academic support services</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Design facilities that make study space/use more immediately prominent and accessible in order to provide models for academic study/library use</td>
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As many first gen students are from low SES backgrounds, it's unsurprising that our counselor survey found that financial issues are a strong concern. Fortunately, there are ways in which the library can help address these concerns, primarily by providing access to resources like course texts and technology.

As one student in the 2016 study of first gen students shared:

“It definitely took some of the burden of money off of me…[...] I was expecting to have to go [buy] a bunch of like equipment…. Just coming in to the Library I realized that THEY have computers here that I can use. They have printers that I don’t have to pay out of pocket at the time, for paper and stuff like that. They have a lot of resources and stuff at my disposal, so that way I don’t have to, once again, strain my finances and try to keep up.”

While many libraries already provide these types of services and resources, we recommend exploring how to expand and better promote them to first gen students. And beyond these entry-level services, we identified some other opportunities in our data and literature review for libraries to support first gen students' financial management of their education. These include hosting form-filling events in partnership with Financial Aid, providing early application opportunities for library jobs as part of first gen programming, and providing financial literacy materials or training.

UP financial literacy libguide: (https://libguides.up.edu/personalfinance)
Our final area of recommendations, mentoring and advising, is not a common space for library engagement, but there are ways the library can be involved in supporting these activities for first gen students.

Reaching out to campus mentoring and advising programs (whether first gen or not) to understand how they are talking about the library and whether we can provide additional information about library services is a good first step in making sure that students are aware of and directed to our resources.

Making sure students are aware of the library space as a welcoming part of campus might start with asking that peer mentor programs include meetings in the library and that mentees are shown the “best spots” to study, so they feel they understand the space.

Finally, speaking deliberately about the student-employee/library-staff relationship as one of informal mentoring may prompt library workers to see their role differently and provide the steady adult relationship and flow of information that can anchor students on a campus.

Beyond these entry level services, libraries could investigate more formal participation with first gen mentoring programs. Brinkman, Gibson, & Presnell’s 2013 study called this out as a recommendation: “Librarians should seek to be mentors and/or become involved in student life and academic affairs programming.”
Much of what libraries can do to support first-generation students is an extension of, or stronger focus on, existing service areas.

So, if you are at a library that doesn’t currently offer services specifically for first-generation students, we recommend evaluating what you ARE doing, and identifying whether your current services may already be designed in ways that will support these students—and then connect with other campus first-generation efforts to promote those services.

If you’d like to do more, we would suggest piloting one or two of the entry-level, or even “extended”, services or practices that we’ve recommended here.
We recognize that our recommendations are limited in that they are not based directly on the experiences and input of first-generation students themselves. However, in a follow-up study planned for this year, we intend to test these recommendations with students to identify whether there is a perception gap between the needs we have identified and those that students experience themselves—as well as whether students have experienced any barriers in their use of library services and resources. We are working with the first-generation support systems in place on our own campuses to conduct this research, and we also plan to implement some of what we’ve recommended here at our own institutions.
REFERENCES


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THANKS!

Any questions?