

How Libraries Support First Generation Student Success

Review of the Literature

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Introduction to the Topic

First-Generation college students are a student population who, for their families, are new to the academic expectations and stressors of the normative college experience. Students who are the first in their families to go to college are often from diverse backgrounds with a low socioeconomic status. Libraries have the potential to provide specialized support to students who are unfamiliar with facilitating research, may not feel disposed to reach out for help, and could potentially personally benefit from utilizing library resources. The purpose of this research is to identify how libraries contribute to the academic success and retention of first-generation students. Soria, Fransen, and Nackerud used Astin's (2017) conceptual framework of the Input-Environment-Output model that suggests a college student's background and college experience influences their success to frame their study of the Student Experience in the Research University survey to measure those factors (10). The outcomes indicate that library usage and outreach to first generation students have a positive impact on the development of academic skills. The review of the literature is an overview of this phenomenon and how libraries reach that population.

Review of the Literature

While the library as a popular hub on a college campus makes providing resources easier, it can also serve as an intimidating and overwhelming physical space according to the research done by Arch and Gilman (2019). The researchers sent a survey to secondary school college counselors to better understand the experience that these students might be having as they navigate the transition from high school to college. The challenges found through the survey were as follows: the need for academic support and tutoring services, feeling marginalized in a

social or cultural context, concerns over being separated from their home and family, a lack of familiarity with how college works, financial stability, and the need for advisement and mentorship. Arch and Gilman establish that one great barrier to students seeking help is their lack of understanding for where to go to ask questions that might bridge the gap-- making the case that first generation students are suddenly thrust into a world of trying to understand where to go for help with not just their assignments, but filling out financial aid forms, understanding residence life, and other campus services that lead to their success. The counselor respondents from the survey indicate that many colleges have the resources to support student success, but that students need help establishing who those helpers are in college and they lack the resources at home to help guide them (Arch and Gilman 2019, 12). The research done by Reynolds and Cruise (2019) also affirms that there is cause for concern over how a student's socioeconomic background influences their retention (204). After giving The College Persistence Questionnaire to almost 200 undergraduates at the University of South Carolina Lancaster with the intent of gathering information on student retention factors such as finances, academic efficacy, stress, advisement effectiveness, and more the data showed that a college student's degree commitment had a significant relationship with parent education level (203). This information is backed also by Pickard and Logan's (2013) study on the research process of first-generation students in which it was found that freshmen first-generation students look to mimic authoritative figures in the college experience that they may not have had before, such as their professors in their attempt to do research as they try to find the authority of research-seeking skills they have lacked thus far in their experiences. Freshmen in the survey did not necessarily have anxiety when it came to asking questions, they just did not know who to go to for the information they needed.

In their related study of patterns of information-seeking of first generation college students, Brinkman and Smith (2021) found slightly surprising data that there does not seem to be a marked difference in help-seeking anxiety between first generation and students who have had at least one parent attend a post-secondary education in most areas other than the variable “it is difficult to navigate the system in college” (15). Rather, many first generation students felt alienation from their peers and less likely to seek information from their classmates. From the results of the online survey, students do not necessarily have anxiety towards asking for help, but find difficulty finding the right direction for college information on multiple fronts. Couture et al. (2021) reaffirm this understanding and find that first generation students possess a self-efficacy where they are not inclined to ask for help because they are used to figuring out the answers to their questions on their own (130). Some of the survey questions the researchers released through Qualtrics inquire about demographic information, frequency of use of the library, and open-ended opinion questions for comments. The findings indicate these are students that have to be forward thinking and independent, yet feeling like they do not belong among their classmates due to the belief that they should already know how college works (134). The respondents of the survey actually enjoy seeing student workers providing services in libraries because it makes them feel a greater sense of belonging in the library (136). Students enjoy activities and events, such as snacks, interactive white boards that ask questions, and the ability to customize their library experience. The data shows that first generation students do not benefit from a “one size fits all ” library instruction, but a more individualized approach to making students feel like they belong in the library. Couture et al. urge library staff to draw on these independent self-efficacy traits first generation students seem to portray. Similar to this, LeMire et al. (2021) found in their study of information literacy skills among both continuing education and first generation

education students that there seemed to be little difference in the two. Both studies serve as a reminder to not make assumptions about what skills first generation students might be lacking, but how to grow the skills they already possess so that they might find belonging and agency in their library experience.

While the reports of Soria, Nackerud, and Peterson's (2015) research on first generation student library uses show low library usage, the results tracked a spike in usage for those students who were also enrolled into the Access to Success program-- an extension of the Student Support Services on campus (641). Therefore, there is some indication that targeted outreach is helpful to connecting library resources to students, which could increase retention rates of first generation students. The Inclusive Excellence initiative is a program at Wellesly College that provides focused support to FGS through bi-weekly meetings with mentors (Barbrow 2020) . A new event headed by library staff, SpeedShare, was an offshoot of the initiative where students shifted to different groups of people to network and discuss different needs/services under a time constraint. After the event, a survey was given to gauge the effectiveness of the activity. Many respondents claimed the event eased their anxiety about figuring out ways the library could be supportive to their research (184). Students reported enjoying the casual environment where they got to talk to librarians one on one or in small groups at the most.

In another study, Parker (2017) discusses a similar experience having been asked to serve as a liaison to the J. Willard Marriott Library's Beacon Scholars Program, which is an initiative designed to provide community to first-generation students. Whereas many institutions still provide a one-time instruction to specific classrooms, Parker opted to do mini sessions throughout the semester and participate in class activities (27). As a result of Parker's new model

of instruction to the Beacon Scholars Program, the library saw a marked increase in one-on-one consultations with first generation students (28). This model allowed for “opportunities to build trust with the library through their relationship” (28). Parker learned from the students just as they learned from Parker-- finding that while a high percentage of students had access to technology at home, their internet was highly unstable, which prompted the purchase of hot spots for students to check out. This approach to librarianship for first-generation students opened up the line of communication to better understand what students need.

Being a first generation college student presents challenges to the equal access of information due to many factors, but also is an area of strength that library staff can draw on to grow the information literacy skills of students. The literature is clear that barriers to access exist to first generations that may exist to reinforce historical structures of oppression. Library staff are asking questions to understand how they can ease the navigational obscurity of the college experience. Understanding this issue is imperative to breaking the structural cycle of students from households who have a familial history of graduating from college being more likely to accomplish their degree than students who might be the first in their families to obtain a bachelor’s degree. If libraries are stewards of equal access to information, then understanding the challenges, barriers, and strengths of underserved groups is essential to providing that service. Providing outreach and a more specialized, personal service to First Generation college students has the potential to play a major role in addressing the divide and contributing to the retention of those students. The challenge is best practices for effective outreach and wayfinding to students. Asking the question of how to reach students where they are is essential to the future of understanding effective outreach methods to connect students with services. Finding the best practices for outreach to vulnerable student populations and supporting student success and

retention will contribute to breaking the cycle of only those whose families have had the opportunity for higher education get to continue that lineage.

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