



# “We’re Gonna Figure This Out”: First-Generation Students and Academic Libraries

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**abstract:** Although extensive research has looked at first-generation college students’ experiences, little has examined the role of the library in their academic lives. This article reports the results of an exploratory study to better understand the experiences of first-generation college students at three universities. Key findings of this study focus on themes of self-advocacy, a sense of belonging, library customization, and integration of the library with the larger campus. This article discusses these themes in the context of improving library services and spaces, ultimately providing more inclusive resources for all student groups. Implications and recommendations for professional practice are discussed.

## Introduction

First-generation students (FGS) often encounter structural barriers on campus that enforce expectations of tacit knowledge. A variety of programs ranging from federally funded TRIO programs to university-specific summer bridge initiatives attempt to reduce these barriers and acculturate FGS to the higher education landscape. Academic libraries often partner with these programs with aims of demystifying the library and introducing students to college-level research tools. However, many of these initiatives are designed to aid first-generation students in learning the “hidden curriculum” (that is, the implicit vocabulary, procedures, and culture)<sup>1</sup> of attending college rather than dismantling the need for such learning. Many students, first-generation or

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not, struggle to master the unintended and unacknowledged lessons and values they must learn to succeed in college.

Extensive research has been conducted on first-generation students’ university experience, but such research often uses a deficit perspective, which views students’ differing backgrounds as deficits to be corrected rather than strengths to be utilized.

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and interview data to describe the experiences of FGS with academic libraries, including information literacy, spaces used for academic work, and students’ sense of belonging. Recognizing that this group is not a monolith, the researchers designed an exploratory study using an asset-based framework to investigate the academic lives of FGS while

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centering student voices and honoring previous experiences. An asset-based approach recognizes students’ cultural differences and funds of knowledge as assets for teaching and learning rather than deficits to be remedied. In addition to respecting students’ previous experiences and existing knowledge, the use of an asset-based model acknowledges the role of the hidden curriculum and structural barriers to success in higher education. Based on this approach, the researchers recommend practices that will help eliminate these barriers and support student growth. Key findings of this study focus on themes of self-advocacy, a sense of belonging, library customization, and integration of the library with the larger campus. This article discusses these key themes in the context of improving library services and spaces, ultimately providing more inclusive resources for all student groups, and includes implications for practice.

The role of academic libraries as a key factor of how first-generation students experience college is often neglected. A team of researchers from three universities sought to explore the experiences of first-generation students to inform the design of library spaces, services, and initiatives and to identify how the library might inadvertently contribute to structural barriers. In this paper, the authors use survey

### Literature Review

Historically, much of the library and information science (LIS) literature on FGS has been informed by deficit thinking that frames them as outsiders in higher education, as a problem to be solved, and as reluctant library users.<sup>2</sup> This deficit thinking positions learners as lacking and unlikely to succeed in college, and it thereby “‘blames the victim’ for school failure rather than examining how schools are structured to prevent poor students and students of color from learning.”<sup>3</sup>



One manifestation of deficit thinking in LIS literature is the idea that first-generation students are a singular group that “are different from other students, and they need help.”<sup>4</sup> Another is the assumption that they lack preparation for overall success in college. Catherine Haras and Suzanne McEvoy argue that “some factors, such as first generation, minority, and low income status, place students at risk for academic failure and require early intervention.”<sup>5</sup> Studies often use an incantation of negative trends to describe FGS, including lower ACT scores and grades as well as higher dropout rates.<sup>6</sup> Addressing the ability of FGS to complete college-level library research, Elizabeth Pickard and Firouzeh Logan found that they “struggled with

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a range of information literacy skills” and “appeared to perceive research as a single-step endeavor rather than as a process.”<sup>7</sup> Colette Wagner observed that nontraditional students (including FGS) “approach the academic library as if it were a dangerous pit of intellectual quicksand” which they attempt to avoid because they think it will take too much time to learn research skills.<sup>8</sup> Taken together, these instances of deficit thinking offer a grim understanding of the abilities, characteristics, and motivations of FGS.

In response to deficit thinking, recent scholarship in LIS has advocated for the use of asset-based approaches in working with FGS. Xan Arch and Isaac Gilman contend that the goal “should be to make our library services ‘student-ready,’ instead of expecting first-generation students (or

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any students) to be ‘college-ready.’”<sup>9</sup> Asset-based approaches adjust the lens through which first-generation students are viewed, focusing on the strengths that students bring from their families, communities, and previous education. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators advocates using such an approach for working with first-generation

students.<sup>10</sup> Kim Morrison writes, “Rather than forwarding the story of being placed at the margins [these approaches] tackle the colonial narrative by placing communities’ cultural wealth alongside it, giving prominence to cultural wealth and assets.”<sup>11</sup> Addressing information literacy instruction specifically, Amanda Folk posited that a “funds of knowledge approach to research assignments, one that is rooted in honouring the wealth of knowledge that students bring with them to college, may reframe research assignments as opportunities for marginalised students to engage academically.”<sup>12</sup> Morrison transformed the IL classroom using asset-based pedagogy to create a foundation for learning based on the backgrounds and knowledge that FGS bring with them, particularly relating to systemic oppression. Reflecting on these efforts, Morrison concluded, “It is my students doing the intervention on me, doing intervention on the



practice of information literacy instruction/definition for librarians.”<sup>13</sup> In contrast with the deficit understanding of FGS as being at risk of failure and in need of intervention, the asset-based view asks what institutional interventions are required so that libraries can work successfully with and for FGS.

In Morrison’s study, the interplay of FGS status with other identities, particularly those related to race and ethnicity, highlights the importance of considering intersectionality when discussing FGS. Such students are not a homogenous group, but instead display a wide range of backgrounds and identities related to such factors as race, class,

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gender, sexuality, and ability, as well as the intersection of those identities.<sup>14</sup> As with any student, FGS experience all their identities simultaneously, and all inform their understanding of higher education.

Other asset-based LIS research has explored self-advocacy and independence among first-generation students. Vasti Torres, Al Reiser, Lucy LePeau, Laura Davis, and Jeffrey Ruder found that Latinx first-generation students tend to seek information about college from friends and pamphlets first. They only consult with faculty or staff, such as advisers, once they had encountered a crisis.<sup>15</sup> Research shows that FGS develop informal networks of support when they feel official university support

systems do not serve their needs.<sup>16</sup> This tendency toward independence and alternative support systems may mean that FGS solve problems without asking for help from library employees. However, as Dallas Long recommended in a study on Latinx FGS, to address this issue, the library (rather than students) should change through “greater and earlier outreach, the development of multicultural competencies, greater articulation of [its] purpose in student success, and engaging students culturally through a critical examination of [its] role in Latino students’ lives.”<sup>17</sup> In their study on FGS and library spaces, Karen Neurohr and Lucy Bailey found that students create meaning in library spaces

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that go beyond the intended purpose set by the library.<sup>18</sup> The research by Long and by Neurohr and Bailey discovered that first-generation students tend to make library resources and spaces fit their needs, sometimes despite the library seeming less than welcoming, accommodating, or culturally appropriate.

Students’ sense of belonging on campus is an important theme in LIS research on FGS. In one study, first-generation students expressed a sense of needing to catch up with their continuing-generation peers, assuming “there

was a ‘system’ to learn,” and therefore feeling stressed and alienated.<sup>19</sup> Such implicit systems make up the hidden curriculum of higher education.<sup>20</sup> Folk emphasized that “the culture of higher education, which has its historical roots in white, patriarchal,

middle- and upper-class, heteronormative values, may be alienating to students whose cultural backgrounds are different from the privileged culture(s)."<sup>21</sup> Research suggests asset-based interventions, such as relationship building through embedded librarianship<sup>22</sup> and instruction founded on asset-based pedagogies,<sup>23</sup> have a place in addressing that alienation.

For a comprehensive review of FGS in higher education literature, see Thomas Spiegler and Antje Bednarek's article "First-Generation Students: What We Ask, What We Know and What It Means: An International Review of the State of Research."<sup>24</sup> Also see Darren Ilett's critical review of the LIS literature on FGS.<sup>25</sup>

### Institutional Context

This project was designed to explore the experiences of first-generation students at three public universities in Colorado. Colorado State University (CSU) in Fort Collins, the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) in Greeley, and the University of Colorado Boulder (CU) are all public, doctoral-granting schools founded in the nineteenth century. The three universities were chosen because they have distinct educational missions while sharing a geographic area and the purpose to educate state residents. All three are predominantly white institutions, with white undergraduate enrollment rates of 72 percent (CSU), 58 percent (UNC), and 68 percent (CU) at the time of this study.<sup>26</sup>

These three universities vary in educational mission, size, and first-generation student enrollment and support (see Table 1). Colorado State University (CSU) is the state's land-grant institution with a focus on agriculture and natural resources programs, including an extension service that provides assistance to the entire state of Colorado. In 1984, CSU became the first university in the nation to offer scholarships specifically for first-generation students. Later, CSU developed the First Generation University Initiative, a consortium of faculty, staff, and students who work together to develop strategies and provide support for first-generation student success. CSU librarians have intentionally engaged with the initiative's programs and services through outreach, collection development, research, and teaching, particularly within the last six years.

The University of Northern Colorado (UNC) was founded as a school for teacher training and continues to have a strong focus on educational degree programs. The Center for Human Enrichment at UNC houses Student Support Services/TRIO and the Academic Bridge program, both of which provide advising, mentoring, workshops, and other services to support FGS. UNC employs a librarian whose primary role is to serve as liaison between the Center for Human Enrichment and the library by teaching and mentoring FGS students, assessing programs, and collaborating with the center's faculty.

The University of Colorado Boulder (CU) is the flagship state university with strong engineering, business, and liberal arts programs. It has a range of campus-wide offices, programs, services, and scholarships for first-generation students and underrepresented student populations. The library creates connections with these programs primarily through subject liaisons assigned to a college or department.



## Methods

Each university used a common research protocol, approved by its Institutional Review Board, to collect data in two phases. In the first phase, a survey was disseminated to first-generation students. In the second phase, a subset of survey respondents participated in a qualitative, semi-structured interview based on themes that emerged from the survey and questions identified by the research team. Small incentives were provided for participating in the survey and interviews, including a \$10 Amazon gift card and entry into a drawing for a bookstore gift certificate.

### Survey Development and Administration

The research team created a 19-question survey that was distributed using Qualtrics software. The survey was designed to capture demographic information; the identities students associate with themselves; and their frequency of use of, comfort with, and perceived importance of library resources, spaces, and services. Additionally, the survey asked open-ended questions encouraging students to share experiences on their home campuses, barriers to success, and any additional comments. Dissemination of the survey varied by university. At CSU and UNC, the offices of institutional data provided the research team with a list of e-mail addresses for students classified as first-generation based on admissions data. At CU Boulder, no such list could be acquired, so researchers leveraged connections with programs supporting first-generation students. This resulted in some programs providing a list of e-mail addresses for students, while others shared the invitation through newsletters or electronic mailing lists. Across the three institutions, 901 students responded to the survey (see Table 1).

### Interview Development

The researchers reviewed survey responses and found common threads across the three universities. These included feelings of comfort and safety in the library, the challenge of assumed knowledge for navigating the library and campus resources, and the impact of

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services (such as printing and parking) and staff approachability on respondents' use of library spaces and services. Additionally, respondents raised concerns from their personal lives, such as difficulty paying for textbooks, that intersected with library usage. Finally, many described how they learned library systems or expressed a desire to learn more about how the library worked. The research team used this information to create

a semi-structured interview guide (see the Appendix), agreeing to a core set of five questions that would be asked of all interview participants with additional prompts to guide the discussion if needed. Team members at each university had the option to develop additional questions to examine themes, issues, or areas of inquiry specific to their locations.



Table 1.

First-generation student demographics of the three public Colorado universities in the study

University	Undergraduate enrollment	First-generation students	Survey responses	Interview participants
Colorado State University (CSU), Fort Collins	24,742	5,962 (24%)	407	17
University of Northern Colorado (UNC), Greeley	8,211	3,488 (42%)	398	14
University of Colorado Boulder (CU)	27,665	4,782 (17%)	96	17
<b>Total</b>			<b>901</b>	<b>48</b>

### Interview Data Gathering and Analysis

Members of the research team e-mailed the 377 survey respondents who indicated interest in a follow-up interview to invite them to participate. Interviews were conducted in library meeting rooms during normal business hours and were audio recorded. Each interview participant completed a brief demographic survey before beginning the interview. A total of 48 students across the three universities participated. Of the students interviewed, 23 percent ( $n = 11$ ) identified as transfer students, and 94 percent ( $n = 45$ ) attended school full-time. Interview participants ranged in age from 18 to 43 but overwhelmingly were under the age of 25 ( $n = 45$ ). Participants from all three institutions were predominantly white, with Hispanic/Latino the next largest population represented (see Figure 1). Some races and ethnicities, notably American Indian/Alaska Native, were not represented at any of the three universities; at CU, no black or African American students participated in interviews. All three institutions had more women than men participate at the interview stage (see Figure 2).

The interviews solicited information about students' experiences on individual campuses; their interaction with library spaces, resources, and services; and their approach to academic work. Interview recordings were transcribed using dictation software, with additional editing completed by a member of the research team from the participant's home campus. Interviews were then loaded into Dedoose qualitative data analysis software and coded using a hybrid approach.<sup>27</sup> The research team drafted a codebook to

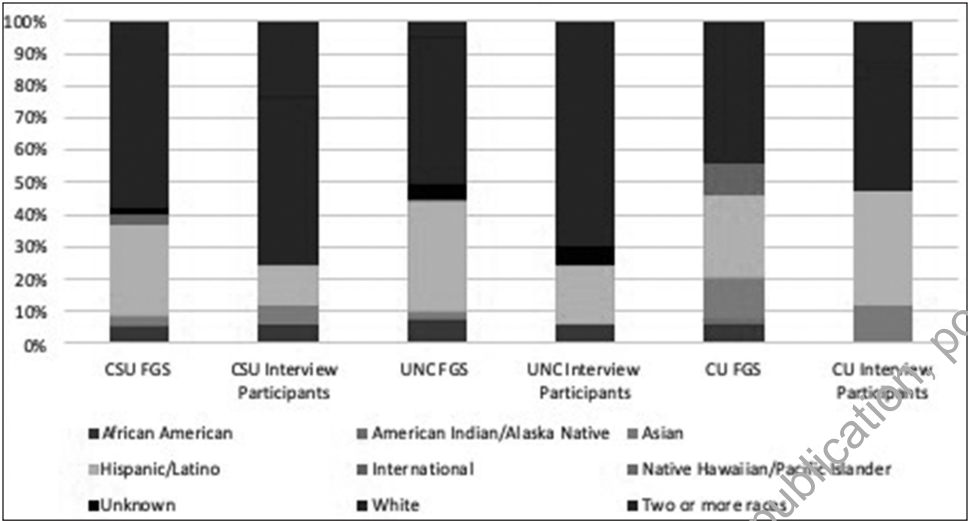


Figure 1. The race or ethnicity of interview participants compared to that of first-generation students (FGS) at the three universities in the study, Colorado State University (CSU) in Fort Collins, the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) in Greeley, and the University of Colorado Boulder (CU).

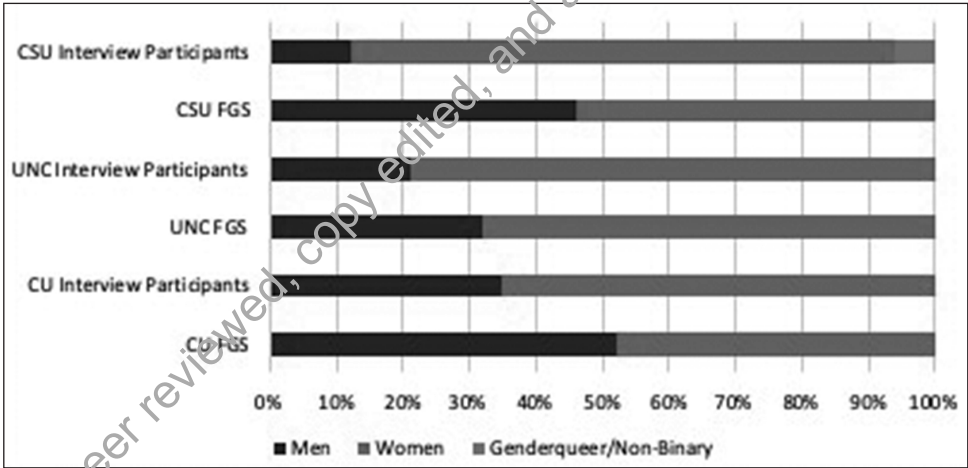


Figure 2. The gender of interview participants compared to that of first-generation students (FGS) at the three universities in the study, Colorado State University (CSU) in Fort Collins, the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) in Greeley, and the University of Colorado Boulder (CU).

serve as a framework, based on the focus of the research project, themes identified in the survey, and areas of specific interest to each university. Each interview was then coded by a researcher from the participant’s home campus and reviewed by at least one other team member from another institution. Team members could add codes as needed, and the team met to discuss the scope and necessity of codes throughout the analysis process.





The principal investigator removed or merged duplicate codes and made final decisions on any lingering coding questions. After all interviews were coded, the research team used Dedoose to explore patterns in the codes, pose questions, and review excerpts.

## Findings

The interviews revealed several themes relating to how FGS use academic libraries, including self-advocacy, their sense of belonging and identity, library customization, and integration of the library with the larger campus. These results are not intended to represent the complete range of views or ideas expressed by students in the interviews but are guiding points to discuss how academic libraries can support first-generation students and reduce structural barriers.

### Self-Advocacy

One major theme that emerged in the interviews was student self-advocacy: how students navigated library structures to access needed resources and assistance. Many students reported high levels of comfort asking for the help and materials they needed, as illustrated by one student commenting, "I feel pretty confident in that. I know that there's a lot of stations around the library that have people that I can ask." Many students tied their initiative or motivation directly to their experience as FGS, which they said made them more inclined to engage in trial and error, more open to seeking help, or more willing to figure things out on their own. One student said, for example, "I kind of self-taught, as one does. First-gen students, I noticed that whenever I've done other group work with first-gens, we're very, like, we're gonna figure this out." Another interviewee credited FGS status for making students "forward thinking" and "risk-taking."

Some students reported barriers to seeking help and navigating library resources, including discomfort or hesitance asking for help because they feared they were expected to already know the answer to their question, reinforcing the idea of the hidden curriculum that FGS may face. For example, with regard to requesting help, one student commented, "You know, it's kind of intimidating, 'cause I feel like I should already know." Another student noted, "It is a little different just coming here and feeling like everyone else has guidance, and I don't really have guidance." All three libraries employ students to staff public service points, and some interview participants mentioned that they were more comfortable asking for help from students, who appeared to be the same age they were and therefore more approachable. One participant shared, "You assume adults that are a little older and out of school know everything, and you don't want to be that person to ask them a dumb question. Or something that they are going to be like, 'Oh, you don't know that?' But a student isn't really going to be like that because they are learning alongside you." Another student

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reported, “A library run by students is just a library run by people who are in the same boat as you.” Several participants also noted that they knew student employees from other contexts, such as a former teaching assistant or friend of a sibling, and that they appreciated encountering familiar faces. One remarked that seeing student employees was valuable because it emphasized the role of the library as a university employer. However, some students reported hesitance to interrupt or difficulty getting the attention of visibly occupied employees, and several commented that they found student employees unapproachable when they were working on homework or talking to each other.

In addition to using library service points, students also noted that they sought research help from others, including professors, advisers, and other students. Some participants also reported helping other students, including one who encouraged other students to use library resources: “I actually happen to know about this resource and, telling other students about that, they’re usually, like, ‘What?’ And, like, ‘That’s amazing.’ ‘Like, yeah, you should totally use it.’” Overall, students reported a strong sense of self-advocacy related to their first-generation status but also described barriers they encountered, both institutional and structural.

### Sense of Belonging

Students indicated their use of the library space was related to whether they felt welcomed and respected as individuals, including their identities as FGS and all their intersecting identities. Often, they associated a productive library space with a safe, inclusive environment.

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A participant commented, “This is a place that you can come whenever you have stuff to do, and you are not going to be subject to any discrimination or judgment, I guess. People come here for all the same reasons: to study.” Another student reported, similarly, “There’s no real hate. It’s really calm. You know, everyone is there to, everyone is there for the same reason . . . So nobody really cares by that point how someone is or what they are doing.

I feel it is a safe zone.” Some students also connected their library experience explicitly to their FGS status, saying, for example: “The library’s very helpful . . . It’s a great place for resources and everything, and I love being in here. So, I mean, it’s helped out a lot with me struggling, with my family not knowing what I’m doing.”

Many participants discussed intersecting identities, such as socioeconomic status and race, and noted that those identities impacted whether they felt welcome in the library and on their home campus more broadly. Some connected class status to their experience as FGS; for example: “It definitely can be, I think, a source of more stress for first-generation students ‘cause generally the parents are not as socioeconomically well off as people who had gone to college. Like that’s just how the system works.” However, some students commented that their FGS status was often conflated with low socioeconomic status, contrary to their personal experience. Still other participants shared the tension they felt between the identities they held compared to the ones stressed by the university community. One student of color observed that “it seems like being a first-

generation student is more celebrated here than my other identities” and that racial identity was minimized. This same participant shared that it was often a challenge to be the only student of color in a class or other university space but added, “The library already does, like, a lot for me to overcome it. It gives me a place to study and just be me and hang out.” Students saw inclusivity of their identities as an essential part of a useful study space, connecting freedom from discrimination and judgment directly to their ability to study successfully.

Participants expressed appreciation for services and programs that emphasized student well-being, such as free coffee and tea, therapy dogs, and supportive programming. One student recounted, “They

had, like, free food, they had some pizza and some water and some stuff like that, and so just the fact that there’s a lot of people here that, like, care about the people that go here and want to make sure that they’re doing all right.” Another student reported using a particular library because “there’s always like tea and cookies, and the front desk workers

are just always really nice, and they always say ‘Hi,’ and there’s like a whiteboard of random daily questions, and it just feels so different that I really enjoy it.” These gestures of care resonated with students, and many described feeling greater connections to the library because of them.

Students expressed few concerns about a sense of belonging specific to the library, but some reported privileging other campus spaces that supported them in robust ways. One participant noted that she spent most of her spare time on campus at a space that is part of a first-generation student program, saying,

They provide space, and, like, I commute from home, so I don’t want to go out and buy lunch every day, so they provide, there’s like a fridge, a microwave, there’s just like things that are needed that you can just take advantage of. There’s free printing, there’s computer access . . . It’s a really good support network.

Participants strongly associated a safe space for varying student identities with a conducive study environment.

### Library Customization

Another key theme was the high value students placed on customizing the library for their own needs and finding a space for themselves within it. This theme came up most often with respect to different study habits and noise levels, and it emerged at all three institutions, even though they have significantly different floor plans and furniture. For example, one student reported,

So there’s always somewhere you can go to, just get away and just either relax or study or just, you know, just do whatever you need to do in the library. But there’s that also, there’s another section where you can be with your friends, and you can be talking

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... and nobody's really minding ... So I think that's really cool about how there's like a social aspect library, a group aspect to the library, and then there's like an individual, more quiet, relaxed aspect ... I think that's kind of essential to have in a library.

Students also appreciated that they could express their use of the space to others; for example, one participant described how one of the libraries provided "a little tent that says 'If you need a place to work you can sit with me.' So, like, people that are sitting alone, they'll like, put it out and then, like, so then someone doesn't feel bad about sitting at their space." Overall, students valued a wide

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Some comments on customization specifically referenced stereotypes or negative understandings of libraries, and other remarks suggested students' uncertainty regarding their relationship to the space and their ownership of it. For example, one student shared, "Stereotypically when people think of libraries, they think of, like, quiet. They think of, like, librarians walking around. And I have never experienced that. If there is staff, they are there to help, and it's friendly. And it's never 'What are you doing here?' or 'Can you be quieter?' or anything like that." The idea that library employees could play a policing role was perceived by some students as a possible barrier. Some of the negative comments about the library related to policies forbidding some uses of the space, such as restrictions on eating or talking in certain areas or not finding an appropriate space for their needs.

Students mentioned customization and relevance in discussions of instruction and reference, as well. In two of the three institutions, standardized library instruction primarily occurs in first-year composition classes. Although students generally found the teaching helpful, some reported that the one-size-fits-all model did not work for them. For example, some of the FGS interviewed were transfer students, who often miss first-year instruction altogether. One transfer student suggested an FGS-specific orientation session

and to target that towards, like, first-generation students who, maybe, have been around for a little while and, kinda be like, "Hey, we recognize maybe you'd had to navigate this, and you've tried to build your own systems, and we wanna, like, talk to you about how you've done that and also show you some, like, tools and tricks, and how do you be more efficient."

This was a request for group-specific instruction that also acknowledges previous experiences, identities, and self-taught strategies.

Students often emphasized flexibility and relevance in talking about whether an interaction was helpful; for example: "They helped me figure out how to print, how to find the journal articles I needed for my papers, kind of good places to go, depending on what I needed." Students also expressed a variety of preferences in terms of how library services are promoted, including flyers, brochures, and customized events. One student requested "a little poster board or something that was, like, 'meet your librarian,'" so information about librarians was more accessible in public spaces. In general, applicability to specific personal needs seemed to be a large factor in student valuation of library spaces and services.



## Integration with Campus

The final theme identified was how FGS perceived the connection between the library and other university spaces, services, and aspects of their lives. Higher education institutions tend to have arbitrary, institution-specific distinctions that students do not always recognize. These factors, while not always within library control, nevertheless have a significant impact on student use of the library and perception of library services and spaces. This was apparent in student interviews when participants discussed the ease of getting to the library in terms of parking, bus routes, and location on campus. Students frequently mentioned availability of parking and bus routes as relevant to their library use; for example, one student reported not using the library because of difficulty parking there, summarized as, “The library’s fine, other than me getting to the library.” This sentiment was echoed by students across all three institutions, indicating that the cost and location of parking presented a challenge for using the library. Although the library has no control over parking, it affects whether students can get access to necessary resources.

**... the cost and location of parking presented a challenge for using the library.**

Participants also identified the relationship between the library and other important buildings on campus (for example, residence halls and the student center) as a key factor in library use. For example, at one university, the main library stands in the middle of campus, adjacent to the student center. Students described using the library because it is “literally the center of campus.” However, participants also requested that the library provide an array of generalized services because of its convenient location—for example, that the library hold information sessions on tutoring because the main building where tutoring is conducted is significantly farther away. At another university, the two libraries stand on either end of campus, which made location a factor, although students were divided about its impact. One participant considered the library too distant on the other side of campus and shared, “I’m going to admit it. I don’t wanna walk all the way over to the library.” This student expressed bewilderment that the student center has a more central location than the library, making it an easier gathering and study space.

Students also discussed the connection between the library and other campus services, often requesting greater collaboration or integration. These comments covered a wide range of services and programs, including instruction and service desks. For example, one student recommended more library involvement in assignment planning: “I’d like to see more of a connection between, like, the Business College and the library on looking, like, maybe setting up assignments that work.” This comment suggests that students may also be interested in greater integration of library instruction into their disciplinary studies.

Multiple students requested that the library research desk provide information not just about the library but also about the entire campus: “Like the Help Desk could give you resources on everything, not just—like, [the university] as a whole, not just on the library.” Some libraries in this study also host independent support services in the same building, such as tutoring, disability services, and writing centers. Students often





referred to these resources as library services, indicating that they do not necessarily recognize institutional distinctions among campus departments that seem related but

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must be navigated independently, and that FGS are looking for ways to get overall, cohesive support.

Relatedly, students also tied library services and spaces to other aspects of their personal and academic lives. Many reported that financial pressures were a major concern, and the topic came up in a range of comments about the library, especially

regarding services and difficulty finding other study spaces. Students often valued free services and resources available to them as part of their student status. As one participant noted, “It was nice to get an overview of just the resources and stuff because I feel like even now I learn about stuff we have for free as students . . . and you’re like ‘Wait, you get that for free?’ . . . I swear it’s like something new every day that you’re like, ‘I can get that for free here?’” Issues of cost came up around several areas, including coffee

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and tea, printing, laptops, textbooks, and parking. One student reported that the library was a good study place because “you don’t have to buy coffee” to be there. For students who lived at home to save money, access to library study spaces was important to their success since they often had difficulty studying at home due either to lack of space or interruptions from family members.

Although many of these factors are traditionally considered irrelevant to library decision making, they may have a major impact on how and when students use the library, and it is important to consider how they affect use of critical support resources.

### Limitations

The data came from three doctoral-granting public universities with close geographic proximity within one state. Without random sampling and a wider participant pool, it is not possible to make generalizations based on the data reported here. Additionally, survey dissemination differed at one university (CU Boulder), leading to an overrepresentation of students from the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences for both the survey and interview portions of the project.

Interview participants self-selected to engage in follow-up discussions with members of the research team, which may have skewed the results in favor of students who had a particularly positive or negative view of the library. This convenience sample meant that the interview participants did not match overall campus or FGS demographics. All three universities had greater rates of women interview participants than men compared to



university FGS demographics. Additionally, interview participants did not represent all races and ethnicities. However, the qualitative information the research team gathered presented a rich picture of student experiences across the three universities, providing a foundation to begin understanding the role of the academic library for first-generation students.

### Implications for Professional Practice

The findings have implications for library practice broadly and for working with first-generation students specifically. They suggest best practices, such as recognizing student self-advocacy, reducing barriers related to the hidden curriculum of higher education, and creating programming and services that are inclusive of all identities. Although the findings were derived from analysis of conversations with FGS, working toward these objectives would likely be helpful to all students. Such efforts might particularly benefit groups that are often marginalized, including international students, undocumented students, students of color, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds—groups that often have a high degree of overlap with first-generation students.

Library employees rarely know they are working with FGS except when collaborating with a support program for this population, such as the TRIO programs, and the definition of a first-generation student can vary even within a university. First-generation students may be difficult or impossible to identify and therefore to target for outreach or services. This issue may be compounded by the tendency among FGS toward self-advocacy or independent problem solving. Therefore, services for and interactions with students are more inclusive if library employees do not assume students know the hidden curriculum

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of higher education and academic libraries. Possible strategies include designing user-friendly websites, advocating for the creation of more intuitive search tools from vendors, and avoiding or explaining jargon. Libraries can also appeal to the tendency toward self-advocacy by providing tools for self-guided learning in various formats. Further, when library employees know they are working with FGS, they can engage in conversations with these students and with the programs designed to support them to understand local contexts, identify any unintentional barriers, and implement necessary changes.

Participants spoke of the ways they customize library spaces and services to make them their own and to serve their needs. Libraries can accommodate this trend by inviting students to use spaces and materials in ways that make sense for them and encouraging a sense of ownership of library spaces. They can offer spaces that vary in size (group and individual), noise level, lighting, foot traffic, and furniture types. Offering multiple modes of communication, including in person, chat, phone, e-mail, and social media, appeals to different comfort levels and allows students to seek help at any time. Various types of instruction, from online learning tools to one-on-one research consultations to group instruction, also appeal to students' different preferences. Instruction can be targeted and responsive to FGS while honoring their previous experience, rather than employing a one-size-fits-all approach for all students.



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promotion practices. Libraries could implement critical pedagogical methods, which challenge students to examine power structures and patterns of inequality within society, in instruction and reference services.<sup>29</sup> Libraries could also develop inclusive, culturally sustaining programming related to students’ identities and communities as well as feature art and exhibits that represent the cultural backgrounds of underrepresented or indigenous students. Such programming, along with small gestures of care, such as

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snacks and activities designed to alleviate stress, communicates to students that the library is concerned about their success and well-being. Findings also suggested that students do not perceive the library as a distinct unit of the larger institution. Many students see everything offered in a library building as a library service, and they view services related to their library use, such as printing and parking, as under the purview of the library. The degree to which library services and spaces integrate seamlessly into students’ daily routines is a measure of the success of those services. Libraries can capitalize on this in a number of ways. They can serve, as participants suggested, as a local information hub concerning all units on campus and in the community. Libraries can advocate with various logistical units on campus to ensure that library buildings are easily accessible. They can partner with service providers and with campus organizations related to students’ intersecting identities to provide support services and culturally sustaining programming and services in the library. Finally, libraries can collaborate with programs that support FGS specifically to incorporate the library into students’ higher education experience. Ideally, the library is an integrated part of students’ overall college life.

In this study, some participants expressed negative, stereotypical viewpoints about library employees, including the sense that they were there to monitor the space and enforce rules, or that they might criticize students for asking dumb questions. This finding indicates that it is especially relevant to continue efforts to make library employees more approachable and to provide inclusive service to all students.

In this study, FGS generally expressed comfort using library spaces and asking for assistance. Their sense of the library as a safe, nonjudgmental space contributed directly to their ability to use library resources and spaces to their full advantage. However, to foster inclusivity and combat the “overwhelming Whiteness of the academic library profession,”<sup>28</sup> libraries could reconsider policies regarding library spaces. They could also hire diverse staff at all levels, including student staff, whom FGS often find more relatable and welcoming; and eliminate inherent biases in retention and

promotion practices. Libraries could implement critical pedagogical methods, which challenge students to examine power structures and patterns of inequality within society, in instruction and reference services.<sup>29</sup> Libraries could also develop inclusive, culturally sustaining programming related to students’ identities and communities as well as feature art and exhibits that represent the cultural backgrounds of underrepresented or indigenous students. Such programming, along with small gestures of care, such as

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Though FGS often display self-advocacy and problem-solving skills, it is incumbent on libraries to remove the barriers that perpetuate the need for these qualities in the first place. As Freeda Brook, Dave Ellenwood, and Althea Eannace Lazzaro observed, "Users of academic libraries whose needs are not being met have found ways around the barriers that library workers unintentionally construct."<sup>30</sup> In keeping with the asset-based framework, libraries must identify and eliminate those barriers. It is not FGS who are deficient and in need of intervention, but rather libraries and library employees that must strive to reduce barriers and improve access.

## Conclusion

This exploratory study sought to understand in a holistic way how first-generation students experience their academic library. Using an asset-based approach, this project explored the strengths FGS bring with them to college, as well as barriers to access and success that libraries might inadvertently create. The researchers found that first-generation students tended to self-advocate, solve problems, and customize library resources and spaces. However, they also encountered barriers, including the hidden curriculum of higher education and academic libraries, confusing procedures and search tools, and sometimes unwelcoming library employees. Notably, students felt that the inclusivity and nonjudgmental atmosphere they sensed in the library contributed directly to their productivity. Future research could explore the factors that make students perceive the library as an inclusive space compared to campus more broadly. It could also examine the ways in which FGS status intersects with other identities, both in terms of students' assets as well as structural barriers related to those intersectional identities. Finally, future research could compare the experiences of FGS and continuing-generation students to highlight further the inequities unintentionally perpetuated by academic libraries.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

The following questions constitute an interview guide for the follow-up interview. These interviews are designed to be semi-structured and open-ended, and the interviewer may add additional questions or follow-up questions as necessary. These questions should therefore be understood as a framework rather than a script.

1. Tell me about why you chose to attend this university.
  2. Tell us how you define being a first-generation college student./What does it mean to you to be a first-generation student?/How do you define being a first-generation student, and tell me what that means to you?
  3. Tell me about how you use the libraries at this university.
  4. Tell us about a positive or welcoming experience you have had in the library.
  5. Tell us about a negative or frustrating experience you have had in the library.
- What was the transition from high school to college like for you? What types of resources did you have at your high school?



- What has helped you most in transitioning to campus (family, friends, resources, prior life experiences, your own personal strengths)?
- Who do you turn to for support when you encounter barriers?
- What has been helpful to you on campus?
- What skills or knowledge from high school (or earlier) are you able to use to be successful in college?
- What skills or knowledge from home or your community are you able to use to be successful in college?
- Whom do you turn to for assistance with academic assignments and projects?
- Please tell us about a research assignment you had more recently. Has your approach changed from your first assignment? What skills, tools, or resources do you find yourself using now?
- Have you ever gotten help/talked to a librarian? What was your experience?
- How often and in what ways do you use the libraries?
- How do you see the library/describe the library? Has your perception changed over the course of your time in college?
- Have you encountered any barriers to using the library?
- Did you receive any library instruction? How did it change your use/perception of the library?
- How do you use the library most frequently (i.e., study space, research help, databases)?



- How could your experience at the library be improved?
- What do you look for in a study space? Do you have a preferred study location? What do you think about when choosing a study space?
- How does the academic library compare to other libraries you have used (for example, high school, public)?
- What advice would you give incoming students, now that you’ve been on campus for a while?
- What do you wish you could tell the university community about your college experience?

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