



From the Editor
portal: Libraries and the Academy 2022
Johns Hopkins University Press Award for
Best Article

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The Editorial Board of *portal: Libraries and the Academy* has selected “We’re Gonna Figure This Out’: First-Generation Students and Academic Libraries” as recipient of the 2022 Johns Hopkins University Press Award for the best article published in the journal during 2021. Authored by Juliann Couture, Jimena Bretón, Emily Dommertmuth, Natasha Floersch, Darren Ilett, Kristine Nowak, Lindsay Roberts, and Renae Watson, it appears in volume 21, number 1, pages 127–47 and can be accessed at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/777831>.

The criteria used in the selection process for this award include the quality of research methodology; the extent to which the article places library issues in a broader academic or higher education context; the degree to which it makes a significant contribution to the literature or the advancement of knowledge; and the timeliness, originality, and overall quality of writing. After an assessment of all articles in volume 21 and independent review of those nominated by Editorial Board members, the Best Article Award Committee chose this piece as the 18th annual recipient of the award. The eight authors will each receive a plaque and a cash prize from the Johns Hopkins University Press.

The winning article reports the results of an exploratory study trying to better understand the experiences of first-generation college students (FGS) at three Colorado universities: Colorado State University in Fort Collins, the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, and the University of Colorado Boulder. Instead of depicting FGS background and experiences as deficient and in need of correction, the article asks us to view the students’ perceptions and practices as useful strengths. The researchers distributed a survey to FGS across the three institutions, identified resulting themes, and followed up by conducting qualitative interviews with a subset of those students. The article presents key findings around four central ideas for potential improvement of library spaces and services that could provide a more inclusive experience for all student groups.

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The central themes coming out of the study are those of self-advocacy, a sense of belonging and identity, library customization, and the integration of the library with the larger campus. Self-advocacy, or how students navigate library structures to get what they need, ranged from working with others on a trial and error basis, to asking for help at service desks, to at times feeling hesitant or too intimidated to ask for assistance. The respondents appreciated the welcoming areas of the library and regarded them as conducive to studying and working comfortably. Library customization and adaptation were valued, whether in spaces, instruction, or assistance provided, to accommodate learners' personal study habits and needs. Finally, how well the library is integrated with the rest of campus had a significant impact on FGS use and perception of library resources. Parking, location, knowledge of the rest of campus, availability of space, and any associated costs all affected how students felt about and interacted with their library.

Using an asset-based approach, the researchers offer relevant implications for professional practice not only to better serve FGS and other marginalized groups of students but also to potentially benefit all learners. Avoiding the assumption that undergraduates are familiar with the hidden curriculum of libraries, including their unacknowledged procedures and terminology, the authors suggest designing user-friendly websites and avoiding industry jargon where possible. Varying library spaces, modes of communication, and instructional tools are recommended, along with diversifying student and professional staff, and developing broader programming. Understanding that FGS may fail to see the library as a distinct unit on campus is helpful and relevant to better integration into their overall college life and experience. The article concludes by reiterating that it is not FGS who are deficient, but libraries and their employees who must try to make the improvements needed to ensure equity and diversity.

Juliann Couture is an associate professor and Emily Dommermuth and Lindsay Roberts are assistant professors at the University of Colorado Boulder, where Couture is head of the Business Library, Dommermuth is a science and engineering librarian, and Roberts an education librarian. Jimena Bretón is an associate professor and Kristine Nowak and Renae Watson are assistant professors at Colorado State University, where Bretón is a student success and inclusion librarian, Nowak a student success and first-year experience librarian, and Watson an online learning and student success librarian. Natasha Floersch is a library technician and Darren Ilett is an assistant professor and teaching and outreach librarian in Michener Library at the University of Northern Colorado.

Thanks to members of the Best Article Award Committee: Becky Albitz (chair), Harriet Lightman, and Scott Vine. They ably guided the evaluation and selection process for this year's award.