

Libraries Support First-Generation Students through Services and Spaces, but Can Do More

Arch, X., & Gilman, I. (2019). First principles: Designing services for first-generation students. *College & Research Libraries*, 80(7), 996–1012. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.80.7.996>

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Evidence Summary

Libraries Support First-Generation Students through Services and Spaces, but Can Do More

A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To provide recommendations for academic libraries in supporting first-generation college students, defined by the study’s authors “either as those whose parents have no college experience or did not graduate with a bachelor’s degree” (p. 996).

Design – Multidisciplinary literature review and two qualitative survey questionnaires.

Setting – United States secondary and post-secondary schools.

Subjects – College Counsellor Survey: 300 private/parochial, private/secular, public, and

charter secondary/high schools in rural, suburban, and urban areas randomly selected from across all 50 states. Academic Library Survey: Academic libraries at 100 four-year institutions.

Methods – College Counsellor Survey: An online survey was sent to potential subjects via email. The survey included basic demographic questions and open-ended questions about counsellors’ perceptions of the challenges faced by first-generation college students, the types of institutional support they need, and how academic libraries could offer support. The answers were analyzed in NVivo using a combination of inductive and axial coding in order to develop a set of themes reflecting the

most commonly-mentioned challenges and support needs.

Academic Library Survey: A survey invitation was sent directly to library deans and directors at 100 four-year institutions and to two academic library electronic mailing lists. The survey included questions about services academic libraries offer for first-generation students. The data were analyzed to determine whether academic libraries were offering services that matched the thematic areas identified in the College Counsellor Survey.

Main Results – College Counsellor Survey: The response rate was 24% (n=78). There were six themes which were identified regarding challenges and support needs for first-generation students: Academic and Tutoring, Social and Cultural, Home and Family, Navigating College, Financial, and Mentoring and Advising. Recommendations for library support included library participation in first-generation student orientations, library instruction in research methods, and conveying that librarians are welcoming and friendly.

Academic Library Survey: Out of the 59 responding libraries, 19 reported offering services designed for first-generation students, while 6 additional libraries reported offering services they believed would be useful for first-generation students, though they were not designed for them specifically. The library services addressed needs relating to the Academic and Tutoring, Navigating College, and Financial themes. The library services did not address the needs relating to the Social and Cultural, Home and Family, and Mentoring and Advising themes.

Conclusion – Based on the surveys and literature review, the authors provide recommendations for academic library services for first-generation students that address each of the six thematic areas of need. The recommendations include, but are not limited to, assigning liaisons for first-generation programs, working to create an inclusive and affirming library environment, designing library spaces that support the multiple social

roles and identities of first-generation students, helping family members of first-generation students become aware of the library as a resource, providing training on applying for financial aid, and having librarians either provide outreach to mentorship programs or become mentors themselves.

Commentary

Research on first-generation college students has increased in library and information science over the past decade, as it has in higher education research as a whole (Ilett, 2019). As the authors note, much of the literature on first-generation students relies on the deficit model, which ascribes achievement gaps in education to a problem on the part of individual students, rather than a failure of the educational system that is not set up to help all students succeed (ibid). This study contributes to a shift away from deficit thinking, towards an approach in which libraries and other educational institutions focus on how they can design services, spaces, and instruction that are more inclusive of all students.

This study was assessed using the CRiSTAL Checklist for Appraising an Information Needs Analysis. The findings and recommendations for libraries are extensive and are based on triangulated data gathered through two surveys carried out with different populations and a multidisciplinary literature review. A number of examples and quotations are provided to illustrate the identified themes. The authors acknowledge as a limitation of the study the fact that their data are not based on input from first-generation students. In their next stage of research, the authors intend to gather data directly from first-generation students in order to test the validity of their recommendations and to explore their experiences with academic libraries.

The design and implementation of the two surveys are clearly described, and the instruments are provided as appendices to the article. The authors describe the inductive and axial coding approaches used to categorize survey responses. However, it is unclear

whether the coding was done by one or both researchers. If the coding was done by both researchers, it would be helpful to know what steps were taken to ensure consistency between coders.

In addition to the surveys, the authors also base their recommendations for library services on a multidisciplinary literature review. One area in which the evidence presented could be stronger is if the authors had described how the multidisciplinary literature review was conducted (e.g. information sources consulted and search terms used).

This study is significant in several respects. It sheds light on the needs of first-generation students to succeed in college by drawing on the expertise of college counsellors working in secondary schools. Further, by using a multi-survey approach, it ties these findings to what academic libraries are doing to support first-generation students and makes concrete, detailed recommendations for ways that libraries could expand their support in areas such as mentoring and financial literacy. The reader is strongly encouraged to consult the original study for these recommendations. The study will be particularly useful in helping library practitioners support first-generation students in areas beyond library instruction, such as services, programming, and space design.

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