

# First Principles: Designing Services for First-Generation Students

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For many first-generation college students, traditional academic culture and structures can create barriers to their engagement on campus and academic success. To ensure that academic libraries are not also presenting unnecessary challenges to these students, first-generation needs and expectations should be important considerations in library service and facility design initiatives. Drawing on a multidisciplinary literature review and a survey of high school counselors' experiences advising first-generation students, the current study identifies common needs and challenges of first-generation students and provides correlated recommendations for how libraries can best equip themselves to meet those needs.

## Introduction

As colleges and universities focus on identifying evidence-based approaches to improve student success, persistence, and retention, academic libraries are increasingly trying to demonstrate their contributions to these efforts. While there is growing evidence that libraries can influence the success and retention of undergraduate students,<sup>1</sup> there is also evidence to suggest that some students experience library facilities, resources, or services as intimidating or uncomfortable,<sup>2</sup> which can present a barrier to academic success. In response to this “library anxiety,”<sup>3</sup> libraries have attempted to redesign services and facilities to improve the student experience. However, there is little indication that these efforts have specifically considered the characteristics of one group of students who may have the most difficulty navigating academic libraries and the traditional academic environment in general: first-generation college students.

It is generally assumed that first-generation students—commonly defined either as those whose parents have no college experience or did not graduate with a bachelor's degree—will be challenged by academic culture and expectations because they lack familial history or knowledge on which they can draw for support as they move through college. This assumption is seemingly borne out by data showing that, compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation students drop out of college at a higher rate<sup>4</sup> and complete their degree within six years at a lower rate.<sup>5</sup> With approximately one-third of all US undergraduates—and just under one-quarter of entering students at 4-year institutions—categorized as first-generation,<sup>6</sup> it is vital for colleges and universities to understand the needs of these students and to address institutional barriers to their success.

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As the central hub for academic support and peer collaboration on many campuses, libraries have a unique opportunity, and a responsibility, to support first-generation students as they progress through their education. Libraries must ensure that their services and resources are helping students navigate their academic requirements, not presenting a challenge as other institutional structures do. To accomplish this, libraries must understand the nature of first-generation identity, the needs of first-generation students, and the obstacles inherent in traditional academic culture that may also be present in the library. The current study focuses on identifying common needs of first-generation students and provides recommendations for how libraries can equip themselves to meet those needs.

### **A Service Framework for First-Generation Students**

First-generation students are generally more likely to come from a low socioeconomic background, to be people of color, to be older, to be female, and to have dependents.<sup>7</sup> However, they are not a homogeneous group for whom a single set of services will address all needs at every institution. The issues encountered by an individual first-generation student are defined not only by their first-generation status but also by their race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other characteristics. Difficulties that are automatically ascribed to a student's first-generation identity may in fact be related to one or more of these other facets of their identity and the ways in which those are supported and engaged with at their particular college or university. Accordingly, current research and practice suggests that an intersectional approach, which considers the multiple and interacting determinants of student identity and outcomes, is most appropriate and will be most effective when designing services for first-generation students.<sup>8</sup>

Although first-generation services will vary by institution and the specific student populations they serve, there are two assumptions that can inform service design at every institution. First, that institutional practices, especially at four-year institutions, inherently privilege the dominant culture (white, middle-class, male, heteronormative).<sup>9</sup> Second, that students from outside the dominant culture possess attributes, knowledge, and experiences that should be seen as assets that will enrich their own and their peers' academic experience.<sup>10</sup> If the first assumption is used to question traditional practice and inquire how it can be made more inclusive, and the second assumption is used to explore ways in which students' diverse backgrounds and experiences can be drawn on both for their own support and to shape their institutions, colleges and universities will be well-positioned to create services and structures that will not only benefit first-generation students but will ensure that schools are "'student-ready' for all students."<sup>11</sup>

Using this basic framework to design student services in the library or across the institution necessarily challenges a belief long held by many researchers and educators: that first-generation students' struggles and lower graduation rates are due to the students' deficits. There is a significant body of literature in social science disciplines (especially education) that reinforces this deficit model in its exploration of the challenges these students face, suggesting either explicitly and implicitly that first-generation students have "inherent shortcomings that [need] to be compensated for,"<sup>12</sup> such as lack of motivation and self-esteem.<sup>13</sup> While it is true that first-generation students often lack shared knowledge of how to navigate academic culture, this does not indicate a deficit on the part of the student; rather, it demonstrates a need for the institution to better accommodate difference in the design of curriculum, cocurricular activities, and support services. Rather than expecting first-generation students to conform to traditional university culture, institutions should invite students' backgrounds and knowledge

into curriculum and into social and learning communities, as well as encouraging students to draw on it as a source of strength. As a result, students will experience their identities, culture, and experiences as valuable and relevant to their education and will be more likely to be engaged and successful.<sup>14</sup>

While efforts to meaningfully incorporate students' diverse identities and experiences into information literacy programs are not new,<sup>15</sup> little research has been done as to how academic libraries can more broadly accommodate the needs, experiences, and expectations of first-generation students and ensure the library is not reinforcing an academic culture that unfairly places these students at a disadvantage. The majority of available literature focuses on approaches to library instruction and on the information-seeking behaviors of first-generation students.<sup>16</sup> While this prior work makes it clear that the academic library has the potential to be a supportive space for first-generation students that "fosters a sense of community and belonging"<sup>17</sup> and contributes to their academic success, it is equally evident that current trends in library service and facility design may be less than inclusive of all students' needs. For example, one study found that, for first-generation students, "the confusion of the academic library led students to report, 'I'll never use this. I didn't see any books. There was nothing but computers and little lounge areas.'"<sup>18</sup> Libraries can, and must, do better. An understanding of the students we serve—especially students who may be marginalized by the culture of their own institutions—is an essential first step.

## Methods

Many first-generation student studies examine the experience of students at individual institutions or focus on a single potential determinant of academic success (such as knowledge of academic culture or financial status). To provide a broader lens and preliminary understanding of the ways in which academic libraries may be able to best support first-generation students' collegiate experience, the current study's methods were designed to explore cross-institutional perspectives and practices related to first-generation students' needs.

Because the initial transition from high school is critical, understanding the concerns with which first-generation students enter college can help libraries design services to address student needs beginning in the first semester and year. To gain perspective on these concerns, this study sought input from secondary school college counselors. It was anticipated that counselors would be able to provide a general overview of first-generation students' expectations related to college life that would not be limited to a single institution or to a few students' experiences. These general findings can then be tested by individual institutions against the specific needs and identities of their first-generation populations.

Concurrent with exploring the needs and concerns of incoming first-generation students, this study also examined the services and resources that academic libraries currently offer to meet the needs of these students. Because the library literature provides very few instances of services designed for first-generation students, we contacted academic libraries directly to gather examples of current service offerings.

To obtain this information about the perceived needs of first-generation students and current services offered by academic libraries, we conducted two qualitative surveys. Both surveys were reviewed and designated as exempt by the authors' respective Institutional Review Boards.

### *College Counselor Survey*

Using the National Association for College Admission Counseling membership list (limited to institutional secondary school members in the United States) as the sampling frame, we derived a heterogeneous purposive sample by randomly selecting a total of 300 institutions from across all 50 states. We anticipated that the total number of actual respondents would be sufficient to reach saturation and identify commonly perceived needs and concerns of counselors' first-generation advisees; with a response rate of approximately 24 percent for most questions, this proved to be true.

College counselors at each institution were identified by a search of the institution's website, and an online survey was emailed directly to the counselor. We received 78 responses from an institutionally diverse group of counselors (no individual question received more than 73 responses). Respondents were relatively evenly split based on school type (21 private/parochial; 25 private/secular; 28 public; 4 charter); school size (31, 0–500 students; 18, 501–1,000 students; 29, 1,001+ students); and location (9, rural; 41, suburban; 28, urban). Of the 69 respondents who provided information about the percent of their advisees who are first-generation students, there was significant variability, but 56 of the respondents shared that 5 percent or more of their advisees were first-generation (34 had more than 10 percent).

In addition to basic demographic information, the survey included several broad open-ended questions developed by the investigators that asked counselors to comment on (a) the challenges they perceive first-generation students will face in college; (b) the concerns that students themselves have shared; (c) the types of support first-generation students would need once they started college (see appendix A for survey questions).

Survey responses were imported into nVivo and coded to identify common themes. Inductive coding was initially used to categorize responses within each survey question; then axial coding was employed to develop a single set of themes across questions that identified areas of greatest concern/interest for first-generation students that could inform library service design.

### *Academic Library Survey*

To supplement the available literature on library services for first-generation students, we surveyed a sample of academic libraries at 4-year institutions in the United States. While approximately 36 percent of community college students identify as first-generation,<sup>19</sup> service design for community college students presents unique challenges (such as a higher proportion of commuter students). Because one driver for the study was service development at our (4-year) institutions, we elected to focus on 4-year institutions as potential comparators.

To increase the likelihood of response across institution type, we selected 12–14 institutions within each Carnegie classification of 4-year institutions to create a heterogeneous purposive sample of colleges and universities (the total sample was 100 institutions; we anticipated a higher response rate than with the counselor survey). At each institution, a survey invitation was sent to the library dean or director. Following distribution of the survey to the purposive sample, a survey invitation was also sent to two academic library listservs to increase the total number of examples of services to first-generation students. Forty-seven libraries responded to the individual invitations, and 12 libraries responded to the listserv invitation.

The survey asked whether the library had designed any services specifically for first-generation students (and what those services were) and, if not, whether any such services were planned. From the survey responses, we developed a list of current service offerings

(see appendix B for survey questions). While we recorded the frequency with which specific services (such as instruction sessions) were reported, the primary purpose of the data was to gather examples of a variety of services and assess whether these service offerings addressed the thematic areas of need identified in the counselor survey.

## Results

As part of coding the counselor survey responses, we identified a set of themes that most commonly occurred across questions:

- **Academic and Tutoring:** concerns and challenges with the rigor of college coursework and support needed in academic preparedness.
- **Social and Cultural:** connection with peers and perceived reflections of cultural identity and values in the university environment, especially for students from marginalized groups.
- **Home and Family:** concerns of homesickness and separation from family, as well as pressure from family to succeed or to visit home.
- **Navigating College:** understanding of how the college system works and where to find help, as well as skills like time management.
- **Financial:** ability to afford college and potential hidden/unexpected costs.
- **Mentoring and Advising:** university-assigned mentors, peer mentors, and academic advisors, as well as mentoring and advising done through first-generation student programs.

Counselors were initially asked what challenges they anticipated that first-generation students would face as they transition to college. The most frequent challenges mentioned by counselors were related to navigating college. For example, one counselor wrote: "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)." The other most commonly cited challenge was finances, especially the ability to afford college and potential hidden/unexpected costs.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage of Respondents</b>
Navigating College	29/72	40%
Financial	25/72	35%
Home and Family	18/72	25%
Social and Cultural	14/72	19%
Academic	13/72	18%
Other	3/72	4%

In addition to asking about counselors' perceptions of challenges, we asked them about the top concerns about attending college that first-generation students had shared with counselors. Financial challenges loomed large once again, with 73 percent of respondents mentioning students' concerns with affording college. The other most prevalent worry for students was leaving their home and family. As one counselor responded: "The concerns tend to center around separation from parents and other formal and informal support providers." A final area of concern for students, not reflected in the core themes we identified, was related to the college application process.

**TABLE 1.2**  
**Concerns That Students Shared with Counselors**

Theme	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Financial	53/73	73%
Home and Family	22/73	30%
Social and Cultural	11/73	15%
Academic	8/73	11%
Application Process	7/73	10%

From anticipated challenges and concerns about college, our questions moved to focus on the types of support first-generation students would need once they started college. The first of these questions focused on institutional support needed during the transition to postsecondary education. While the responses to this question varied, a majority of responses mentioned mentoring and advising as a crucial support system for first-

generation students as they move from high school to college. Most of the comments in this category recommended general mentoring and advising practices; for example: “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.” Other counselors specified a need for advising targeted at first-generation students, as well as peer-mentoring programs. A smaller number of responses mentioned either student orientations at the beginning of their first year or precollege programs as important for first-generation students.

**TABLE 1.3**  
**Institutional Support Needed to Help with the Transition to College**

Theme	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Mentoring and Advising	43/64	67%
Social and Cultural	10/64	16%
Orientation	8/64	13%
Precollege Program	7/64	11%
Financial	4/64	6%
Home and Family	2/64	3%

When asked specifically about what institutional support first-generation students would need to succeed in their coursework, mentoring and advising once again rose to the top, with more than half the respondents mentioning these services as important for first-generation success. Tutoring was also frequently recommended. Finally, just under a quarter of counselors indicated that it would be important for students to receive support in navigating college, including learning skills like time management that help students prepare for and complete

**TABLE 1.4**  
**Institutional Support That Would Help These Students Succeed in Their College Coursework**

Theme	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Mentoring and Advising	37/63	59%
Tutoring	17/63	27%
Navigating College	14/63	22%
Social and Cultural	4/63	6%

academic requirements, as well as understanding university systems and practices such as financial aid requirements and office hours.

The final survey question asked counselors for suggestions as to how academic libraries can best serve first-generation students. These responses were not coded, and they were used to inform the development of our recommendations for libraries. The most common services mentioned were library participation in first-generation student orientations, library instruction in research methods, and positioning librarians as welcoming, friendly adults on campus.

## **Discussion/Recommendations**

As we compared the themes 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 by existing library services. Of the 59 responding libraries, 19 were offering services targeted toward first-generation students, with another six identifying services that they felt would meet first-generation needs but were not designed with them in mind. Across these library services, the themes of Academic and Tutoring, Navigating College, and Financial areas were addressed, but there was not as much evidence of library programs addressing needs related to the Social and Cultural, Home and Family, or Mentoring and Advising themes.

Of those libraries that developed first-generation-targeted services, the most common were instruction programs, usually in conjunction with university-run first-generation programs. Libraries also reported textbook programs aimed at reducing the cost of course texts and outreach efforts targeted at first-generation students designed to raise awareness of library services. In some cases, outreach started with area high schools, helping bridge the gap to college for students.

Though not generalizable, the library data gathered suggests that, while some libraries have considered first-generation student needs, there is room for the development or expansion of services that are more responsive to the challenges that university expectations present to these students. The following recommendations address all six thematic areas of need identified through the counselor survey and were developed by drawing on information about existing library services and from the review of first-generation student issues discussed in library, education, sociology, and psychology literature. In these recommendations, we are suggesting specific services for first-generation students as well as identifying ways in which existing library services, which could be functioning as barriers to use of libraries by these students, could be improved. We believe that these suggestions, while made with first-generation students in mind, have the potential to benefit all students.

### ***Academic and Tutoring***

Academic support is at the core of library services; libraries offer liaison programs to academic departments for research and reference support, provide scaffolded information literacy instruction, and work to make sure the campus and community understand how to use library services and resources to inform teaching and learning. A natural next step is extending the liaison/personal librarian model to cross-disciplinary programs for first-generation students, as well as integrating information literacy instruction into existing first-generation student programs, including orientations and summer bridge programs. Intentional integration into these programs is critical for establishing a positive connection with the library for

first-generation students. As previous research has found, the physical library building and the library's organization of information can be difficult to navigate and intimidating, but increased librarian presence as part of first-generation student programs can significantly lessen these perceptions.<sup>20</sup> Equally important, as some students from underrepresented groups (which describes many first-generation students) may feel that there is a stigma, or admission of inadequacy, attached to "academic help-seeking," having the library take the first step to establish that connection and normalize the need for assistance can help reach students who might not otherwise seek help.<sup>21</sup> Services like liaison and personal librarian programs that provide a single point of contact in the library for first-generation students also speak to the need for more individual interaction with students, a recommendation for libraries from the counselor survey.

When developing library instruction sessions as part of this integration into first-generation programming, there are three specific elements to consider that will best support students. First, drawing on the diverse prior knowledge and experiences of students when designing course content (such as literature search topics) can engage students and affirm the value of their existing knowledge.<sup>22</sup> Next, incorporating opportunities for students to learn from one another supports the finding that peer assistance is often a crucial academic support, especially for these students who did not have parents who attended college.<sup>23</sup> Incorporating group work into library instruction can mean these students can build solid peer relationships that can help them understand academic work. Finally, library instruction may benefit from transparent instruction design, a method that attempts to make expectations and criteria for evaluation clearer for students who are not familiar with academic culture and expectations.<sup>24</sup> Davis highlights this practice: "Perhaps the best way to encourage first-generation students to participate is to make classroom procedures as transparent as possible, so first-generation students feel they are on an even footing with non-first-generation students."<sup>25</sup>

Beyond this, we also recommend bringing other academic support services, such as tutoring and writing assistance, into the library. Co-locating necessary academic services in the library can help minimize barriers to students accessing the support they need, which can be crucial to their retention.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, recent research has indicated that student engagement with library services correlates with improved academic performance and even student retention.<sup>27</sup> 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).

**TABLE 2.1**  
**Recommendations: Academic and Tutoring**

Liaison/personal librarian assigned to university first-generation student programs
Information literacy instruction for university first-generation student programs, including summer bridge programs
Peer assistance as part of a library orientation program and/or library instruction
Review library instruction for alignment with transparent design principles
Co-locating tutoring, writing center, and other academic support services with the library

### *Social and Cultural*

A commonly cited challenge for first-generation students, especially as they initially transition to college, is a struggle for social and cultural adaptation and acceptance. The experiences that first-generation students bring with them may not always align with the forms of culture that are privileged on a college campus,<sup>28</sup> and working to create a friendly and welcoming environment can help establish the library as an inclusive place on campus. This can be as simple as establishing norms of behavior for front-line staff; one counselor survey respondent suggested that academic libraries should “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.”

However, basic friendly engagement is not enough—intentional efforts to create the library as a space that affirms students’ diverse identities and their contributions to the college community are also necessary.<sup>29</sup> As first-generation students are more likely to come from minority backgrounds,<sup>30</sup> one aspect of creating a inclusive and welcoming environment is employing a diverse faculty and staff, including student workers.<sup>31</sup> While this may take time, due to recruitment and hiring cycles, another key component of creating this environment is making sure library employees understand how to welcome students from diverse backgrounds,<sup>32</sup> including first-generation students. Brinkman, Gibson, and Presnell (2013) mention that “[b]uilding 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.”<sup>33</sup> An orientation for library employees from student services officers who work with diverse populations on campus can help build this empathy and understanding. As a more intensive learning experience for library employees, libraries might consider ethnographic “field trips” to public or high school libraries to gain direct exposure to what students have experienced as the “library,” and what differences/potential barriers there might be in the way academic libraries deliver services.

Beyond cultivating diversity and empathy in library faculty and staff, the design and use of library spaces is also an important consideration in ensuring that first-generation students experience a sense of belonging on campus. Incorporating displays, events, and artwork into the library that are inclusive of a variety of backgrounds and values can help establish community and should support the various identities that first-generation students bring to campus.<sup>34</sup> Inviting student cocreation of these displays and events, and working with first-generation student groups on campus, can also further contribute to a sense of shared ownership and belonging in the library. Beyond temporary displays and events, considering the multiple identities of first-generations in the design of spaces and library furnishings is also critical. Depending on the campus context, some first-generation students may be commuter students or may be responsible for children. Designing spaces that welcome and support these roles and identities (such as following the model of schools that serve primarily commuter students in creating family-friendly study spaces<sup>35</sup>) can further remove unintended barriers to student

**TABLE 2.2**  
**Recommendations: Social and Cultural**

Create an inclusive and welcoming environment, including employing diverse faculty, staff, and student workers; ensuring messaging and signage is clear and intuitive; and hosting culturally diverse displays and events
Educate library workers about common challenges for first-generation students
Create opportunities for library faculty and staff to see public and high school libraries

success. This type of welcome should be made explicit by ensuring that library services and messaging are clear and intuitive (similar to the idea of transparent instruction) and do not create anxiety in students who may already feel like imposters on campus.<sup>36</sup>

***Home and Family***

While the library will never be a substitute for a student’s family, the preceding Social and Cultural recommendations, in particular creating an inclusive and welcoming environment, can begin to address issues related to students’ home and family-related concerns. In our data, counselors shared that first-generation students anticipated being homesick and were concerned about the inability of families to advise them on college life. For students who are homesick and need a place to feel at home, creating an inclusive environment can make the library a safe haven for them.

Unfortunately, academic culture in general privileges students who more readily assert their independence and see college as a time to move beyond their families. This is not inclusive of many first-generation students who come from more interdependent cultures with strong family bonds.<sup>37</sup> Although family relationships are often presented as a source of tension for first-generation students,<sup>38</sup> they are also an important support.<sup>39</sup> Libraries should therefore acknowledge and support the critical role that family plays in most first-generation students’ lives.

Building on models for institutionwide parent/guardian communication, educating parents about the academic library through various forms of outreach can help parents understand the support systems available for their student.<sup>40</sup> 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, parents may be more likely to encourage the student to make use of the resources that they know about and trust. As one form of outreach, some libraries have started creating LibGuides aimed at parents, for example Howard-Tilton Memorial Campus Library at Tulane University’s “Parents’ Guide to Library Services and Spaces.”<sup>41</sup> Additional ideas for reaching out to parents include a newsletter or library orientation session aimed at parents.

<b>TABLE 2.3</b> <b>Recommendations: Home and Family</b>
Inclusive and welcoming environment
Online information for parents: listing library hours, printing services, special events
Parent session on library services for Orientation or Admit weekend
Regular updates: newsletter, social media that parents could subscribe to

***Navigating College***

While it is useful to ensure that parents and families are aware of, and comfortable with, the resources available to their first-generation 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-generation students would not know where to go to find resources that they need in college. Lack of knowledge of how to navigate the organizational structure and expectations of academic life is perhaps the

most commonly cited challenge for first-generation students,<sup>42</sup> and, as a core academic support, libraries should make sure that students know how to use their resources and services. Several of the recommendations listed in table 2.4 focus on ways to make sure these students understand how the library can support them as soon as they start college, including working with first-generation 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-generation students, it may be just as important to create an environment in which students can informally learn from one another. In doctoral research that studied first-generation students' perceptions of the library as place, Neurohr noted: "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" and went on to observe that "being around peers who are doing academic work supports their own behavior toward academic work."<sup>43</sup> 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. As suggested in the Academic and Tutoring recommendations above, bringing other academic support services into the library can also allow students to observe their peers taking advantage of these supports and "can play [a] significant [role] in connecting students to fragmented campus information sources."<sup>44</sup>

**TABLE 2.4**  
**Recommendations: Navigating College**

Ensure that orientations and bridge programs include library sessions and basic tips on using library spaces and resources
Work with the admissions office on its campus tour script to understand how the library is portrayed and shown
Design facilities that make study space/use more immediately prominent and accessible to provide models for academic study/library use
Co-locate services to provide easy access to tutoring, writing, and other academic support services

### *Financial*

As many first-generation students are from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, it is unsurprising that counselor survey respondents indicated that financial issues were 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. Course readings and technology are among the "hidden costs" of college that can present barriers for first-generation students.<sup>45</sup> Several of the respondents to our survey of library services mentioned textbook programs as a way they address the needs of first-generation students, one mentioning: "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." Technology lending can range from laptops to WiFi hotspots to help commuter students who may not have reliable WiFi access at home.<sup>46</sup> While many libraries already provide these types of services and resources, promoting them to first-generation students may help address some of the financial concerns of these students. In addition to these efforts to reduce student costs, libraries can also consider how best to provide income opportunities for students

through employment. One strategy could be providing early application opportunities for library jobs as part of first-generation programming.

Beyond these services, there are opportunities for libraries not only to directly reduce student costs but also to reduce barriers to first-generation students' successful financial management of their education. Financial literacy, particularly related to the costs and financing structure of college, is frequently cited as a challenge for first-generation students.<sup>47</sup> While creating financial literacy materials or hosting financial literacy training is not a common area of service for libraries, this can be another avenue for financial education for students who may not enter college prepared to manage their own money. It has been suggested that, to be effective, financial literacy training "should be campus-wide [...] and should involve staff, faculty, and students."<sup>48</sup> Given this more collaborative approach, the library, as a central source of information, would be a natural partner. Some libraries have begun to experiment with offering online guides; for example, "Personal Finance" at the University of Portland.<sup>49</sup> A specific component of financial literacy that has been cited as a challenge for first-generation students is a lack of familiarity with college financial aid processes. For example, first-generation students may be less likely to fill out the FAFSA on time (or at all).<sup>50</sup> Libraries can help address this by hosting events in partnership with Financial Aid for completing forms like the FAFSA or scholarship applications, to assist students who may not understand where to go for help with these crucial documents.

**TABLE 2.5**  
**Recommendations: Financial**

Course text programs, including course reserve programs
Laptop/technology lending program
Advertise library student jobs, or provide early application opportunities, at summer bridge programs and first-generation student orientations
Financial literacy guides or training
Form-filling events for financial aid (FAFSA, scholarship apps, and the like)

### *Mentoring and Advising*

This final area, mentoring and advising, though noted by counselor survey respondents as important, is not a common space for library engagement. However, there are ways the library can be involved in supporting these activities for first-generation students. A starting place may be reaching out to campus mentoring and advising programs (whether aimed at first-generation students or not) to understand how they are talking about the library and providing these programs with any additional information needed about library services and resources. Offering the library as a place to hold mentoring and advising meetings may help make students more aware of the library as a welcoming part of campus. Peer mentors, in both campuswide and first-generation-specific programs, may have an additional ability to familiarize mentees with the library by talking about favorite study spots in the library and the idea of finding a place to feel at home in the space.

Beyond this, librarians and library staff could seek direct involvement in mentoring roles, as suggested in a previous study: "Librarians should seek to be mentors and/or become involved in student life and academic affairs programming."<sup>51</sup> This could occur as part of traditional library roles (such as through an embedded instructional model),<sup>52</sup> or it could include

investigating more formal participation with first-generation mentoring programs. Another approach could be framing the student-employee/library-staff relationship as one of informal mentoring, which 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.

<b>TABLE 2.6</b>
<b>Recommendations: Mentoring and Advising</b>
Working with university mentor and advising programs (peer and otherwise) to incorporate library topics
Provide a space for mentor meetings
Encourage peer mentors to share about favorite study spots and the concept of “finding your place” in the library
Librarians and library staff serving as mentors in university-run programs for first-generation students
Encourage library staff to engage in informal mentoring with their student employees

### *Limitations*

A primary limitation of these recommendations is that they are not based directly on the experiences and input of first-generation students themselves. In the next phase of this research, we intend to test these recommendations with first-generation students to identify whether there is a perception gap between the needs identified by college counselors and the literature and those that students experience themselves—as well as whether students have experienced any barriers in their use of library services and resources. In addition, while these recommendations should be relevant for any academic library, their specific application outside of a four-year, primarily residential context was not considered here. There are unique challenges to supporting students at two-year, commuter colleges, and that should be factored into any implementation of these recommendations at such institutions.

### **Conclusion**

Much of what libraries can do to support first-generation students is an extension of, or stronger focus on, existing service areas. A good first step for libraries is to evaluate current services to identify how they might support the specific needs of first-generation students on their campuses and then connect with campus first-generation efforts to promote those services. The next step is to identify how best to extend or prioritize services that make library resources, processes, and facilities more visible and intuitive for students from any background.

If we step back from the first-generation label and consider the central challenge these students face—that academia is its own culture, with its own language, norms, and expectations—we are left with a problem that we can seek to address that will help first-generation students but should ultimately help all students. We should try to make the academic experience, and the library experience, more accessible to all students. Our goal, as recently suggested for higher education as a whole,<sup>53</sup> should be to make our library services “student-ready,” instead of expecting first-generation students (or any students) to be “college-ready.”

## APPENDIX A. High School Counselor Survey

1. Name of school:
2. Type of school
  - Public
  - Private, secular
  - Private, parochial
  - Charter
3. Size of student population
  - 0–500
  - 501–1,000
  - 1,001+
4. Location of school
  - Urban
  - Suburban
  - Rural
5. Does the high school where you work have a library?
  - Yes
  - No
6. What staffing does the library have?
  - Full-time librarian or library media specialist
  - Part-time staff librarian or library media specialist
  - None
  - Other
7. What would you estimate is the percentage of your advisees who will be the first of their family to attend college?
8. What concerns have these students shared with you about attending college?
9. What challenges do you feel these students will face as they transition to college?
10. Are there particular approaches you use with first-generation college students that differ from your other students you serve?
11. 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?
12. Once these students are in college, what kinds of support would help these students succeed in their coursework?
13. Do you have any suggestions on how academic libraries can best serve first-generation students attending college?

## APPENDIX B. Library Survey

1. Name of institution:
2. Have you developed any library services specifically for first-generation students? If so, please describe.
3. If not, have you considered doing so? What kinds of services have you considered?
4. Does your university have a staff member or office dedicated to first-generation student concerns?
5. If possible, please provide an estimate of your institution's first-generation population.

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