Supporting First-Gens in the Library Classroom

A Case Study in Improved Connections

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What I’m Going to Talk About

The first-gen student demographic

The unique needs of first-gens

Strategies I use to promote first-gen student success
Goals for this Session

DEVELOP
Increased understanding of first-gen student population

LEARN
Specific strategies to empower first-gens in your classroom

EXPAND
Pedagogical toolbox as librarian instructors

6/3/22 Supporting First-Gens in the Library Classroom
First Some Context...

Who I am

Where I am

Why this is important to me
A comprehensive college on the shores of Lake Ontario

- 6,600+ undergrad students and 1,000+ grad students
- 110+ undergraduate majors and minors
- 40+ graduate programs
- 30% of students self-identify as from culturally diverse background
- 89% of students receive financial aid

Penfield Library

- 10 full-time librarians
- 12 professional staff and clerks
- 30+ student workers
WELCOME TO PENFIELD LIBRARY!

Ask Us!

About...

- Finding textbooks and other course readings
- Reserving quiet study and group spaces
  - Evaluating sources
  - Using databases
- Citing sources with confidence
  - Employment
- College history & more

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- I was an Art History/Anthropology double major for my undergrad degree
- I love a good road trip and have been to all of the lower 48 United States
- I have an 18-year-old cat named Razz
- I like to paint and hike in my free time
Why First-Gen Student Success is Important to Me

Two amazing high school dropouts (GED holders)

Don

Diane ("Dinny")

Opportunity deficits

Other strengths and knowledge assets
Who are First-Gens?

Varying definitions

“First-generation college students are students who enrolled in postsecondary education and whose parents do not have any postsecondary education experience.”

_U.S. Department of Education_

“First-generation college student is defined as an undergraduate whose parents do not have a bachelor’s or higher degree.”

_Center for First-Generation Student Success_

Nationally

- 33% of higher-ed students today are the first in their family to attend college

_SUNY Oswego_

- 29% of Oswego students identify as a first-generation student
What are their challenges?

• Lack of exposure to college policies, procedures, expectations, and jargon prior to arrival
• Struggles with confidence and sense of belonging on campus
• Higher levels of stress and anxiety
• Impostor syndrome
• Increased difficulty speaking up / asking questions in class

“...first-generation students cannot benefit from their parents’ college-going experience—a valuable source of cultural capital that helps students navigate college (e.g., understanding the significance of the syllabus, what “office hours” means, or how to cite sources in written assignments).”

U.S. Department of Education
My Goal = Eliminate Barriers to Success

**Develop** tools and strategies for my library instruction sessions to help first-gen students in the library classroom.

**Conduct** more equitable and inclusive instruction sessions.
First Step

Anonymous Pre-Instruction Survey

A simple survey gauging students’ current skill levels, confidence, and overall mindsets surrounding college-level research.

- **Built** an online survey students can answer anonymously
- **Kept** it short (4 or 5 questions max)
- **Asked** simple questions that touch upon confidence, preparation
- **Worked** with profs to develop questions relevant to specific class
- **Distributed** survey prior to library instruction
- **Shared** results with students in class

Google form or other simple survey tool
Anonymous Pre-Instruction Survey (cont.)

**Have you ever had a librarian teach you how to do research?**
- Yes: 29%
- No: 71%

**Do you feel confident that you can do college-level research?**
- Yes: 12%
- No: 24%
- Maybe: 65%

**Do you know what a database is and how to search one?**
- Yes: 41%
- No: 35%
- Maybe: 24%

**What resources do you currently use for your college papers and projects?**
- Google
- Google Scholar
- Wikipedia
- Websites
- Search engines
- Library website
- Archive.org
- The internet
- Britannica
- The library databases
First Step
Anonymous Pre-Instruction Survey (cont.)

Used what I learned from the survey to improve my instruction

Pre-instruction preparation
- Learned about my students’ library education and research skills background
- Gained a better understanding of their collective mindset
- Formulated instruction highlights as needed
- Met my students ‘where they’re at’

Ice-breaker to connect with students
- Shared survey results at beginning of class
- Built their confidence and sense of community
- Reduced feelings of isolation
- Encouraged class participation
- Reduced their anxiety and stress

Post-instruction assessment
- Compared with end-of-class surveys
  - How are students feeling/thinking after instruction session?
  - Do I need to do more to help build confidence levels and inspire connection with material?
- Improved my instruction for next time
Next Steps

What else could I do?

To help first-gens (and others) in my classroom
To improve confidence levels
To make classroom more equitable and inclusive
Clearly Articulated Goals

- **Highlight** important / main elements I’m going to cover
- **Prepare** students by giving an overall framework for their attention
- **Cue** students to specific areas/important elements
- **Tell why** what I’m sharing is important
  - **Tie in** with larger college and career goals
Outlines for Note Taking

- **Highlight** important / main elements of the instruction session
- **Cue** students to specific areas to pay attention to
- **Serve** as a framework for note taking
- **Help** students process information in their own words
- **Provide** a useful reference doc after class
- **Help** with information retention
- **Assist** students to develop note taking skills (help with ‘opportunity deficit’ in this area)
Anonymous Question Posting Boards

- **Address** anonymous questions during class in real time
- **Address** questions afterwards in post-instruction ‘reach out’ email
- **Help** less confident students to ask questions and participate in class
- **Reduce** feelings of isolation
Tools & Strategies

Concept Maps & Flowcharts

*Visuals can make ideas more accessible*

- **Serve** as an alternate means to convey information
- **Break up** instruction sessions and introduce a bit of movement, activity
- **Cue** students to importance of topic
- **Provide** different means of access/understanding
- **Can be** used quickly for a variety of different concepts
  - Keyword selection
  - Research process as a whole
  - Scholarly/peer-reviewed sources

Quick visuals don’t take long, and they enhance learning!
Tools & Strategies

Normalize Help & Resources

Provide information and location for:
• Librarians
• Research Help Desk
• Writing Center
• Tutoring Center
• Peer Reference Assistants
• Research Party Events

Show:
• First-Gen Resources Guide
• Other helpful LibGuides
• Ask A Librarian contact info

First-Gen Student Resources Guide
https://libraryguides.oswego.edu/FirstGen_ResourceGuide
Tools & Strategies

Normalize Help & Resources (cont.)

First-Gen Student Resources Guide
https://libraryguides.oswego.edu/FirstGen_ResourceGuide
Partnerships with Non-Library Teaching Faculty

Provide

- **Relevance** and **context** to your instruction session
- **Recognition** of shared goals
- **Opportunity** for classroom faculty to see survey results
- **Opportunities** for idea sharing
  - Worked with English prof to come up with survey questions for his class
  - Working with Writing Fellows to help develop instruction videos over summer
Tools & Strategies

Next Day ‘Reach Out’

- **Provide** contact info and other resources for help as links or attachments (e.g. citation handouts, notes outline, etc.)
- **Answer** any last questions posted on anonymous board
- **Answer** any questions or comments from post-instruction assessment
- **Reconnect** with students and professor
- **Reinforce** availability of help and resources
Tools & Strategies

Post-Instruction Assessment

Compare to anonymous pre-instruction surveys

What did you like most about this session?

• “I found out the numerous tools I can use in order to be successful in my courses.”
• “It will help me with my future research papers. I'm also aware of all the sources Penfield has to offer.”
• “I feel more confident in my researching.”
• “I didn't know the databases were so easy to use.”

Confidence levels higher!
A Couple of Other Things: Extending the Classroom

Research Parties

- Drop-in space for students to meet with librarians, writing tutors, and each other in a relaxed, fun atmosphere
- Social and collaborative (pizza and chocolate bribes)
- Multiple librarians and student tutors circulate the room, answering questions and assisting students with various research needs

- **Promote** student use and understanding of library’s resources
- **Foster** student familiarity and engagement with librarians and other sources of help
- **Reduce** stress and anxiety associated with doing research
- **Encourage** atmosphere of scholarly collaboration and community
- **Encourage** student interest and receptivity in seeking out research help
Peer Reference Assistants (PRAs)

- Student Peer Reference Assistants work evening and weekend hours at library’s Research Help Desk
- PRAs answer directional and library policy questions, reserve spaces, make referrals, and answer basic research questions
- Refer more complex questions to librarians

- **Encourage** student interest and receptivity in seeking out research help at the Library
- **Reduce** intimidation factor for less confident students
- **Provide** an opportunity for academic and professional development for student workers
Thank you!

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References


