

Tapping into the assets of first-generation students during times of transition

Times of
transition

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to present research on the assets of first-generation college students and offer asset-based practices that can be implemented to support students during emergency transitions.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reviews the literature related to first-generation college students and cultural wealth and then details practices for implementation by librarians working to enhance the transition to online learning for this student group.

Findings – The author identified in the literature six assets of first-generation college students: reflexivity, optimism, academic resilience, goal-orientation, civic-mindedness and proactivity. These assets coupled with Yosso's concept of community cultural wealth provide a frame of reference for examining and implementing services and programs to enhance the educational experience of first-generation college students during emergency transitions.

Originality/value – Whereas existing literature on first-generation college students assumes a deficit lens, this paper puts forth the cultural assets of this population that may be leveraged by librarians. Student assets are positioned alongside forms of capital that also may be utilized to guide the work of librarians.

Keywords Library services, Online education, Transitions, Marginalized communities, Asset-based services, First-generation students, Underserved populations

Paper type Conceptual paper

First-generation college students

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, college students worldwide have unexpectedly made the leap to online education. For first-generation college students (FGCS), the sudden transition may be even more unsettling, leading students to experience discomfort. Students have moved back to their, sometimes, multi-generational households that do not have the comforts that enhance the academic experience such as consistent internet access or laptops and other equipment to borrow (Fischer, 2020). They no longer have a physical distance between home and school and no private space for studying or gathering with friends. There may be feelings of vulnerability with this sudden need or expectation to bring virtual strangers – figuratively and literally – into the home. Additionally, students are now manifesting their school or student personas at home where there can be both support and resistance from family or housemates (Adams and McBrayer, 2020; Tyckoson, 2000). Added to this tension is the very real ongoing issue of the digital divide, which has been noticeably exacerbated during the pandemic, exposing the inequities faced by



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traditionally marginalized communities that also intersect with FGCS including those based on race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender identity, physical ability and geographical areas (e.g. rural and urban communities) (Pew Research Center, 2020; Whitley *et al.*, 2018). The Center for First-Generation Student Success refers to students with these intersecting identities as “first-gen plus”, noting that while the identity “can increase campus-wide engagement, it can also unintentionally lead to misconceptions and gaps in use of services.” (Whitley *et al.*, 2018, p. 7).

First-generation students are a third of the college student population, yet just 27% will earn a degree within four years (Whitley *et al.*, 2018). Compared to continuing-generation students, the lived experiences of FGCS are considered to place them behind the curve in terms of preparedness for college, thus making them likely to fall through institutional cracks. Characteristics of FGCS include coming from families with lower median incomes (\$41,000 compared to \$90,000 for parents of continuing-generation students); working more hours while enrolled and working off-campus at a higher rate; and having dependents at a higher rate than their counterparts (30% compared to 16% for continuing-generation students) (RTI International, 2019a, 2019b). The last two characteristics signal students whose lives take place on the margins of campus. Having dependents may lead one to spend less time on campus and to be less integrated into the college student experience. Being employed and employed off-campus lends to a commuter-like experience, one where students may not participate in extracurricular activities or academic enrichment experiences. In the academic year 2011-2012, first-time FGCS reported using financial aid at a much higher rate than continuing-generation students (65% compared to 49%) (RTI International, 2019c). Unfortunately, other services were used less frequently, most notably academic advising at 55% compared to 72% and academic support services, where the library is often placed on the organizational chart, at 30% compared to 37% for continuing-generation students (RTI International, 2019c). Related to academic library usage, even though FGCS report having positive experiences with school and public libraries, they find the size of the academic library intimidating, books difficult to locate, and the multi-library system complicated (Brinkman *et al.*, 2013). Experiencing a straining situation like the COVID-19 pandemic increases the need for intentional attention and services directed to FGCS to support a smooth transition to online learning.

Libraries have a history of marginalizing patrons (Rubin, 2016; Wiegand and Wiegand, 2018). Higher education systems are no different as noted by diversity, equity and inclusion librarian at the University of Florida, Twanna Hodge:

When higher education was being built, it was not built with women in mind. It was not built for people of color, not built for people of different abilities. It was not built for the people that we are striving to make sure are included today (Hodge, 2020 cited in Leckrone, 2020).

FGCS find higher education institutions cumbersome to navigate (Brinkman *et al.*, 2013; Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2018). Experiencing an abrupt transition to a different mode of instruction makes the experience even more distressing, thus, it is especially important to keep marginalized students from falling in the gap. The purpose of this article is not to provide academic librarians with a delineation of the challenges faced by FGCS. Rather, presented here is an illumination of the cultural assets FGCS bring to college institutions followed by assets-affirming practices librarians may apply when working with those unexpectedly transitioning to the virtual classroom. Now is an optimal time for librarians to intentionally support students by tapping into their culturally derived assets.

Assets of first-generation college students

Research on FGCS has traditionally taken a deficit approach foregrounding skills and preparation lacking in FGCS or family and life circumstances that pose as hinderances to

student academic success. An asset-based approach looks at skills and traits students bring based on their lived experiences and which may be applied in higher education settings. This article takes as its theoretical frame of reference the assets-affirming concept of community cultural wealth (CCW) (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Initially conceived to acknowledge the “array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and used by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression”, CCW takes as its underlying premise that norms, customs and value assessments are largely based on the experiences of western White, middle and upper-class people (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) proposed six forms of capital – aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistant – that expand the view of what is valuable beyond measures of income and the values of the dominant culture. Several forms of capital relate to the experiences of FGCS who share similar marginalized experiences as communities of color based on their perceived differences from the dominant status quo.

Assets of FGCS as identified in the literature can be conceptualized using CCW, giving structure to how educators and librarians think about and take steps to draw on FGCS’s assets during times of transition. Four forms of capital that align with assets of FGCS are aspirational capital, referring to resilience and being able to maintain hope amid barriers; social capital or the networks and contacts that support how one moves through institutions; navigational capital, which acknowledges the skill and agency employed to work within institutions; and linguistic capital or the social and intellectual skills that support various forms of communication (Yosso, 2005). Placing FGCS’s assets in the context of CCW serves to explicitly validate the wealth they possess using language valued by the institutions they inhabit. Further, framing assets using the concept of CCW, because of its broader attention to oppressive institutional practices, acknowledges the barriers and challenges faced by FGCS while illuminating the cultural capital they bring to higher education and that may be leveraged at particularly trying times such as we are currently facing.

As the data show, FGCS begin their undergraduate experience with responsibilities that make their time unlike what is portrayed on television – an experience of clubs, homecoming games, hanging out on the quad and spring break vacations. They also bring to college assets based on their experiences. Garrison and Gardner (2012) identified four sets of assets exemplified by FGCS, presented here in alignment with Yosso’s forms of capital. First, FGCS are proactive, which manifests as resourceful, self-reliant and able to think strategically. Students surveyed by Garrison and Gardner (2012) were experienced in building informal information networks of staff and parents of friends, finding answers through non-traditional means an asset noted by Brinkman *et al.* (2013, p. 646) as a response to “weaknesses with formal support networks on campus”. Students displayed self-reliance and independence, charting their own path as evidenced by their college pursuit. As experienced strategic thinkers, FGCS possess problem-solving skills that serve them well in courses as well as managing the byzantine system of higher education. For them, planning is not hasty as there is no room for error. Proactive and resourceful individuals, FGCS possess social and navigational capital honed from years of dealing with institutions in their personal lives. For example, undocumented FGCS have experienced being called on to translate documents and processes and to be an information resource for family or community members (Suárez-Orozco *et al.*, 2015). Through proactivity, FGCS draw on their navigational capital, which at times work in tandem with their social capital *vis-à-vis* their self-initiated private networks used to negotiate institutions not created with them in mind. Related to this combination of social and navigational capital are interdependence (an asset identified by Stephens *et al.*, 2012) and civic engagement, an asset identified in

undocumented FGCS referring to their community activism and work in community organizations, which actually served as motivation for college (Suárez-Orozco *et al.*, 2015).

FGCS are goal-oriented, mission-driven and academically resilient (Garrison and Gardner, 2012; Suárez-Orozco *et al.*, 2015). For some, obtaining a degree is in service to their goal of having a better future with more earning potential and career possibilities. These goal-oriented students are persistent – learning from mistakes and pledging to do better next time – and flexible in that they are adept at adapting to changing circumstances; in this sense, FGCS may be primed for the transition to online learning relying on their aspirational capital and ability to remain hopeful in the midst of barriers and transitions, though experiencing a pandemic is especially unsettling.

Another asset related to aspirational capital observed by Garrison and Gardner (2012) is students' optimism as demonstrated by their positivity and enthusiasm for what they experienced as college students. Students exhibited a "silver lining" (p. 37) perspective even when faced with academic disappointment. Their hopefulness is what led them to pursue higher education and, coupled with being goal-oriented, leads them to persist. These FGCS also demonstrated self-confidence recognizing their accomplishments, strengths and abilities.

The final asset reported by Garrison and Gardner (2012) was that of reflexivity as expressed by students' insightfulness and self-awareness. The group of FGCS spoke openly about themselves, traits and preferences, acknowledging their resilience in the face of doubt from even their families. Reflexivity could be used by FGCS as a means of creative expression in line with the communications aspect of linguistic capital.

The assets of FGCS reported in the literature – reflexivity, optimism, academic resilience, goal-orientation, civic-mindedness and proactivity – and related forms of CCW are valuable for handling the challenges of higher education particularly in times of emergency transition. Of course, FGCS are not a monolith; some assets may not apply, and others may lie unrecognized. Nonetheless, librarians are advised to work with faculty to use identified assets of FGCS for the benefit of easing their transition to remote education.

Asset-based approaches to transitioning online

Institutions identify FGCS through admissions or financial aid applications. Such information is not always passed along to faculty or staff for privacy reasons (Whitley *et al.*, 2018), thus to prevent FGCS from falling through the cracks, intentionality is essential. This will certainly involve working across campus departments, starting with faculty and advisors. Based on the literature, presented here are pragmatic approaches the author proposes librarians can take to support the transition to online learning for FGCS. Implementation at the class-level with buy-in and advocacy by faculty can springboard to broader implementation campus-wide.

Integrate library tutorials into course learning management system

First-generation students' proactivity and resourcefulness serve as entry points for librarians to position the library as an online resource by creating well-organized and curated resources to support the transition. Tutorials on the library's website serve this purpose, however embedding resources in the online course's learning management system (LMS) has the appeal of easier access, reducing the probability of getting lost on the library's website. Librarians are advised to work with faculty to determine course-specific resources to include based on assignments and course objectives along with traditional research resources nurturing self-reliance in a contained space. The space can also be used to decipher the cultural language of the library with a guide to library lingo such as that found

on University of Wyoming library's LibGuide for FGCS [1]. Integrating library resources and tutorials into the course LMS supports navigational capital supporting students' agency to manage online library resources in an intuitive, closed environment and boosting optimism having done so effectively.

Build alliances with trusted staff and advisors

Though FGCS report feeling overwhelmed and frustrated by formal information structures such as academic libraries, they report having positive prior library experience (i.e. public or school libraries) in addition to taking initiative to cultivate informal information networks consisting of various staff for non-academic and academic matters (Brinkman *et al.*, 2013). Graf's (2019) suggestion that librarians diversify authority when it comes to information literacy and library resources is applicable to enhancing the online transition for students. Though group work is common in college and brings some social interaction that may become part of students' information network, one-off assignment-focused interactions or activities that are not personally meaningful to students may not contribute to building the social network or support system students desire. Authentic relationships are important to first-generation, thus extending on Graf's (2019) idea and recognizing that students studying online may be less inclined to visit campus and serendipitously come across information about library resources, librarians are encouraged to educate staff within FGCS' informal networks on library resources, equipping them to support students through the transition to online learning. Students have built trusting authentic relationships with non-library staff; equip these supporters with information that may be imparted to FGCS who already have their attention. An example is the collaboration between librarians and advisors at the Miami University Oxford campus (Birkenhauer, 2020). Librarians are members of the campus advising association and developed a Canvas module to inform advisors of the role librarians play in students' academic success. A partnership like this but based on CCW, connects the dots between academic skills and the assets students bring with them helping students identify ways to transfer those assets to school situations. Moving FGCS to the center involves acknowledging that they bring something to the table that may be transferred to the situation at hand.

Create transparent assignments

Librarians already work with faculty when creating course-specific information literacy sessions. In support of FGCS transitioning to online courses, they are advised to extend the collaboration to include assignment design. Collier and Morgan (2008) found that continuing- and first-generation students have better success when and prefer that expectations and requirements are explicitly communicated such that goals are clear and they know what to aim for. In support of FGCS' goal-oriented asset, librarians are advised to partner with faculty to create assignments using transparent assignment design (Leuzinger and Gallo, 2019). Key elements of transparent assignment design are:

- clearly communicating the purpose, transferability and/or real-world relevance of the assignment;
- describe the tasks of the assignment; and
- plainly articulate the grading criteria.

The first element plays to the mission-driven qualities of FGCS and was practiced by almost all librarians surveyed (Leuzinger and Gallo, 2019). Because of its focus on thorough communication, transparent assignment design may also reduce potential for instructions

and expectations to get lost in translation, as happens in online settings, which are not always as conducive to clarifications about course content. Further, feeling competent in successfully completing assignments may bring back any optimism students had for college prior to the transition.

Encourage reflection

Interviews show FGCS to be self-aware, insightful and thoughtful when talking about personal traits and preferences and life experiences, demonstrating gratitude and resilience (Brinkman *et al.*, 2013; Garrison and Gardner, 2012). Students in a community college information literacy class, many of whom were first-generation, demonstrated persistence and success due largely to the asset-based and reflection-oriented pedagogical practices used by the instructor (Morrison, 2018). In the rap and hip-hop themed information literacy course, students wrote educational autoethnographies discussing their “cultural framework, K-12 schooling, family history and relationship, and their daily educational experiences” (Morrison, 2018, p. 75). Such an exercise is well-suited for the current situation given the changes students are making in their educational experience. Librarians are encouraged to create opportunities where students can reflect on how their research process has changed due to sudden online-only access to resources or lament the loss of study space with the closure of the academic library among other reflective topics related to the transition.

Stimulate civic engagement

Research shows that FGCS are rich in social capital through the communities they serve and their community networks of support in personal and academic matters (Brinkman *et al.*, 2013; Suárez-Orozco *et al.*, 2015). Before the emergency move to online learning, students likely developed a cadre of peers for which their civic engagement asset can be activated in the form of peer support. Further, peers are one of the first three sources of information FGCS consult (Tsai, 2012). Thus, in the spirit of the African American proverb “each one teach one”, librarians can work with FGCS to share with their community of peers tips and tricks based on their post-transition library, research and online experiences. Drawing on students’ linguistic capital and social media expertise, this peer-to-peer voluntary activity may take the form of short video or audio recordings, depending on students’ abilities and access to technology. The short bursts of peer-supplied information puts a friendly face to an unsettling experience and encourages students to continue connecting with and helping one another.

Conclusion

Literature about FGCS has long focused on the challenges they face; however, the unexpected transition to online courses brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to serve this population differently. Librarians are encouraged to adopt an asset-based approach to working with FGCS and faculty who might have FGCS in their courses. Proactivity, goal-orientation, optimism, civic engagement, academic resilience and reflexivity, assets of FGCS identified by Garrison and Gardner (2012) and Suárez-Orozco *et al.* (2015), together with Yosso’s concept of CCW, offer a foundation in which services, course resources and programs can be grounded. The five asset- and community wealth-based approaches presented here may be implemented by librarians and educators alike in support of FGCS’ adjustment to learning in a virtual environment.

Note

1. Library resources for first generation students. 2019. University of Wyoming. Last modified August 26, 2019, available at: <https://uwyo.libguides.com/c.php?g=955135&p=6892285>

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