

When the Helicopters are Silent: The Information Seeking Strategies of First-Generation College Students

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Introduction

Research on Millennial students suggests that today's young adults are more likely to consult their parents first when seeking information.¹ In colleges, the convenience of cell phones enables students to ask their parents for help with everything from classes and homework to roommates and laundry.² Yet, if students are supposedly turning to their parents as major sources of information, what happens to students whose parents never went to college? Where do those first-generation students go for information, what are their challenges, and what is our role, as information professionals, in providing assistance?

As higher education becomes more accessible and necessary to obtaining future employment, an increasing number of first-generation students are attending college. Previous studies indicate that first-generation students are a high-risk population, with higher drop-out rates,³ lower levels of academic self-confidence, lower grades, and lower self-efficacy than their peers.⁴ In addition, they are more likely to be ethnic minorities, come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and enter college less academically prepared.⁵ First-generation students are also more likely to report feelings of being "outsiders" on campus.⁶ While the challenges that first-generation students face are well documented, no studies have specifically investigated the information-seeking behaviors of this population.

In particular, little is known about how first-generation students' self-perceptions of their abilities to find everyday life information may impact their academic information seeking behaviors. This paper holistically explores how first-generation students' non-academic and academic information seeking behaviors impact each other, and how the library functions as a facilitator or barrier to information.

Literature Review

Reijo Savolainen's theory of everyday life information seeking (ELIS) provides a useful framework for examining strategies that first-generation students use to navigate campus life.⁷ Savolainen describes how people have an internal, "meaningful order of things" that shape their everyday lives. This order is structured according to choices one makes in terms of available time, resources, and networks.⁸ Savolainen calls the active maintenance of this order "mastery of life." When things are out of order, individuals engage in various problem-solving or information-seeking activities. These activities are not random: they are grounded in one's culture and social class, as well as past experiences.⁹

While Savolainen's empirical study focuses on information-seeking in a non-work environment, he cautions against setting up what he calls a "false dichotomy" of information seeking processes in work

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versus non-work environments. Rather, he argues that individuals' lives are holistic—one's meaningful order of things may overlap between work and non-work situations—and that information seeking strategies in all environments complement or influence each other.¹⁰

Previous research conducted by Lisa Given on mature undergraduate students further demonstrates how work and non-work information seeking behaviors described by Savolainen overlap within a university setting.¹¹ Given argues that for mature undergraduates, a holistic view of students' lives is necessary, and that the division of academic versus non-academic information seeking is not always clear.¹² As an example, Given describes how students tended to turn to academic resources such as professors when they encountered non-academic needs such as finding childcare. Given also describes how mature students drew from everyday life experiences to complete academic work. Interestingly, Given argues that mature students' primary information needs were academic, and that "the library was a common starting point" for research and assignments.¹³

Currently, no study has explored the everyday life information seeking behaviors of first-generation college students. The majority of studies conducted to date on first-generation students have come from the fields of student affairs, education, and sociology. The studies fall into 4 categories: (1) Quantitative studies that describe general characteristics of first-generation students, often in comparison with non-first-generation students; (2) Quantitative studies that focus on variables that impact first-generation students' retention or grades; (3) Qualitative studies that explore how first-generation students experience college, focusing on issues of identity formation; (4) Assessments of intervention programs or initiatives. Among these studies, a few suggest that first-generation students may have different information needs than their peers. Yazedjian, et. al.'s study reported that first generation students' ($n=4$) parents did not understand college life and could not offer advice.¹⁴ Torres, et. al. found that among Latino/a students, some whom were the first in their family to attend college, did not recognize advisors as authority figures for academic information, and relied on pamphlets or peers instead.¹⁵ Other studies allude to the idea that first-generation students receive less "support" or "help" from their parents,¹⁶ but these studies do not specifi-

cally focus on information seeking behaviors.

Within the literature of library and information science, only a few studies have addressed first-generation students as a population. The first was David Tyckoson's "Library Services for the First-Generation College Student" in 2000. Using interviews as well as surveys and previous literature, Tyckoson described first-generation students as struggling to balance competing priorities of academic and family life while in college. While the study did not focus on information seeking, Tyckoson's students also reported having either very low or very high exposure to libraries prior to enrolling in college.¹⁷ More recently, Logan and Pickard explored how first-generation students understand the research process. Contrary to previous literature, Logan and Pickard found that first-generation students had reasonable experience with research prior to attending college. This study described various information seeking behaviors related to the research process, including searching and selecting sources, and asking for help on assignments. However, it was not clear from the findings how first-generation students' research patterns were any different from college students in general.¹⁸

Our study adds to the previous scholarship by considering how first-generation students seek academic information and experience the library, but positions this information seeking behavior within the context of the strategies they use to navigate college life in general. A student's research does not happen in a vacuum, but is tied to whether he or she, on a holistic level, has the necessary information and tools to succeed in context of their overall college experience. Our study had four aims:

1. To investigate how first-generation students perceived their level of knowledge about college;
2. To describe the everyday life information seeking strategies that first-generation students utilized in college within the context of their prior strategies for finding college-related information;
3. To explore how first-generation students' perceptions of their own college knowledge or their everyday life information seeking practices impacted their academic information seeking behaviors;
4. To understand how the library was used or perceived by first-generation students in the

context of their everyday life and academic information seeking.

Methodology

We invited students who self-identified as the “first in their family to go to college” to participate in focus groups. Invitations were distributed to offices and programs on campus, including residential life, diversity and academic support programs, and student activities. Fifteen women and two men, from a range of academic majors and from freshmen to seniors, participated in four focus groups.

The interviews consisted of fourteen open-ended questions, designed to frame discussions about information seeking within the context of the students’ college experiences. The focus groups ranged in length from fifty to ninety minutes, and covered five broad topic areas: (1) students’ decision to attend college, (2) their college-related information seeking behaviors prior to enrolling, (3) their college experience in general, (4) their everyday life information seeking experiences in college, and (5) their feelings about research and the university’s library. Finally, we gave students an opportunity to comment further on anything that we had or had not asked during the focus group. These questions enabled us to determine whether our sampled students’ experience was similar or deviant from existing literature on first-generation students. The interviews were audio and video recorded, and then transcribed.

Data was analyzed using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR).¹⁹ This method draws theories about data from the ground up, and involves several prescribed steps. After each member of the team independently coded focus group transcripts, we negotiated a consensus set of domains (major themes) and core ideas. An external auditor checked domains against the transcripts and provided feedback. Finally, we conducted a cross-analysis, in which core ideas were characterized in terms of frequency of occurrence. In our analysis, four domains and sixteen core ideas emerged. This paper focuses on themes relating to information seeking and to libraries.

Results

Domain 1: Financial Issues

First-generation students spent a significant amount of time worrying as well as seeking information about financial matters. Although we never asked any ques-

tions specifically related to finances, students reported struggling with issues including selecting their college based on amount of financial aid, deciding when to purchase a textbook, and needing to have a job. Respondents described feeling not as “privileged” as other students on campus, and that this was a source of pride as well as frustration. As one student put it, “There are cockier students who do want to flaunt ‘Hey I’m better than you and I have this much money,’ and [they] laugh at me. ‘Oh you have to maintain a certain GPA to keep scholarships.’ Yeah, and I’m back [home] on the street. Mom and dad can’t afford to feed me for the rest of my life. I’m sorry. I have to make a living. I have to do something. I can’t just depend on my parents.”

Domain 2: Relationships with Family

Students typically described feeling disconnected because of their family’s inability to relate to their college experiences. One student described feeling like her college life was separate from her family by saying “I practically have to divorce my family for 10 months out of the year, and that’s hard.” Others said they felt the need to “teach” their families about their lives. Students also typically saw themselves in the role of nurturer in their families, wanting to protect parents or being asked to help siblings. Several students expressed concern about “stressing out” their parents with details of everyday college life to which their parents could not relate. Others reported feeling a responsibility to help their siblings, and other family members, with schoolwork. However, some first-generation students tended to withhold information from their parents or generally keep conversations vague in order to protect their independence. One student described taking advantage of their mother’s lack of college knowledge: “I’ll say I’m studying for a final, and she’ll say, ‘Well didn’t the semester just start?’ And I’m like, ‘Uh, it’s an early midterm final’ or something, ‘a pre-final.’”

Domain 3: College Support Systems

Many students had participated in formal recruitment programs for minority or low-income students. However, our respondents felt that these programs, while well intentioned, had problems. For some students, the multiplicity of programs was a source of confusion. Others expressed concern over the university’s focus on first- or second-year diversity recruiting ef-

forts and perceived a lack of follow-up: “I feel like the university, gives off an image as how much they want to welcome students, but then I don’t feel like its executed in a way that’s effective sometimes. Especially like diversity seminars or whatever... Like, now that you’re here you’re just here. You know, do your own thing...” Some students described these programs as feeling “fake” or “not sincere.” Additionally, while most formal programs were targeted towards students of color, our respondents described many other facets of diversity such as religion, sexual orientation, class, ideology, and age.

While students discussed some weaknesses with formal support networks on campus, many also pointed out that informal support networks were more effective and valuable in not only feeling welcomed on campus, but also in finding information. Several participants reported that faculty and staff were valuable sources of information as well as support. Personal contacts created an environment in which first-generation students felt comfortable both in seeking information as well as a family-like protective care given to them by support staff such as bus drivers and janitors. Several described faculty members going out of their way to help them: one student spoke of a faculty member who had given her money when she was struggling to pay bills, to buy books, and to afford food. Others described using “bigs” in their sororities or fraternities for information or support.

Some students identified faculty or staff members who were their mentors on campus. It was not clear whether these mentoring relationships were developed through formal or informal channels. For example, one minority student described seeking out faculty and staff who “looked like me” who might become their mentor. However, some offices on campus do provide mentoring programs, typically for students affiliated with a low-income scholarship program or with Diversity Affairs programming. Interestingly, only students of color mentioned having faculty mentors, who were also persons of color.

Domain 4: Information Seeking is Overwhelming

Students generally perceived an information deficit as compared to their peers concerning the social and academic operation of college. They assumed there was a “system” to learn, and trying to navigate it caused daily stress and frustration. As one student put it, “I feel like [people know more things than me], all the

time. Because even if they are freshmen or seniors, I feel like they have the inside scoop on things like that, and they say it to me and I’m like, was I supposed to know that? ...It makes me feel overwhelmed ‘cause I don’t have that background, to know that this is what you do.” A further source of frustration was the jargon and vocabulary used in university life, which compounded their feelings of being lost.

While they perceived a lack of information, their parents were unable to provide it. For some students, this was despite the fact that they talked to their parents frequently and could ask them for information about other things. Others reported that their parents simply could not help them, even if they did ask. “I don’t ask my mom about any advice anymore, because she’s horrible at it. She’s like ‘I don’t know what to tell you,’ every time, even if it’s about the smallest thing.” One student made the distinction between having their parents be supportive of them going to college and their ability to actually offer any advice: “Maybe we had support from our families, but we don’t have them here with us to like, buy the books or take us places... It’s like [for other students] their parents are their mentors and they can tell them what to do... unlike us, we just go and we learn from our experiences.” Another student mentioned that when she turned to her parents for advice, she was actually discouraged to persevere and succeed: “I was frustrated with my roommate, and with my grades—I couldn’t get them up and I kept struggling no matter how much I kept studying and it just wasn’t working. But then I call my mom and she’s like, ‘oh well then come home.’ And I’m like, that’s not what I need to hear right now. I need someone to help me with study skills and stuff, you know, asking what do you do... how do you do things so you can succeed?”

In terms of where students sought information instead, about half reported they first tried to find it themselves on the Internet, the university website, and by calling campus offices. However, students found this process as frustrating and exhausting. About a third of participants described close personal relationships with faculty and staff members, and said these were the first people they turned to for information. On the other hand, some students also reported their advisor or mentor was not particularly helpful or seemed unfriendly. Several students also mentioned it wasn’t always clear which advisor (departmental, residential, academic support program, etc.) they needed

to turn to for certain kinds of information, and so they would get shuffled between departments.

While first-generation students felt prepared academically, they felt impeded by the lack of adequate study skills and the ability to manage time. Furthermore, the library, including its services and functions, was a confusing world, adding to this overall general academic stress. Influenced by their past use of small school or public libraries, participants' idea of the library was traditional, either a place with books or a place to study. Their positive experiences of the past and 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." Nearly universally, the respondents felt intimidated by the size of the library, the difficulty in locating a book, and the complexity of the system of multiple libraries on campus. In some cases, the library was not seen as a place to "get things done." It was too noisy, too hard to find a quiet place to study, had too many sections, and had confusing technology. For some students, the inability to find information in the library reinforced their feelings of failure and frustration.

Discussion

The students in our study shared many characteristics of first-generation students from previous studies: most of them came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and reported struggling with adjusting to college. In contrast to the existing literature, our students generally felt emotionally supported and encouraged by their parents to attend college. Most of them also reported that they felt academically prepared for college.

Once they arrived at college, our students found that formal university support systems were not always helpful in providing information. Instead, students developed informal support networks to meet their information and support needs, for both academic and non-academic types of information. The students involved in fraternities and sororities reported turning to their "biggs" in these organizations for help with navigating college life as well as with academic questions. On the other hand, Greek life was often cited as another source of confusion about college life to those who were not involved. Institutional diversity also plays a role in how students find support networks, as students sought or found men-

tors of similar backgrounds. Minority students mentioned finding mentors in faculty and staff of color. This suggests that while formal diversity-related programming may not have been as effective, it was very important to minority students to be able to connect with other minority faculty and staff. Finally, students mentioned turning to working-class university staff such as bus drivers, custodians, and cafeteria servers as another source of information and support. While it is not clear whether first-generation students felt more able to relate to non-academic staff due to socioeconomic or class-based affinity, it is clear that in general, the students sought both academic and non-academic information from non-academic sources.

Like the mature undergraduates in Lisa Given's study, first-generation students' academic and non-academic information seeking behaviors overlapped. However, unlike Given's students who reported the most difficulty in finding academic information, first-generation students in our study reported that non-academic information was the biggest source of concern. They expressed frustration in trying to find information about college life in general, and consistently mentioned that they believed their non-first-generation peers did not struggle with the same information issues.

In the context of Savolainen's theory of everyday life information seeking, this sense of frustration among first-generation students indicates that they felt that they were not achieving "mastery of life." Savolainen discusses how "mastery of life may be either passive or active." Passive mastery of life is a monitoring of everyday life when things are generally in a coherent order. This passive, orienting information is gained without effort, through channels encountered in one's immediate environment. Active mastery of life, on the other hand refers to problem-solving activities that people engage in when an individual's "meaningful order of things" is disturbed. This involves the active seeking of practical information needed to solve the problem at hand.²⁰ The situations that first-generation students encountered on campus were outside their "normal" culture and social experience, causing them to engage in active problem solving on a regular basis. Our students used words such as "inside scoop" or "knew tricks of the trade" to describe how they viewed their peers' knowledge base, and "out of the loop" to describe themselves. While first-generation students struggled to figure

things out on their own, they felt that their peers had simply been able to learn this information passively. They assumed that their peers “just know things ... because they’ve had this conversation before with their parents.”

Our study also revealed some evidence that first-generation students’ self-perceptions as being information-poor in the realm of their everyday lives on campus impacted their academic information seeking behaviors. One student described the following experience in the library: “I was looking for a whole section that wasn’t there and I thought I was going crazy and finally I went and asked someone and they said, ‘Oh that’s at the science library.’ So I said ‘Okay thank you,’ but... the science library? I didn’t know where that was... anyway, like I said I didn’t like writing papers already but I didn’t think I’d fail at that too.” In this reference transaction, the librarian expected that the student would either know where the science library was, or if not, would ask for directions. The student’s response, however, suggests that he had already encountered so many information-seeking failures on campus that he did not pursue directions. Instead, he assumed that not knowing the location of the Science Library was simply another example of how he was failing to succeed on campus. Consequently, he never retrieved the book he needed for his assignment.

While first-generation students may not be unique in feeling lost on campus, it is significant that they repeatedly used language such as “hidden thing I don’t know,” “don’t understand the system,” or “not for me” to describe their perceptions. This language implies that first-generation students believe that they are outsiders, and furthermore, several students indicated that this belief was a source of stress. Several students described feeling frustrated when they felt that the person they were seeking help from expected them to know something about campus life. In one student’s words, “I’m sorry it was such a sin for not knowing. Was that in the manual I lost?” Many students reported not asking for clarification when they encountered jargon that they did not understand, such as “bursar,” “Blackboard,” or “Banner Web” (the university’s registration system). This too suggests students are repeatedly encountering information failure.

While a majority of our participants described feeling lost on campus, most of them also reported feeling that this was not the case when seeking college information while in high school. Almost all of

our students mentioned using their guidance counselor as a one-stop source of any information about college, including selecting schools, the application process, finding financial aid or scholarships, visiting campuses, and preparing for college by taking the proper courses. However, once first-generation students entered college, they discovered that information was fragmented into divisions and offices with terms like “academic affairs” or “student affairs” that would have little meaning outside the university. Figuring out what office, or perhaps offices, to go to was stressful and non-intuitive. Instead of one advisor, a student might have a financial aid advisor, a resident advisor, an academic advisor, and a program advisor, or even more. Within libraries, students might be referred to a subject librarian, a first-year librarian, or another specialist librarian for their information needs. Many first-generation students perceived that other students could ask their parents when they had questions about the “big picture” of navigating college life, whereas they could not.

Libraries often view themselves as referral centers for both research as well general university services. They partner with writing centers, tutoring programs, and offer workshops and services to develop information literacy, technology skills, and many other related academic skills. Labels such as “information commons,” illustrate that libraries perceive themselves as one-stop-shops for academic and non-academic information. Despite this, first-generation students did not see the libraries in this light. In fact, the majority of respondents reported feeling some form of anxiety in the library, despite their prior positive library and research experiences. Students expected the familiar, small, quiet, and easy-to-navigate libraries of their high school days. In contrast, they described the main university library as loud, crowded, and unfamiliar, with hard-to-locate resources. Like the larger university environment, first-generation students found libraries to be fragmented into silos of information. Multiple libraries on campus and various departments within those libraries added to first-generation students’ challenges in information seeking. Students in our study reported that this “cognitive dissonance” led to anxiety and negative feelings about the library and their abilities to use its services.²¹ Some students reported actively avoiding the library or believing that it was not useful for them. Others simply assumed that the library was one more instance of academic

cluelessness. In addition to feeling overwhelmed with financial pressures, dealing with changing family dynamics, and new social pressures time management, etc., students faced anxiety in a place on campus uniquely situated to help alleviate that anxiety and to meet their information needs.

Conclusions and Opportunities for Further Research

The findings in our study are exploratory and are limited by the demographics and programs offered at our university. However, we can offer a few suggestions for libraries when considering interactions with and services for first-generation students.

1. Transactions at public service points don't occur in a vacuum. Library staff need to be careful when using library jargon, and seek to clarify terms and directions. Building empathy in public service librarians for the particular challenges that first-generation students may face can help to bridge the information gap and to alleviate students' anxiety.
2. It is important for libraries to employ a diverse staff that encompasses a range of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientations, socioeconomic backgrounds, or other life experiences.
3. Through establishing connections to and partnerships with other campus departments, libraries can advocate for the needs of first-generation students with faculty, staff, and university services. Examples of programs may include living learning communities, mentoring or outreach programs, orientations, courses and seminars, workshops, or residence hall programs. By fostering these partnerships, librarians can learn more about specific everyday life information seeking challenges that first-generation students might have on their campuses. Forming partnerships and presenting the library as a place where one can go to find connections to non-academic as well as academic information can also help erode perceptions of the library as a book warehouse.
4. Librarians should also seek to be mentors and/or become involved in student life and academic affairs programming.

In considering the information seeking behaviors of first-generation students, it is important to examine both everyday life information seeking as well as

research skills and processes. First-generation students' information-seeking behaviors are not always partitioned by function or need, but often intertwine between their academic and non-academic lives. Our study shows that while first-generation students may feel academically prepared for college, they may feel information-poor in comparison to their peers when it comes to understanding the university system. Generally unable to turn to their parents for information about college, first-generation students face additional hurdles in all aspects of their information seeking while on campus. Libraries can play significant roles in connecting students to fragmented campus information sources as well as in mitigating and alleviating the library anxiety students face in conducting research and using our services. While these challenges may or may not be unique to first-generation students, addressing them will benefit students and improve the services libraries provide.

Notes

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