INTRODUCTION

Students in the transition to college bring new perspectives to the work of academic libraries. Many of these students have only visited high school and public libraries prior to college, and a university library may be confusing and intimidating. Additionally, the recent years of pandemic-related library closures may have resulted in an even greater lack of familiarity with libraries as a part of an academic community, and thus lack of understanding of how academic libraries can support research and coursework. While libraries often have extensive outreach programs for first-year students, such as tours and orientations, building an understanding of library services before students even arrive on campus is important to help students access resources early in their college career and give them a feeling of belonging and control in a new space.

From the academic library perspective, learning the characteristics of students in transition to college is equally important. Just as the student experience prior to college has changed in recent years, the needs of students who arrive as first-year students have also changed. The traditional focus on tours and orientations must be paired with efforts by library personnel to understand the current students in the transition to college and create library spaces and services that meet their evolving needs.

This outreach to students in transition is not a one-size-fits-all project. Students from minoritized backgrounds and students who are the first in their family to attend college are potentially especially vulnerable to discomfort in library spaces, because academic libraries, like their parent universities, were created for majority identities. Library services, collections, and spaces are thus more likely to reflect these majority identities and feel unwelcoming to new students who do not fit this mold. This also makes these students ideal for academic library outreach as their backgrounds and needs do not match traditional library services, and feedback from minoritized and first-generation students in transition will help academic libraries understand and welcome a diversifying student body.

The University of Portland (UP), Clark Library created a pilot program to reach high school students from an academic library at a mid-size private university. The grant-funded program focused on outreach to nearby high schools which are majority non-white and serve significant populations of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students who will be the first in their family to attend college. The program also employed UP first-generation (FGEN) students as library experts and tour guides, thereby providing both a growth opportunity for the FGEN students as well as peer contacts and resources for the high school students. We expect that the documented experiences of high school students encountering the university library

* Xan Arch, Dean, Clark Library, University of Portland, arch@up.edu; Heidi Senior, Reference/Instruction Librarian, Clark Library, University of Portland, senior@up.edu
will have a significant impact on our library’s strategy for constructing services that jumpstart library use in first-year students, especially those coming from first-generation and minoritized backgrounds. Instead of focusing on how we teach students to understand academic libraries that were never built for them, the Library Bridge program values the unique viewpoints of the students and uses these viewpoints to inform new library services that better meet the needs of students in the transition to college.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Supporting High School Students in the Transition to College

The Library Bridge program’s focus on outreach to high school students continues a rich historical tradition of academic library connections with secondary schools. Librarians’ publications about high school students until the 1980s largely focused on the academic library’s role in providing resources lacking in secondary schools.4 With Mellon’s5 coining of “library anxiety” as one of several barriers to library use among college students, the conversation changed to one of academic librarians’ direct outreach to high school students, in which tours, orientations, and information literacy instruction would ease their transition to higher education.6 Other reported benefits of outreach to high school students include bridging the digital divide;7 connecting with the community surrounding a university;8 recruitment and encouraging applications;9 and sending the message that students are capable of pursuing higher education.10

These approaches to helping students in the transition to college understand the academic library match much of the literature on supporting first-generation students, another group featured in our Library Bridge program. Research on first-generation students and the academic library has noted that this group may be less likely to reach out to academic advisors or other support staff for essential resources and information, as they may be unaware of available resources, insecure about their lack of cultural knowledge, or unwilling to impose on staff.11 In order to support these students, the literature has indicated that institutions need to take an active role in fostering validation and promoting active learning and interpersonal growth among students, faculty, and staff.12 This can involve reaching out to students, designing activities that support student engagement, and providing culturally responsive support services that meet the unique needs of first-generation college students.

Benefits of Peer Collaborations

By employing peer ambassadors to give the library tours, we heeded research on the most efficacious method to convey information to students. In considering how to connect students with information at institutions of higher education, researchers have classified students’ information sources as “hot”—familiar, informal, trusted, such as family and friends; “cold”—more formal and institutional, less trusted, such as official communications and less-familiar institutional authority figures; and “warm”—between the two, such as professors, peer leaders, and tutors.13 Because reaching the “hot” sources can be difficult, researchers recommend that institutions connect with “warm” sources to convey information effectively. Librarian researchers have concurred. Arch & Gilman14 suggested creating a program of peer mentors for first-generation students; Neurohr15 found that “seeing fellow students studying or doing academic work in the library spaces matters for first-generation students” and that “being around peers who are doing academic work supports students’ own behavior toward academic work.”

Asset-Based Approaches

Contrary to much of the literature on first-generation students and students in transition which takes a deficit lens, a central focus of the Library Bridge program was honoring the perspectives and feedback of these students. Maluski and Bruce16 recently questioned the concept of library anxiety as a student characteristic that needs to be “fixed” and instead posited that the hegemonic structures of academic libraries are the problem and evolving libraries based on the stated needs of students is the best route for lessening any anxiety related to libraries. Similarly, in a critical review of the literature on libraries and first-generation college students or students in transi-
tion to college, Hodge found that librarians were attempting to “fix” students’ perceived deficits rather than focusing their efforts on “identifying and addressing the systems and structures that limit library use”.\(^{17}\) Hodge added that addressing issues at the library level might benefit all library users. Inspired by these concepts of an asset-based approach to student knowledge and experience, we chose to focus on how high school students and first-generation students could teach us as a library, rather than focus on helping them understand the library as it currently is. Our system of peer mentors decenters librarians as the sole authority on library usage and implements an asset-based approach by recognizing that more experienced students have valuable experiences that ought to be shared with newer students.\(^{19}\)

**POSITIONALITY STATEMENT**

The authors self-identify as cisgender White women, and consequently have not experienced the same level of discomfort with traditional White spaces such as academic libraries as have our minoritized students and faculty colleagues. Through the work of the Library Bridge program, we strove to be humble and mindful in soliciting feedback from minoritized and first-generation students about library services and spaces, understanding that we invariably brought our own lens to the information we received. We acknowledged this lens in the process and, to the extent possible, implemented the suggestions we received as authentic viewpoints of those we serve as a library, rather than relying on our own perspectives.

**LIBRARY BRIDGE PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

In the Library Bridge program, we invited local high school students to learn about the university library to support their transition to college and interviewed these students to gain insights into the student experience encountering the library space and services for the first time. We based the interview questions on recent research on first-generation college students and academic libraries,\(^{20}\) with the goal of extending this earlier work to students in the transition to college. See Appendix A for the interview protocol and questions.

Our focus on nearby high schools was intentionally designed to reach minoritized students and those who would be the first in their family to attend college. To determine which students to contact, we relied on lists provided by the UP Admissions Office of students from our target high schools who had expressed interest in the university. That helped narrow down the set of students to contact, meant we had contact information readily available, and provided some context for the communication because they had registered interest with UP. However, using Admissions Office lists was an acknowledged convenience method and meant that we limited our pool of students to those who were already considering college and possibly, since our university is private and relatively expensive, those who may have greater financial resources than other students at their high school.

The other population we reached as part of this program was first-generation college students at the university. We posted a job titled First-Generation High School Ambassador on the university student employment board and worked with our first-generation student office to help identify potential students. These students served as tour guides for the high school students and were provided with training, both in using the library and in serving as ambassadors for it. We expected that this peer contact for the high school students could help create a greater sense of belonging in the library space, especially through shared stories of the ambassadors’ own library use.

The FGEN students expressed during onboarding interviews that they themselves were initially apprehensive about using the library, so hiring them as guides for the high school outreach program provided a way for them to develop a greater depth of understanding about library resources and to feel empowered in their own library use. It also gave them a stronger sense of ownership of the library space, as well as a chance to develop presentation and mentoring skills through their interactions with high school students. We felt that it was important that these FGEN students help shape the program from their own perspectives, so in addition to learning about the library and giving tours, the ambassadors’ work time was spent providing feedback on the tour script and sharing their impressions of the high school students’ questions and points of confusion. Bringing them into the program as partners gave us a further avenue to use student viewpoints to guide our work as a library.
Grant Support

The Library Bridge program was supported in the 2022 calendar year by a grant from the Jackson Foundation. The award money primarily funded stipends and transportation allowances for the high school students who shared their impressions and experiences with us. We felt it was important to compensate these high school students for their feedback on our services and for helping us evolve as a library towards a better understanding of the needs of those we will support in future years. We also used a significant amount of the award to fund the FGEN ambassadors through student worker wages. Finally, the grant money funded the purchase of copies of a book about succeeding in the transition to college, *College Rules!, 4th Edition: How to Study, Survive, and Succeed in College.* We chose this book to give the high school students during their visits because it is accessible and informative about the transition to college but also includes specific mention of the support that the academic library can provide.

OUTCOMES

We measured the success of the Library Bridge program through the feedback we received from the first-generation student ambassadors and from the high school students. Additionally, we evaluated ourselves on our ability to synthesize and implement aspects of the feedback to help our own services evolve as a library.

Successes Working with FGEN Ambassadors

Throughout the grant year, we employed six university FGEN students as peer tour guides and ambassadors. We started with a detailed training session on library services and resources, to prepare them to answer questions from the high school students. We also asked the ambassadors to review the training outline and the tour script before implementation, to tell us what they wanted to know more about and what should be added for the benefit of the high school students. For example, one of the ambassadors suggested introducing the high school students to library workers throughout the tour: “I think [one thing that would help students feel welcome is] coordinating with the staff and students that are working and including a quick introduction so that they feel comfortable walking up to them and asking questions later.”

The tour script emphasized that the ambassadors’ goal should be to “make the students feel like they belong in the library and the library is a place where they can find support when they need it.” As part of this, the ambassadors were encouraged to bring their own library experiences to their interactions with the high school students. One FGEN ambassador told us during training: “Throughout giving the tour, I think I would like to really emphasize the resources that students are given, how to rent/check out equipment, what the process is like because I found it intimidating when first transitioning to UP. In addition, making it known that the staff at the library is truly there to help you be successful at UP.” Her own experiences with the library in her first year of college helped her shape her work with the high school students she met, and she tailored her tour accordingly.

The training had the secondary benefit of helping the FGEN students become experts themselves in using the library. One ambassador commented on how this training was helpful to his own coursework: “Something that I learned that I found helpful was about the library databases and all of their subscriptions. I did not know about these before and I felt like they really helped me out with some of my papers this year.” While our employment of the ambassadors was primarily as peer tour guides for the high school students, we were happy to find that the training also supported FGEN students in their coursework through increased library knowledge.

Successes Working with High School Students

Thirty high school students participated in the program, over the grant year. The high school students clearly enjoyed the contact with their UP tour guides and learned from them along the way. For example, when asked what aspect of the library they could see themselves using the most, one high school student said, “The citation guides, because the tour leader is a biology major and she uses them a lot, and I’m also planning to be a biology major.”
major, so I imagine I’ll use them a lot also.” Seeing the library through the eyes of their tour guide helped students feel more comfortable and see the library as a space for them to belong on campus.

The students also had positive and constructive feedback about the library space and services. When asked what they liked most about the library, one student commented, “I like that it’s group work based, community oriented. It seems to be less about competition and who can be the best, it’s about working together to succeed.” When asked what would help students feel at home in the library, one student said “introductions to the staff. Remove the stigma about librarians that they are intimidating—there are perceptions of them as shushers and grumpy, especially in the college environment.” Another student commented “I’m sometimes nervous about being around people and asking for help but I’m glad you have a receptionist to help people.” Finally, when asked the best ways the UP library could help students in the transition to college, one student replied: “Give tours. The tour was very helpful. I probably could have figured things out on my own, but it was nice to be presented with everything, so I don’t have to do that.”

**How the Library Will Grow in Response to this Program**

A central goal of the Library Bridge program was to learn from high school students and their impressions of the library; therefore, we built in time through the year to review and synthesize feedback from the interviews. Significant feedback included better highlighting areas of the library’s space and services that were confusing to newcomers, such as our online topic guides, printing services, and assistance locating books on the shelf. We used these ideas to help design a brochure meant especially for new and prospective students and featuring the most prominent areas of questions or confusion.

One of the most consistent pieces of feedback from high school students was praise for the student-led tours and how these tours increased the students’ comfort with the space. This feedback helps us understand the importance of using peer tour guides, particularly for students in the transition to college, because these connections with individual people help to demystify the library space. Along with appreciation for their student tour guides, high school students expressed the desire to meet the library staff at the front desk and liked the opportunity for casual interactions with students as they walked through the library. When we promote the library, we often focus on describing the services we provide, rather than the people that work and study in our space, so this student feedback will lead us to further prioritize building a human connection with the library into our tours and orientations.

High school students also suggested ways to make the space welcoming to students like them as they start college, including study halls for first-year students and other affinity groups. In Fall 2022, in immediate response to this feedback, we piloted three study halls aimed at first-year and first-generation students. These casual events were held in conjunction with campus student services groups and framed as a mix of social and academic time for new students. The events showed promise for increasing familiarity with the library early in student academic careers and we plan to continue these events in future years.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Library Bridge program was not without challenges. One of the main difficulties was contacting high school students and scheduling the tours; even with the aid of the Admissions contact lists and the promise of a stipend for the visit, we received responses from a small percentage of the high school students we contacted. However, at UP, several schools and units have new outreach programs or summer camps designed to connect with high school students. To continue the Library Bridge program, without grant funding, we plan to work with these other programs, especially those focused on minoritized and first-generation students, and find ways to add a library outreach component when possible.

We also hope to continue to solicit high school student feedback on our library space and services so we can evolve as a library with each new incoming class of students. Programs like the Library Bridge are part of a suite of strategies that academic libraries can use to evaluate their services to become more student-ready. Instead of the traditional emphasis on teaching new students the correct way to use the academic library, a student-ready
focus means we will recognize the knowledge and voice of students in transition to college and solicit their perspectives when developing our library space and services.

**Recommendations**

- Consider using university students as tour guides for high school students, to provide peer contacts.
- Involve tour guides in training and tour planning: ask them to evaluate documents before the program begins and ask for reflections afterward.
- When designing tours or orientations, whether for high school students or new university students, build in opportunities for student feedback to better understand how to present library services and spaces.
- If possible, find ways to compensate students for their time in providing feedback, either in hourly wages or via stipends.
- To reach students in the transition to college, partner with the admissions office, high school outreach programs, summer camps, and bridge programs to provide library tours and programming to students already coming to campus.
APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL & QUESTIONS

4 days ahead: email student with interview questions, campus map, and directions to look for tour guide.

Day of Interview: Ambassador waits at entrance for high school student, gives tour, delivers to interviewer

Interview: Give book and flier, and take student address for mailing stipend check

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Purpose statements are for the interviewer only, to help guide the conversation and to identify how we might use the feedback)

1) After this brief introduction, what do you like most about this library so far, and why?
   Purpose: What is immediately appealing? Can we talk up those elements to new students?

2) What can you imagine using most, and why?
   Purpose: What is immediately appealing? Can we talk up those elements to new students?

3) Where in this library do you feel most comfortable?
   Purpose: What vibe are we giving off?

4) What makes you nervous or unwilling to use this library?
   Purpose: What is scary or a turnoff? How can we mitigate?

5) How does the library feel similar to libraries you have used before?

6) How does it feel different from other libraries you have used?
   Purpose: What are the cognitive disconnects? What will not be intuitive for new students?

7) What aspects of libraries do you find confusing in general?
   Purpose: General aspects of libraries. If these are true for us, how can we mitigate?

8) As a library at a university near your high school, what are ways we could help students like you in the transition to college?
   Purpose: How can we expand or change this outreach for HS students?

9) How can the library make all students feel at home in their first year of college?
   Purpose: How can we do better for first years and students in transition to college?

10) What other questions do you have about the library and the services we provide?

11) What feedback do you have about the tour's organization and content?

12) What feedback do you have about our draft brochure aimed at high school students?

NOTES


13. Ball & Vincent, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Slack et al., 2014, cited in Grim et al., ”Is It What You Know,” 5.


20. Arch and Gilman, ”Academic Library Services for First-Generation Students.”

