

What We Talk About When We Talk About “First-Generation Students”: Exploring Definitions in Use on College and University Websites

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First-generation students (FGS) are a population that has received increasing attention, but the term “first-generation student” has been inconsistently defined. Such inconsistency creates challenges not only for research, but for students themselves, many of whom may find they meet the FGS definition in one institutional context, but not another. In this study, we analyze how the term “first-generation student” is defined on the public websites of colleges and universities in the United States and Canada and discuss implications for students and academic libraries.

Introduction

A 2017 *New York Times* article on the complexities of determining who meets the definition of “first-generation student” highlights multiple cases where the boundaries of the category become unclear, including a student whose father has a master’s degree, but who was raised by other relatives who did not attend college; a student whose sole degreed parent died when he was a toddler; and a student who may qualify as *both* first-generation and a legacy student because, while neither parent has a college degree, her grandmother attended the institution (Sharpe, 2017).

First-generation students (FGS)—those who are the first or among the first in their families to attend college and/or earn a college degree—have received increasing attention from higher education and library and information science researchers. Understanding the experiences of FGS and interrogating institutional infrastructure and library services from their perspectives, can identify areas where prior knowledge of—and comfort with—academic norms are assumed, and can assist in eliminating barriers for all students, particularly those who have been historically underserved (Arch & Gilman, 2019; Stallworth & Maurici-Pollock, 2023). Many institutions now provide targeted resources and support, including scholarships and other financial aid, to this population.

Multiple academic libraries, alone or in partnership with others on campus, now offer targeted programs and services for FGS, including instruction sessions, customized research

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assistance, first-year orientations, specialized collections, liaison librarians, and networking events (see Barbrow et al., 2020; Deng, 2021; Graf, 2019; Graham et al., 2021; Graves et al., 2021; Ilett, 2019). But who is a “first-generation student”? Those attempting to research or design resources for FGS have found that attempting to articulate who belongs in this population and who does not can be remarkably complex. Attempts to define FGS must deal with the multiple structures families take, as well as with the varied experiences with postsecondary education a student’s family members may have. As a result of this complexity, the scholarly literature uses multiple definitions of FGS, which complicates what we know about this population. Those most impacted by this complexity, however, may be FGS themselves. These students, who are often unfamiliar with the category or unaware of their own FGS status until their initial encounters with higher education, may struggle to reconcile official definitions of the term with their own lived experiences. This may result in confusion or tension, particularly when students’ biographies do not map neatly onto institutional definitions of the boundaries of the FGS category (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Bowker and Star, 1999).

Literature Review

Exploring the definitions of “first-generation student” used in higher education provides a background for this article. Preliminary results from a study of university library websites found that, among those who offer services or resources for FGS, few provide a definition of the term (Bernier et al., 2021). This study’s main questions are: Who are “first-generation students”? How are they defined? What criteria are used to determine who counts as being a “first-generation student”? Examining those definitions has the potential to provide an idea of who higher education deems to be categorized as “first-generation” and who is excluded.

The term “first-generation student,” in use since at least 1979, began to appear widely in the literature on higher education in the early 2000s (Gable 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). The term has been used to define—often vaguely and inconsistently—a category of college and university students who have little or no prior family experience with higher education (Ilett, 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). A search for the term online uncovers multiple possible definitions, some of which emphasize the additional support available to those identifying as FGS. *College Terms You Need to Know: A Complete Guide* defines the term first-generation as “students who are the first in their families to attend college or whose parents didn’t complete a college degree” (CollegiateParent, 2022). *The Ultimate College Terminology Guide* provides this explanation of “first-generation student”: “to qualify as a first-generation college student, learners must be the first individual in their immediate family to pursue higher education. These learners often qualify for additional financial aid” (Best Colleges, 2022).

While there are definitions for FGS in some college terminology guides, other sources, such as *Education USA* and the *U.S. Higher Education Glossary* provide no definitions of the term (Narayan, 2011; United States Dept. of State, n.d.). In the United States, federal eligibility guidelines for funded TRIO programs—which are programs “designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2023)—define FGS as: “individuals both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree,” or in the case of students who “resided with and received support from only one parent,” those whose sole supporting parent did not complete a degree (Higher Education Act of 1965, 2011).

The exact definition in use at any individual college or university, however, may vary. The Center for First-Generation Student Success FAQ, notes that the definition of FGS is

complex, and that institutions use different definitions; it recommends that students “ask your admissions counselor, academic advisor, or a faculty member to learn more” (NASPA, 2020). Couture et al. (2021) note that the definition can vary even *within* a university. Given these varied definitions, it is unsurprising that students may be unclear whether they qualify as FGS.

The “First-Generation Student” Definition in Research

The inconsistency in defining FGS also extends to academic literature; in the past several years, a myriad of definitions have been applied in studies of this population, with little consistency between research studies; reviews of literature on FGS have found up to 18 definitions in use by researchers, most of which in some way rely on education levels of a student’s parents to determine whether a student is first-generation (LeBoueff & Dworkin, 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; Toutkoushian, 2018).

While it may seem straightforward to determine first-generation status based upon parental education, researchers highlight several nuances. “Parents” could refer to biological parents, stepparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, and/or godparents, for example (Stallworth & Maurici-Pollock, 2023; Toutkoushian et al., 2018). Some definitions include or exclude the educational experience of other family members, such as siblings, and may or may not account for students raised in family structures other than two-parent households (Ilet, 2019; LeBouef and Dworkin, 2021; Stallworth & Maurici-Pollock, 2023). “Education” can also refer to a variety of higher education experiences including the level of education (e.g., undergraduate or graduate), type of degree (e.g., two-year, four-year, Master’s, Ph.D.), and whether the degree program was completed (Ilet, 2019; Stallworth & Maurici-Pollock, 2023; Toutkoushian et al., 2018). There are additional complexities when it comes to defining first-generation *graduate* students, as the term may encompass both students who are the first in their family to pursue or obtain *any* level of higher education, as well as those who are specifically the first to pursue or obtain an advanced degree (Guillen, 2021; Stallworth & Maurici-Pollock, 2023). Further complicating matters, the FGS designation has at times been extended to include those students who are the first in their families to get a degree from an institution within the United States (NASPA, 2020; Stallworth & Maurici-Pollock, 2023).

The many ways in which the term FGS has been defined and operationalized raises methodological concerns for research on FGS. Much of the existing research assumes a binary between FGS and non-FGS (i.e., continuing-generation) students which, in conjunction with inconsistent definitions of FGS, makes it difficult to make accurate comparisons and to determine whether—and to what extent—meaningful differences between first- and continuing-generation students even exist (Deng, 2022; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013; Toutkoushian et al. 2018; Toutkoushian et al, 2021).

As a result, some scholars have adopted, and added to, a growing list of definitions which recognize levels, degrees, or a continuum of first-generation status to acknowledge important differences in resources and cultural capital between students (Darrah et al., 2022; Patfield et al., 2020; Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013; Toutkoushian et al., 2018). One such example is the scale developed by Darrah et al. (2022) ranking FGS from Level 1 (“Parents or guardians attended some college (but did not complete)”) to Level 4 (“No one in immediate or extended family attended or completed college”), with those at the highest level identified as being in most need of additional assistance. Yet even definitions with this degree of nuance contain

assumptions about family relationships and structures, as well as the knowledge and cultural capital that are likely to be transmitted by family members, and these may or may not match students' lived experiences.

A compounding issue is that first-generation status is sometimes conflated with other variables and identity categories. Ilett's (2019) critical review of library literature on FGS finds that the use of phrases such as "minority and low-income/first-generation students" often makes it "unclear whether all the listed categories apply to all students being discussed" noting that often the term often operates as a kind of "cipher" for students of color and/or working-class students (pp. 3–4). Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) also note a conflation of FGS status with identity categories including race, ethnicity, social class, and geographic origin. Additionally, while FGS populations are heterogenous and include multiply-marginalized individuals—and indeed, FGS status is often the result of communities' historical exclusion from academia—there has been a historic lack of intersectional research that examines how FGS status, race, gender, class, and other aspects of student identity interact to shape students' experiences with higher education (Arch & Gilman, 2020; Bettencourt et al., 2020; Hodge, 2022; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018).

Unfortunately, research on FGS also frequently uses deficit framing, which focuses on the skills and resources FGS lack (Barbrow, 2020; Brinkman & Smith, 2021; Graf, 2019; Ilett, 2019; LeBouef and Dworkin, 2021). Often, even the names used for such conflated categories, such as "disadvantaged," "nontraditional," "at-risk," and "nonelite," reflect this deficit framing (Dworkin, 2021; Ilett, 2019; Lee & Kramer, 2013). Such framing illustrates Spiegler and Bednarek's (2013) argument that FGS is not only a constructed identity group, but a constructed *risk* group. This framing may not only lead students to avoid the FGS identity as potentially stigmatizing but may negatively impact the experience of FGS if librarians and other educators view them as "a problem that needs to be solved" (Ilett, 2019). Recent research has begun to shift to an asset-based approach for understanding FGS, which recognizes the unique knowledge, skills, and assets FGS bring to campus (Arch & Gilman, 2020; Folk et al., 2018; Hands, 2021; Ilett, 2020; Stallworth & Maurici-Pollock, 2023).

The Challenges of the "First-Generation" Definition for Students

The challenge of categorizing FGS not only impacts the research, of course, but also the students themselves when the category of FGS is adopted by institutions, embedded in academic support infrastructure, and used to determine access to resources or define the boundaries of community. The potential benefits, as well as the potential stigmatizing effects, of identifying FGS as a group in need of additional support and targeted services—particularly when these are shaped by deficit framing—are noted areas for further study (Arch & Gilman, 2020; Bettencourt et al., 2020; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). The potential for the category to create torque—"the twisting that occurs when a formal classification system is mismatched with an individual's biographical trajectory, memberships, or location" (Bowker & Star, p. 223)—for students whose lived experiences make them difficult to sort neatly into FGS or non-FGS, also warrants further exploration.

While FGS are often eligible for additional financial aid and institutional support—including, increasingly, targeted library support—accessing these resources requires eligible students to first recognize FGS as an identity category, and then to be able and willing to identify themselves as FGS (Bettencourt et al., 2020). For this to occur, students need to know which definition(s) of

FGS have been adopted by their university (or the segment of it with which they are interacting), and to determine whether they fit the FGS definition. This can be complicated for the multiple students whose biographies mean they meet some definitions of FGS, but not others.

The suggestion, noted earlier, that students ask a counselor, advisor, or faculty member for help in determining FGS status in a particular context (NASPA, 2020) assumes both that these individuals will be able to provide accurate help, and that a student is likely go to these authority figures to seek clarification in the first place. However, both assumptions are at odds with the research on FGS information-seeking behaviors, which consistently finds that these students avoid seeking help, and that they value self-reliance and independent problem-solving (Arch & Gilman, 2020; Couture et al, 2021; Graf, 2019; Tsai, 2012).

While other studies have examined the ways in which the term “first-generation student” is defined in academic literature, our research focuses on how the term is defined in spaces that students can easily access themselves, specifically, on the public-facing websites of colleges and universities. We sought to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: How is the term “first-generation student” defined on the public-facing websites of colleges and universities?
- RQ2: What criteria are used to define a student as “first-generation”?
- RQ3: Is there consistency across institutional websites in the way the term “first-generation student” is defined?

Method

We began by looking at the websites of the parent institutions of the 118 academic libraries that were members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) as of April 2022. We chose this sample for our initial analysis because it includes both private and public institutions across both the United States and Canada, serving both undergraduate and graduate students.

Throughout May and June of 2022, we searched university websites using Google, applying the following search strategy: “first-generation students” OR “first-generation college students” OR “first-gen students” OR “first-gen college students” site:[university.edu], limited to the first page of search results. This strategy retrieved results regardless of hyphenation in the text. We examined the text of each result for a definition of the term “first-generation student,” and we excluded definitions found in news articles, event announcements, and publications located in institutional repositories, archives, or hosted journals. If a page contained a qualifying definition of the term “first-generation student,” we recorded the URL and wording.

Our search resulted in 174 qualifying definitions found on the sites of 94 institutions. These included formal definitions that had been adopted by an institution, as well as less formal definitions that were used by a single university program or organization. We found most definitions on pages for programs or services targeting FGS; the pages of university admissions departments, counseling centers, study abroad programs, and resources for parents and faculty members also yielded multiple definitions. Only one qualifying definition was found on a library page. Many institutions defined “first-generation student” in more than one way across the retrieved results from their sites, and some even had more than one definition on the same webpage.

A conceptual content analysis was conducted on the wording of each definition to understand which criteria were used in defining “first-generation student,” as well as which criteria, and unique combinations of criteria, appeared most often. An initial round of inductive

coding was conducted to develop a codebook, followed by two subsequent rounds of coding on all definitions. At least two researchers examined each definition. When disagreement or questions arose, researchers met and came to a consensus on how to code the text, bringing intercoder reliability to 100%.

Results

Across the sites in our sample, we found that there are at least 87 unique definitions of “first-generation student” in use on ARL university websites. Each definition differed in some substantial way from others in its criteria for which students qualify as “first-generation students.” The definitional criteria found are detailed below.

Family Members Considered

Definitions differed regarding which family members’ educational attainment would be considered in determining a student’s first-generation status.

Parents, Guardians, and Other Caregivers. Of the definitions that mentioned the education levels attained by specific family members, the majority — 104 (59.77%) — referred to the student’s parents. In addition, 44 (25.29%) contained language that assumed a two-parent or two-guardian family structure, using phrases such as “neither parent” or “both parents.” Some definitions were more expansive in addressing differences in family structures. Fifty-one (29.31%) definitions specifically mentioned guardians or caregivers; three definitions (1.72%) specifically included adoptive parents; and one (0.57%) also included “other custodial family members.” In contrast, one (0.57%) definition was more restrictive, as it mentioned that only biological parents’ education would be considered.

“First in Family.” Some definitions were less specific about which family members’ educational attainment would be considered in determining whether a student is first-generation. Fifty-six (32.18%) defined FGS as the first in their family to attend college/obtain a degree; eight (4.6%) specified that an FGS is the first in their *immediate* family to do so, with immediate family not further defined; and seven (4.02%) used phrasing like “in the first generation” or “among the first-generation,” suggesting that the educational attainment of same-generation family members is not considered. Six (3.45%) definitions used “among the first” or “one of the first” in the family, or similar phrasing and one (0.57%) considered a student’s “closest family members.” Significantly, one (0.57%) defined FGS as “the first in [their] family or support system to go to college” (emphasis added).

Excluded Family Members. Some definitions explicitly excluded the education attained by specific family members from consideration in determining FGS status, most often a student’s same-generation siblings who had graduated from or are currently enrolled in college. Thirteen (7.47%) defined students as FGS even if they had siblings currently in, or who had graduated from, college. Non-custodial parents were also excluded at times, with eight (4.5%) definitions specifically mentioning not considering the educational levels of non-custodial parents, parents with whom a student did not live, or parents who did not support the student. A further two (1.15%) definitions specifically did not consider parents about whom a student has no information, and one (0.57%) mentioned excluding the educational levels of cousins.

Other Family Situations. A handful of definitions included students who do not or did not live with their families, such as students in foster care or those experiencing homelessness. Two (1.15%) definitions included students who are/were in foster care or wards of the

state; one (0.57%) included students who “did not regularly reside with or receive support from a natural or adoptive parent prior to age 18.” One (0.57%) definition included students who are/were homeless youth.

College Attendance vs. Degree Completion

FGS definitions also varied in whether they included students whose parent(s) or other considered family member(s) had attended college but not completed a degree, or whether they included only those whose considered family member(s) had not attended college or pursued a degree at all. A handful of multi-part definitions covered both situations. One hundred and ten (63.22%) defined FGS those whose considered family member(s) have not earned, obtained, or completed a degree, and 80 (45.98%) defined as FGS those whose considered family member(s) have not attended college or pursued a degree at all.

Type of Degree Obtained or Institution Attended

Of those definitions that specified a type of degree (i.e., beyond “college degree”), 101 (58.05%) specified a four-year institution or a bachelor’s degree or higher; one (0.57%) specified an undergraduate degree (with no further specification); and one (0.57%) specified attending college and/or professional school. Less common were definitions that excluded students with family members who have associates degrees, or who have pursued other postsecondary education or training. Six (3.45%) definitions specified any postsecondary education or experience; three (1.72%) specified a two-year institution or an associate’s degree or higher; and two (1.15%) specified any education or technical training beyond high school.

While programs, resources, and definitions specifically addressing first-generation *graduate* students were rare, three (1.72%) definitions defined FGS at the graduate level as those who are specifically the first among their considered family members to pursue a graduate, professional, or advanced degree.

International Institutions

Twenty-three (13.22%) definitions included as FGS those whose parent(s) or other considered family member(s) have attended college and/or obtained degrees from institutions outside the country in which the university is located, here in the United States or Canada. One of these, from a U.S. institution, also specifically defined FGS as a U.S. student.

Time Frame of Family Members’ Degree Completion

A small number of definitions considered the time frame of family members’ degree completion, and included in the FGS definition those whose parents or other considered family members have a college degree, but did not pursue it directly after high school. Four (2.3%) definitions included as FGS those whose considered family member(s) completed a degree “later in life”; one (0.57%) included as FGS those whose parent(s) or guardians(s) did not complete a degree within six years of their own high school graduation; and one (0.57%) included as FGS those whose parents completed a degree after the student was born.

Students’ Resources, Past Experiences, and Prior Knowledge of Higher Education

A small number of definitions included criteria for FGS status directly addressing students’

lack of resources and/or lack of experience with or knowledge of higher education. For example, five (2.87%) included students' lack of exposure to or knowledge of higher education; three (1.72%) mentioned students' need for additional resources; two (1.15%) included as FGS students who "have a similar life experience" as those who otherwise fit the FGS definition. Similarly, one (0.57%) definition included students who lack "personal or familial experience navigating institutions of higher ed"; one (0.57%) included students "looking for a place to build community and support"; and one (0.57%) included students who lack family support for their decision to attend college.

In addition, some definitions conflated FGS with class status by including low-income and working-class students in the definition. Two (1.15%) definitions included low(er) income students, and one (0.57%) included students from working-class or non-white collar backgrounds.

Other Criteria

A handful of other criteria were found that do not fit neatly into any of the above categories, including 12 (6.90%) definitions that explicitly allowed FGS to self-identify. Other outlier definitions were as follows: one (0.57%) included those who are FGS "at the time of application"; one (0.57%) defined FGS as undergraduate students; one (0.57%) excluded students when both parents' educational status is unknown; and one (0.57%) included those who "want to be an ally to and support" FGS. Table 1 shows the nine combinations of definitional criteria that appeared most frequently in the sample, along with example wording for each.

TABLE 1
Most Common Combinations of Definitional Criteria

Criteria	Example Wording	Frequency
First in family, attend	"the first person in your family to attend college"	32
Parents, guardians, complete degree, 4-year	"student whose parent(s) / legal guardian(s) do not have a bachelor's degree or higher"	11
Parents, 2-parent lang., complete degree, 4-year	"students with neither parent having a four-year college degree"	10
Parents, complete degree, 4-year	"A first-generation student means your parents did not complete a 4-year college or university degree"	9
Parents, guardians, 2-parent lang., complete degree, 4-year	"neither parent or guardian completed a four-year college degree"	9
Parents, guardians, siblings excluded, complete degree, 4-year	"one whose parent(s)/legal guardian(s) have not completed a bachelor's degree. Even if an older sibling is pursuing a bachelor's degree or has already earned their degree, you are still considered a first-generation student"	4
First in family, attend, 4-year	"the first in their families to attend a four-year college/university"	4
First in family, complete degree, 4-year	"students who are or will be the first in their families to earn a bachelor's degree/graduate from a four-year college"	3
Parents, guardians, 2-parent lang., complete degree, 4-year, US/Can institution	"a student, faculty, or staff member with neither parent or guardian having graduated with a 4-year degree or higher, in the United States"	3

Eleven other unique combinations of criteria each appeared twice in the sample. All others appeared only once.

As evidenced by the number of different definitions found, “first-generation student” is a category with porous and inconsistently defined boundaries. While FGS are commonly described as the first in their families to attend college, the following are some examples of students who may or may not find themselves included within the FGS population depending on the specific criteria in use in a particular context:

- A student with one or more parents with an associate’s degree, but none with a bachelor’s degree,
- A student with one or more parents who attended a four-year institution, but did not graduate,
- A student with a degreed parent with whom the student has no relationship,
- A student with one or more non-parent family members, such as siblings or grandparents, who already have degrees or are currently attending college,
- A student with parents who have advanced degrees, but who is the first in their family to attend college in the United States,
- A graduate student whose parent has a bachelor’s degree, but who is the first in their family to attempt an advanced degree.

Discussion

The researchers have found at least 87 different definitions of “first-generation student,” but few specify the level of the student (i.e., undergraduate or graduate). The number of definitions alone could be confusing for students, and this research does not even include definitions from every institution in the United States or Canada. Is it necessary to have numerous definitions to define a group of students? With definitions that differ at each institution, this can be confusing for students to determine how to self-identify. In addition to the confusion caused for students, this sheer number of definitions can create challenges for academic librarians in defining and reaching out to FGS populations, determining their needs, and measuring the impact of resources and services developed for them. For researchers studying FGS, the number of definitions also creates a barrier, especially when recruiting students to participate in studies and deciding how to define them. Why are students asked to self-identify as FGS if they qualify as being one at one institution and not at another institution?

A surprising amount of variance exists in how colleges and universities define “first-generation student” on their public-facing websites. Definitions differ in how they contend with the complexities of defining a family, a parent, or a generation. Definitions also differ regarding what familial higher educational experiences disqualify one from FGS status, ranging from having any educational experience beyond high school to—in the context of graduate studies—having obtained an advanced degree. Interestingly, while most institutions in the ARL sample were in the United States and many of these appeared to be recipients of TRIO funding, only two definitions included FGS criteria that matched the official criteria for TRIO eligibility. Some otherwise similar definitions failed to explicitly account for the circumstances of students raised by a single parent. In context this may seem to be a minor difference, but in practice this may mean the difference between a student being deemed eligible to access resources meant for FGS or not, as was the case for the student with the deceased degreed parent profiled in the *Times* (Sharpe, 2017). Examining the criteria and

wording included in definitions of FGS can help in identifying sites of tension and torque, as well as in interrogating the assumptions inherent in the construction of FGS as an identity category.

Who Do We Talk about When We Talk about Family?

A student's FGS status is defined by their family members' lack of educational experience, but definitions vary in which family members' educational attainment is considered or, in some cases, explicitly excluded from consideration. Most often, if a definition names specific family members, it specifies a student's parents. Around 30% of definitions in our sample were worded to accommodate the family structures of students raised in single parent households, or by one or more non-parent guardians or caregivers. Multiple definitions, however, contain wording such as "neither parent" or "both parents" which assumes a two-parent, or two-guardians, household. This assumption may leave students raised by single parents, or in blended or multigenerational families struggling to reconcile the definition with their own family structures.

Assumptions about students and family structure are also evident when we consider which family members are *not* named in FGS definitions. For example, explicit mention of the educational attainment of students' grandparent(s) was not found in any definition. Also not found was any explicit mention of a student's own spouse and/or adult children, who, if present, would be members of a student's immediate family, and whose experiences with higher education could inform a student's own trajectory. A handful of definitions did acknowledge that some students pursue a degree later than immediately after high school and/or after they themselves have become parents but do so by counting among the FGS population those whose *parents* have pursued degrees "later in life" and/or after the student was born.

When definitions specifically excluded family members, they almost always referred to either non-custodial parents, or siblings who had already enrolled in or completed college. In the latter case, all siblings in the same generation are considered FGS, regardless of other siblings' educational attainment, though studies have found that for younger siblings, older siblings who had attended the same or a similar school were strong sources of support and information (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Gable, 2021).

A small number of definitions explicitly counted students who did not reside with or receive support from members of their families of origin, regardless of the educational attainment of those family members, as FGS. These definitions included students who are/were in foster care or those who are/were homeless youth. All other definitions assumed a relationship between the student and parent(s), guardian(s), or other family members, which is another aspect shaping the FGS category that warrants further interrogation.

Not all definitions were specific about who counted as being in a student's family or which family members' educational attainment were considered. In fact, the first in their family to attend college, without further specification, is the most common way FGS are described. Some definitions use the narrower phrases "immediate family" or "closest family" without further specification, while others only specify that a student needs to be "among the first" or "one of the first" to be considered FGS. In one case, the phrase "family or support system" was used as an acknowledgement that a student's closest ties and sources of support may not be limited to their family.

What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Higher Education and Educational Achievement?

Definitions varied in what educational experience FGS’s qualifying family members could have. Over 60% of definitions included as FGS those whose considered family members may have attended an institution of higher education, but did not complete a degree. This means that, by many definitions, some FGS do have family members with experience applying and being accepted to college, even if they did not finish.

Definitions also varied regarding which institutions or types of degrees were considered. When a type of degree or type of institution was specified, most definitions found in our sample from four-year research universities specified that a student’s considered family members did not attend a four-year institution or obtain a bachelor’s degree. Substantially less common, but still present in our sample, were definitions worded to exclude students with family members with other types of postsecondary educational experience, such as earning an associate’s degree or attending a vocational or trade school.

While graduate students or studies were rarely referenced in definitions, three include graduate students as FGS if they are the first among their considered family members to earn or pursue an advanced degree. Finally, around 13% of definitions include as FGS those who are specifically the first of their considered family members to earn a degree from an institution in the United States and/or Canada, an acknowledgment that these students may have a family history of engagement with higher education in general but still lack family experiences with the cultural norms and hidden curricula of North American institutions.

What Else Do We Talk About When We Talk About “First-Generation Students”?

For researchers and institutions, a student’s first-generation status often serves as a proxy for a lack of resources and/or experience with, or prior knowledge of, higher education. A handful of definitions spoke specifically to this lack, although some definitions did conflate categories, as noted by Ilett (2019), by including low-income and working-class students under the first-generation umbrella.

FGS definitions included a handful of other criteria. One definition spoke directly to the temporal aspect of the category, noting that FGS were those who met the FGS definition “at the time of application.” Under the wording of at least some definitions, the lived experiences of a student’s other family members could potentially disqualify them from FGS status between application to and graduation from college.

Some definitions allowed students to self-identify as FGS, and some, including definitions found on the websites of Brown University and George Washington University, invited students to do so based on their own perceived lack of prior exposure to, or knowledge of, navigating higher education. Such maximally inclusive definitions broaden the reach of programs and resources for FGS by allowing students who would fail to meet stricter criteria to access and benefit from them. However, such inclusivity has also led to criticism that loose definitions allow otherwise privileged students to take advantage of assistance meant for those with fewer resources and use FGS status as a “power-up” (Barnett, 2022). Sima (2022) notes that a failure to make a distinction between “first-generation” and “low-income” can lead to students in the latter category feeling further stigmatized in programs and spaces meant to assist them when those spaces are dominated by their higher-income, first-generation peers.

On the other hand, less inclusive definitions risk excluding students who have similar challenges as those who do meet stated criteria and would benefit from the resources available (Gable, 2021).

Overall, the basic assumptions that underlie the FGS category include that students have a relationship with their family of origin (often specifically, their parents), and that students whose family members lack experience with higher education will differ from continuing-generation peers in their knowledge of and comfort with higher education, as well as the resources and support they can draw from during their college experience. However, these assumptions may not map neatly onto students' lives. Additionally, as discussed earlier, emphasis on students' first- or continuing-generation status alone ignores the impact of students' other intersecting identities on their higher education experience. It may also render invisible the impact of social systems outside the family and other sources of knowledge, support, and cultural capital that may be accessible to some FGS students but not others, such as the elite private high schools attended by some students in Jack's (2016) study of low-income undergraduates at an elite university.

With so many different definitions of what it means to be a "first-generation student," is the term useful as a category and as a way of understanding students' needs, identities, and relationships with higher education? And if so, what is the most appropriate definition? We believe that, yes, it is useful, but that it is also important to examine the work that "first-generation student" as a category is doing in each context.

This research has implications for academic librarians because they serve a broad student population, including FGS. As Graham et al. (2021) found, academic libraries play a role in student success for FGS. Providing services and resources to better assist these students is valuable; however, a lack of clarity over who qualifies as FGS could create barriers for students or exclude those who need the extra support. Providing services and resources for FGS shows that academic libraries are committed to supporting these students, contributes to existing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and demonstrates that the academic library is aware of, and cares about, the needs of FGS. Such work contributes to FGS's success and possible retention.

Conclusion

This study examined how the term "first-generation student" is defined on the public-facing websites of a sample of four-year research universities in the United States and Canada. Planned follow-up studies include examining the use and definition of the term at other types of institutions serving large numbers of FGS—including community colleges and tribal colleges—as well as examining how the term has been defined and operationalized in the library literature. In addition, we are examining the current services academic libraries are offering to FGS and the role academic libraries can play in serving the information needs of FGS pursuing advanced degrees.

The experiences of FGS are a useful area of study for librarians, even though the concept itself is difficult to rigidly define and is currently defined in a wide variety of ways on student-facing websites. The sheer number of definitions found in this sample demonstrates the lack of consistency with which the category has been defined and understood.

For academic libraries developing programs and services for FGS, this study's findings suggest that the complexity of the FGS category may create a barrier to targeted students ac-

cessing these services because they not know if they qualify as FGS. For researchers, the number of FGS definitions also creates a barrier, especially when recruiting students to participate in studies, asking them to self-identify, and deciding how to define and categorize participants. All these barriers make it difficult to determine the extent to which differences actually exist between first- and continuing-generation students’ experiences and information needs.

The challenges and torsion this definitional inconsistency potentially creates in students’ lives, particularly for those students who may qualify as FGS in one definition but not in another—something our results show is possible even within the same institution—warrants further research. The fact that, as research shows, FGS often have difficulties related to help-seeking in the context of higher education, which may make them reluctant to seek out additional clarification if uncertain of their own status, further exacerbates these challenges. For academic libraries and other institutions on campus seeking to serve FGS, it is important to consider the inconsistency of the definition and how it potentially impacts students’ understanding of whether they are entitled to access services and support available and marketed to FGS.

Seeking to understand the academy from the perspective of those who lack a family history of experience with it can help identify areas where our own infrastructure requires or privileges that experience. FGS programs can provide students with needed community and support and can help them to make sense of their own academic experience. However, the category itself may also serve as a barrier to those who fall outside it. Furthermore, *any* definition of FGS is an imperfect proxy for a student’s knowledge of, and comfort with, academic norms, and many definitions do not encompass other aspects of a student’s identity or other sources of influence and support beyond a student’s own family.

Our findings lead us to make the following recommendations for libraries considering offering targeted support to FGS and to LIS researchers hoping to learn more about them. First, define the term “first-generation student” in the context of the library and acknowledge the definition is complex. An expansive definition that acknowledges different types of family structures and lived experiences may serve as less of a barrier to students who would benefit from resources and programs targeting FGS.

Second, focus on your own institutions and infrastructure and identify ways they may require or privilege prior knowledge of academia. For example, does navigating the library website require prior knowledge of terms that may be unfamiliar to someone without a history of engagement with higher education? If so, can this be changed? Are there other assumptions about students—such as that students live on campus, can rely on financial or academic help from their families of origin, or are unlikely to be parents of minor children—that may disproportionately, but not solely, impact FGS and that underlie what services are being offered and how they are delivered? Identifying and removing barriers, rather than creating specialized services to help particular groups overcome them, has the potential to help students beyond FGS.

Third, because definitions of FGS—including those tied to access to federal aid and other resources—can vary, provide guidance for students, potentially in the form of LibGuides or other online resources, that can help FGS navigate this definitional landscape. This could, for example, help students from single-parent families determine if they meet the official definitional criteria for TRIO-funded programs in the United States. There is also the potential for academic librarians, in their role as information professionals, to provide guidance and support to their own institutions for creating a consistent definition of FGS across campus.

For research on FGS, provide a clear definition of FGS to participants and to readers because our study's findings suggest it is likely that both groups that both have encountered varied definitions of FGS. Consider developing an approach like Darrah et al. (2022), who studied multiple levels or categories of FGS. For example, do the experiences of FGS whose considered family members have not completed a degree but have some college experience differ from those whose family members have no college experience at all?

Finally, remember that FGS are a heterogeneous group and that FGS status is only one part of a student's identity. Students' experiences with academia and academic libraries may also be profoundly shaped by race, gender, socioeconomic status, age, (dis)ability, and other demographic variables. Our study points to a need for more intersectional research, including additional research exploring: a) how the FGS term functions in higher education and to what extent the category itself may function simultaneously as an identity, a useful concept for examining inequities, and a barrier to student support; b) to what extent students who are uncertain about whether or not they meet the criteria for FGS opt-in, self-select out, or are excluded by others from partaking in resources or community meant for FGS, and to what extent this is correlated with other axes of systemic marginalization and privilege; and c) how libraries' adoption of the FGS category for targeted support and outreach impacts the student experience.

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