

What Does it Mean to be First: Defining First-Generation Students

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ABSTRACT

First-generation students have been receiving increasing attention from LIS researchers. But who are first-generation students? The term has been inconsistently defined in scholarly literature, and a recent analysis of research university websites found over 80 definitions in use on university websites. In this interactive panel, we will discuss how the term first-generation student is defined and used, which students may or not be considered first-generation in particular contexts, and the uses, meaning, and utility of the category for researchers, academic institutions, and students themselves.

Exploring the definitions of first-generation students (FGS) in higher education provides a background for this panel. There is potential to address the main questions the panelists are trying to answer: Who are first-generation students? How are they defined? What 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.

While some college terminology guides have definitions of first-generation students, others provide no definitions. This confusion surrounding who counts as a first-generation student also extends to research, and many FGS definitions have been applied to study this population. In their review of 24 FGS articles published in higher education journals, Peralta and Klonowski (2017) found that researchers used a variety of conceptual and operational definitions (9 and 12 definitions, respectively) and frequently provided no conceptual or operational definition at all. Calling for the term FGS to be clearly operationalized, the authors suggest that researchers adopt the following definition as standard: “an individual who is pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a postsecondary degree” (p. 635).

While it may seem straightforward to determine first-generation status based on parental education, researchers have pointed to several nuances. The term ‘parents’ could refer to biological parents, stepparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, and godparents (Davis and Maurici-Pollock, in press; Toutkoushian et al., 2018). Some definitions include or exclude the educational experience of other family members like siblings or cousins (Davis and Maurici-

Pollock, in press). Education can also refer to a variety of higher education experiences, including the level of education (undergraduate or graduate), type of degree (2-year, 4-year, Master's, Ph.D.), whether the degree program was completed (Davis and Maurici-Pollock, in press; Toutkoushian et al., 2018), and whether the degree was earned in the United States. Unsurprisingly, students may not know how or if they are first-generation students.

PANEL FORMAT

Introduction

The panel will use Google's electronic whiteboard, Jamboard, to encourage audience participation. We will begin by asking audience members to each provide a definition of "first-generation student." Next, we will discuss the most common definitions provided by audience members and consider which students may be potentially included or excluded when the category "first-generation student" is defined in a particular way.

We will then consider the advantages and disadvantages of maximally inclusive definitions and of allowing students to self-identify as FGS and invite the audience to join us in reflecting on the work the category of first-generation may be doing in particular contexts. We will also consider the potential impact of the FGS label.

Research

Next, we will present research done by Davis and Maurici-Pollock. While other researchers have examined the ways in which the term first-generation student is defined in academic literature, our recent study focused on how the term is defined in spaces students can easily access themselves, specifically, the public-facing websites of colleges and universities.

Our examination of 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 revealed that at least 85 unique combinations of criteria had been used to define "first-generation student," each of which differs in which students are included in and excluded from this population. The main axes of difference found are detailed below:

Family Members Considered

Definitions differ in how family members' educational attainment determines a student's first-generation status.

- **Parents, Guardians, and Other Caregivers:** Most often included in definitions are the education levels attained by a student's parents. Some definitions account for differences in family structures.

- **“First in Family”:** Some definitions are less specific about which family members’ education attainment is considered in determining whether a student is first-generation.
- **Excluded Family Members:** Some definitions explicitly exclude the education attained by specific family members—most often a student’s same-generation siblings—from consideration in determining FGS status.
- **Other Situations:** A handful of definitions also include FGS as those students who do or did not live with their families, such as students in foster care or those experiencing homelessness.

College Attendance vs. Degree Completion

Definitions also vary in whether they include as FGS those students whose parent(s) or other considered family member(s) have attended college but have not completed a degree or whether they include only those whose family member(s) have not attended college or pursued a degree at all.

Type of Degree Obtained or Institution Attended

Of those definitions that specify a type of degree (beyond “college degree”) an FGS’ considered family member(s) have not earned or type of institution they have not attended (beyond “college”), most specify that FGS are the first among their considered family members to attend a four-year institution or obtain a bachelor’s degree.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Finally, we will open a discussion with the audience. Some questions to address are:

- What is the benefit of having numerous definitions of a first-generation student? What message is this sending to students?
- How can students determine if they are first-generation if definitions vary from institution to institution?
- What if a student transfers to a different institution? These are questions to consider and can be confusing for students.
- Are we being inclusive or creating more barriers?
- How do students feel about the label?

PANELISTS

Rebecca Stallworth is an assistant professor in the School of Library and Information Science at Simmons University. Her research focuses on marginalized groups and their use of academic library resources and first-generation students.

Danielle Maurici-Pollock is an assistant professor at the Simmons University School of Library and Information Science. Along with Dr. Stallworth, she has been examining first-generation students’ information-seeking in their paths to and through graduate education.

Africa S. Hands is an assistant professor in the Department of Information Science at the University at Buffalo. Her current research agenda examines public libraries as an information resource for college-bound patrons and the experiences of first-generation students - both as users of academic libraries and students and professionals in the LIS field.

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ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

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