

Still Lost in the Academy: The Importance of #L1S and Other First Generation Initiatives

[August 10, 2015](#) [Just Thinking](#), [Student Issues#1s](#), [class](#), [first generation](#), [mentorsSarah Crissinger](#)

*Disclaimer: This post is only about my experience as a first generation student. My experience is not truth. While I try to highlight some research done on this topic and point to others' reflections, it's worth stating that first generation student's experiences are as diverse as they are.*

Sometimes I get comfortable. I start to think that I have "made it" (whatever the hell that means), that I finally have some level of comfort with the academy, that I can speak the language of academia, that I can honor where I come from while still fitting in where I've worked so hard to be. And then I realize just how naïve I am.

A lot has happened in the last few months to bring me back to this topic. Kelly Kietur recently wrote a brilliant blog post entitled "[HOT TAKE: class feelings and lis](#)," where she names her feelings of never belonging as being a "perpetual outsider". This really resonated with me and pushed me to think about and reflect upon my recent experiences and how they relate to my first generation student status.

I just moved to a new institution, Davidson College, to start my journey as a new professional. The transition has been smooth sailing, mostly because of the awesome team that I have here. Still, Davidson is a very prestigious, selective college (the class of 2018's [median ACT score was a 31](#), which is 5 points higher than my best) and it has been difficult for me not to psych myself out about being in this environment. Davidson also recruits brilliant faculty that have degrees from other highly prestigious institutions. I often find myself doubting my ability (more on this later) to connect with them in a meaningful way or even have an in-depth conversation with them.

In addition to adjusting to Davidson, I've spent a lot more time with my mother recently. A few weeks ago she volunteered to help me move everything I own down to North Carolina, which was not an easy task, given that it was almost one hundred degrees for most of the move. Even just this one act illustrates my mom's thoughtfulness and generosity. *She has taught me things about the world that you can't learn in a classroom.* She continuously keeps me grounded but still ambitious. Yet being with her for almost a week reminded me that we always have to remember where we come from. She mispronounced words that are in my daily vocabulary now. She asked me a lot of questions about flying because she hadn't been on a plane in over a decade. She talked about the physical work she had been doing and her fear of not having a real plan for retirement. I say these things *not* to embarrass my mom or ground sweeping statements about those without post-secondary education but simply because I think they illustrate what sparked my reflection. Does pronunciation really define how I feel about my mom? Of course not. But here I'm reminded of one of Maria Accardi's more recent insights on her [Library Burnout blog](#):

I think that the impulse to compare yourself to others in order to improve your mindset or make you feel grateful is not always the most affirming mental move to make, but thinking about my life in terms of my mother-in-law's life has certainly informed and enriched my perspective, because while I do feel marginalized in some areas of my life, I also exist on multiple axes of privilege.

I value every minute I get to spend with my mom. But every minute also reminds me that I'm often playing make-believe, trying to pretend that I fit into academia *and* the poverty that I come from or, worse, that I have finally found my true place in the academy and that I should be ashamed of where I started and who I "left behind". These feelings often create a sense of guilt that can be unmanageable.

To top it all off, I have also been working on the first draft of my first peer-reviewed publication. Kelly describes publishing in a journal as "daunting and almost impossible," which I agree with. As I read more and more articles for my literature review, I find so much of the LIS and education literature **inaccessible**. These are articles about development, international forms of open access, the digital divide, and critical and inclusive pedagogy and *I have trouble understanding a lot of it*. Why write an article if the people that you are writing it for/ about can't read it?! Ellen MacInnis recently [tweeted](#) something I think everyone claiming to do "radical" research needs to read:

Remember: if it's not accessible, it's not radical. [#critlib](#)

So what's my point? Why am I writing about this on ACRLog? I believe that we still have a lot of work to do in LIS, both in supporting and nurturing new LIS professionals that come from a first generation background and in creating academic library services that support first generation students broadly. In addition, I often see a lot of conversations focused on either the financial or academic hardships that first generation students face. These usually talk about retention in terms of scholarships, grants, or work study or the availability of academic support structures like remedial courses or tutoring. These conversations are vital to the success of first gen students. But I think that the social and emotional challenges that first generation students grapple with sometimes take a back seat to these more "tangible" problems, even though addressing them is just as important to actually retaining students. Further, if students are feeling guilty, angry, abandoned, and alone it is likely to affect their academic success.

### **For Ourselves**

There are LIS professionals that [identify](#) as "first generation," whether that means being the first person in their family to go to college or graduate school or the simply someone that is currently part of a different class than the one they were raised in. How can we, as first generation LIS practitioners, support each other? How can our colleagues learn more about the challenges we face?

This work has already been started! Cecily Walker (@skeskali) has started to collect feedback from self-identified first generation LIS folks about what support they need. As a result, she moderated [a Twitter chat](#) on June 1<sup>st</sup> where first gen LIS professionals discussed the challenges they face, how their experiences with class have informed their work, and what "coming out" to colleagues looked like. Cecily explains why she finds this work important on [her blog](#).

I've had two revelations recently that I'd love to see the LIS community discuss more.

Several years ago, Teresa Heinz Housel wrote an article for the *Chronicle* entitled "[First-Generation Students Need Help in Straddling Their 2 Cultures](#)." In the article, she describes her experience realizing that a new status didn't change the disconnect she felt while in the academy:

After I accepted a faculty position, I wrongfully assumed that the old cultural demons would be gone. If anything, cultural isolation can increase up the career trajectory. Dinner parties, intellectual competition, and expectation of education as a right rather than a privilege underscore academic values.

I continue to learn and re-learn this. Earlier I described this feeling of "making it," of feeling secure in academia. I am constantly realizing that being a first generation student actually

means realizing again and again that I am different. I have profoundly different experiences than many of my colleagues and that's okay. *It's actually something to be proud of.* But sometimes I will find myself in situations where it's difficult to remember that. I feel ashamed that I don't know something or I feel lost in certain conversations. I feel like I'm a helpless college freshman all over again. How do other LIS professionals deal with these feelings? How do we continue to show pride in being different and assert that our voices make academia a much more rich and fascinating place?

I have also been thinking a lot lately about how the media and the public has informed the way I think about my abilities and myself. Lynne Coy-Ogan wrote a dissertation in 2009 where she studied first-generation students in depth. One of her findings was that despite their resiliency and success in other aspects of their lives, first generation students were often reluctant to identify themselves possibly because of shame related to the criminalization of poverty. They believed that they were "subordinate to their peers" and they often underestimated their abilities (Coy-Ogan, 2009, p. 19). They are also more likely to accept degrading or demeaning labels or representations of themselves (Coy-Ogan, 2009).

I do this a lot. I beat myself up. I underestimate my ability in a variety of situations, from #critlib chats to faculty outreach. I have already doubted this blog post and the quality of my writing several times! Part of this is that I am a human being. We always have some level of self-doubt and fear when we're putting ourselves out there. However, the older I get, the more I realize that my feelings fit into a greater narrative that the world has told me about myself. From [Missouri's food bans](#) to [Arizona's drug tests](#), our nation has no problem dehumanizing its poorest citizens. Welfare recipients are depicted as lazy drug addicts whose only skill set is manipulating and cheating the system. This idea has been [alive and well](#) since Reagan depicted the "welfare queen" several decades ago.

When you spend all of your life hearing these things about yourself, about your caretaker, about your community, what does this do to your self-esteem? What do you internalize? More importantly, how do we take these stories back? How do we assert that they won't have power over us any longer? How do we help students do the same?

### **For Our Students**

We have to acknowledge that a) first generation students exist on our campuses and b) that they experience the same challenges I've discussed above (and many more). There is a ton of literature on how to serve and mentor first-generation students and taking advantage of it should be an active part of library service planning, not an afterthought.

Again, I think that there also needs to be a more extensive conversation about the emotional, affective challenges inherent in being the first person in your family to straddle class lines and bear the emotional weight of "making it" for everyone before you that couldn't. I know that having mentors that were more familiar with higher education than my parents has been invaluable. Having a community of other first generation students, faculty, and staff to work through these issues with would have also been helpful. How can librarians take on these roles? Librarians should also start to think about first generation students' needs in the context of information literacy, scholarly communication, and technology. Brinkman et al. presented an ACRL conference paper entitled "When the Helicopters are Silent: The Information Seeking Strategies of First-Generation College Students" in 2013. They explore a thought-provoking idea: if first-generation students' parents don't have specific information-seeking experience (as most other college students' parents do) how do their information-seeking habits differ from their peers, both academically and practically? How does this affect library anxiety?

### **Getting to Work**

Housel ends her *Chronicle* article with the following sentence:

I have slowly found other first-generation colleagues at my institution and others. Our conversations helped me realize that the biggest lie we have faced is that we do not belong in academic culture.

Let's make our profession one that intentionally challenges and disregards this lie instead of perpetuating it.

#### References

Brinkman, S., Gibson, K., & Presnell, J. (2013). When the helicopters are silent: The information seeking strategies of first-generation college students. In D.M. Mueller (Ed.), *Imagine, innovate, inspire: The proceedings of the ACRL 2013 conference*. (pp. 643-650). Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries.

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