

Peer Consultation: How Academic Libraries Can Better Serve Their First-Generation Students

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Abstract

First-generation (FG) college students represent a growing population in North American higher education. Yet, many academic libraries continue to rely on traditional, transactional service models that conflict with these students' documented preference for relational, peer-based support. This conceptual paper synthesizes recent literature on FG students' information behaviors and institutional barriers to library use. Drawing on asset-based frameworks and Karen Fisher's theory of Information Grounds, the analysis reveals a critical paradox: FG students highly value library resources and spaces, yet often avoid formal service points because of relational barriers with authority figures. To address this gap, the paper proposes a Peer Research Conversation Program (PRCP), a library-based peer mentorship model that intentionally recruits successful FG students as consultants and operates in a dedicated, low-stakes space separate from the traditional reference desk. The proposal is supported by evidence-based justifications and aligned with the American Library Association's Code of Ethics and values of principlism. The paper also acknowledges practical limitations, including resource requirements and implementation challenges. By shifting from an authority-driven to a peer-mediated, asset-based model, academic libraries can better support FG students' academic success and sense of belonging.

Article Type: Conceptual Paper

Introduction

First-generation (FG) college students, broadly defined as those whose parents did not complete a four-year baccalaureate degree (U.S. Department of Education, 1998), represent a significant and growing demographic within North American higher education. Their success is critical to the instructional and community engagement missions of universities, yet they often navigate the academic landscape with a different set of social and cultural capital than their continuing-generation peers. For information professionals, understanding the distinct information behaviors of this population

is essential for developing effective and equitable services. Historically, institutional approaches have often been framed by a deficit perspective, focusing on what FG students supposedly lack rather than the unique strengths and strategies they possess. This paper challenges that framing.

This paper begins by synthesizing the scholarly discussion surrounding the information behavior of FG college students in North American higher education, with a particular focus on the shift from deficit-based to asset-based frameworks. It argues that the central challenge for academic libraries is not a lack of resources, but a

misalignment between traditional, transactional service models and the demonstrated preference of FG students for relational, peer-based, and informal help-seeking (Payne et al., 2023). Drawing on the theoretical lens of “Information Grounds” (Fisher, 2005), the analysis highlights how academic libraries can shift from a deficit to an asset-based approach (Graf, 2019). The paper concludes with an evidence-based and ethically grounded proposal for a peer-to-peer research mentorship program situated in an academic library at a large public research university.

Literature Review: Scope & Selection

Several parameters guided the selection of literature for this review. The key factor is including articles that represent both traditional deficit-oriented skill assessments and the more recent asset-focused experiential studies, which are essential to analyzing the central intellectual tension around the topic. Further, the selection prioritizes research that explores the social, affective, and identity-related perceptions of information behavior, aiming to provide a more holistic understanding than skills-based metrics alone. Another key parameter is the thematic alignment between the student and the institution. To be included, an article must either (a) focus on the identity, experiences, or behaviors of FG students, or (b) directly analyze an institutional context, like an academic library or mentoring program, through the specific lens of its relationship to this student population. This review also prioritizes peer-reviewed articles published primarily between 2018 and 2025 to ensure the analysis is contemporary and specific. In addition, a limited number of studies on general peer-mentoring programs in academic libraries are briefly referenced to situate the proposed service within existing institutional practice and to clarify its distinct contributions for FG students. These parameters ensure the selected literature represents both sides of the topic’s ongoing and most significant debate and presents them in the correct context. They also enable the literature presented here to go beyond broad discussions and build a body of evidence that directly guides the development of

culturally competent library services. Ultimately, these parameters led to the inclusion of sixteen sources in this literature review, emphasizing the diverse identities of FG students and the significant connections between these students and higher education institutions.

Literature: Synthesizing Evidence

Conceptualizing “First Generation”

The term “first-generation college student” is widely used, but its definition is complex; there is debate in the literature over its definition and application. The way a researcher or institution defines the term often reveals their underlying philosophy. The most widely used benchmark for defining FG students is the one established by the United States Department of Education’s Federal TRIO Programs, which classifies a student as FG if their parents have not completed a four-year baccalaureate degree (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). This objective, demographic definition provides a standardized measure for institutional and quantitative research. Because of this, many quantitative and institutional studies adopt a straightforward demographic definition – if they define it at all – classifying students whose parents do not hold a bachelor’s degree as FG for comparison and assessment purposes. Leary et al. (2023) ask students to self-identify as FG through a binary selection of “yes” versus “no” to the question “Are you a first-generation college student (neither parent completed a 4-yr college degree)?” (p. 160), relying on assumptions and treating FG status as an unexamined categorical variable. In addition, LeMire et al. (2025) identify their participant groups, but the methodology section does not articulate the specific criteria used to define FG, instead assuming the category as self-evident. A growing body of asset-based scholarship, however, argues that this binary label is insufficient and often misleading. Research by Bettencourt et al. (2022) challenges this approach by utilizing “meaning-making,” as a student’s personal identification with the label of FG and its meaning in their life is a more significant factor than the demographic fact itself (p. 275).

The complexities of FG identity are explored in numerous modern studies. Toutkoushian et al.'s (2018) research provides a comprehensive discussion on the challenges of defining the concept, incorporating eight definitions of the category and identifying significant differences among them. Bettencourt and Forrest (2025) reveal five identities and experiences that shape participants' FG status salience, breaking down further that FG is even secondary to their experiences as being, say, a racial and ethnic minority, having a sibling, or being a transfer student. Payne et al. (2023) further complicate the definition by demonstrating that the identity is not synonymous with a lack of ability – an implicit critique of the deficit approach as well. This need for a holistic view is further highlighted by research into non-academic factors, such as the unique mental health challenges faced by this population that they try to alleviate (Wang et al., 2022). Viewing FG as an identity rather than a category or check-box reveals a more complex and capable student, directly challenging the deficit-based frameworks that often support simplified demographic labels.

Key Information Behaviors

Building on the asset-based identity framework, the information behaviors of FG students are not random or deficient; instead, they are characterized by strategic, multi-layered help-seeking behavior. The literature shows a general preference for self-directed and informal peer networks over formal institutional channels. For example, Payne et al. (2023) found that students follow a distinct sequence: they first use online resources "to figure it out themselves," then turn to informal sources like peers and Teaching Assistants (TAs), and only approach professors as a final resort (p. 799). This pattern reveals a general reluctance to engage with formal authority figures, creating a barrier that is only overcome when a formal resource is "deemed to be especially useful" (Payne et al., 2023, p. 799). The main challenge, then, is understanding what makes a formal resource "especially useful" enough to surpass this strategic reluctance.

The value of personal connection in information seeking is powerfully demonstrated by Ballin et al. (2025) in their study of mentorship provided by faculty who were themselves FG students. They found that FG students actively seek out these relationships because they foster a "sense of belonging" and provide crucial "emotional support, guidance, and social needs" (p. 18). This finding directly answers the question raised in Payne et al. (2023): a formal resource becomes "especially useful" the moment it becomes relational. The shared experience and trust built in a mentorship relationship are what motivate a student to bypass their usual preference for informal sources.

This demonstrated preference for informal, relational help-seeking can be explained by Karen Fisher's theory of "Information Grounds." Fisher (2005) defines these as "behavioral settings" where people gather for a primary purpose, but where the social atmosphere facilitates a secondary, often serendipitous, exchange of information (p. 185). The informal networks of peers and TAs that students in Payne et al.'s (2023) study prefer are classic examples of information grounds; they are comfortable, low-stakes social spaces where students feel safe asking questions and sharing knowledge. Additionally, the mentor relationship described by Ballin et al. (2025) illustrates how a strong personal connection can create an information ground, transforming a potentially intimidating formal space like a professor's office into a trusted, supportive environment for information sharing. Ultimately, the literature shows that FG students are not merely seeking people over systems; they are strategically seeking out the safety and effectiveness of information grounds. This presents a direct challenge for traditionally formal and transactional institutions, such as academic libraries, to consider how they can foster such environments.

The Role of the Institution

The academic library presents a critical paradox for FG students. While evidence shows they value the library's physical spaces and resources

even more highly than their peers (Stocking et al., 2024), their demonstrated reluctance to engage with formal authority figures (Payne et al., 2023) creates a hidden barrier to accessing the library's most valuable asset: its human expertise. The institutional challenge, then, is not to prove the library's worth, but to bridge the gap between its high resource value and its high relational barrier by shifting from a transactional to a relational service model.

A closer examination of the evidence reveals the first half of this paradox: FG students don't just use the library; they value its foundational offerings with a distinct sense of importance. In their survey of student perceptions, Stocking et al. (2024) found that FG students "rated all library services highly in terms of importance and satisfaction" (p. 135). Notably, services related to the physical space were highly rated, highlighting the importance of the "library-as-a-place" for these students, while access and discovery services were also valued, confirming the library's essential role in providing low-cost or free resources (Stocking et al., 2024, p. 135). However, the most significant discovery is in the services where their opinions differed the most noticeably from those of their peers. According to the study, the difference was most statistically significant for services providing "student support," which FG students rated as far more important (Stocking et al., 2024, p. 135). This finding is crucial, as it shows FG students have an articulated need for the support the library offers, but there is a disconnect between this need and the methods available to fulfill it.

This disconnect becomes evident when examining the library's traditional approach to human interaction in the context of documented help-seeking behaviors among FG students. The reactive transactional nature of a formal reference desk sets the librarian as an institutional authority figure that students strategically avoid (Payne et al., 2023). This has led scholars to call for a reimagining of the library's role. Graf (2019), for instance, argues that to serve these students, librarians must shift their perspective, recognizing them as "people with stories to contribute, not only needs to be

met," and directly challenging the institutional "narrative about FG students' deficits" (p. 14).

Critically, Graf (2019) recommends a practical solution: librarians must "let go of the notion of themselves as the primary source of help" and instead embrace that students naturally "turn to peers" (p. 14). This leads to the direct recommendation of "creating opportunities for academically successful peer mentors" (Graf, 2019, p. 14). This shift toward a relational, peer-supported model is reflected in efforts to integrate the library into a broader campus-wide "Culture of First-Generation Student Success" (Pressimone Beckowski & Winfield, 2021). Ultimately, these scholarly recommendations are a direct application of the core principles of equitable, culturally competent service. As Cooke (2017) argues, effective instruction requires "relationship building," and librarians must "make additional efforts to build rapport with their communities and really learn about their information and instructional needs" (p. 62). The scholarly and professional mandate is clear: the institution must intentionally create new services that provide flexibility, diversify authority, normalize help-seeking, and build upon the trust and shared experience inherent in a peer-mentoring model. They also need to abandon a one-size-fits-all transactional method and instead focus on a user-centered and relational approach.

Broader Context: Peer-Mentoring Models in Academic Libraries

Peer-to-peer research assistance programs have been implemented in various academic libraries across North America and have demonstrated benefits for general student populations, including increased engagement, reduced anxiety at service points, and scalable support (O'Kelly et al., 2015; MacKinnon & Shepley, 2014). However, the majority of existing models are not explicitly designed around the documented help-seeking patterns, identity-based needs, or asset-based strengths of FG students. Collier (2017) notes that peer mentors are often perceived as more relatable, and thus more credible, than authority figures because

they share a common perspective with mentees – an advantage particularly relevant for FG students navigating unfamiliar institutional norms. The Peer Research Conversation Program proposed in this paper extends this body of work by intentionally recruiting successful FG students as consultants, grounding the service in asset-based frameworks and Information Grounds theory, and directly addressing the relational barriers identified in the FG-specific literature. By locating the service in a dedicated space separate from the traditional reference desk, the program creates a low-stakes, relational environment that aligns with FG students' demonstrated preferences.

Service Proposal

The literature review reveals a clear user need: FG students require information services that are relational, peer-mediated, and operate within trusted, low-stakes environments to overcome their reluctance to engage with formal institutional authorities. While they value the library's resources and support services, the traditional reference desk model creates a relational barrier that prevents them from fully accessing the library's human expertise. To address this identified gap, this proposal outlines the creation of a Peer Research Conversation Program (PRCP), situated within the academic library of a large public research university. This program moves beyond a transactional model of service to build a sustainable, asset-based support system that leverages the power of shared experience to foster information literacy and a sense of belonging for FG students.

The Proposed Service: Peer Research Conversation Program

The PRCP is a library-led initiative designed to provide research assistance through consultations with trained upper-level undergraduate students, with a specific focus on recruiting successful FG students as the consultants. The program's core function is to de-center the librarian as the sole authority and

create a more approachable, less intimidating entry point for research support.

Consultants would be hired and trained by librarians on core information literacy competencies, including database searching, source evaluation, citation practices, and research topic development. Critically, this training would also include modules on mentorship, active listening, and communication strategies for building rapport, explicitly preparing them to create the supportive relationships valued by their peers. The program would be located in a designated, comfortable, and highly visible area within the library, separate from the formal reference desk, to encourage drop-in use and informal interaction. This space would be intentionally designed to be welcoming, with flexible seating and collaborative technology, transforming it from a service point into an information ground. Services would be offered through both scheduled appointments and drop-in hours, providing flexibility to meet varying student needs.

The role of the PRCP is not to provide answers, but to guide fellow students through the research process, sharing strategies and normalizing the challenges inherent in academic work. By employing successful FG students, the program leverages their experiential knowledge of navigating the university, making them credible and empathetic sources of support. Librarians would transition from being the primary frontline service providers to being program coordinators, trainers, and expert resources for the peer consultants, allowing them to scale their impact and focus on higher-level support.

Evidence-Based Justification

The recommendation for the PRCP is a direct application of Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP), which calls for professional decisions to be grounded in the "best available evidence," including research findings, professional expertise, and user perspectives (Koufogiannakis, 2013, p. 7). The design of this service is made directly from the

body of evidence presented in the literature review.

First, the program directly addresses the primary information behavior identified by Payne et al. (2023), who found that FG students tend to turn to peers before approaching formal authority figures, like professors or librarians. By establishing a peer-to-peer model, the library aligns its service with students' existing help-seeking patterns rather than attempting to force them into an uncomfortable or counterintuitive institutional mold. The PRCP utilizes the informal, trusted network that students naturally seek out.

Second, the program is designed to create the relational connection that makes a formal resource "especially useful" (Payne et al., 2023, p. 799). The findings of Ballin et al. (2025) demonstrate that mentorship relationships with those of a shared identity provide essential "emotional support" and foster a "sense of belonging" (p. 18). The PRCP is rooted in this finding by making peer mentorship the central component of its service, transforming the interaction from a simple transaction into a supportive relationship. This model also follows the explicit recommendation of Graf (2019), who argues that librarians must empower students by "creating opportunities for academically successful peer mentors" (p. 14).

Third, the program is a practical application of Fisher's theory of "Information Grounds" (2005). The formal, transactional reference desk is not a natural information ground; it is a designated service point that can induce anxiety. The proposed PRCP space, by being physically separate, comfortable, and staffed by peers, is designed to become an authentic behavioral setting where students can gather for academic work and engage in the serendipitous, low-stakes exchange of information that Fisher (2005) describes.

Finally, this service directly resolves the paradox identified by Stocking et al. (2024). Their research shows that FG students place a significantly higher value on student support

services from the library (Stocking et al., 2024); however, other evidence suggests that they tend to avoid the primary channel for that support.

The PRCP establishes a new, more effective channel that bridges this gap, ensuring that the library's support resources are made accessible in a culturally competent and user-centered way.

Ethical Justification

Beyond its evidence-based foundation, the PRCP aligns with the professional values and ethical commitments of academic librarianship. The American Library Association's Code of Ethics (2021) provides an outline to guide ethical decision-making. Wilkinson's (2014) framework of principlism offers a structured approach to ethical reasoning by applying core professional duties to specific situations. The principles of competence and diligence, for example, encourage librarians to apply their professional knowledge thoughtfully and make sustained efforts to serve their communities effectively (Wilkinson, 2014). Developing the PRCP demonstrates this by drawing on research about user behavior to design a responsive, targeted intervention. It is also consistent with Article I of the Code of Ethics, which calls librarians to provide the highest level of service to all library users through equitable access (ALA, 2021). Instead of maintaining a service model that creates a barrier for some students, the library is proactively working to reduce those barriers and provide equitable access.

The program is also consistent with Wilkinson's (2014) principles of respect for autonomy and respect for community. It supports FG students by offering an option that aligns with their documented preference for peer-based support (Payne et al., 2023). At the same time, it recognizes FG students' informal networks as a cultural asset. By intentionally recruiting successful FG students as consultants, the program validates their lived experience and contributes to the strength and visibility of that community.

These commitments further align with Article IX of ALA's (2021) Code of Ethics, which affirms the

inherent dignity and rights of every person and calls on librarians to confront inequity and advance social justice through services and the allocation of resources and spaces. This principle also corresponds with Wilkinson's (2014) value of justice, which involves the "fair distribution of resources, services, and opportunities" (p. 13). The PRCP advances this principle by intentionally directing library resources – including staff expertise, wages, and space – toward a population that often faces systemic barriers to academic support.

Limitations and Considerations

While the proposed PRCP is grounded in evidence and aligned with professional values, several practical limitations should be considered. Establishing and sustaining such a program requires dedicated space, ongoing funding for peer consultant wages, librarian time for training and coordination, and a sufficient pool of academically successful FG students willing and able to serve as mentors. Not every institution will have the resources or conditions necessary to implement the model exactly as described. In addition, designing a service that feels both credible and approachable presents ongoing challenges. Terms such as "consultant," "mentor," and "conversation," for example, were chosen to balance formality with relationality, but the effectiveness of any label will depend on local campus culture and student perceptions.

Conclusion

This paper has synthesized a body of literature to demonstrate that FG college students possess distinct, asset-based information behaviors characterized by a strategic preference for relational, peer-mediated help-seeking. The evidence reveals a critical disconnect between these behaviors and the traditional, transactional service models common in academic libraries, creating a significant barrier to information access for a growing student population. The core problem is not the value of the library's resources, but the accessibility of its human expertise.

To address this challenge, this paper proposes the establishment of a Peer Research Conversation Program (PRCP) within the academic library of a large public research university. This service, grounded in the principles of evidence-based practice, is designed to align directly with the identified information behaviors of FG students. By leveraging the power of peer mentorship, the program seeks to create a trusted, supportive information ground that fosters research skills, normalizes the help-seeking process, and cultivates a sense of academic belonging. The PRCP also aligns with the professional values and ethical commitments of academic librarianship, as outlined in the American Library Association's Code of Ethics and aligned with the ethical framework of principlism. It is an act of professional competence and diligence, a demonstration of fidelity to the library's mission, and a necessary step toward achieving distributive justice for all students. By intentionally shifting from an institutional authority model to a user-centered relational one, academic libraries can move beyond simply serving diverse populations and begin to empower them, fulfilling their core mission to support equitable access to information and opportunity for each student.

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