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Critical, Compassionate, and Collaborative Pedagogy: Supporting First-Generation Student Success Through Learning Communities

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Critical, Compassionate, and Collaborative Pedagogy: Supporting First-Generation Student Success through Learning Communities

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INTRODUCTION

First-Generation college students (FGCS) comprise nearly 56% of students enrolled in post-secondary education today (NASPA, 2016), and are generally referred to as students whose parents have neither attended college nor earned a degree. Unlike continuing-generation students, FGCS are more likely to be students of color, immigrants, student-parents, low-income, and above the age of 24. According to Jehangir (2010), FGCS are often stereotypically categorized as “at-risk,” and are perceived as students that need to be fixed or saved. Libraries and librarians are in the unique position to employ critical pedagogy and learning communities as a means of engaging, validating, and learning from FGCS by bringing their narratives and identities to the forefront through compassionate communication.

The term “critical compassionate pedagogy” first emerged with Hao (2011) and the perspective that educators should criticize institutional and classroom practices that place underserved students, such as FGCS, at a disadvantage. The four components of compassionate pedagogy include observation, feeling, need, and request. This pedagogical approach helps teachers and librarians better counter institutional barriers and practices that inhibit FGCS success. The hidden curriculum refers to the ways in which the cultural wealth of historically marginalized students is devalued or ignored in both what is taught, and how one teaches in the classroom. By engaging in compassionate communication in conjunction with critical pedagogy in a learning community, FGCS students can cultivate a sense of belonging and increase their involvement in social and academic areas, leading to an increase in retention.

In this interactive workshop for LOEX 2020, participants explored the four components of compassionate pedagogy—observation, feeling, need, and request—to understand how librarians and FGCS can improve their pedagogical interactions in and out of the classroom. Then, in groups, participants developed a learning community framework for building curricular and pedagogical bridges that invite students’ stories, experiences, and cultural wealth into their library and more broadly for the campus community. Participants’ ideas, activities, and potential campus partners for their future FGCS learning community that challenge the isolation and marginalization their students experience on their campus are included in the appendices.

FGCS OVERVIEW

According to NASPA, up to 56% of students enrolled in postsecondary education are first generation. Although there are varying definitions of the term “first generation,” most agree that it refers to students whose parents have neither attended or earned a degree from a postsecondary institution. This is also the definition that West Chester University uses. Students who are first in their family to attend college are a diverse group who juggle numerous life roles and identities. Being a college student is one of these many identities, and it is viewed as an avenue for upward mobility for not only the student but also their family and community. Unlike students whose parents attended college, first-generation students are more likely to be students of color, immigrants, student-parents, low-income, and above the age of 24. Given the lack of financial resources, first-generation students

are also more likely to live off-campus and work at least part-time, which constrains their academic and social integration on campuses.

Constraints on social and academic integration might explain why even though more and more first-generation students do attend college, not enough are earning a degree. In fact, first-generation students are the least likely subpopulation to earn a degree. The attrition rate of first-generation college students within the 1st year of college is 26% compared to 7% for their traditional counterparts. In public four-year institutions only 34% of first-generation students earned a bachelor's degree within six years compared to 66% of their peers (NASPA, 2016).

So, to understand the experience of first-generation students it is necessary to contextualize the ways in which these demographic constraints are translated into the feelings of isolation and marginalization, particularly at large, predominantly White institutions. Most first-generation students have to figure out how to navigate the complex path to college (e.g., financial aid, housing, registration) with little help from families who are not equipped with this navigational knowledge of the system—sometimes this is referred to as the 'hidden curriculum.' Once they get into college, they carry not only their own individual hopes but often the aspirations of their families and communities.

Critical compassionate pedagogy through learning communities is one means of engaging, validating, and learning from first-generation students to bring their narratives, identities, and successes to the forefront of a university. By doing so, first gen students can begin to feel as though their prior experience and knowledge is accepted and gain friendships and meaningful connections on campus, which ultimately leads to higher retention rates.

CRITICAL COMPASSIONATE PEDAGOGY

Critical Compassionate Pedagogy (CCP) is a blend of Critical Pedagogy and Rosenberg's (2003) theory on Compassionate Communication strategy to intersect not only being critical about academia's role in oppression, but to also explicitly be compassionate educators. There are four components to this reflective pedagogy practice, and the following sections will provide a definition and some practical applications for each component. Those components are Observation, Feeling, Need, and Request and will provide the base theory for building a learning community.

Observation

As Rosenberg (2003) states, observation is the intent to observe without making an initial judgment or evaluation. As we already discussed, first gen students have been (stereo)typically categorized as at-risk students, and are perceived as students that need to be fixed, intervened, and saved. Due to systemic and institutional barriers in education, first gen students are often not asked what they need first before assumptions are made about them. By observing or surveying students, we can find out what students on our individual campuses need from us to help them succeed.

For example, librarians can:

- Observe first gen students working in the library—are they sometimes late to work? Can you ask them about their transportation needs, or if they possibly have another job or family need that makes it difficult for them to get to campus on time?
- Survey students to find out what they need from the library—maybe that looks like lockers for their stuff, or a quiet or private space for breastfeeding their child.
- Ask them what you can do specifically to help them learn.

Feeling

After observing these needs, we need to ask ourselves as educators how we feel about accommodating those requests. It is important that we examine our feelings toward FGS because we must be prepared to teach them in our classrooms and learning communities. If all we perceive of FGS is that they are at-risk and are likely to fail, then we are not prepared to teach them and only continue the process of under-serving them.

For example, librarians should:

- Examine their own assumptions about FGS
- Self-reflect on their own approaches to pedagogy and teaching
- Consider whether they are able to make adjustments that enhance the first gen experience

Need

With our knowledge of how we feel about meeting the needs of FGS, we must ask what we need from our students and vice versa to create a culturally inclusive pedagogy.

For example:

- What kinds of pedagogy do we need to develop to help FGS succeed? This could look like encouraging faculty to include an assignment where students can discuss first-gen experiences. This empowers first gens to feel included and accepted in the academy—their voice as academic work.
- What do our FGS need from us to succeed in and out of our classroom or library? How can we be advocates for their success?

Request

Open communication and ask our students what they can do to become the best they can be not only while in the classroom, but also for their overall personal, academic, and professional development. Many first gen students might not know about the supports available across campus, and we are in a unique position as librarians to share that information while also not being the bearer of grades.

- Get out of the library and find ways to connect to other offices who are doing things for first gen students and see if you can get involved.
- Go back to observation—do you notice a student who comes to the research help desk who seems to need extra support beyond the library? Connect them.

Librarians and libraries really are the heart of campus. We serve as the connectors between students, faculty, staff, and the community. If we as librarians are able to apply these moments of compassion for students' needs, we can really change the course of their academic career. And one way to do that without our own credit-bearing class is to start a learning community where first gen students can meet, connect, and have their stories heard while also receiving academic support.

LEARNING COMMUNITY APPLICATIONS FOR LIBRARIES

Research has demonstrated that learning communities can lend themselves to increase retention of historically marginalized students by cultivating a sense of belonging, increasing student involvement in both social and academic areas, and developing a supportive network of peers (Jehangir, 2010). Participants in this LOEX 2020 workshop then worked together to develop and build a framework for cultivating a learning community that is both compassionate, critical, and collaborative. Appendix B provides details regarding participant ideas towards in building their own campus learning community framework.

Considering the four components of Critical Compassionate Pedagogy, participants were asked to think of some goals or learning objectives that would be appropriate for a First Gen learning community at their libraries. This time allowed participants to think about their own students' needs, and think of some goals they would like students to leave with. Some examples of goals from my own work include:

- Bring the storied experiences of First Gen students out and validate them.
- Build connections among other First Gen students to help anchor them to campus.
- Connect students to supports across campus.
- Educate faculty on how best to support First Gen students in their classrooms.

Participants were then asked to think of some activities that could be incorporated in and out of the classroom that would help support those goals. Some examples of activities for my own goals are:

- Have students meet in the library for study hall/structured lab time, asking them of course when would work best and which modality is easiest.
- Provide definitions of commonly misunderstood campus lingo.
- Inform students of supports available and take the stigma out of it with my own narrative.
- Host an info session for faculty advisors on how to support First Gens.

Finally, participants were asked to think about how we can celebrate first gen students with larger events. What campus connections do we have that might want to partner on these events? More traditional learning communities are often between classrooms and living spaces--could we invite those folks into the library's learning community? This might look like:

- Creating a digital archive project of first gen student stories and experiences. Remember these students are not only first gen, but also the first generation to attend your institution

- Host a first gen mixer
- Connect students with other first gen faculty/staff across campus—maybe a checkout a first gen professor event

Potential Campus Partners:

- New student programs office
- Multicultural center
- Campus housing office, etc.

CONCLUSION

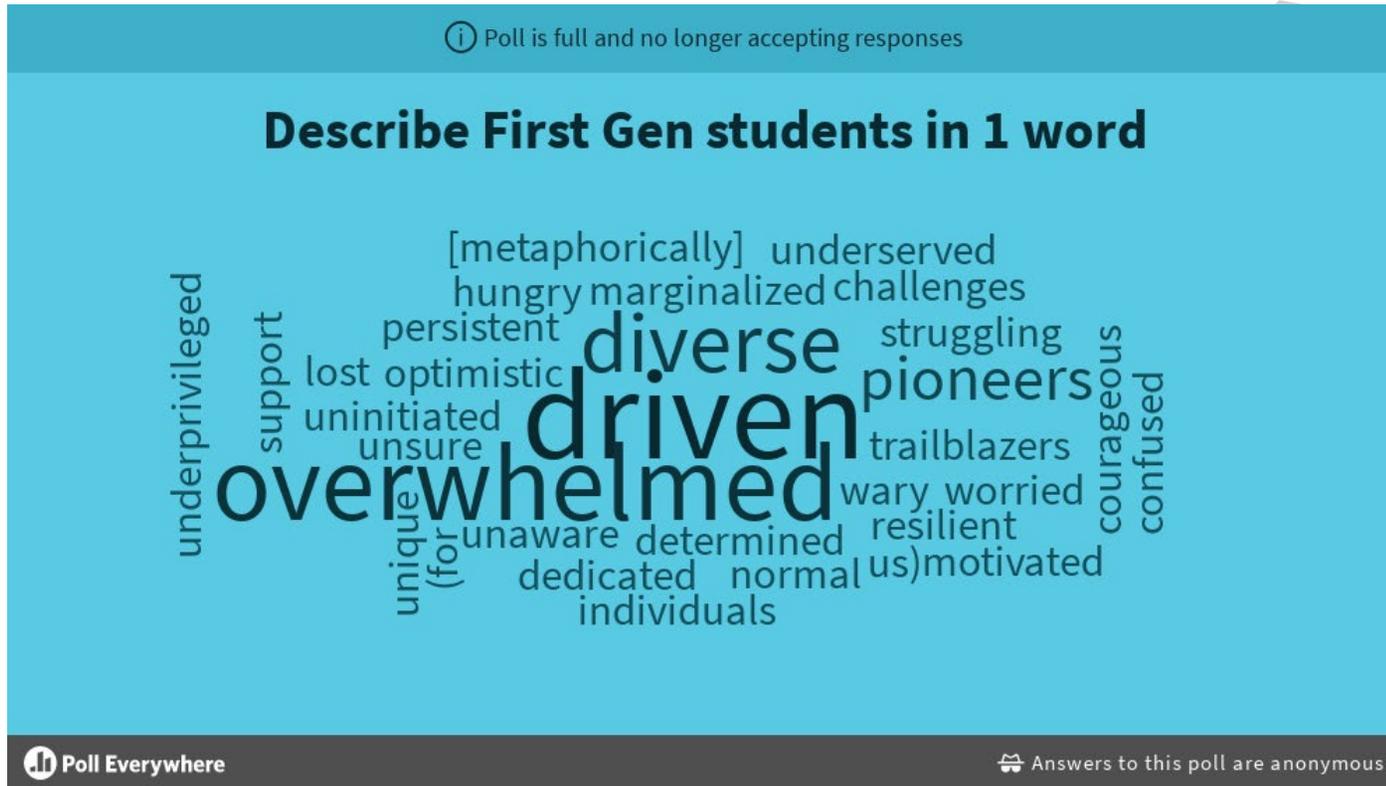
First-generation students face a series of challenges to get to college and must take on new battles as they try to find their way on our campuses. One way to enrich their journey and enrich the academy is to draw on their cultural capital, bring their stories and lived experiences into the learning process, and allow them to voice and author their selves. Bringing the lived experience into the classroom or learning community is messy and imperfect, but its authenticity allows students to be co-teachers and participants in knowledge construction. In doing so, we build the necessary bridges to sustain students who have been marginalized and silenced. Supporting first gen students is not only mission critical, it's compassionate and necessary. We have an ethical obligation to support all student needs and by making small pedagogical changes to show we care and understand, and that we can help bridge the gap. Through the work of building a compassionate learning community, we were able to increase our 2nd year retention rate by 11%.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Activity: Describe first gen students in one word



APPENDIX B

Participant Activity: Padlet Learning Community brainstorming notes

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Title	First Gen Learning Community Framework
Description	let's brainstorm!
URL	https://padlet.com/amypajewski/qmyfpx8x02e42rzy
Builder	Amy Pajewski (amypajewski)
Created At	2020-05-03 23:48:32 UTC
Subject	Body
Teaching activity ideas (small group/online/in-library)	
Publication featuring 1st Gen faculty & staff	https://mays.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/benefactor-2019.pdf
Point out that even though the institution has been historically attended and funded by only generations of white men, that their contribution to the institution and culture is what will make the institution even better. That their voice on campus and in scholarship and the archives is lacking and needed.	I find that a lot of first gen students are from minority and oppressed groups. It's hard to feel belonging to a place that has historically rejected your presence. Perhaps identifying voices that should be included and encouraging contribution to archives: oral histories, student group papers, crowdsourcing photos and ephemera from past first gens and their time on campus...
	Zine workshop
focus groups	
We have doe specific session where student could send in questions before and did an activity with them "Ask Me Anything" events with faculty, staff	
Events connecting first year professors with first year students	
Welcome reception	Our university held a welcome reception. Our library had a table. We also had 1st generation staff available.
Have FG students proof your LibGuides or FAQs or whatever you create... ask students to work together to	
	Panel of 1st gen students sharing with faculty/instructors/frontline staff things that helped or hurt in classes
ask students to draw on their experiences in the classroom	
Book Club	After reading the book, "Educated", myself I wondered if students would be interested in a book club.
We do a First Gen Stories event where we hear from a panel of FG Faculty and Staff, and it's a mixer for people to exchange their FG stories with each other and connect with campus resources.	
Make tutorials easy to access for intro research tasks, maybe even hosting them on a first gen LibGuide. "navigating bureaucracy" workshop - pitched to all students not just 1st Gen students meet in library for orientation	
Panel of grad students who were formerly 1st gen at that institution Connect students to 1st gen staff in library.	

library orientation day, with lunch or breakfast	
open house with free food	
peer mentorship program	
First-gen student research day in archives; research institutional history. Student led Q&A sessions in partnership with relevant campus communities, especially for intersectional concerns Craft in-class activities that allow students to draw on their unique experiences and make connections to the academic sphere. Offering workshops in the library that addresses some common challenges (hosting a workshop on financial literacy, for instance).	
What activities could you do to meet your goals? Where would those activities take place?	
Event ideas (larger events or partnerships in or out of the library)	
How about a "celebrating one's heritage day."	
Campus wide resource brochure listing all of the supports and offices Have library presence at events for first gen students hosted by other groups Zine about First Gen Students and Faculty	
Hosting student study sessions	
Lightning talks for faculty about how to support FG students in various ways Library social media posts highlighting librarians and staff who are first gen for First Gen Student Day. Literacies programs: financial, information, digital, media, etc.	
art exhibit	
human library event focused on first gen students	
first gen oral history project	
Collaborate with Residence Life Department/Staff	I've been fortunate to have developed a relationship over the past 3 years or so.
work with the Academic Resource Center for a mixer, dinner First Gen network/mixer	
Hosting a panel on first gen experience, w/ mix of faculty and students. Are there larger events, initiatives, or programs that would help FGCS feel a sense of belonging or heard?	

Potential Campus partners	
Academic support centers, ie tutoring, writing centers, etc.	
Cohorts for first writing course	
Multicultural Services Center	
student associations for different religions, aspects of identity	
Academic Success Center	
Wellness related services/offices	
Campus Counseling Center for struggling students.	
Get alumni who were FG to share their stories and include in archive. Connect with alumni office.	
First-Gen Dorm	
Academic support units, advising, office/center for diversity & equity; TRIO	
Study abroad (I also wish I'd known it was something I could have done)	
Student Life	
What are others already doing on campus to support FGCS? Who could you partner with on events, activities, or classroom instruction? How?	
Goals/Learning Objectives of your learning	
Help them feel a sense of belonging on campus and ownership and belonging in the library and archives.	A place where they feel valued and as important contributors to the scholarly world.
Reveal the hidden curriculum that continuing students already know/have learned from their parents!	
Demystify systems & structures and invite them to contribute to discussions and ask questions	
Create community where they can contribute (intellectually, emotionally, socially) and benefit from the contributions of others.	
seeing librarians as trusted educators and partners in their educational careers	
When FG students graduate, give them a platform to tell their own story to first-year gen students. This gives them self-value while making an impact on others.	
Understand that librarians are a resource that can be used for any questions they have.	
see their stories/experiences represented in the university/college narrative	
Empowering students to ask questions, know where to find answers, and to know that they belong. Make the implicit rules explicit.	
	Have students empowered so they will know which resources to use throughout their years in undergrad Have a "buddy system" so they can have accountability for tough times open office hours for different support services in a library room?

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feel empowered in their college experience	
Connect FGCS to FG staff.	Know libraries are places where they belong and can ask for help on anything.
How to use resources for academic and personal success	
Increase connection to the library and to campus. Gain confidence to approach faculty and staff. Make connections between their life experiences and their academic work/experiences. A sense of belonging - "you belong here!"	
Wayfinding, navigating library systems and resources	
Understand the norms of scholarly communication	
	Connect to campus
A place to break down the jargon that can be a barrier to first gen students. Feel personally connected to people on campus (faculty, staff, students, programs)	
Find out who they are and what intimidates them about the campus or library	
Provide safe space for FGCS to ask what they think are "dumb questions".	
Support & resources available across campus	
Sense of intellectual ownership	
Understand we are here for them for more than just research needs. Give students opportunities to connect w/ each other.	
Sense of connection to each other, to the institution, to students/faculty/staff and wider community where college is set.	
	Confidence in seeking help, accessing campus resources, and sharing successes
Awareness of resources available to them and how to access those resources. Connection to campus, socially and academically.	
Feel connected to the campus community	
Provide opportunities to give feedback.	
Empowered to ask for help when they need it,	
Provide leadership opportunities	
Consider observations, feelings, needs, & requests when making your goals.	