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**Traitors in One World, Imposters in  
Another:**

**Research Assignments as Academic Engagement  
Opportunities for First-Generation Students**

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**<https://go.osu.edu/alao18folk>**



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**What do you know about first-  
generation students?**



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**How does your institution engage  
first-generation students?**



## First-generation students are...

- students whose parents have not completed a 4-year college degree.
- less likely to persist after their first and second years of college (DeAngelo et al, 2011; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2006).
- less likely to complete their degree (DeAngelo et al, 2011; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2006).



## First-generation students are more likely...

- to be students of color.
- to be of a non-traditional college-going age.
- to have care-taking responsibilities.
- to work full-time.
- to attend school part-time.
- to live off campus.
- to have unmet financial need.
- to be foreign-born or speak English as a second language.



**First-generation =  
DIVERSE**



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## Cognitive frames & organizational learning

Deficit	Diversity	Equity

Adapted from Bensimon, E.M. (2005). Closing the achievement gap in higher education: An organizational learning perspective. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 131, 99-111.



## Cognitive frames & organizational learning

Deficit	Diversity	Equity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focus on stereotypes</li><li>• Blame students or their backgrounds for achievement gap</li><li>• Remediation</li></ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Fix the student</b></li></ul>		

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focus on stereotypes</li><li>• Blame students or their backgrounds for achievement gap</li><li>• Remediation</li><li>• <b>Fix the student</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focus the representation/frequency of differences</li><li>• Celebration of diversity coupled with color-blindness</li><li>• Workshops, sensitivity training</li><li>• <b>Fix the worker(s)</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focus on structures or process that create inequity</li><li>• Institutional responsibility for systemic racism</li><li>• Institutional accountability for equity</li><li>• <b>Fix the culture</b></li></ul>

Adapted from Bensimon, E.M. (2005). Closing the achievement gap in higher education: An organizational learning perspective. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 131, 99-111.



# First-generation students & Academic engagement



**...culture matters!**



## First-generation students & academic engagement

- Academic culture has its own discursive practices (Elmborg, 2006; Nicholson, 2014)
- These discursive practices may remain tacit for many undergraduate students who are novices in their discipline (Leckie, 1996; Mann, 2001; Valentine, 2001)



“As a result, students who are unfamiliar with this practice [decoding the tacit conventions of academic literacy] are often

***misrecognized as intellectually inferior, ‘weak’ or lacking ability.”***

– Burke, 2012, p. 193



“FG students might feel the need to disguise their authentic voices or stories on campus in lieu of fitting in, but this problem may also extend to their life back home.

***Thus for FG students there is a sense of being an impostor in one world and a traitor to the other.”***

– Jehangir, 2010, p. 42





# What does this mean for academic libraries?



## Research assignments as situated practices

- Research assignments are ubiquitous (Head & Eisenberg, 2009)
- Research assignments are discursive practices situated in academic culture (Elmborg, 2006; Folk, 2018; Nicholson, 2014)
- Academic librarians often serve as discourse mediators (Simmons, 2005)



## Research study

- 30 first-generation students who were...
  - in at least their 3<sup>rd</sup> year of study,
  - between the ages of 18 and 24,
  - and enrolled full-time
  - at two regional campuses of a major research university (not Ohio State!)
- Semi-structured interviews lasting up to 75 minutes
- \$25 gift card at the end of the interview



**Students drew upon their identities, lived experiences, prior knowledge, and interests to select topics when given the opportunity to do so.**

Two different orientations to this approach:

- *Performance orientation* – a strategy to stay motivated and lower the barrier to success.
- *Learning orientation* – an intrinsic motivation to learn more and educate others about a personally meaningful or significant topic.



**Only students who exhibited a learning orientation to a research assignment exhibited dispositions and knowledge practices related to information literacy.**

- These students were more likely to be minoritized beyond their first-generation status (i.e. LGBTQ student or students of color)



# Implications

- Research assignments may be opportunities for asset-based (Ardoin, 2018; Martin, Smith, & Williams, 2018) or identity-conscious (Pendakur, 2016) academic engagement
- Meaningful assignments may have implications for...
  - the motivation to learn.
  - the development of information literacy skills.
  - the ability to transfer learning to other contexts (Eodice, Geller, & Lerner, 2016).



## Want a more in-depth look at this?

Folk, A.L. (2018, in press). Drawing on students' funds of knowledge: Using identity and lived experience to join the conversation in research assignments. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 12(2).

Folk, A.L. (forthcoming). Reframing information literacy as academic cultural capital: A critical and equity-based foundation for practice, assessment, and scholarship. *College & Research Libraries*.



# And if you're a real glutton for punishment...

Folk, A.L. (2018). Learning the rules of engagement: Exploring first-generation students' academic experiences through academic research assignments. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA.

<https://go.osu.edu/folkdiss>





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Thank you for your time! 😊

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## Exploring their environment

### Laila

Whenever I was in our mandatory study hours, I would look around at the different athletes. I'd be like, "That person does this," and, "Hmm, they're not doing homework." "This person plays this." "They're doing a little bit of something." ...I'm like, "Okay, they're not in season now," and like, "Okay, they're in season now" ... Sophomores didn't [have mandatory study hall] if they had a certain GPA, but there were some... juniors and seniors there. You didn't have a high enough GPA but still had to do study hour, so you're like, "**Okay, what's going on here?**" That made me think, too.





## Making meaning

### Cheyenne

She also helped me look at different things that I didn't even think to look at or to do research on. That definitely opened up my eyes to just all different things. I didn't even—when I started I wasn't even really looking at the mental illnesses. Then she told me to at least take a gander at it and see if that has any effects to these kids [perpetrators of school violence], which it does... **As I kept doing research and everything like that and learning more about different mental illnesses, I wasn't as angry, and I learned a lot of different things.**



## Educating others – developing an authoritative voice

### Gabrielle

It was more so like I didn't just wanna leave out of the class and not take nothing from it, so what I did was I got a small group together, and we actually sat down and just talked about it... Like, "Tell me something that you don't know, and I'll tell you something that I don't know, and we'll try to educate each other." Because I'm not gonna lie, **sometimes it does get frustrating to continuously keep talking about it, but it's always gonna be there, so you gotta try to at least educate someone else about it that doesn't know.** It was like, well, maybe I'll just do my project on it.



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## Educating others – asserting an authoritative voice

### DeShawn

The thing with this is, I saw this as an opportunity for me. I could either (a) run and go to a different college or (b) stand my ground and educate people... **an opportunity to educate the white populous who really don't understand what it is or what it means to be an African-American student.**