

University at Buffalo, Department of Information Science

LIS First-Generation Students Turned Professionals: Career Barriers and Cultural Assets

Introduction: The Department of Information Science at University at Buffalo (UB) in collaboration with Ithaca S+R requests \$492,772 for a three-year **applied research grant** to investigate the career experiences of first-generation students turned professionals (FGSTP) in library and information science (LIS). This project examines the experiences of this population to better understand workplace challenges and identify factors leading to success, which in turn may lead to inclusive and diverse workplaces. As a population with intersecting identities, the lack of research and information on first-generation students at the graduate level presents an equity and diversity issue that impacts the workplace. This research advances LB21 Goal 1 to recruit, develop, and retain a library and archives workforce from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds (Obj. 1.1). Findings from this work are intended to provide actionable insights to inform future program and association initiatives, inform managers and supervisors, and provide asset-based narratives for current students and recent graduates as they start or continue building their LIS careers. We propose a multi-method approach to address two research questions: RQ1) What structures, challenges, policies, and/or practices exist that impact inclusion and advancement of first-generation students in LIS workplaces? and RQ2) What strategics, tactics, and cultural assets are employed by first-generation students to navigate and succeed in LIS workplaces?

Project Justification: Career navigation and success can be particularly challenging for professionals from traditionally marginalized backgrounds including first-generation students and professionals. [ALA's Spectrum Scholarship Program](#), importantly, works to improve and increase racial and ethnic diversity among library professionals. However, it does not explicitly focus on first-generation students whose intersecting identities (e.g., first-generation and LGBTQIA, immigrant, low-income, or from rural backgrounds) compound their professional experiences of being [first, only, or different in the workplace](#). First-generation identity and related challenges do not end at graduation. Just as first-generation students navigate the [hidden curriculum of academia](#), there is also a [hidden curriculum of careers and the workplace](#). It is widely known that career success is in great part influenced by whom you know; however, social capital varies based on one's racial and socioeconomic status and background. Owing to their [backgrounds and socioeconomic status](#), first-generation students are thought to have less well-cultivated social capital than is necessary to benefit their job search and career growth. Further, career capital, which concerns the "[overall set of non-financial resources a person is able to bring to \[their\] work](#)," manifests in ways that disproportionately impact individuals based on personal demographics.

Library workers who want to advance in the workplace may not possess the career capital element of *knowing-whom*, which reflects one's accumulated network and contacts [that can be a resource in a job search](#). In discussions with library workers from marginalized backgrounds, workers speak at length about the difficulty getting started in the field, the need for job search assistance and advice about networking, and the challenges of moving up the career ladder. Workers from marginalized backgrounds, such as first-generation students, may be pushed to the professional margins remaining, reluctantly, in non-managerial positions. Some leave the profession altogether presenting a retention issue. Career preparation and navigation are not always emphasized in graduate programs. Existing literature points to a [need for career services and programming tailored specifically to graduate students'](#) career development stages and varied needs. In a survey of master's students (primarily in the social sciences, sciences, and humanities), workshops related to career support were most desired. [Students also were interested](#) in sessions on job search strategies and building professional networks. Through this project, we aim to gain an empirical understanding of the challenges faced and learn from the success of others in order to cultivate environments of inclusivity, belonging, and career achievement.

Project Work Plan: The research team will take a narrative and [feminist epistemological approach](#), which prioritizes the lived experience as meaning, use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, and an ethic of caring. Methods will involve focus groups and storytelling through narratives. **Phase 1:** Three to five focus groups of up to 8 participants each will be conducted to collect data concerning the biases, policies, and/or practices that may impact inclusion and career advancement for FGSTP (RQ1). Focus groups foster generative dialogue among participants eliciting rich, descriptive data from their perspectives and lived experiences. Outreach for focus group participants will include solicitations to select groups through social media and listservs with attention to those relevant to the intersecting identities of first-generation students, such as ALA's Rainbow Round Table and the Association for Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL). Interested participants will have the option to participate in focus groups virtually or in-person at LibLearnX 2025. In both instances,

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participants will be compensated for their time. Transcripts of the focus groups will be analyzed through content analytic and coding approaches to inform RQ1 and advance our understanding of the challenges faced by FGSTP. A forthcoming survey by the principal investigator on career services available and of interest to graduate LIS students will serve as a secondary data source to this project.

Phase 2: Building on discussions in the focus groups, participants and others will be invited to construct individual career narratives, which will enhance understanding of the barriers, strategies, and assets attributed to success. The narratives will serve as illustrative case studies for analysis to address RQ2. [Yosso's \(2005\) community cultural wealth](#) framework, which posits cultural forms of capital relevant to populations from marginalized backgrounds, provides an asset-based lens through which to analyze data to address RQ2. With permission, the narratives will be compiled and published as an online open educational resource. Narratives have transformative power for the writer and reader. Constructing career stories allows participants to "[highlight particular experiences to produce a narrative truth by which they live](#)" and from which others can learn and feel solidarity, especially those from marginalized backgrounds.

Phase 3: The research team will contract with a consultant to create a suite of deliverables. In keeping with the iterative, responsive, and feminist research approach, the deliverables will be guided by findings from phases 1 and 2. Intended deliverables include an on-demand recorded webinar for managers and supervisors with the preliminary goal of promoting inclusive onboarding practices for FGSTP; an online open resource collection of career narratives with resources to support a smooth workplace transition; and a report summarizing findings and offering recommendations and guidelines for managers and job search committees.

Project Personnel: *Dr. Africa Hands*, principal investigator (PI), has been PI on two grant-funded projects including one that informs the proposed research. She studies first-generation students, information access of marginalized groups, and the professional education of LIS students. Dr. Hands has presented career planning workshops for LIS and other professional organizations. She also completed the inaugural ALA Career Development Facilitator training. *Melissa Blankstein* (co-PI), researcher at Ithaca S+R, designs and leads large-scale, national research projects, including multiple IMLS-funded initiatives, on student and faculty needs, support services and structures, and organizational leadership in collaboration with educational and cultural organizations. We also will assemble an external advisory board comprised of 3-4 members with relevant expertise. The following professionals have agreed to serve: *Kim Dority*, LIS Career Specialist and Kent State iSchool Instructor; *La'Tonya Rease Miles*, Ph.D., Director of University Partnerships, ReUp Education; and *Maurini Strub*, Assistant Dean of Strategy and Planning at the University of Rochester Library.

Diversity Plan: Outreach efforts for study participants will include recruitment throughout organizations dedicated to supporting diverse library professionals. Members of the advisory board will bring diverse perspectives to inform this project. Findings from this research will inform efforts to create or expand LIS professionals' formal networks to enhance social and career capital for the diverse group that is FGSTP. Lastly, this project has implications for our diverse communities. Intentional efforts to support students from traditionally marginalized populations in their preparation and pursuit of full-time LIS positions may result in a workforce more representative of the communities served.

Project Results: Findings will be shared throughout the project period on the project website, in relevant social media communities, via webinars with professional organizations, and through the noted deliverables. Insights from this research will be of interest to ALA's New Members Round Table and Core Forum and the Critical Pedagogy Symposium, all of which draw diverse practitioners at varied career levels. Findings from this study will be valuable to LIS program administrators interested in developing co-curricular opportunities to support graduate student career development and to faculty interested in incorporating career development topics in their courses. This project will benefit current students through its advocacy for diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces. Data also will inform LIS employers interested in implementing onboarding experiences to meet the needs of FGSTP.

Budget Summary: The requested funds of \$492,772 over a three-year period will support salary and wages for UB-PI (\$52,283); student support (\$20,800); fringe benefits for UB-PI and student (\$28,795); travel (\$8,000); supplies, materials, and equipment (\$3,200 for qualitative data analysis software and other supplies); other costs (\$12,000 for participant incentives, advisory board, and publishing); UB indirect costs (\$101,308); subawards and contracts (\$266,386 for contractors and Ithaca S+R personnel, travel, and indirect costs).