

## Identifying, understanding, and supporting diverse first-generation scholars in linguistics

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**Abstract.** One in three college graduates is in the first generation of their family to complete a bachelor's degree (NCES 2016), including 27% of doctoral students (CGS 2022) and 28% of tenure-track faculty (Morgan et al. 2022). Although there exists ample diversity of perspective and experience among first-generation students, relative to continuing-generation students, they are more likely to work full-time, care for dependents, and/or contribute to the income of their households. They are also more likely to be older, lower-income, racially minoritized, and to have graduated from community colleges. These factors provide first-generation linguists with unique forms of cultural and symbolic capital that often go undervalued in academia. We demonstrate how faculty can establish effective and nurturing mentoring relationships with first-generation students, how first-generation graduate students and faculty can maintain a work-life balance, and how to use tailor-made case studies to increase the visibility of generation-based educational inequity. Our perspective emphasizes structural barriers over individual shortcomings and uplifts first-generation voices in a variety of academic roles and institutional contexts within linguistics and allied disciplines.

**Keywords.** first-generation students; diversity; equity; inclusion; intersectionality; hidden curriculum; scholarship of teaching and learning; mentorship; higher education

**1. Introduction.** First-generation scholars have the potential to make significant contributions to linguistics and the mind sciences. As the first in their families to pursue higher education, they offer unique insights shaped by their distinct experiences of enculturation, identity formation, and language socialization. As a result of macrostructural (e.g., economic insecurity) and institutional barriers (e.g., the hidden curriculum), first-generation scholars may encounter difficulties in the course of their academic trajectory. Our work encourages linguists to recognize the assets that first-generation scholars bring to the field and to confront the systemic inequities that hinder their full participation.

We are heartened by the increasing visibility of first-generation scholars and concerns in linguistics. At the same time, visibility means little if it is not accompanied by the active creation and maintenance of resources tailored to first-generation needs, inclusive of grants, mentorship programs, and targeted academic support services. The proliferation and fortification of such support systems will facilitate the academic success and social integration of first-generation scholars within linguistics. This not only intellectually enriches our field, but is consonant with our broader goals of diversifying the discipline and disinvesting from structures of inequality in academia more broadly (Charity Hudley et al. 2020). This paper details concretely how to

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identify, understand, and support diverse first-generation scholars in linguistics. Through dialogue and collaboration, we can work towards forging a more inclusive and equitable academic environment where all scholars, regardless of their generational status and how this intersects with their other identities, have the opportunity to thrive and make meaningful contributions to the field.

**2. Identifying first-generation scholars.** Although we acknowledge that some authors may opt for a more or less expansive conception of *first-generation*, for the purposes of this paper, a first-generation scholar is someone who “will be the first person in their immediate family to graduate from a 4-year college,” including “students whose parents have attended a 4-year college but did not graduate, and students whose parents attended and graduated from a 2-year college” (Charity Hudley et al. 2017). Given that federal programs only consider the education level(s) of the guardian(s) with whom the student shares a regular residence (Higher Education Act 1965, 1998), the often cited one-in-three figure may fail to count students from first-generation backgrounds with more complex family or residential histories. First-generation status is not always visible to educators, either because the scholar in question may not feel comfortable disclosing, or because they are not aware that it is a facet of their identity that may be relevant to mentors, instructors, and supervisors.

Students who are educationally marginalized on the basis of their first-generation status are likely additionally marginalized on the basis of other identities. With respect to socioeconomic class, for instance, the median parental income for a first-generation student is \$41,000, compared to \$90,000 for continuing-generation students (RTI International 2019). It is crucial to emphasize that although broader demographics trends exist, first-generation scholars are individuals within a highly heterogeneous group. Mentoring and support intended to address generation-based educational inequity should not come at the expense of acknowledging each individual’s unique background, experiences, and strengths, especially with respect to scholars who are marginalized on dimensions additional to generational status (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, immigration status, *inter alia*). Concomitantly, given that the population of the first-generation student is more likely to be racially minoritized, immigrant, and lower-income, single-issue advocacy is not workable. We maintain that advocating for first-generation scholars requires us to attend to inequities on other axes as well.

**3. Impostor syndrome.** IMPOSTOR SYNDROME describes a psychological state in which competent individuals question their competence, potential, or sense of belonging. We propose that at least some instances of impostor syndrome are reducible to experiences of exclusion from the HIDDEN CURRICULUM, which we further address in §4. Although impostor syndrome has been embraced by various individuals as a concept that speaks to their condition, we propose that at least *some* deployments of it function as a way to psychologize and individualize broader processes of systemic and institutional marginalization.

3.1. DECENTERING THE IMPOSTOR SYNDROME NARRATIVE. The impostor phenomenon was first described by Clance & Imes (1978) in the context of highly accomplished professional women. Despite stellar records of achievement, they believed themselves to be inadequate and to be defrauding their colleagues of their competence. The impostor discourse has saturated public life and is now used to describe the experiences of many individuals and groups beyond high-achieving women. Anecdotally, it is not uncommon to hear graduate students in linguistics frame their experiences within an impostor syndrome narrative. That discourses of impostorism have such a strong association, real or perceived, with positionalities of marginalization troubles us.

We wonder if the impostor phenomenon is not in some sense an internalization of systemic racism, classism, (cis)sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, somanormativity, and if it does not in some sense backgrounds these structures and blames the individual for their feelings of subjective ill-being within these structures. We believe that the layperson's casual deployment of the impostor syndrome narrative is no substitute for rigorous social science and thoughtful social advocacy.

Ample previous work exists on structural barriers within the academy, be these socioeconomic (e.g., Morgan et al. 2022), racial (e.g., Monari et al. 2023, Dupree & Boykin 2021), gender-based (e.g., Meza-Mejia et al. 2023) or intersectional (e.g., Showunmi 2023; Crenshaw 2013). Morgan observes that faculty in the US are 25 times more likely to have a parent with a doctorate—strikingly, this number doubles for faculty employed at higher-prestige institutions. Rickford (2014) highlights the lack of diversity among linguistics faculty in particular, and as Mantenido et al. (2024) suggest, linguistics curricula do not often nurture a sense of belonging. Consequently, first-generation scholars in linguistics, especially students, labor under conditions of poor representation and social integration, which some may name as impostor syndrome. Although it may be easy to frame the impostor syndrome as a problem of confidence and not competence, we argue that it is less on the so-called impostor to change their worldview, and more on those in positions of power to challenge a maldistribution of cultural capital that promotes feelings of doubt, exclusion, and impostorism.

3.2. THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM. The hidden curriculum describes those lessons that furnish continuing-generation students with greater cultural capital and social integration in hegemonic academic structures. It includes “implicit academic, social, and cultural messages; unwritten rules and unspoken expectations; and unofficial norms, behaviors, and values of the dominant-culture in which all teaching and learning is situated” (Boston University Teaching Writing 2019). These norms may be behavioral (how to ask questions in class), linguistic (how to write an email to a professor), sartorial (how to dress for a conference), or procedural (how to seek conference travel funding). By definition, the hidden curriculum is often not transparent, and therefore acts as a vehicle of marginalization. Haeger et al. (2018) argues that members of the academy from racially minoritized, first-generation, and low-income backgrounds are less likely to have access to support systems for navigating the hidden curriculum. We argue that this is the true etiology of impostor syndrome, leading first-generation scholars to feel a lack of knowledge and belonging that crucially does not coincide with a lack of competence.

**4. Mentorship.** In what follows, we offer a variety of best practices in mentoring that are intended *both* to demystify the hidden curriculum *and* to nurture the numerous strengths of first-generation scholars. These practices will facilitate the integration and success of first-generation scholars, thereby making the field more inclusive. This is a form of harm reduction: we stress that we are making the *field* more inclusive; we are not making the hidden curriculum more inclusive. It is not possible to make the hidden curriculum more inclusive, as the hidden curriculum is constructed or enforced with the interests of marginalized individuals in mind, and specifically functions to entrench inequities in cultural capital and access.

As the field becomes more inclusive to first-generation scholars, two important realities are cast into relief. First, we see that it is possible to accompany (Bucholtz et al. 2017) and support first-generation scholars as they use the assets that they already possess to navigate the hidden curriculum. Second, we see that the skills that first-generation scholars exemplify and model are compatible with and should be celebrated by the academy (see Freire 1972; hooks 1994; Ladson-Billings 1995; Thomas 2024; and Mantenido et al. 2024 on the importance of ensuring that

students' strengths, experiences, and identities are reflected in the structure and functioning of educational institutions). We hasten to add that these practices can be used with mentees from an array of backgrounds, including continuing-generation mentees and mentees marginalized on non-generational axes.

4.1. **STARTING A MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP.** Establishing a mentor-mentee relationship can be a daunting task both for the mentor and the mentee. We strongly encourage prospective mentors to consider writing a mentoring autobiography before actively mentoring a student. This is an important tool that encourages you to reflect on your own experiences as a mentee and who you are or want to be as a mentor.

As a mentor to a student who is experiencing conditions of disciplinary undersocialization, it is often necessary for you to take the initiative to schedule a first-time meeting with your student. (It is for this reason that this section addresses the mentor directly with the second person pronoun.) Students may mention that they wish to work with a mentor, but they may not know how to reach out in order to ask for an initial meeting. For this reason, we suggest that prospective mentors reach out to their prospective mentee(s), as soon as possible after a connection is made.

In a first-time meeting, it is crucial for the mentor to nurture in the mentee a sense of belonging. We believe that this is best done by offering evidence, on the basis of the mentee's prior performance, that they belong in academia. Furthermore, mentors should consider the mentor-mentee power imbalance, and the ways in which these dynamics can produce or limit feelings of belonging. One way to combat issues produced by unexamined power dynamics, to determine the quality of fit between a mentor and a mentee, and to create a guide for what the relationship will look like is through the drafting of a mentorship agreement (see, e.g., *Advancing Inclusive Mentoring Program 2022*).

4.2. **THE MENTORSHIP AGREEMENT.** The mentorship agreement is a tool which cultivates agency in both the mentor and the mentee, in that it allows both to establish how the mentor-mentee relationship will function. The co-writing process itself generates a large quantity of evidence that can be used to assess whether the relationship is a good fit. The mentorship agreement should be in the form of a shared document that outlines the following:

- (1) *What should a mentorship agreement do?*
  - a. Establish who you are as a mentor and what you value (e.g., are you hands-on or hands-off, do you want weekly meetings, what are your expectations of the mentee, etc.).
  - b. Establish who the student is as a mentee and as a person (e.g., what are the student's duties outside of school, what are their expectations of a mentor, what is their working style), but only as much as they are willing to share.
  - c. Share ideas on a sustainable pace and amount of work, based on who you are as a mentor and who they are as a mentee.
  - d. Ensure that the meeting environment facilitates sharing: Minimize distractions (as much as possible), listen, be mindful of the time the mentor spends speaking—give the mentee plenty of opportunities to speak.
  - e. Co-create a timeline with shared expectations and reflect on what is needed to maintain this timeline.
  - f. Ascertain that both parties agree on the decisions made.
  - g. Periodically revisit the document throughout the course of the mentor-mentee relationship, making joint revisions if necessary.

4.3. SUSTAINING THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP. While the mentoring agreement is an excellent resource in the development and maintenance of the mentor-mentee relationship, there are further actions that a mentor can take in order to sustain a productive and nurturing mentorship practice. These actions include, but are not limited to, providing scaffolding, maintaining a sense of meeting etiquette, and encouraging the mentee to look for additional mentors, perhaps through the creation of a mentorship network. Mentees may expect one mentor to suffice, but it is part of the mentor's job to tell the mentee that we all need multiple mentors who can address different needs. It is unreasonable, in light of the workload required, to be the sole mentor in your mentee's life. Lone mentorship does a disservice to your mentee. It is also important to apprise the mentee of the importance of peer-to-peer mentoring, and if possible, to help set up peer-to-peer mentorship structure for them in the form of a lab (see Franz et al. 2022 for further details).

With respect to meeting etiquette, we encourage mentors to reflect on how to give feedback that is both constructive and sincere and to be aware of the time each person spends talking during meetings. It is crucial for the mentor to remain fully present during mentorship meetings: for instance, even if we receive multiple emails during a scheduled meeting, it is necessary not to prioritize our inbox or mobile phone over the needs of the mentee at a time that was specifically reserved for them. Etiquette concerns could form a part of the mentorship agreement and should be subject to re-evaluation as the relationship evolves.

Scaffolding is especially important, both within the context of mentorship meetings and in all other supervisory interactions with the mentee. We ask mentors to always check with the mentee what they know and what they do not know. Assuming that a mentee should be capable of doing something is unproductive, and over time may discourage your mentee from expressing that they do not know something or that they are unable to do something. Specific skills that we would encourage mentors to consider teaching include: how to apply for grants, how to write an abstract, how to organize one's schedule and to partition a research into actionable steps, how to write a paper, how to connect with communities and build relationships, and how to create experimental stimuli. In other words, mentors should be prepared to share practical knowledge with mentees, rather than merely acting as a font of linguistic knowledge.

As a final note, we wish to remind the reader that there is no such thing as a perfect mentor. Mentorship is a craft that demands constant work and growth. We recommend that mentors read up on scholarly work, whether in linguistics or in other disciplines, on mentorship. You may be employed at an institution that conducts mentorship workshops (e.g., the Advancing Inclusive Mentoring Program in the California State System), and you may belong to a professional organization that is committed to this work (e.g., the Pop-Up Mentoring organized by the Committee for Gender Equity in Linguistics of the Linguistic Society of America).

**5. Setting realistic expectations.** It is common for academics to talk about their long working hours. It is true that academic jobs often require more than a "standard" 40 hours of work per week, and that the nature of academic work at all levels means that the barrier between work and personal life can be easily blurred. However, academic socialization is such that more work (often implicitly defined as more time working) is widely seen as inherently better than less work, and this idea can be exacerbated by dynamics such as the "up or out" nature of many academic transitions (e.g., qualifying exams, tenure reviews, the academic job market itself), or as a reaction against the tendency of some of those outside of academia to minimize the amount of work done by students and faculty. This can be a particular issue for first-generation academics, who are known to face strong internal pressures to prove themselves (see §3) as well

as possible issues of family and friend networks not understanding the workload pressures faced by undergraduates, graduates, and faculty.

Studies of time spent on job-related tasks support the claim that academics spend more time working than those in most occupations.<sup>1</sup> Myers et al. (2023) and Link et al. (2008) find that US faculty spend about 50 to 54 hours per week on work-related tasks (the average full-time employee in the US works about 42). To accomplish this, many faculty keep what Solomon (2011) called “grazing” schedules, in which work is done in interrupted chunks throughout each day. This larger than normal amount of work that academics either feel the need to take on or are required to take on (or both), and the concomitant bleed of work functions into what would otherwise be personal time, feeds into issues with work-life balance, which is one of the top reasons that early-career faculty leave academia entirely (Spoon et al. 2023).

An important question, then, is how to resist the pressures that lead to poor work-life balance and accompanying burnout. The answer depends, unfortunately, on what career stage one is in—the level of power, and therefore control, held by academics at different stages is radically different. However, it is always possible to be armed with the knowledge that economists and industrial engineers have long studied the effects of overwork on productivity, and have consistently found that longer hours do *not* correlate with higher productivity (see, among many others, Padilla & Thompson 2016; Pencavel 2018). Therefore, it is not just to your own advantage, but also to the advantage of your supervisor (whether that is a chair, a dean, a dissertation advisor, a lab supervisor, or anyone else) to work toward accomplishing tasks, and not simply to put in more hours to be able to point to time on task.

But how can you do this? At some level, it comes down to the same message as the previous section (§4): Find and cultivate good mentors. These can be those with more experience in a position or at an institution than you (and therefore, generally speaking, with more power than you) who can help by providing advice or even backing you up when you have to decline a task, or peer mentors who can provide you with a sort of “reality check” for things you are asked to accomplish. No matter who they are or precisely what role they play in the process, they can help you step outside of your own mind and view the situation more clearly.

In addition, you may well find that you have more allies than you might expect in your efforts to build a healthy work-life balance—after all, those who supervise you ultimately do want you to succeed, even though they might not immediately recognize the best way for that to happen. With respect to dealing with academic administrators, policy can be an important asset—for postdoctoral and faculty positions, there should be a handbook outlining your responsibilities and protections, and this is often also the case for students, especially but not exclusively at universities where graduate students are unionized. And finally, remember one important fact: If you really do ultimately need to simply say no to a request for something that will take up too much of your time and attention, even if the person asking you is disappointed by your response, they will not hate you—they will simply have to find someone else to take it on, and if it is actually necessary enough it will be done by someone.

Ultimately, you need to advocate for yourself and your own well-being, both on your own and with the backing of mentors and others. The boundaries of academic positions are often fuzzy and can expand to fill all the time that is available for them, but a successful academic career (or, we would suggest, any successful career) requires the setting of clear boundaries and limits.

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<sup>1</sup> The studies here all investigate faculty workloads. Unfortunately, studies of overall student workloads (as opposed to time spent by students on particular types of tasks) are lacking at this time.

**6. Advocating for first-generation visibility and power.** We do not claim to have the final word on how to promote first-generation flourishing in the field of linguistics. We hope that this paper invites you to begin the work of attending to issues of generation-based inequity as they play out in your home institutional contexts. To that end, we have made available a collection of 12 case studies. These case studies typify common difficulties encountered by first-generation scholars across a range of identities, academic ranks, and institution types. Although similar collections have been compiled in the past, our collection is the first to address concerns specific to the discipline of linguistics. The problems raised by the case studies do not have easy answers, nor do they have uniform answers across diverse institutional contexts. Importantly, we note that depending on a mentee’s level of exclusion by the hidden curriculum, or a mentor’s level of investment in fighting inequity, some of the problems may not register as problems at all. In other words, a collaborative discussion that centers the perspectives of first-generation students functions *both* as a practice of hidden curriculum demystification (cf. §3.2) *and* as a practice of mentorship development (cf. §4.3). Our ultimate goal is to resolve these problems, or at least to help our mentees survive under the conditions that produce them. We imagine a variety of uses for these case studies, to include the below in (2).

- (2) *Case studies in first-generation experiences in linguistics: Possible use cases*
- a. Graduate students writing a statement of teaching philosophy and mentors writing a mentoring biography (cf. §4.1) may find it useful to reflect on how they might respond to the problems raised by the case studies.
  - b. Mentors and mentees may exchange responses to the case studies as they co-write their mentorship agreement (cf. §4.2).
  - c. Staff in IDEA (inclusion, diversity, equity, and access) roles, within centers of teaching and learning, and within career services centers may use the case studies in workshops and training events.
  - d. Student leaders who are already engaged with race-, gender-, class-, sexuality-, or ability-based activism may consult the case studies in order to add a generational component to their intellectual, advocacy, or organizing work.
  - e. Tenured and tenure-track faculty may discuss these case studies as a part of a faculty meeting in the context of a discussion on more equitable mentoring and hiring practices.
  - f. First-generation scholars may explore the extent to which their own experiences are represented by these case studies—and they may choose to contribute further case studies to the collection.

A sample case study follows, and all 12 can be found in the case studies file for this article at the following URL (names used come from the Diverse Names Generator (O’Leary et al. 2023)):

<https://journals.linguisticsociety.org/proceedings/index.php/PLSA/article/view/5712/5535>

- (3) *Sample case studies*
- a. Lujain (*they* pronouns) was one of your best students this semester in Introduction to Linguistics. They did their final project on variation in the acceptability of gender-neutral pronouns in Portuguese. You tell them that you hope to see them in future courses, but they tell you that they only enjoyed a few topics in the introductory course. “I really enjoyed sociolinguistics, language and racialization, and language ideologies, but I thought syntax and phonology were kind of a pain.” You know that if Lujain

decides to major in linguistics that they will have to take many more formal classes, and that there are very few options that will be appropriate for their interests and talents at this particular institution. What advice do you have for Lujain?

- b. You are a member of a faculty search committee. One of the candidates, Dr. Childers (*she* pronouns), is a white female first-generation scholar who works in a subfield that is underprioritized in the department. She comes from a rural, working-class background and worked for nonprofits committed to rural youth empowerment for ten years before starting graduate school. She has continued to do activism around the areas of healthcare accessibility and food insecurity in rural environs, but this work is largely orthogonal to her research on the syntax-prosody interface. Your department wishes to make a hire that furthers the department's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Your search committee chair says that first-generation status alone does not make a candidate "diverse," and that her activist work, while commendable, does not help us diversify the linguistics professoriate. What is your response to this?

**7. Conclusions.** In this paper, we have attempted to provide an overview of some of the issues faced by first-generation academics generally and those in linguistics specifically, and to offer some suggestions to lessen the impact of those issues. In §1, we argued that supporting first-generation scholars is to their benefit as well as to the benefit of the field of linguistics. In §2, we spotlighted the heterogeneity and intersectionality of first-generation scholars and how they are ill-served by single-issue or single-identity activism. In §3, we problematized lay deployments of the impostor syndrome as a practice that obscures the manner in which the hidden curriculum of hegemonic Anglo-American academia maldistributes social, cultural, and symbolic capital in a manner that visits disproportionate harm on first-generation scholars. In §4, we provided concrete steps towards establishing a more nurturing and productive mentorship practice. In §5, we outlined how to maintain a work-life balance in academia. In §6, we provided resources for increasing first-generational visibility within one's own institutional context. One critique of our approach here may be that what we have framed as first-generation issues affects everyone, or that our solutions are beneficial to everyone. We do not disagree with this. Rather, we wish to emphasize that our attention to generation-based inequity *by nature* invites a broader, more intersectional perspective, and undergirds our commitment to a juster and more inclusive scientific study of the human language faculty.

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