First-gen in the classroom: Teaching by and for first-generation scholars in higher education

Shannon Bryant, Joshua Dees, Miranda K. McCarvel, Victoria Thomas & Tran Truong[1*]

Abstract. First-generation scholars are individuals who are the first in their family to attend a four-year college or university. In response to affirmative action bans, admissions committees have begun to use first-generation status as a way to promote a diverse student body, leading to an increase in the number of first generation students. Within the sociology of education, first-generation scholars are typically discussed from a deficit-based perspective that emphasizes their lack of preparation, lower degree completion rates, and enmeshment in reductive discourses such as *impostor syndrome*. Although we see value in naming and challenging the systemic barriers that encumber first-generation scholars, we propose that the field of linguistics and its allied disciplines are especially well suited to pursue an asset-based perspective of the first-generation experience. First-generation students are disproportionately bilingual, heritage speakers, and/or immigrants, and even monolingual first-generation students without a recent immigration background often have exposure to stigmatized dialects and sociolects. First-generation experiences of transitioning and translating between different language ecologies in home, school, work, and/or activist spaces foster resilience, resourcefulness, and metalinguistic awareness that can be leveraged in the linguistics classroom. We provide a collection of best practices in teaching and course design geared towards undergraduate-level linguistics courses rooted in a philosophy of universal design that demystifies the hidden curriculum and gives greater pride of place to the study of language in sociocultural context. Not only do these interventions increase first-generation belonging and success, but they improve the quality of learning for all students, including continuing-generation students.

Keywords. first-generation; asset-based pedagogies; course design; scholarship of teaching and learning; universal design for learning

1. Introduction. For the purposes of this paper, we use *first-generation* to describe an individual who is the first in the family to obtain a baccalaureate degree. As linguists, we are cognizant and respectful of definitions of this term that are either broader or narrower in scope. Given our premise that *first-generation-centered course design is universal design*, we believe that our recommendations will improve learning for all students, and therefore will be broadly applicable even to those instructors who subscribe to a different understanding of the term. The first-generation identity is not monolithic and intersects with race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, immigration status, nontraditional student status, parental/caregiver status, and other life experiences (Bowie et al. 2024). As of 2020, about 54% of undergraduate students in the US

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identified as first-generation. First-generation enrollment and visibility are both on the rise as universities, in response to ongoing attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in higher education, have adopted first-generation status as a proxy indicator for sociodemographic variables that can no longer be taken into account in admissions, recruitment, and financial aid determinations (Elwood et al. 2023). We believe that this dynamic, which we call the *first-gen turn*, creates both challenges and opportunities for educators, particularly in linguistics and its allied fields. On the one hand, our institutions will be enriched by the expertise of first-generation students, who bring to the classroom diverse experiences of cultural socialization and unique forms of metalinguistic awareness. On the other hand, we may be called upon to support those first-generation scholars who, as a result of structural underexposure to the hidden curriculum (Beristain et al. 2025), may demonstrate lower levels of engagement, academic performance, retention, and/or degree completion (Chen 2005).

Many institutions have been highly responsive to the first-gen turn, especially those equipped with robust centers of teaching and learning. On the faculty side, these bodies may provide training events or consultations on first-generation-inclusive syllabus or assessment design. On the student side, they may provide social or networking events and access to study spaces, printing, or college readiness programming (e.g., bridge programs, cf. Thayer 2000). They may provide signage, stickers, and buttons that identify community members as first-generation, thereby shaping the linguistic landscape of the campus and encouraging the development of a shared first-generation consciousness and reducing feelings of isolation and otherization. (Certainly, if your institution is *not* doing any of these things, these are all initiatives that you can reproduce at a departmental scale in consultation with your chair, director or undergraduate studies, and/or student leaders with a first-generation background.) At the same time, even the most well-resourced centers of teaching and learning rarely have materials, resources, and/or events that are geared specifically to linguistics. Fortuitously, linguists are predisposed to see first-generation students as assets in the classroom and may have an easier time than scholars in other disciplines in promoting first-generation academic thriving.

The organization of this paper is as follows. In §2, we introduce two perspectives: asset-based pedagogies (Moll et al. 1992, *inter alia*) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL; Rose 2001). The first perspective allows us to move beyond deficit-based narratives of so-called first-generation under preparation to narratives that center their resilience and flexibility as people who navigate myriad institutional barriers and who move between linguistically diverse ecologies. The second perspective allows us to show how demystification of the "hidden curriculum" reduces structural impediments to success for both first- and continuing-generation students. All five authors are first-generation, and our proposals for best practices in course design in §3 draw on both our apprenticeship of observation as students as well as our teaching experiences. §4 concludes.

2. Asset-based pedagogy & universal design. We begin by considering deficit-based perspectives before introducing an asset-based perspective and UDL.

2.1. DEFICIT-BASED PERSPECTIVES. First-generation students are often positioned in the higher education literature as a problem to be solved. With respect to major selection, first-generation students from lower-income backgrounds may self-select out of linguistics or other passions as a result of internal and external pressures to choose immediately lucrative career paths, such as business and healthcare (Wright et al. 2023). They are described as feeling intimidated by highly theoretical subjects (Zhu 2025), especially non-healthcare-related STEM subjects such as

linguistics. Discourses such as *impostor syndrome*, *stereotype threat*, and *implicit bias* loom large in the first-generation imaginary.

The academic abilities of first-generation students are also often problematized. Compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation students who did not report a strong sense of belonging are more likely to drop out of higher education rather than transfer to a different institution (Ishitani & Kramer 2022). Weisen et al. (2024) found that first-generation had significantly lower grade point averages, higher dropout rates, and lower graduation rates. First-generation students, as a result of lower social capital, may struggle to select institutions that are the best fit for them and subsequently struggle to locate resources and support once they are there (Soria & Stebleton 2012).

First-generation students are also more likely to attend access-focused institutions, such as community colleges and regional public universities (RPU, Startz 2022). One of the authors attends such an institution, which boasts a 46% first-generation population (CWU 2024). In these schools, linguistics departments, laboratories, student research and travel funding, and courses establishing extensive theoretical foundations in linguistics may simply not exist.

2.2. ASSET-BASED PERSPECTIVES. We acknowledge that authors who deploy the deficit-based perspective are ultimately committed to the increasing first-generation students' academic performance and sense of belonging. At the same time, we submit that not enough attention is being paid to the gifts that first-generation students bring to the linguistics classroom, nor to the ways in which inclusive linguistics pedagogy can increase first-generation belonging and success. First and foremost, with respect to the learning environment, linguistics classes in many institutional contexts are often on the smaller side, and although this can be a problem in funding regimes that reward high enrollment, it is a benefit for first-generation students, who report higher belonging and retention when courses are smaller (Soria & Stebleton 2012).

Second, with respect to course content, many first-generation students are bi- or multilingual (including heritage speakers), Many have an immigrant background; indeed, first-generation immigrant students numbered 1.9 million, or 11% of all students (Feldblum et al. 2024). Many first-generation students are racially minoritized and have experiences of facing linguistic prejudice and discrimination rooted in raciolinguistic ideologies (Rosa & Flores 2017). First-generation students who are monolingual and not racially minoritized may still have knowledge of or exposure to regional varieties, sociolects, or registers that are unique to their life experiences. *All* first-generation students have experience with moving between linguistic worlds and translating (literally or figuratively) the experiences of their families and communities in hegemonic settings, or vice versa. The linguistics classroom may be one of the few spaces on campus in which these experiences can be both the object and means of analysis and reflection. Although courses in field methods, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology may be obvious candidates to incorporate first-generation-specific linguistic and sociocultural expertise, we suggest that theoretical courses would also be enriched by direct engagement with multilingualism, linguistic variation, language ideologies and attitudes, and language and identity, and that these concerns are quite likely to engross first-generation students.

We use asset-based pedagogies in the broad sense to refer to a variety of approaches emphasize the strengths that diverse students bring to the classroom, including culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995), culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay 2000), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim 2017). Whereas the bulk of mainstream pedagogy content from centers of teaching and learning is either linguistics-neutral or linguistics-inapplicable, these authors engage directly with linguistics (e.g., Bucholtz et al. 2017). They provide

instructors and students with ways to challenge standard language, monolingual, and raciolinguistic ideologies, particularly of English language learners and heritage speakers, both of whom tend to be disproportionately first-generation. It goes without saying that these articles, frameworks, and perspectives can be brought into the classroom, thereby helping first-generation students to feel more seen and represented by the curriculum, as well as to nurture a reflective and critical teaching practice in the instructor.

Applied linguists have expended tremendous effort in communicating to monolingual policymakers that bilingualism is a valuable asset, not a deficit (Crawford 1995, *inter alia*). First-generation students in linguistics classrooms can go beyond this. As people whose linguistic repertoires may be stigmatized by both the wider hegemonic society (e.g.. as speakers of a non-English language or a stigmatized dialect) as well as by people from their community of origin (e.g., by older family members or friends of a different class background), first-generation students will benefit from course content that problematizes exclusionary and essentialist conceptions of the native speaker (Cheng et al. 2021). Work to support repertorially rich first-generation students can increase their academic engagement as well as prompt linguistic justice.

2.3. UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING. The concept of *universal design* first emerged in architecture to describe an approach to designing products and the built environment in such a way that they were maximally usable by everyone regardless of their age or access needs. It was extended to pedagogy by Rose (2001) and christened *universal design for learning*, where it is associated with a curriculum design philosophy that centers multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement. In the context of this paper, we use it to refer to a mindset that we can apply to a syllabus, assignment, or assessment to ensure that every student has a better learning experience, regardless of their generational status. In other words, instead of designing a class as usual and then taking additional time to add *for first-gen student* signposts, we assume that in a demystified hidden curriculum benefits all students. Likewise, instead of adding a week about multilingualism or heritage languages in order to help first-generation students feel seen, one can design a syntax course in which heritage language data is incorporated in pieces throughout the term, in a way that broadens the empirical base and sharpens the theory construction ability of all students, regardless of their language background.

3. Best practices in teaching and course design. We approach this section with an understanding that higher education was not designed with first-generation students (or other marginalized groups) in mind. As Bowie et al. (2024) highlights, the academy poses socio-economic (e.g., Morgan et al. 2022), racial (e.g., Dupree & Boykin 2021), gender-based (e.g., Meza-Mejia et al. 2023) and intersectional (e.g., Crenshaw 2013) barriers. Within linguistics itself, Mantenuto et al. (2024) note that the curricula do not nurture a strong sense of belonging. Because of this, there are several perceived 'gaps' first-generation students may experience in higher education, including:

- College preparedness (Atherton 2014; Elliott 2014; Horowitz 2017);
- Fewer interactions with faculty (Kim & Sax 2009; Soria & Stebleton 2012; Yee 2016);
- Fear of being "found out" as incompetent (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice 2008);
- Tendencies to not seek assistance (Lipp & Jones 2011; Hicks & Wood 2016; Yee 2016);
- Emphasis on independence in the academy (Stephens et al. 2012; Wilson & Kittleson 2013; Smith & Lucena 2016).

In this section, we tackle these perceived 'gaps' with inclusive course design that affirms the

strengths first-generation students already possess, including but not limited to:

- High academic self-concept (Atherton 2014; Elliott 2014);
- Strong interdependent learning styles (Stephens et al. 2012;);
- Appreciation of impactful learning (prosocial learners; Harackiewicz et al. 2014);
- Appreciation of quality interactions and connections with faculty (McKay & Estrella 2008; Wang 2014; Trammell & Aldrich 2016; Glass et al. 2017);
- Resourcefulness and possession of valuable lived experiences (Bass & Halverson 2012).

The overarching theme of this section is recognizing that first-generation students are heterogeneous, and course design should reflect, celebrate, and accommodate this. In what follows, we discuss syllabus design, course assessment, classroom practices, and support outside of the classroom.

3.1. SYLLABUS DESIGN. Inclusive course design starts with the syllabus. More than just a summary document, the syllabus serves as the gateway into the course. It welcomes students in, establishes their learning trajectory, and sets the tone for classroom dynamics. It also offers instructors an opportunity to ensure that their students set out on a more equal footing. This section serves as a checklist of the major pieces of information that should be included in a syllabus. The intention is not to dictate exactly how a syllabus ought to be structured, nor how decisions about the content of a syllabus ought to be resolved. Rather, the goal is to provide some scaffolding for creating a syllabus that works for all students, first-generation included.

Just as important as *what* information goes in the syllabus is how clearly that information is conveyed. Clear communication is crucial for academic success, particularly for students with fewer experiences in higher education and limited access to institutional knowledge (Watt et al. 2023). The syllabus is fundamentally a tool *for students*; explicitness and accessibility are paramount to its utility. That being said, we would like to emphasize the distinction between *student-facing* documents, distributed to individuals enrolled in the course, and *public-facing* documents, for instance those posted on departmental websites. Given increased scrutiny of syllabi amid current culture wars, what follows should be read as recommendations about what to include within student-facing documents in particular.

3.1.1. INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION. Syllabi often open with information on the course head and instructional team: who they are, and how they can be contacted. Be explicit about preferred channels of communication, and whether certain channels are better suited for certain kinds of correspondence. For instance, you may encourage communication through the course website or discussion forums such as Discord or Slack for general course questions that other students are likely to share, reserving email for more personal matters. It may also be helpful to clarify how students should address instructors in their emails, bearing in mind that they may not have learned the conventions that many in higher education have come to expect. Finally, consider specifying when students can expect replies, especially if there are set times or days of the week when you do not check messages. The latter is a good way of setting boundaries from the very start of term and sets a positive example for students who may themselves struggle with "shutting off."

Related to instructor information is information about office hours. Most basically, the syllabus should indicate when and where office hours will be held each week. However, it is important to note that some students may not be aware of what "office hours" are. Instructors may therefore consider adopting a more transparent name such as "student drop-in hours" and/or

including an explanation about how that time may be used. Such steps may be especially impactful for first-generation students: as described above, first-generation students have been shown to have a strong appreciation of quality interactions and connections with faculty but who nevertheless have fewer interactions with faculty and are less likely to seek help as compared to their continuing-generation peers. We also encourage including virtual or by-appointment options for office hours in order to increase accessibility, noting that most first-generation students work at least part time and work nearly twice the number of hours as their continuing-generation peers (RTI International 2019).

3.1.2. LEARNING OBJECTIVES. Syllabi should provide a brief overview of what the course is about and, most importantly, what the students will gain by taking it. Clearly stated learning objectives help motivate the structure and content of the course, encouraging buy-in and providing a foundation for learning. They can also frame the knowledge and skills to be mastered in the course in ways that highlight their applicability beyond the classroom, helping students translate their learning experiences into successful career attainment. The latter may be especially impactful for first-generation students, who often come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and therefore prioritize areas of study based on their perceived applicability to the job market (see §2.1). For instructors, putting priorities to paper provides a reference point against which to check their course design, helping ensure that their policies, assessments, and teaching strategies align with desired learning outcomes.

It is important to state learning objectives in a way that students with little or no prior experience with the subject matter can understand. Avoid jargon as much as possible in the syllabus; when it must be used, pair it with a simple explanation to make it more accessible. To help ground the topics to be covered in the course, include concrete examples drawn from everyday life that all students will readily recognize and connect with. When in doubt, run your syllabus by a friend or colleague in another field to make sure your language is welcoming and beginner-friendly.

3.1.3 COURSE POLICIES. No matter what policies you set for your course, it is crucial that they are clearly communicated in the syllabus. This ensures that students know what is expected of them and what happens when these expectations are not met. There is no complete, definitive list of policies that should be included; it is often the case that the need for some policy is realized only upon being faced with a situation in which it would have been helpful. Here are a few common course policies along with details that ought to be specified in the syllabus:

- Attendance: Whether attendance is required in the course, the conditions under which absences are excused, and what students should do in case an absence is incurred.
- Participation: Whether and how students are expected to participate in class, and whether there are alternatives available for students who face barriers to participation.
- Community standards: What comprises appropriate, respectful engagement inside the classroom, what students should do if they feel that community standards have been violated, and what steps will be taken following a violation.
- Assignment submission: Whether and under what conditions late work is accepted, whether and under what conditions extensions are granted, and whether students are allowed resubmissions.
- Student collaboration: Whether and how students can work together on assignments.
- AI use: Whether and how students can use AI tools in their coursework, and what happens if the policy is violated.

Course policies are ultimately meant to serve students, not harm them. As such, when deciding on course policies, it is good to keep in mind the diversity of students' experiences and needs. For example, for first-generation students, attendance and timely submission of assignments may be impacted by work obligations (Pike & Kuh 2005; Wilbur & Roscigno 2016), while in-class participation may be hampered by perceived language deficits (Rosa & Flores 2017) or fears of being "found out" as incompetent (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice 2008). Consistent with the principles of UDL, course policies designed with first-generation students in mind can make the course work better for all students, no matter their background.

3.1.4 ASSESSMENT BREAKDOWN. Syllabi should contain an overview of the kinds of assessments students will encounter in the course, and how much each assessment contributes to students' final grades. Many instructors also include instructions and rubrics so that students have an idea going into the course of how their work will be graded; if this information is not in the syllabus, it is helpful to indicate where it can be found once it is available. For guidance on how to design course assessments that support first-generation students, see §3.2.

Along with *what* students will be asked to do, the syllabus should clearly indicate *when* they will be asked to do it. Include a schedule for coursework broken down by week or class day, and list assessment due dates so that they are easy for students to find. While course schedules are very often presented as tables, consider also making a non-table version for students who rely on text-to-speech assistive technology.

3.1.5 CAMPUS RESOURCES. Learning depends on far more than what goes on inside the classroom. While instructors cannot control what happens in students' lives, they can support students by providing pointers to campus resources in their syllabi. This includes accessibility and accommodation resources, resources for student health and wellbeing, on-campus tutoring and learning support, linguistics-related student organizations, and basic needs assistance and food pantries.

3.2. COURSE ASSESSMENT. When designing assessments, regardless of the generational status of students, pedagogical transparency is highly impactful. Under the framework of Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT, Winkelmes 2013), instructors communicate to students the reasoning behind pedagogical choices, specifically discussing purpose, tasks, and criteria. This helps instructors make evidence-based choices and promotes students' critical thinking (Winkelmes 2013). The use of TILT is incredibly important for first-generation students as they report a lack of transparency in instruction negatively affects their learning, and when teaching and learning is transparent, they have great self-efficacy (Ojha et al. 2024).

When designing assessments, an instructor should map these to specific learning outcomes for the course. This is done using backwards course design. A part of UDL, backwards course design means identifying the skills and knowledge you want students to gain in the course, then establishing demonstrable learning outcomes. Next you determine which teaching methods, content, policies, readings, and assessments allow students to achieve each learning outcome. When considering assessments, authenticity to the field should be considered. Learning practical skills that linguists use in their careers can appeal to first-generation students who often chose majors based on earning outcomes (Montmarquette et al. 2002) as they can see those skills as transferable to a job. Authenticity in assessment means that the assessment is engaging, contains worthy problems or questions of importance, requires students to use knowledge to fashion performances effectively and creatively, and is either replica of or analogous to the kinds of problems faced by adults or professionals in the field (Wiggins 1993).

Authenticity also can help mitigate one known issue in assessment: the resistance to formative assessment. Assessment can be divided into summative and formative. Summative assessments are judgments instructors make about student performance; these are final, performative evaluation of a student's knowledge/skills. Formative assessments are evaluations done throughout the semester to provide feedback to the instructor and the student about student learning. Regardless of the type of assessment, "...assessment without timely feedback contributes little to learning" (Chickering & Gamson 1987: 4). The timing of feedback can be critical, with Kulik and Kulik (1988) finding that feedback on summative assessments is more efficient when it follows a delay, perhaps allowing students to process their performance before reviewing the assessment, while feedback on formative assessment should be given immediately to be most effective. Summative assessment is most familiar to students; however, formative assessment may be unfamiliar and less valued by students. Brazeal and Couch (2017) note that first-generation students may be resistant to formative assessments and this can be mitigated through the use of TILT and authenticity.

In addition to providing feedback at the right time, there are other best practices to consider. One key factor is that assignments should be motivated by and connect back to learning outcomes. As supported by TILT, instructors should be transparent and explicit in how a specific assessment relates to and assesses a student's performance in relation to the learning outcome. Thus, it is important that instructors have their assessments mapped to their learning outcomes. Some of this transparency can be achieved through the use of rubrics. Rubrics lay out the elements upon which a student is being evaluated and can provide students an understanding of their learning. It also makes transparent what skills and knowledge the instructor expects a student to possess. In addition, providing example assignments can help students understand instructor expectations. This level of transparency in instructions, expectations, and feedback is beneficial for first-generation students and "it is beneficial for faculty to be clear and transparent in their expectations and assignments and give timely feedback to their students on their work" (Ricci & French 2023: 35).

3.3. CLASSROOM PRACTICES. Thus far, attention has been paid to the structure of courses. However, how an instructor conducts themselves in the classroom and the environment they create are also important pieces of the puzzle for ensuring ample support.

There tends to be a mismatch between first-generation students' preparedness for college and their academic self-concept, often characterized by a high academic self-concept (Atherton 2014; Elliott 2014) alongside lower levels of college preparedness (Atherton 2014; Elliott 2014; Horowitz 2017). Importantly, we use "college preparedness" to refer to an understanding of the hidden curriculum (see Bowie et al. 2024). This mismatch has been noted to have adverse effects on students' self-efficacy, which can, in turn, affect students' overall learning experiences and success in school (e.g., GPA and persistence rates).

There are several classroom strategies that can help bolster students' academic self-concepts, demystify the hidden curriculum, and establish realistic expectations about the learning process. Centering the teacher-as-learner by modeling uncertainty, curiosity, and question asking establishes a realistic baseline for students. It lets them know that it is perfectly normal not to know something, while also modeling how to approach gaps in one's knowledge. Furthermore, employing low-stakes questions can help build confidence by inviting students to engage with more accessible entry points. Anonymous polling systems (e.g., Socrative) can also be used to ask questions, alleviating anxiety about being wrong in front of peers or instructors. When students do answer questions in front of the class, it is good practice to adopt a most generous

interpretation (MGI). Highlighting what a student did get right—or nearly right—and then filling in the gaps lets them know that they are on the right track while still identifying areas for growth.

A final strategy for mitigating the mismatch between academic self-concept and college preparedness is the use of in-class worksheets that model assignment expectations. Reviewing students' answers while circulating and asking students to share responses on the board or through polling can provide structured opportunities for practice and feedback. Crucially, instructors should avoid asking a student with an incorrect answer to present that response publicly. While it may be tempting to use such moments to model error correction, a more effective approach is to present a constructed incorrect example and ask students to identify and repair the error.

Another mismatch concerns the emphasis on independence in the academy (Stephens et al. 2012; Wilson & Kittleson 2013; Smith & Lucena 2016) and first-generation college students' strengths in interdependent learning (Stephens et al. 2012; Eddy & Hogan 2014). University-level education places considerable value on independent work. While independent work remains important, it is equally important to recognize and reinforce the value of interdependent learning, both within and beyond the classroom. As such, interdependent work should occupy a meaningful place in course design. Structured opportunities for collaboration—such as small-group activities or the classic think–pair–share—are effective ways of drawing on students' strengths in interdependent learning. These practices not only support engagement, but also give students insight into how their peers approach problems, often providing them with new strategies for navigating course material. In this way, interdependent activities not only support engagement, but also help students develop a broader set of strategies for approaching academic work.

Taken together, these classroom practices not only support students' academic self-concepts and engagement, but also make visible the expectations and norms that too often remain implicit, contributing to a more supportive and transparent learning environment, where students are regularly reminded that they are linguists in training—they are not expected to know everything already.

3.4. SUPPORT OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM. Support does not end in the classroom. In fact, positive interactions with university instructors have often been cited as a motivating factor for first-generation students (Watt et al 2023). Glass et al. (2017), for example, note a significant and positive relationship between out-of-class faculty interaction and co-curricular engagement for first-generation college students. Additionally, first-generation students often express a desire for—and an expectation of—positive relationships with their professors (Wang 2014; Trammell & Aldrich 2016). Despite this, the literature consistently demonstrates that first-generation students tend to have fewer interactions with faculty than their continuing-generation counterparts (Kim & Sax 2009; Soria & Stebleton 2012; Yee 2016), are less likely to engage in academic and social activities associated with college success (Stuber 2009; Stuber, Klugman & Daniel 2011; Roksa & Silver 2019), and are less likely to join or participate in academic and social clubs (Terenzini et al. 1996; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin 1998; Pascarella et al. 2003, 2004).

Crucially, we must ask ourselves why first-generation students are not establishing the level of connection that they desire. According to the literature, there are several contributing factors. First, they may fear being "found out" as "incompetent" (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice 2008), which can discourage them from engaging with their professors deeply or frequently. Additionally, large class sizes—especially in introductory-level courses—appear to negatively affect first-generation students' ability to build relationships with faculty (Beattie & Thiele

2016). First-generation students also tend to have more competing commitments outside the classroom than their continuing-generation counterparts. For example, they are more likely to work, often for longer hours, to pay for tuition and living expenses (Pike & Kuh 2005; Wilbur & Roscigno 2016), and they are more likely to have dependent children (Engle 2007). With this in mind, we turn to strategies that instructors can use to mitigate this gap between expectation and reality.

Establishing a space of encouragement, inclusion, and support begins in the very first week of classes. Learning students' names, regardless of class size, is an effective way of demonstrating that you recognize them as individuals. Anecdotally, the authors have observed that students in larger lectures often express surprise and appreciation when instructors make the effort to learn their names. This reaction suggests two things: first, that such efforts are unfortunately not the norm, and second, that students respond positively when they are recognized in this way. Reshaping *office hours* at the start of the semester is another effective strategy. One approach involves rethinking how this time is named. We invite readers to consider alternatives such as *drop-in hours*, *brainstorming hours*, *chat hours*, or *coffee and questions*. Another involves how this time is framed: as an informal space to work, ask questions, have a snack, and get to know the instructor. The authors have even explicitly incorporated attending these hours as a form of participation, particularly for students who may be less inclined to speak in class. In a similar vein, simply framing support as normal and universal and reminding students of this regularly can have an impact.

Throughout the semester, there are additional actions instructors can take. First-generation college students value clarity (Watt et al. 2023); therefore, being clear and reasonable about the type of access students have to you outside of class is essential. Likewise, if there is a particular style or format of communication (e.g., for asking questions or sending emails), instructors should not assume that students will already be familiar with it. Instead, modeling these expectations explicitly can provide students with the confidence to approach you in the manner you prefer. Additionally, valuing student answers and questions, both in and out of class, is an effective way to foster comfort and approachability. We recommend avoiding phrases such as "I don't understand what you mean" or "That's not quite correct." Instead, if an answer or question is unclear, instructors can recast it by offering their interpretation and inviting the student to confirm or clarify. Similarly, when a response is only partially correct, it is helpful to highlight what the student has understood correctly before filling in any gaps.

How instructors engage with students outside of the classroom and beyond "office hours" can also have a strong impact on the student–instructor relationship. Learning students' names and faces early in the semester provides opportunities to greet them in the halls or at departmental events. These small interactions help students feel seen and more comfortable approaching you. Furthermore, if your department has an undergraduate linguistics organization, offering to give a talk or otherwise getting involved demonstrates your investment in students and creates additional opportunities for interaction.

The strategies provided here specifically target the gap first-generation students experience between their expectations of a relationship with their professor and the realities they are met with in college. We recognize that no university, no program, and no instructor is exactly the same. A wholesale implementation of these strategies may not work in all cases. However, we strongly recommend the use of at least some of them to better support the first-generation students in linguistics classrooms.

4. Conclusion. First-generation students are already present in numbers in our institutions. Certainly, there remains much to be done in order to bring more of them into linguistics and to welcome the ones who are already here. The two perspectives outlined here, asset-based pedagogies and universal design for learning, are intended to get us *talking about* first-generation students differently and *teaching* all students differently. We believe that critical engagement with and application of perspectives play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom, a factor recognized as essential to retaining first-generation and/or minoritized college students (cf. Lee & Robbins 1995; Hurtado & Carter 1997; Heisserer & Parette 2002; Vaccaro & Newman 2016). The linguistics classroom demonstrates great potential as a site of resistance and capacity-building as student bodies continue to diversify, peri-pandemic learning loss continues to calcify, and political attacks on higher education broadly—and on the diversity of linguistic practice specifically—continue to intensify.

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