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Voices Across the Spectrum: Grit, Gusto & The Greater Good: The Formation of a First-Gen Caucus

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VOICES ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

Grit, Gusto & The Greater Good: The Formation of a First-Gen Caucus

BY RACHEL EVANS, DEANNE FIX, JOSEPH D. LAWSON, SARA MONALEA McMAHON & AIMEE PITTMAN

A deep dive into AALL's new
First-Gen Caucus.

When Gail Warren, 2020 American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) Hall of Fame inductee and Virginia State law librarian, embarked on a career in law librarianship, she knew she was a first-gen professional even if the term did not exist. “Early in my career I was so scared someone would ‘find out’ and somehow think less of me or think I wasn’t really qualified to do my job,” Warren wrote on AALL’s Members Open Forum in response to a post titled “Calling All First-Generation Professionals.” “It’s likely that background contributed to suffering from imposter syndrome far more than any social anxiety I may have felt,” she continued. “[G]aining more experience, realizing successes at work and in AALL, and having role models and mentors helped me overcome those feelings.”

Defining First-Gen

There are many definitions of what it means to be first-generation. However, there has been a recent push in academic and professional circles to embrace a broader meaning, beyond the widely accepted definition that includes students who are the first in their family to attend college. Defining first-generation professionals is a bit more nuanced. Like the true “first-generation” Americans of the past that our country was built on, the array of first-gen students and professionals today is just as varied as ever, and it has retained the vital spirit and strengths of their ancestors: determination, grit, valor, drive, endurance, creativity, originality, and vision. First-generation professionals are usually from working or middle class backgrounds and may have been the first in their

families to obtain a college degree, not to mention advanced degrees.

As a 2017 *New York Times* article on the topic of first-gen pointed out, the spectrum of this identity often varies wildly based on who is asking the question. (Read the article at bit.ly/MA21NYT.) Is a first-gen student one who has parents with no education after high school, or one whose parents did not complete a degree after high school? What about siblings and extended family? Education of family members usually determines if those family members were qualified for and achieved a professional career. Yet the term professional can also be vague and vary depending on location and field. Even if you have a professional degree, or multiple advanced degrees, your position may not be considered professional by your employer when it comes to a promotion within the organization.

Alternatively, a 2018 *Law Practice Today* article titled “Helping First-Generation Lawyers Thrive” discussed the knowledge and resource gaps that exist for first-gens in the legal profession. Indeed, more institutions are not only seeing the value of first-gen professionals to their organizations, but law schools such as the University of Southern California (USC) Gould School of Law in Los Angeles and the University of Georgia School of Law in Athens are also forming more structured means to provide targeted support to first-gens, including financial assistance, career development resources, and connecting them to mentorship and other opportunities.

AALL member Clanitra Nejdil of the Alyne Queener Massey Law Library at Vanderbilt shared a public comment that she particularly liked how the USC Gould program includes both people who are the first in their families to earn a college degree and people who are from working class or lower-income backgrounds as first-generation professionals. Nejdil said, “I’m sure there are others, like me, who are not the first in

their families to have earned a college degree, but who also come from working-class backgrounds.” As an article from *Above the Law* titled “Welcome to Law School, First-Generation Students” noted, there is “a lack of institutional knowledge about the professional world, law school, and the legal community.” There is also an added layer of complexity for law librarians who are navigating both the legal and information fields simultaneously. The article’s author shares his own father’s words that, for better or worse, may sound all too familiar to many first-gens: “Who you know matters more than what you can do.” (Read the article at bit.ly/MA21Above.)

For purposes of the new AALL caucus, first-generation professionals include, but are not limited to, individuals who are the first in their families to attend or complete an undergraduate, graduate, or professional degree program, come from a low-income or working-class background, or are the first in their families to become a U.S. citizen or to immigrate to the United States. Members of the caucus come from diverse backgrounds and work in a variety of positions across all law library types. When meeting virtually, many members expressed surprise at the number of first-gen professionals in AALL. Removing the stigma of first-gen is an important step in acknowledging the unique issues these professionals encounter while building a more inclusive community.

From First Steps to Formation

After discussions with his director, mentor, and fellow first-gen professional Mariann Sears from the Harris County Law Library, Joseph Lawson wondered how many first-generation professionals there were in the field, and whether there might be enough interest to form a caucus. Lawson discussed the idea with AALL Vice President, Diane Rodriguez, and decided to reach out to all AALL members through Members Open Forum. The forum post yielded five

public responses, and many more responses were sent privately. For many first-generation professionals, there is a fear factor about publicly discussing these issues, and they tend to keep quiet about their familial background, as was noted by Warren in her post to the forum when she wrote that she did not want colleagues to think less of her and her qualifications. “I think they prompted others to feel more empowered in reaching out and expressing interest in connecting with other first-gen professionals,” said Lawson while sending his gratitude to those who publicly responded to his forum post.

Following Lawson’s first Members Open Forum post on August 7, 2020, the discussion forum became email based, and the list of recipients grew significantly. It was here that the definition of what it means to be a first-gen law librarian evolved into the caucus’s current standard as members discussed other organizations’ definitions. This included a push to be as inclusive as possible within that definition. Discussion soon turned to meeting online to organize the effort. The community gathered in late August and discussed their visions for the community, and they shared their first-gen stories. After that initial meeting, 84 percent of the community advocated for forming a caucus. Members also had a chance to volunteer for various working groups. During this time, Lawson was appointed as chair of the caucus effort by member nomination and assent. Lawson worked with Kim Rundle, AALL leadership services coordinator, and Diane Rodriguez, to prepare the caucus establishment petition and present it to the AALL Executive Board. Forty-six members added their names to the petition.

When asked about the work of preparing the petition, Lawson pointed out the contributions of Rundle and Rodriguez. He also stated, “AALL President Emily Florio and AALL Executive Director Vani Ungapen provided valuable insight into the procedure to establish a Caucus,

and AALL Board Member Karen Selden, who serves as liaison to the caucuses, was instrumental in ushering the application through the approval process.” The First-Gen Professionals Caucus petition was approved by the AALL Executive Board during their regular meeting on November 6, 2020. From there, a new Caucus was born.

Unmasking First-Gen Fears

When longtime AALL member and academic law librarian Carol A. Watson was asked about the challenges of being first-gen in this profession without a network of other first-gens for support, she said, “I think it can be difficult for a first-gen to navigate any type of professional career.” In 2020, Watson, like Warren, was inducted into the AALL Hall of Fame. Watson credits much of her success to “having landed in law librarianship among colleagues who have been open-minded and welcoming to individuals from all types of backgrounds.” When asked if she felt the need to hide aspects of her personal or family background in order to succeed, she replied, “Definitely, especially early in my career.” Watson feels that a first-gen Caucus would have benefited her tremendously, especially with feelings of isolation that so many first-gens express, adding that, “It would have been helpful to realize that I’m not alone. In the early stages of my career, I didn’t know what I didn’t know.”

Geraldine Kalim, another first-generation professional and founding member of the Caucus, is in the early stages of her law librarianship career. She replied with sheer enthusiasm at the prospect of members coming together to support one another. “I just love it when first-gens get together!” she shared in email replies to her colleagues following the “Calling all First Generation Professionals” Members Open Forum thread that Warren, Nejd, and others replied to. When asked about the benefits of a first-generation Caucus and knowing other

first-gen law librarians or mentors, Kalim feels that, “It is comforting to meet people who can relate to the common first-gen challenges and insecurities. I love the pay-it-forward attitude and the willingness to lift each other up.” Nejd also shared her thoughts on the benefits of a first-gen Caucus, adding that, “I think such a group could provide wonderful mentorship and support for future law librarians with similar backgrounds and could creatively partner with other AALL caucuses and special interest sections in positive ways.”

Moving First-Gens Forward

In the hopes of further demystifying and defining “first-generation professionals” to the greater law librarian community, several Caucus members have already proposed a session for AALL 2021. In addition to educating others, another central goal of the Caucus is to provide the highly valuable, albeit tough to establish, network of support that so many first-gen professionals so sorely need. Lawson himself stated early on in one of his initial emails to the group that, “On a personal level, I have benefited from having a mentor who, like me, is a first-generation professional.” The Caucus hopes to function as a tool for facilitating meaningful relationships and building a mentoring network of other first-gens in law libraries. The First-Gen Professionals Caucus is open to all AALL members who are the first in their families to cross over a generational threshold into a professional work environment. If the stories above resonate with yours, you can find a growing network of colleagues who are glad to help you navigate the same challenges and find unique opportunities that come along with being a first-gen professional. Learn more about the First-Gen Law Librarians Caucus at bit.ly/AALLFirst-Gen. ■

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