



# Research Report

THE FIRST-GEN SCHOLAR  
PUBLISHING EXPERIENCE



The University of California Press FirstGen Program began as a project to expand our efforts to improve equity in scholarly publishing and to build on the University of California's own FirstGen program to support students who are first in their family to receive a college degree.

To design our program, we first wanted to hear from first-generation scholars. What are the key challenges they face when trying to get their book published? What resources would best support them through the publishing process?

During our initial discovery phase, we reached out to the first-gen scholarly community in multiple ways to answer these questions. Our staff organized background conversations with first-gen scholars and faculty working to support this community. In the Fall of 2020, we launched an online survey about scholars' book publishing experiences, which included both closed and open-ended questions about common challenges and supports. Our staff also conducted follow-up interviews with some of the first-generation scholars who participated in the survey. We then analyzed the interviews for recurring themes and recommendations for the program.

This report provides a brief summary of our key findings during the discovery phase, which we have used to develop our FirstGen Program. We are very thankful to everyone who took the time to participate, and hope our findings will additionally provide some helpful insights to other organizations working to support first-gen scholars.

# FirstGen Book Publishing Survey Results

Our survey was distributed to all of our faculty email lists, which include scholars and faculty from across the U.S. and internationally. We also shared with contacts within the UC system, people working with the first-gen community at other institutions, and via social media to accounts supporting first-gen scholars and diversity in publishing. To provide some comparative insights, we focused on both first-gen and non-first gen scholars who had experience with publishing a book. We also included scholars who had not yet published a book, to try to identify challenges for early-stage scholars and grad students. The survey asked a range of closed questions on challenges and helpful supports in the book publishing experience, with a few opportunities to provide an open-ended elaboration on their answers.

Our survey received approximately 600 responses, about 400 of which were from scholars who identified as first-generation. See graphs on pages 5 and 6 for some key demographic information.

So, what did we learn? While certain areas—such as knowing how to approach an editor or just finding time to publish—were labeled difficult by most, some differences did emerge between first-gen and non first-gen respondents.

## **FIRST-GENERATION SCHOLARS STRUGGLE WITH KNOWING WHERE TO START.**

Over 70% of first-gen scholars said knowing where to start the book publishing process was either very difficult or difficult, compared to 50% for non-first gen scholars.

**FIRST-GEN SCHOLARS FIND KNOWING HOW AND WHEN TO APPROACH AN EDITOR VERY CHALLENGING.** Close to 80% of first-gen scholars said this step was very difficult, compared to about 55% of non first-gen scholars.

**BOOK PROPOSALS ARE ANOTHER COMMON CHALLENGE.** Close to 50% of first-gen scholars said this task was difficult or very difficult.

**ACROSS THE BOARD, AUTHORS LIKE WORKING WITH THEIR EDITOR.** “Working with my editor” was rated one of the easiest aspects of the publishing process by both groups. About 55% of first-gen scholars and 65% of non first-gen scholars rated this aspect easy or very easy. ➤

**MENTORS WERE THE MOST COMMONLY CITED RESOURCE.** About 60% of both groups said mentors were a key support for publishing, the most highly rated across options listed.

**RESOURCES ON PUBLISHING MAY BE HARD TO ACCESS FOR SOME SCHOLARS.** Many respondents from both groups reported either not using or not having access to resources on publishing through academic societies, online, or via presentations by a publisher.

**EVERYONE STRUGGLES WITH FINDING TIME TO PUBLISH.** About 70% of both groups said it was difficult to find time to publish.

**MOST AUTHORS AREN'T SURE HOW BEST TO PROMOTE THEIR BOOK.** About 75% of both groups said this part was very difficult or difficult, although a higher percentage (45%) of first-gen scholars rated this aspect very difficult.

## Publishing Challenges for First-gen Scholars



**80% SAID**  
**KNOWING HOW AND**  
**WHEN TO APPROACH**  
**AN EDITOR WAS**  
**VERY DIFFICULT**



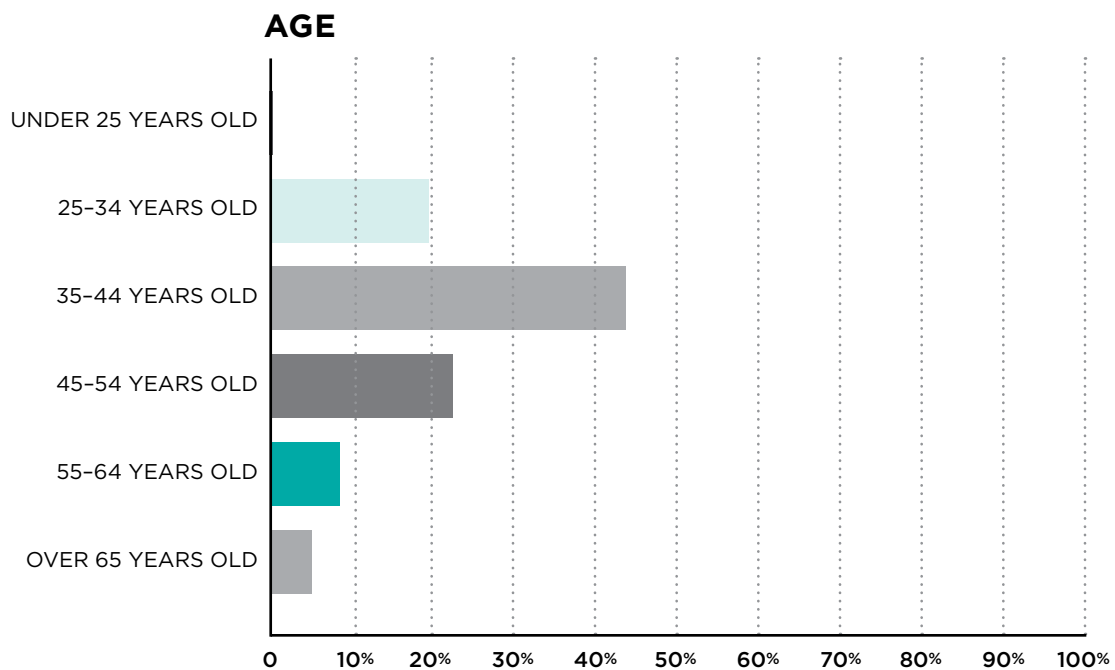
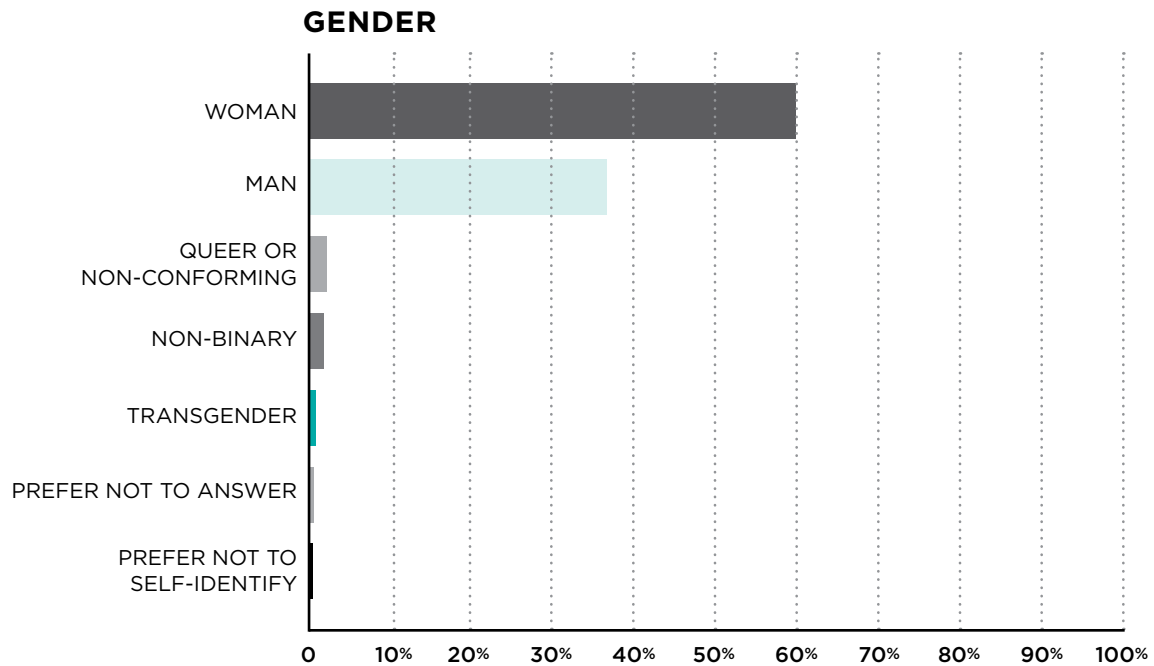
**70% SAID**  
**FINDING TIME TO**  
**PUBLISH WAS DIFFICULT**  
**OR VERY DIFFICULT**



**75% SAID**  
**BOOK PROMOTIONS**  
**WERE DIFFICULT**  
**OR VERY DIFFICULT**

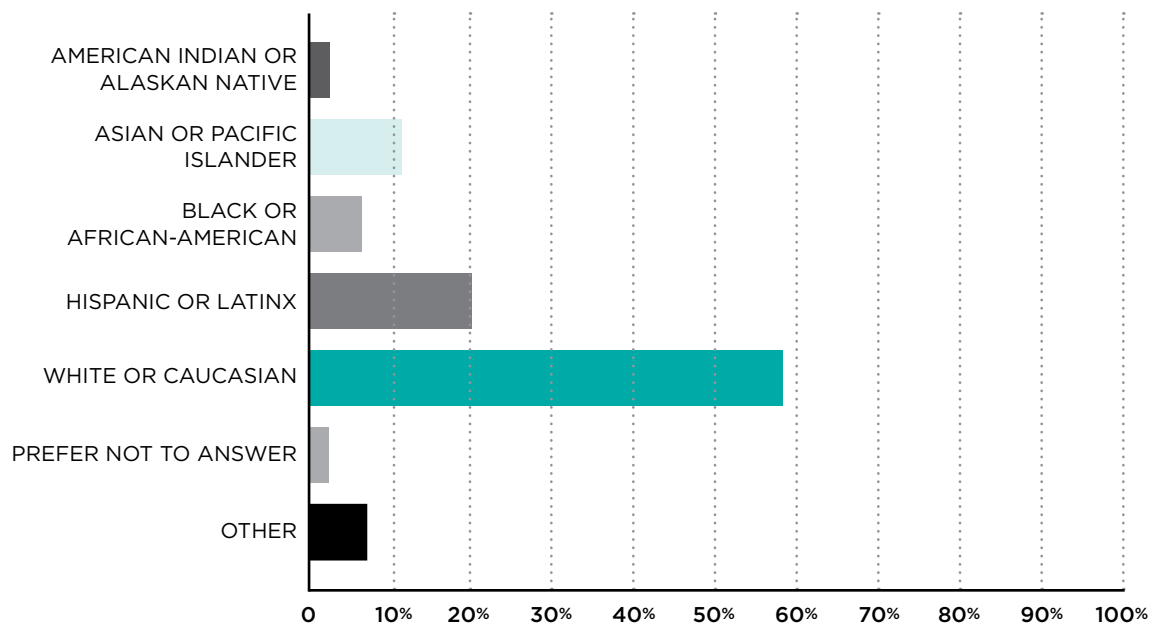
By providing some potential comparative insights between the book publishing experiences of first-gen and non-first gen scholars, these findings helped us to identify what's unique about the first-gen publishing experience. But the overall numbers are also telling. For example, while both groups had very similar responses about the difficulty of finding time to publish, we noted that this was clearly an important challenge to focus on for first-gen scholars, with a staggering 70% of first-gen scholars categorizing this as difficult or very difficult.

## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION: SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

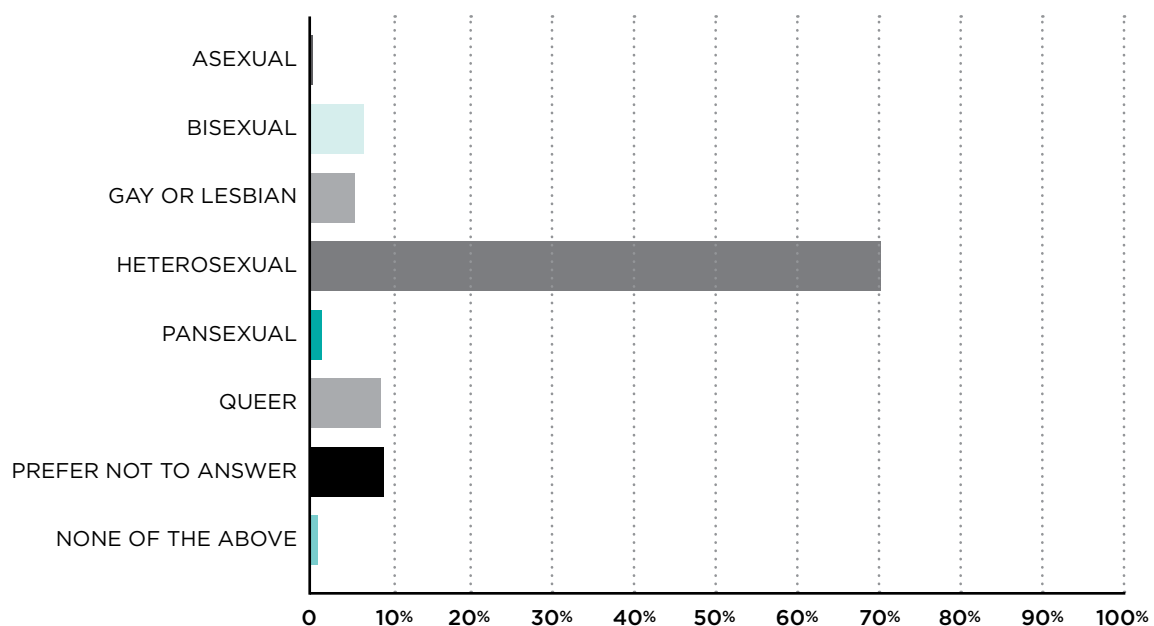


## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION: SURVEY PARTICIPANTS CONTINUED

### RACE/ETHNICITY



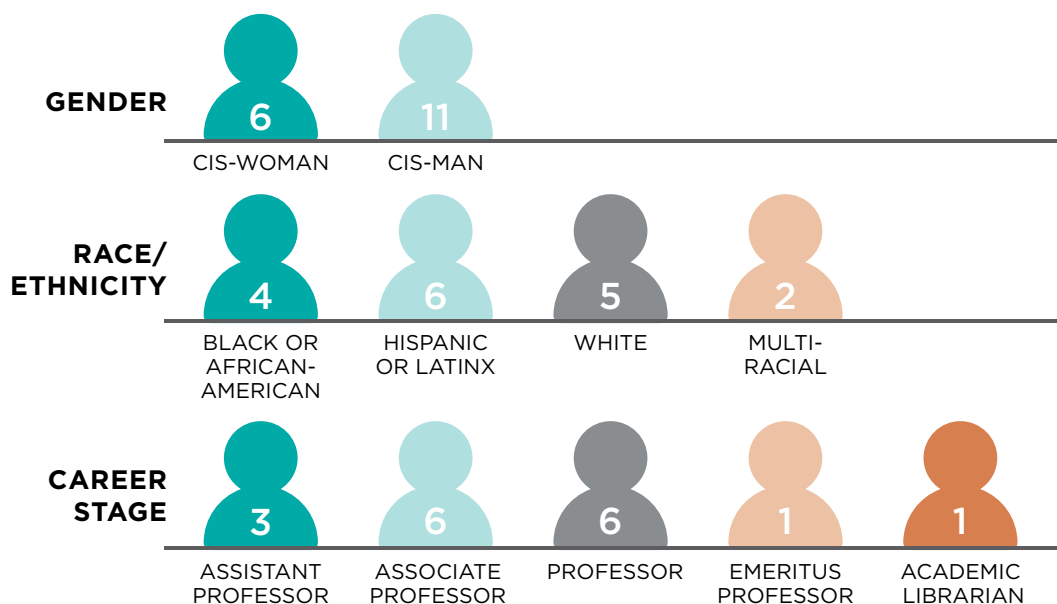
### SEXUAL ORIENTATION



# FirstGen Interview Results

After reviewing the survey results, we wanted to hear directly from these scholars about their experiences. Our staff interviewed 17 first-gen scholars, across many different disciplines and backgrounds to identify key themes of the first-gen book publishing experience (see below). The follow-up interviews allowed us to listen to first-gen scholars' experiences in their own words and hear their recommendations for how a publisher like UC Press could support them. For this stage, we focused only on first-gen scholars who had previously published a book (with any publisher, and not necessarily UC Press). Our interview guide included questions such as, "What kinds of supports and resources on book publishing would be most helpful to you as a first-gen scholar?" and "What is the main thing you want academic presses to know about first-gen scholars?"

## INTERVIEWEE DEMOGRAPHICS



The following summary focuses on two areas: describing the first-gen scholar publishing experience, and key recommendations to support first-gen scholars. To compile these results, we reviewed interview transcripts and coded for key themes. The highlighted quotes are taken from interviews with our participants. Identifying information has been removed, and minor edits have been made for clarity.



## Describing the First-gen Scholar Book Publishing Experience

Book publishing can be an unclear, mysterious process to many scholars, including those who are first in their family to attain a college degree.

What we found was a range of themes that cut across informational, emotional, and social aspects of the first-gen experience. The challenge often wasn't just that first-gen scholars needed more information about publishing, it was also that they might need more social support in getting advice, or emotional support from mentors to combat self-doubt. As one participant described, the first-gen population can feel hidden, but there are specific challenges, like not knowing who to ask for things or if asking is even okay.

### **FIRSTGEN IS A DIVERSE GROUP, FROM MANY DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS THAT CAN IMPACT THEIR ACCESS TO RESOURCES, MENTORING, AND INFORMATION ABOUT PUBLISHING**

Several of the scholars we talked to emphasized the diverse backgrounds of first-gen scholars, who might experience intersecting inequities depending on their race, gender, class, citizenship status, disability, and more. Additionally, first-gen scholars who ended up at well-funded or elite universities, might have very different access to resources or support networks than scholars at other institutions. These variances mean that the publishing experience of one first-gen scholar to another may be significantly different. For example, one respondent contrasted her challenges in publishing against the experiences of a white male colleague who was also first-gen. Other scholars emphasized how first-gen was just one of their identities.

**“** *You have to keep in mind the ways that people are first-gen: international, rural, family or regional background that causes people to not communicate. We don't know if it's okay to ask.*



## LACK OF TRANSPARENCY IN THE BOOK PUBLISHING PROCESS CREATES MORE WORK FOR FIRST-GEN SCHOLARS

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Many scholars we talked to said they had no idea where or how to start when it came to book publishing. Often, they weren't sure what questions to ask, even if they had someone to talk with about publishing. This could lead to a lot of extra work and uncertainty.

“ *There's an inherent hustle to us figuring out what to do. Because you don't know what questions to ask. You don't know what you don't know and that's something that's a constant hurdle.* ”

## IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS TO GET ADVICE OR SUPPORT FOR PUBLISHING

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Even when scholars did have questions about book publishing, many expressed they weren't sure who to ask. They did not necessarily have clear support networks to turn to on this topic. Some expressed that it was a challenge not having role models to show them the process. Sometimes colleagues shared their experiences, but seeking out this advice before securing a job or tenure felt risky. Another participant stressed that what's often not obvious to first-gen scholars is how everything is based on relationships and building connections, and that these relationships are often institutionalized for white scholars, but not for scholars of color.

“ *I sort of had to plunge into it very quickly and I didn't have any kind of support—I felt throughout the process that I was in the dark. It was not a very pleasant experience in general for me.* ”

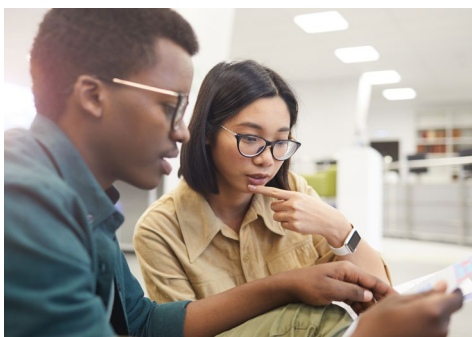
*“I could not walk into anybody's office and say, I don't know what to do. . . . You can't tell the people who are going to vote on your tenure case.”*

## UNCERTAIN RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PUBLISHER

Several first-gen scholars expressed that they weren't sure who at their press could help answer their questions and did not feel very supported through the process. Not having a clear advocate and open communications made the whole process more stressful, especially as issues or questions inevitably arose. Others expressed that approaching editors could be intimidating and fraught, especially given the publishing field's lack of diversity.

“ I never really developed strong relationships with anyone that worked on my book, with the editor or with any of the other people that were working with my stuff. So I spoke to all of them very infrequently.

“Editors felt very intimidating, and it's difficult when you go to a conference, and the people at the booth don't look like you, you don't feel comfortable approaching them.”



## IMPOSTER SYNDROME AND THE NEED FOR A SAFE SPACE TO ASK QUESTIONS

Perhaps the most crucial and common theme that came up in our conversations with scholars was imposter syndrome. Anxiety about their work and their sense of not belonging within academia created added stress and barriers to accessing the information or support they needed. Consequently, all the themes previously discussed were often compounded by imposter syndrome.

Many first-gen scholars expressed feelings of self-doubt about the quality of their scholarship and their ability to publish a book. This made it very difficult for them to feel safe asking questions, and to admit they didn't already know how publishing

worked. As one scholar said, it's intimidating to ask a publisher questions about proposals because there's a "stigma around not knowing." For some, this wasn't a feeling that went away even after tenure. Seeking out information or support could feel like admitting they didn't belong.

“*For me, there was a lot of anxiety about whether or not I could actually do this. And there was a lot of feeling of like, who am I to be trying to publish this book on this topic, even though I've been studying this topic for a very long time.*”

*“You're kind of mortified to admit, or you don't really feel that you're in a safe space to admit, that you really don't know.”*

*“It was harder for me to reach out and ask questions. I could have used support to feel confident what I was publishing was worthy of being published. I had serious doubt about the quality of my work. I felt that as a first-gen scholar, I did not have a strong support group that could hold my hand through the process and help me feel that I was taking the correct steps.”*

As they described these challenges, the scholars we talked to also emphasized how first-gen scholars bring incredible strengths that should not be ignored. As one participant said, “first-gen scholars are incredibly hard-working and have been working hard for the last several years,” by the time they're publishing a book. Another scholar described how first-gen scholars often get to where they are despite all the obstacles because of exactly how valuable their contributions are: “because they have a purpose they got there. They have new voices. They have completely unique contributions to make...We see because we're outside of those [frameworks] and there's a freshness that's there.”

## Supporting First-gen Scholars

In both our survey and interviews, we asked broadly what kinds of supports helped first-gen scholars through the publishing process. Often answers included things that these scholars organized themselves—such as informal writing groups—or support from their institution—like a sabbatical to work on their book. We homed in on several key areas where the press could make a difference.

Interviewee recommendations focused on four key areas:



### ACCESS

TO INFORMATION ON PUBLISHING, TO INCREASE TRANSPARENCY



### OPPORTUNITIES

TO GET DEEP, DEVELOPMENTAL FEEDBACK ON THEIR WORK



### BUILDING

A MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PUBLISHER



### CULTIVATING

A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT

### ACCESS TO INFORMATION ON PUBLISHING, TO INCREASE TRANSPARENCY

“*The sense that you are already supposed to know the answers and the process is very much internalized . . . I think as many things that can be done to make the process more transparent, the better.*”

Interviewees emphasized the importance of making the publishing process as reasonably transparent and equitable as possible, by providing information on key steps in a timely manner and making editors or publishing staff more approachable.

Scholars suggested posting publishing resources and FAQs on publisher websites, organizing workshops or panels at conferences, offering extended Q&A sessions, and doing editor presentations at schools. Several participants commented on the importance of hearing from previously published authors of the same backgrounds, especially authors of color.

Suggested topics covered a wide range:

- identifying the right press
- how to approach an editor
- role of an acquisitions editor
- issues around mentorship
- publishing timelines and step-by-step guides
- book proposals
- contract negotiation
- peer review process
- marketing and self-promotion
- press vs. author roles and responsibilities
- roles of different departments
- editing process
- associated publishing costs

### **OPPORTUNITIES TO GET DEEP, DEVELOPMENTAL FEEDBACK ON THEIR WORK**

**“** *That is one way that I kind of took a while. It was very slow. I think it's because we're mostly caught up with the writing, the writing and feeling confident about our writing.*

*“...it was just so helpful to have someone say I get what you're trying to do. And this is how you can do it even better.”*

The writing process can be extremely challenging, especially as first-gen scholars balance many other time commitments, both professionally and personally, and may doubt the validity of their work. Interviewees commented on how hard it can be to get real feedback on their scholarship, especially after leaving graduate school. Some were disappointed with how little early feedback they received from an acquisitions editor— others weren't sure who to turn to for comments on early drafts or as they crafted their book proposal. One participant talked about their strategy of submitting to journals as a way to get comments on early drafts of their book.

Beyond finding mentors to read their work, scholars reported writing groups as a helpful way to support their writing process and get feedback. Sometimes these were as simple as a consistent date to gather in a room or on Zoom to write together, while others had a more integrated process around providing comments and review.

## BUILDING A MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PUBLISHER

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“ *I want something more meaningful with a publisher than just, you know, let me publish.* ”

First-gen scholars reported often not having a strong relationship with the publisher, finding editors intimidating or inaccessible, and not feeling comfortable asking questions of publishing staff. To build a more meaningful and trusting relationship with the press, scholars recommended:

- Improving the accessibility, approachability, and responsiveness of editors in their outreach to prospective authors, responses to proposals, and while working with contracted authors
- Sharing acquisitions outreach strategies publicly, and focusing efforts on institutions already serving first-gen students and scholars
- Providing background on staff in departments other than acquisitions, to improve author knowledge of the process and facilitate clear contacts at other parts of the publishing process
- Providing transparent information on timelines and processes, and allowing flexibility when possible
- Making the press a safe space for scholars of color —especially considering the lack of diversity in publishing—by educating staff about equity issues and publicizing internal DEI work and commitments
- Publicizing the successes of new voices to encourage younger scholars from the same background
- Showing investment in a scholar’s career and scholarship growth, instead of interest in just a current project

## CULTIVATING A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT

“ *It’s not just about being a space for people to vent or to talk...It’s about helping them to establish those networks of support, potential collaboration in the future, networks that will help to read your unfinished writing... it’s a community of support. And again, all of this is grounded in the notion that you do belong here.* ”



Many first-gen scholars agreed that so much of the support through the publishing process comes down to relationships—with peers, with mentors, with presses. Having strong networks can help connect a scholar to the right editor, provide insider information about the process, find feedback on writing or the book proposal, and provide emotional support and reassurance along the way. Connecting first-gen scholars to these networks in a way that builds a sense of community supports first-gen scholars beyond just the publishing process.

**Mentors.** Mentors were a key support mentioned in both the survey and interviews. Mentors helped junior scholars develop networks, introduced them to editors, and guided them through parts of the publishing process. But there are also challenges to finding the right kind of mentors for first-gen scholars, and some didn’t feel comfortable asking for advice from a faculty advisor deciding their tenure. The most helpful mentorship opportunities:

- Connect scholars with mentors who are also first-gen and can serve as role models
- Provide mentorship opportunities in group settings, not just at the individual 1:1 level
- Keep in mind that publishing often changes, and mentors who haven’t published a book recently may not have the most current information
- Are mindful that mentors from underrepresented groups are often already overburdened

**Peer Groups.** Writing groups or other support provided by colleagues, was another commonly recommended support. Scholars cited the importance of connecting with colleagues in a similar position and career stage to share their experiences. Additionally, our interviewees described how helpful it is to network with colleagues from other campuses. This made them feel more comfortable sharing their struggles without worrying about the politics of their home institution. Within these contexts, opportunities for both one-on-one and small group interactions were important for building personal connections and offering different dynamics that work better for different people.



# About the UC Press FirstGen Program

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS FIRSTGEN PROGRAM** builds on the insights from this report to effectively cultivate and support the work of first-generation scholars—those who are the first in their family to receive a college degree. As we know from research and the University of California’s own FirstGen program, first-gen students often confront a range of intersecting inequalities across race, income, immigration status, and more. First-gen scholars who have gone on to attain advanced degrees must navigate additional barriers within the academy. This report has shown the myriad obstacles first-gen scholars faced when trying to get their work published.

In our role as a non-profit, progressive press within the public UC system, we aim to extend the UC’s efforts by more effectively cultivating, publishing, and promoting the work of first-gen scholars.

Our program includes:

- Financial support to help eliminate costs associated with book publishing, support the writing process, and maximize the reach and impact of the author’s scholarship (e.g., developmental editing, indexing, permissions, etc.)
- Publishing workshops and webinars to help demystify the book publishing process for first-gen scholars, and provide opportunities for community-building and networking
- Online resources about book publishing, to enable publicly accessible information for the first-gen scholar community
- Data and findings from the research phase of our program, to raise awareness about the first-gen publishing experience and provide information to the academic and publishing community about how to support these scholars
- A FirstGen Program email list to establish regular communication with first-gen scholars about relevant publishing resources, events, program updates, and gather feedback

**To learn more about our program, please visit the [UC Press website](#).**

# About UC Press

University of California Press is one of the most distinguished and largest university presses in the United States, dedicated to enriching lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. We believe that scholarship is a powerful tool for fostering a deeper understanding of our world and changing how people think, plan, and govern. Through our publishing we seek to drive progressive change by seeking out and cultivating the brightest minds and giving them voice, reach, and impact.

[WWW.UCPRESS.EDU](http://WWW.UCPRESS.EDU)