

First Generation College Students in a Virtual World: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The COVID pandemic has prompted extensive use of online instruction and has provided first-generation college students (FGCS) with new challenges as well as opportunities. (Berg, 2020). The migration to online learning dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic has required the creation of virtual modalities for instructors and institutions (Lederman, 2020) and has presented unique stresses for first-generation college students. While it is too soon to obtain adequate data to fully determine the impact of the pandemic and the subsequent transition to online learning, a few sources of reliable data are now emerging. Research conducted at Berkeley, California by Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium surveyed 28,198 undergraduate students and was done May through July 2020 at nine universities (26% of respondents (n = 7,233) identified as first-generation students}. (Soria, 2020). Their data reflects and supports findings from studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) as well as Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey (Davis, 2020). The findings indicate first-generation college students are facing new, major, and wide-ranging obstacles in the sudden shift to remote learning. Along with the broader impacts of the pandemic, this new information raises concerns about these highly vulnerable students as they face multiple stresses and new challenges.

Findings show that FGCS encounter considerable hurdles in key areas related to finances, family stress, online learning challenges, limitations in access to technology, and mental health issues. Despite their unique challenges, FGCS students also report elements that are positive and promote their success, including supportive peer relationships, academic and professional assistance, and integration through social groups, friendships and positive interactions with the faculty and the college system. Consequently, institutions of higher learning must urgently consider the emerging data and the impact different barriers and instructional modalities may have in perpetuating existing disparities for first-generation college students.

Index Terms—Online Learning, COVID, First Generation College Students, Student Retention, Teaching Strategies, Latino Students.

INTRODUCTION

First Generation College Students, (FGCS) have been profoundly affected in several key areas, and preliminary research indicates that there is cause for concern (Lederman, 2020). To effectively evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, online instruction and their subsequent effect on first-generation college students, this paper will examine preliminary research that describes barriers faced by first-generation college students. Specifically, we will examine areas found to be significant to college retention and performance of FGCS: finances and employment, family struggles, online learning stresses, limitations in access to technology, and issues of mental health. As an academic community, addressing the struggles of this distinctive group of students is crucial. If the multiple stressors of first-generation college students are not addressed, we risk losing the unique perspectives, capacities, contributions, and skills of this talented but vulnerable population.

THE TIME OF COVID: CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Finances and Employment

According to the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium survey of first-generation students in nine universities, FGCS were more likely than continuing-generation students to experience major financial difficulties during the pandemic (Soria, 2020). These impediments included lost wages from family members, the student's lost wages from on- or off-campus employment, and the student's increased living and technology expenses. Compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation students are nearly twice as likely to be concerned about their ability to continue paying for their education.

Specifically, most first-generation students (87%) reported experiencing at least one financial hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a significantly ($p < .05$) higher rate than the percentage of continuing-generation students who experienced at least one financial hardship (76%). Notably, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to experience the loss or reduction of income from family members (52%) compared to continuing-generation students (32%). First-generation students were also significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than continuing-generation students to have experienced an increase in living expenses (39%) and unexpected increases in spending for technology (27%).

The additional expenses associated with these various expenses: relocating, purchasing technology, and losing wages (both personal and family income) may have negatively impacted the already struggling first-generation students. Concurrently, first-generation students are almost twice as likely to be concerned about paying for their education: 59% of first-generation students indicated that they were concerned, very concerned, or extremely concerned about their ability to pay for their education in fall 2020 compared to 32% of continuing-generation students. The results suggest that overall, first-generation students are significantly ($p < .05$) more apprehensive about financial issues, employment and their ability to pay for their education compared to continuing-generation students (Soria, 2020).

Findings from studies by an interdisciplinary team at North Carolina State University which surveyed FGCS present a similar picture of financial hardships. In the North Carolina study, FGCS respondents stated that the pandemic negatively impacted their access to food (29.6%) and access to personal supplies like toiletries and washing machines (33.1%). Specific statements from FGCS in the North Carolina survey provide additional insight into FGCS's perceptions of how finances altered their lives before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, before the pandemic, 39.8 % of first-generation college students agreed with the statement "I am concerned about having enough funds to complete college." while a higher 63.2 % indicated concern during the pandemic (Davis, 2020). Overall, responses match data that shows the negative financial impact of the pandemic on first-generation college students.

Parental income is also a significant factor in providing monetary and practical resources for first-generation college students (Roksa, 2019). Revenues from home influences students' ability to respond to the pandemic and thus impacts their performance and retention. The median annual household income for students whose parents earned a college degree is almost six figures at \$99,635. For first generation students, this number plunges to \$37,565, quite a disparity in ability to provide resources for these two groups of students. The difference in these income levels impacts FGCS in finding the resources for the shift to remote instruction and contributes to the considerable financial burdens of these students. Consequently, the financial limitations and liabilities carried by FGCS are clearly reflected in the current data.

Family and Relationship Issues

A review of the data from the existing student surveys of FGCS show that, during the pandemic, there were significant major changes related to family, peer and faculty relationships.

FGCS report that, during the current crisis, a troubling one-third of first-generation students reported living in unsafe environments and experiencing abuse (physical, emotional, drug, or alcohol) and also recounted experiencing food and housing insecurity. Survey results suggest that first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than continuing-generation students to live in places during the pandemic that were not as safe and were not free from physical or emotional violence or abuse or drug and/or alcohol abuse. Specifically, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than continuing-generation students to indicate that it was never or only sometimes true that they lived in a place that was free from physical or emotional violence or abuse (19%) and free from drug and/or alcohol abuse (14%). In addition, 14% of first-generation students indicated that it was never or only sometimes true that they lived in places where their identity was respected and 17% indicated that it was never or only sometimes true that they felt safe and protected where they were living (Davis, 2020).

When asked to address responsibilities related to caregiving during the initial months of COVID-19, over a quarter (27.7%) of FGCS mentioned being accountable and having to care for children 0 to 18 in their home. In addition, 18.3% of FGCS who were surveyed described being fully responsible for an adult or older person in their home. FGCS also reported feeling more responsible for the emotional needs of their family as compared to life before the pandemic (Soria, 2020). The surveys also assessed the degree FGCS connected with their family. A review of the data from the University of North Carolina showed that 35.6% of surveyed FGCS reported having a more positive connection with their family due to COVID-19.

In addition, survey data showed that when respondents compared their life before COVID-19 with their present state related to the college experience, FGCS were more likely to feel lonely and miss their friends from college. More likely to struggle with adjusting to college. More likely to admit to having poor study habits and less likely to have resources that will help them excel in school (Davis, 2020).

Were first-generation college students able to maintain key relationships and connections to their peers and instructors during the initial stages of COVID-19? Overall, FGCS expressed feeling less connected to their fellow students and instructors during the shift to remote learning. A distressing 90.6% of respondents felt disconnected from their peers and slightly less 79.7% disclosed feeling separated from their instructors (Flaherty, 2020).

Overall, a significant number of FGCS reported experiencing abusive, less safe and less stable home environments, more caregiving responsibilities, and more disconnectedness from peers, faculty and the college environment. Those additional child and adult caretaking responsibilities, environmental stresses and emotional distance were one of many factors that are negatively impacting first-generation college students.

Online Learning Struggles and Limitations in Access to Technology

The emergency transition to remote learning in the spring of 2020 required a marked learning and teaching adjustment on the part of students and faculty (McMurtrie, 2020). Students were obliged to adjust to virtual and different course structures. These changes happened quickly, along with the many added barriers in other areas that made college work more challenging. Technology issues related to online instruction required resources unavailable to many FGCS: reliable internet, a reasonable workspace, dependable computer and generally adequate technology (Lederman, 2020). Access to these technological essentials particularly affected participation in class meetings, such as those held over web-conferencing software like Microsoft Teams or Zoom (Flaherty).

Overall, we can conclude from the data that first-generation students did not adjust as well to online instruction during the pandemic compared to continuing-generation students. Explicitly, 44% of first-generation students indicated that they adapted well or very well to online instruction compared to 52% of continuing-generation students (Bailey, 2020). When compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to experience impediments and barriers as they transitioned to online learning. For example, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to report that they lacked access to an appropriate study space amid home environments that were potentially distracting and possibly unsafe. Significantly, they indicated not having access to the technology necessary for online learning, and also reported lacking familiarity with technological tools necessary to successfully do online learning.

Additionally, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than continuing-generation students to report that they were unable to attend virtual classes at their scheduled meeting times (22% compared to 14%). In addition, both first-generation and continuing education students experienced difficulties in learning due to the pandemic, including distractions, increased anxiety, and feeling less motivated (Davis, 2020).

In analyzing the transition to emergency remote instruction as related to FGCS, it is crucial to consider the prevalence of technology access, knowledge of technical tools, adequate home environment, additional childcare responsibilities, financial limitations and other barriers to success. Because FGCS are at high risk of encountering these barriers, these disparities will result in unequal learning, performance and retention outcomes.

Mental Health Issues

First-generation students are more likely to experience mental health disorders during the pandemic than continuing-generation students—a disparity that existed pre-pandemic as well (Stebbleton et al., 2014).

Generally, FGCS agreed in surveys that COVID-19 affected their mental health (71.5%) and physical health (42.4%) negatively. In a few instances, students (12.2%) reported experiencing personal loss due to the pandemic. More specific questions centered on the extent COVID-19 affected students' physical and emotional discomforts. Data shows that when students compared their life before COVID-19 with their lives during COVID-19, FGCS were more likely to feel tired or did not have energy. They were less likely to feel healthy. more likely to be indicated having more trouble sleeping (Davis, 2020).

The North Carolina survey used the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2) two-item scale to screen for major depressive disorder symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2003) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-2 (GAD-2) two-item scale to screen students for generalized anxiety disorder symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2007). Based on these screening tools, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to experience mental health disorders during the pandemic than continuing-generation students. The results suggest that 44% of first-generation students and 38% of continuing-generation students screened positive for generalized anxiety disorder (Canning, 2020).

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of our review of data related to first-generation students and the impact of COVID-19 on their college performance suggests that first-generation students face major and significant barriers to completing their college degree. Namely, findings suggest that first-generation students are heavily impacted in multiple and concerning ways, including in finances, employment, relationships, technology access, online learning difficulties and mental health. Surveys of FGCS revealed that they face multiple financial limitations, are apprehensive about affording future semesters, have committed to additional home responsibilities, often live in unsafe environments, feel disconnected from support of faculty and peers, are struggling with remote learning and face emotional anxieties due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

How can institutions of higher learning support these students, lessen barriers and ensure their continued success? Based on our review of the data, we have a number of recommendations for institutions of higher learning that may improve and support first-generation students as they navigate their way through this unique time:

1. Address Financial Barriers-Seek additional funding and aggressively promote employment opportunities available at colleges and universities, particularly virtual work-from-home positions. Since over half of first-generation students also experienced the loss of income of family members, colleges and universities could provide access to career/employment resources to students' family members during the pandemic.
2. Safety Issues-A disturbing one third of first-generation students reported that they live in unsafe environments where they experience physical or emotional violence or abuse and alcohol and/or drug abuse. Whenever possible, provide access to on-campus residential places for safety and stability. Give access to food pantries to help students reduce food insecurity. Moreover, campuses could offer more amenable opportunities for students to stay on campus, even for short periods. Even a few days a week could provide a refuge from a difficult home environment.

3. Expand Mental Health Services--Whenever possible, colleges and universities should provide mental health resources specifically tailored to the unique needs of FGCS. Many first-generation students experience multiple issues that impact their mental health, such as the imposter syndrome, in which students feel an enhanced sense of self-doubt, fear of experiencing failure, and concerns about being a fraud—like they will be exposed as incompetent and unfit to belong in academia (Canning et al., 2020). Counseling services to first-generation students, by mental health providers can hopefully address some of the unique challenges encountered by first-generation students. Psychological services should also focus on virtual options, and engage FGCS in groups and human connections that provide students with a sense of belonging and support
4. Promote Successful Transitions to Online Learning-- First-generation students report inadequate access to technology and struggle with adapting to online instruction. Colleges and universities must provide more technological resources such as access to laptops, Wi-Fi, technical assistance and ways of connecting to faculty and peers.

It is imperative that all aspects of the higher education institutional system--administrators, staff, and faculty--consider the unique nature, experiences, and barriers of first-generation students. We must ensure that first-generation college students continue and expand the fragile success they have attained. To do so, the multiple obstacles they are facing must be urgently understood and tackled, safeguarding the way for their future achievements and success.

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