

Facing COVID-19: An assessment of First-Generation College Students' Persistence to Graduation during a Pandemic

All-Site Report – Summary of Spring 2021 Data Collection

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On January 21, 2020, the Washington State Department of Health confirmed the nation's first case of COVID-19. By mid-March, university officials from across the U.S. suspended face-to-face classes and moved instruction to a virtual platform. University-wide closures across the nation prompted a collaboration between researchers, college administrators and students to assess the impact of COVID-19 on First-Generation College Students (FGCS). For the purpose of this report, the team defines FGCS as an individual for whom neither parent completed a four-year bachelor degree.

What does college persistence to graduation look like for FGCS living through the COVID-19 pandemic? And how, if at all, does COVID-19 exacerbate already existing barriers?

To help answer these pressing questions, researchers from an interdisciplinary team administered surveys to FGCS during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through analysis, researchers identified the effect of the pandemic on persistence to graduation for FGCS. The team also collected open-ended responses from FGCS who provided recommendations to their universities on how to improve supports.

Methods

The research team administered online surveys to FGCS across six universities: Bucknell University (PA), Florida A & M University, Rowan University (NJ), Shaw University (NC), The University of Pittsburgh (PA), and The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Sites were selected based on convenience where researchers purposefully selected FGCS at each site. Each site researcher was responsible for gathering and distributing surveys to FGCS. In some cases, all FGCS received the email while only a small group received the email. This was due to each school's divergent ways in identifying and connecting with FGCS. The team collected respondents' perceptions on the extent to which COVID-19 exacerbated barriers to college persistence, reduced access to resources, hindered connections with peers and family and disrupted health. Lastly, the team administered a photovoice methodology survey where they asked students to take visual images of their workspace to gather perceptions on equitable schooling space. This report presents the combined findings from all sampled sites.



TIMELINE:

- January 2020 – Nation's first case of COVID-19
- March 2020 – Universities suspended face-to-face classes
- June 2020 – Pilot administered survey at Rowan and UNC-CH
- October 2020 – First round of data collection
- April 2021 – Second round of data collection

SPRING 2021 DATA COLLECTION:

- 6 universities
- 257 Barriers survey
- 118 Photovoice surveys
- 30 interviews

Demographics of Sample

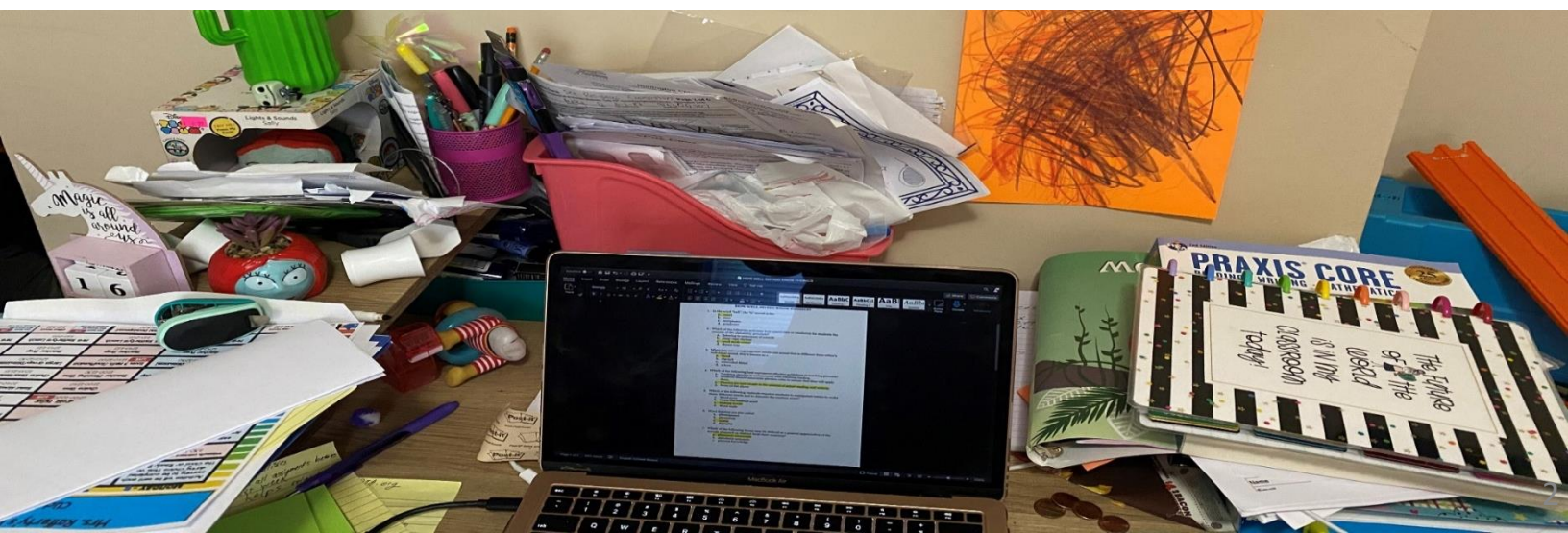
In Spring 2021, 257 FGCS completed the initial online survey. Approximately 30.4% of respondents were White, 75.1% identified as a woman and 25.7% described their households as low-income. Additionally, most respondents represented in-state residents (83.7%) and roughly (30.4%) transferred from another college.

Table 1. Demographics of Survey Respondents

	N (%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White, Non-Hispanic	78 (30.4%)
Hispanic/Latin American	40 (15.6%)
Black, Non-Hispanic	73 (28.4%)
Asian/Asian-American	36 (14.0%)
Multiracial	12 (4.7%)
Middle Eastern/Middle Eastern American	n/a
American Indian/Native Alaskan	n/a
Other Race/Ethnicity	n/a
Prefer not to answer	n/a
Gender	
Woman	193 (75.1%)
Man	51 (19.8%)
Genderqueer or gender non-conforming	n/a
Questioning	n/a
Transgendered Man	n/a
My identity is not listed	n/a
Prefer not to answer	n/a

	N (%)
Family Income	
Middle income	81 (31.5%)
Lower-middle income	75 (29.2%)
Low income	66 (25.7%)
Upper-middle income	24 (9.3%)
High income	n/a
Prefer not to answer	n/a
Class Year	
Senior	72 (28.0%)
Junior	69 (26.8%)
Sophomore	57 (22.2%)
Freshman	55 (21.4%)
Status	
In-state	215 (83.7%)
Full-time during Spring 2020	212 (82.5%)
Transferred from another college	78 (30.4%)

Note: Items with fewer than 10 responses were omitted and replaced with "n/a" to keep subject anonymity.



Barriers

The research team asked FGCS to assess, retrospectively, the extent to which existing barriers were more pronounced during COVID-19 than before the pandemic. When asked about the extent COVID-19 has impacted their **financial barriers** to college, respondents indicated that they were less likely to have enough funds for college next year, more likely to be concerned about having enough funds to complete college and less likely to be able to borrow money for college (see Table 2). The term “Before COVID-19” relates to the period before the university-wide shutdown in March 2020, while “Today” refers to April 2021. Please note that percentages are calculated based on total responses per question, not overall survey completion.

Table 2. Financial Barriers for FGCS

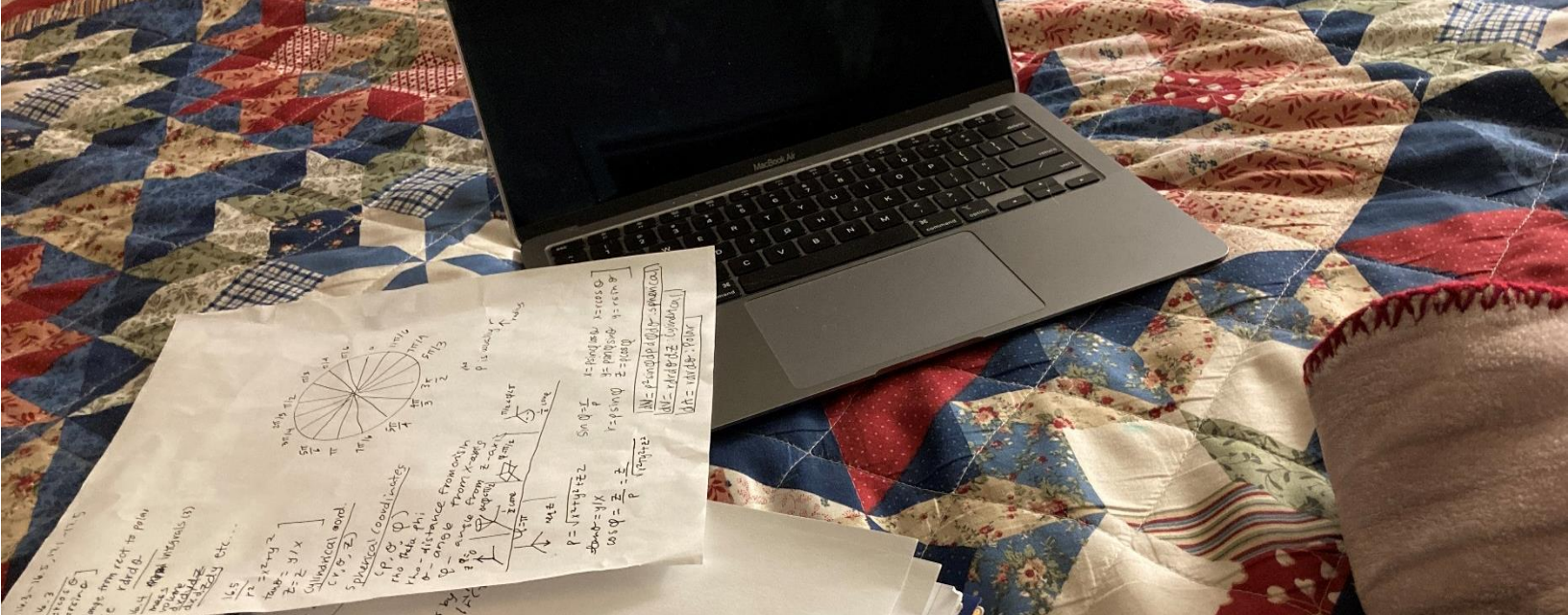
	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
I will have enough funds for college next year.	143 (60.6%)	193 (75.4%)
I am concerned about having enough funds to complete college.	146 (61.6%)	139 (54.3%)
I am unable to borrow money for college.	74 (31.9%)	77 (30.4%)

When asked about the extent COVID-19 has impacted FGCS’ **institutional barriers** to college, respondents saw a minimal difference between Before COVID-19 and today. Table 3 provides additional insight into FGCS’ perceptions on institutional barriers.

Table 3. Institutional Barriers for FGCS

	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
On average, my professors are knowledgeable in their field.	199 (90.9%)	216 (97.0%)

“I had to get multiple part time jobs to support myself since I left home due to family issues. The amount of work that is still demanded on a weekly basis from my professors has been a challenge for me. I work almost every day and cannot afford to have the same study expectations as other students. Working with unique students’ schedules will help improve distant learning.”



When asked how the pandemic exacerbated **academic barriers**, FGCS indicated that they were less likely to like school, more likely to have poor study habits and more likely to have grades lower than expected today (April 2021) as compared to before COVID-19 (see Table 4).

Table 4. Academic Barriers for FGCS

	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
I like school.	126 (53.4%)	211 (83.1%)
I have poor study habits.	156 (65.0%)	97 (37.7%)
I am not concerned about my academic eligibility.	130 (54.6%)	156 (61.4%)
My grades are lower than expected.	136 (56.9%)	69 (27.0%)

Survey respondents also shared their **personal barriers**. Overall, FGCS were more likely to experience loneliness, miss their friends and struggle with adjusting to college today as compared to before COVID-19 (see Table 5).

Table 5. Personal Barriers for FGCS

	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
I struggle with low self-esteem.	132 (56.4%)	124 (48.8%)
I am experiencing loneliness.	177 (75.0%)	93 (36.6%)
I miss my friends from college.	179 (75.8%)	92 (36.4%)
I am homesick.	72 (30.3%)	66 (26.1%)
I feel overwhelmed.	210 (88.2%)	171 (66.8%)
I struggle with adjusting to college.	156 (65.8%)	105 (41.3%)

Resources

The research team asked students to describe the types of resources they used during pandemic. The team defined resources as Wi-Fi, academic tools (e.g., books), personal supplies (e.g., food), space and time. Over half (64.4%) of surveyed FGCS indicated having access to useful resources today as compared to 93.1% before COVID-19 (see Table 6). Also, fewer surveyed students (42.6%) agreed on having a great study environment in April 2021 compared to before COVID-19 (75.0%).

Table 6. Access to Resources

	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
I have the tools and resources needed to be a successful learner in a virtual environment.	220 (85.6%)	-
I have a great study environment.	101 (42.6%)	192 (75.0%)
I have access to resources that will help me excel in school.	141 (64.4%)	216 (93.1%)

"COVID-19 and distant learning has made it hard to feel connected and engaged with my professors and peers. It can be hard to establish the same human connection or console someone through a screen. I've been really stressed about certain things, academically and personally, and I don't have that many people that I'm able to talk to them about. So, I end up using unhealthy methods to cope with stress and it has definitely hurt my academic performance even more."

Relationships

The research team explored how FGCS remained connected to their peers and instructors during the initial stages of COVID-19. Overall, FGCS expressed a low connection to their fellow students and instructors during the distance learning period (see Table 7). Considerably, 18.0% of respondents felt connected with their peers while 25.4% felt connected with their instructors.

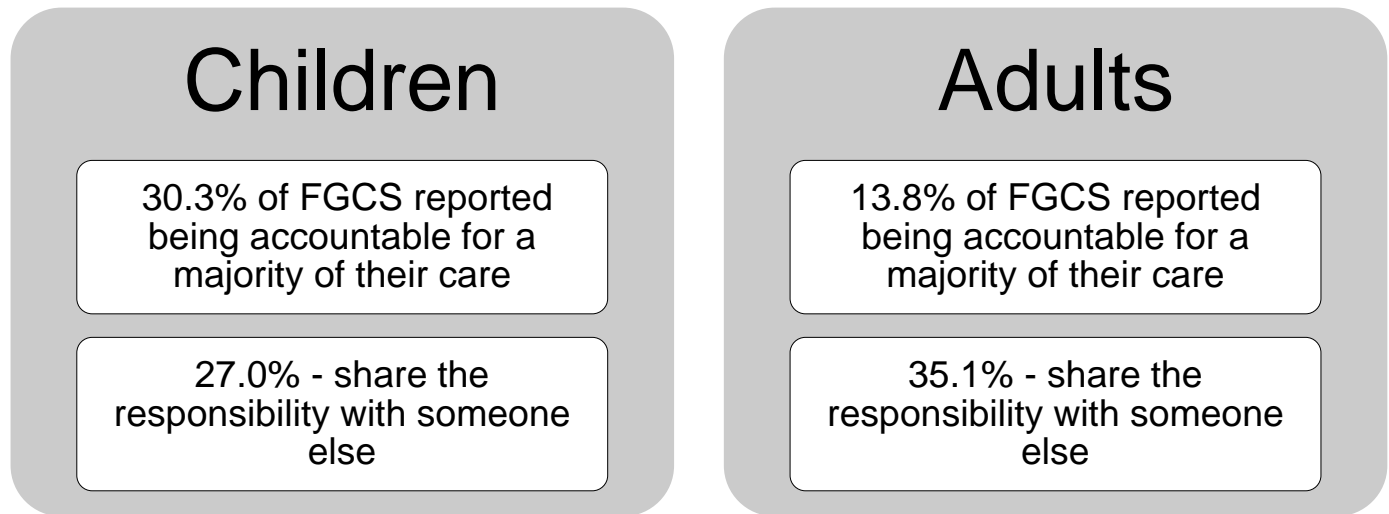
Table 7. Feelings of Connectedness

	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
I feel connected to my fellow students.	46 (18.0%)	-
I feel connected to my instructors.	65 (25.4%)	-
I am emotionally close with my family.	175 (73.5%)	187 (73.9%)
I am physically close to my family.	130 (54.6%)	138 (54.6%)

Caregiving Responsibilities in the Home

The research team assessed the degree FGCS connected with their family and developed newfound responsibilities of caregiving in the home. We asked students to address their obligations related to caregiving during COVID-19. Of those FGCS who indicated having children aged 0-18 in their home, over a quarter (30.3%) mentioned being accountable for most of their care. In addition, 35.1% of surveyed FGCS reported sharing the responsibility of taking care of an adult or older person in their home (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Caregiving Responsibilities of FGCS



The team asked FGCS to assess, retrospectively, the extent to which **family obligations** were more pronounced in April 2021 as compared to before the pandemic. Interestingly, over half of survey respondents (55.9%) indicated being responsible for the emotional needs of their family in April 2021 (see Table 8). FGCS also described their family members, and themselves, as facing physical and mental health challenges unrelated to COVID-19, which would likely create additional caregiving responsibilities, especially during the pandemic.

Table 8. Family Obligations on Health

	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
An immediate family member has a physical health problem not related to COVID-19 (e.g., cancer, diabetes, etc.)	107 (45.0%)	108 (42.9%)
An immediate family member has a mental health condition not related to COVID-19.	89 (37.4%)	91 (36.0%)
My family obligations make it difficult to attend college.	85 (35.9%)	64 (25.2%)
I am responsible for the emotional needs of my family.	132 (55.9%)	117 (46.4%)
I am responsible for the physical needs of my family.	62 (26.4%)	52 (20.6%)
I have personal health problems not related to COVID-19 (e.g., cancer, diabetes, etc.)	66 (27.7%)	68 (26.6%)
I have a mental health condition not related to COVID-19.	110 (46.6%)	106 (41.6%)

Health – Physical and Emotional Discomforts

Overall, FGCS agreed that COVID-19 affected their mental health (74.1%) and physical health (52.9%) negatively. In a few instances, 16 students (6.5%) reported someone in their household experienced hospitalization due to COVID-19. Overall, 70.0% of surveyed FGCS self-reported being at least in good health during the pandemic. To assess a more in-depth perspective of mental health, we generated questions that focused on the extent COVID-19 impacted students' discomforts. Our findings below provide a snapshot of students' physical and emotional discomforts brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

When students compared their life before COVID-19 with their present state on discomforts, FGCS were

- more likely to feel tired or not have energy
- more likely to have a poor appetite
- less likely to feel healthy
- more likely to have soreness in muscles or joints
- more likely to have trouble relaxing
- more likely to be nervous
- more likely to feel depressed
- less likely to wake up feeling refreshed



FGCS' Open-Ended Recommendations

How can university officials improve your distance learning experience?

- Professors should not be able to be biased against remote students in a way that negatively impacts participation grade.
- I appreciate the pass/fail system that is currently in place.
- I know that a lot of international students are learning from their home countries. But some faculty members are not very considerate of different time zones.
- A bit of intervention concerning participation policies. Maintain the participation requirement, but intervene to ensure that there are ways of demonstrating participation besides regular class attendance.
- I am on campus for learning, with hybrid virtual classes. I think returning to normal campus life is the only solution to truly improve student life and learning experience.
- Increasing accessibility to a stable internet connection.

What do you want your university officials to know about how COVID-19 has affected your college experience?

- It has caused my anxiety and depression to get worse.
- That many students are struggling with their mental health.
- Everyone I know is burnt out. Staring at a screen all day is exhausting.
- It has made it harder to connect with people since there is very minimal face to face interaction.
- Covid-19 has ruined my college experience. I am lonely and depressed, and I have so much busy work.

What currently motivates you to continue with schooling?

- A future career that excites me, returning to school post Covid-19.
- The end goal. Most of all, I want to get my degree at the end, and I want to assure myself that I did the best I could to get there.
- Honestly, the motivation is barely there but what keeps me going are my parents.
- I do not want to disappoint my family.
- That the pandemic won't last forever, and I still need to have my education so I can be successful after everything.
- My future and the fact that I have my mom to support when I graduate.
- Being the only one in my family to go to college is what motivates me to want to graduate.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Colleges and universities play a key role in supporting FGCS as they face COVID-19 at home and on campus. Results from this study allow college administrators and interested stakeholders to assess the needs of FGCS and create appropriate supports that assist FGCS on their journey to graduation. Our findings reveal that FGCS continue to face challenges that have been exacerbated by the pandemic when it comes to persisting through college, accessing resources, connecting to family and peers, as well as assessing health. Schooling sites can use the following practices to aid FGCS during the pandemic:

- 1. Assess students' needs** – Encourage faculty and administrators to survey students anonymously to assess students' needs at the beginning, middle or end of the academic period (i.e., semester). Online surveys can be used to assess gaps in resources and supplies (e.g., food, WI-FI, etc.) as well as determine the extent students are facing additional caregiving responsibilities.
- 2. Create virtual spaces to connect** – Allow students to virtually meet in an informal setting across classes, years and regions. Students described feeling disconnected from their peers and expressed a need to connect in a virtual or socially-distanced space.
- 3. Allow for physical and mental health checks** – Ensure that counseling services are available for FGCS, faculty and staff to address exhaustion and burnout. Many respondents reported working longer hours and non-traditional days. Students also stated feeling more stressed and facing emotional and physical discomforts due to the uncertainty of the pandemic.



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The authors are solely responsible for any remaining errors.

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