

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

All Site Report – Summary of Fall 2020 Data Collection

Cassandra R. Davis, PhD, *UNC-CH*
Jason Méndez, PhD, *The University of Pittsburgh*
Dara Méndez, PhD, *The University of Pittsburgh*
Terri Norton, PhD, *Bucknell University*

Harriet Hartman, PhD, *Rowan University*
Julie Sexton, PhD, *The University of Colorado Boulder*
Milanika Turner, PhD, *Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University*

May 2021

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 five universities: Bucknell University (PA), Florida A & M University, Rowan University (NJ), 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
- October 2021 – Third round of data collection

FALL 2020 DATA COLLECTION:

- 5 universities
- 659 Barriers survey
- 166 Photovoice surveys
- 48 interviews

Demographics of Sample

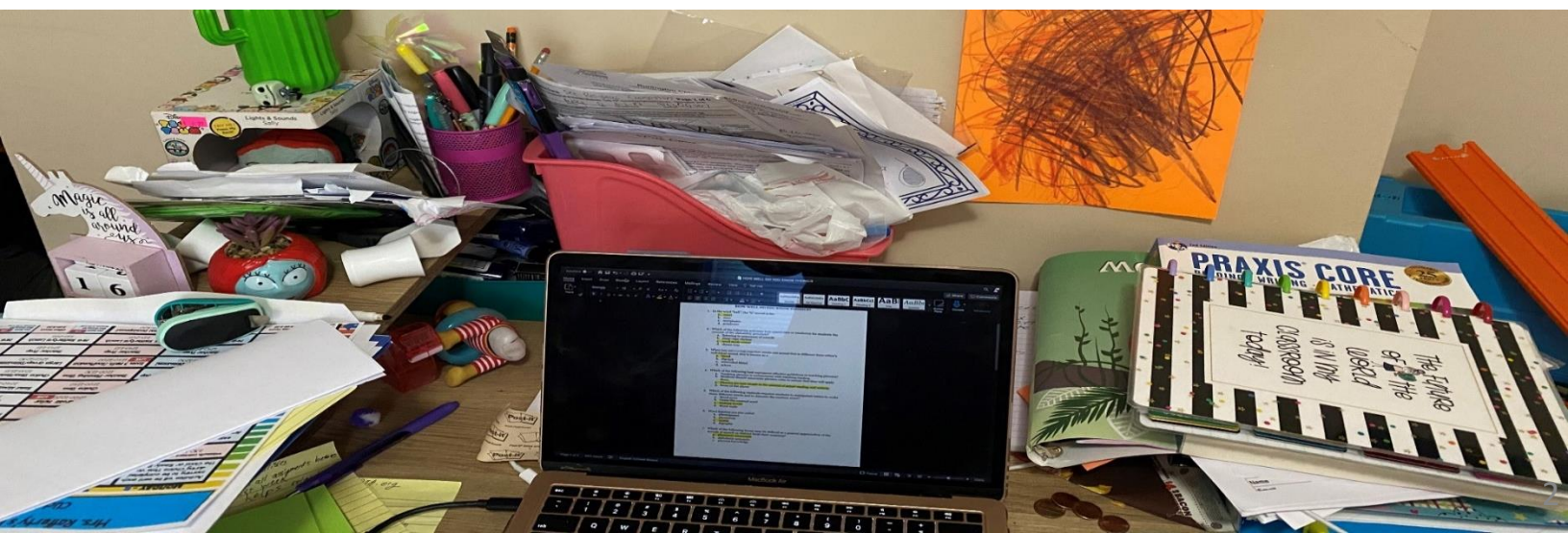
In fall 2020, 659 FGCS completed the initial online survey. Approximately 40.2% of respondents were White, 71.4% identified as a woman and 32.4% described their households as low-income. Additionally, most respondents represented in-state residents (89.9%) and roughly (35.7%) transferred from another college.

Table 1. Demographics of Survey Respondents

	N (%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White, Non-Hispanic	261 (40.2%)
Hispanic/Latin American	127 (19.6%)
Black, Non-Hispanic	119 (18.3%)
Asian/ Asian American	67 (10.3%)
Multiracial	40 (6.2%)
Middle Eastern/ Middle Eastern American	13 (2.0%)
American Indian/Native Alaskan	n/a
Other Race/Ethnicity	n/a
Prefer not to answer	12 (1.9%)
Gender	
Woman	470 (71.4%)
Man	156 (23.7%)
Genderqueer or gender non-conforming	10 (1.5%)
Questioning	n/a
Transgendered Man	n/a
My identity is not listed	n/a
Prefer not to answer	n/a

	N (%)
Family Income	
Lower-middle income	217 (34.0%)
Low-income	207 (32.4%)
Middle income	167 (26.1%)
Upper-middle income	40 (6.3%)
High income	n/a
Prefer not to answer	n/a
Class Year	
Junior	194 (29.4%)
Freshman	168 (25.5%)
Senior	163 (24.7%)
Sophomore	118 (17.9%)
Status	
In-state	581 (89.9%)
Full-time during Spring 2020	453 (69.9%)
Transferred from another college	231 (35.7%)

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 October 2020.

Table 2. Financial Barriers for FGCS

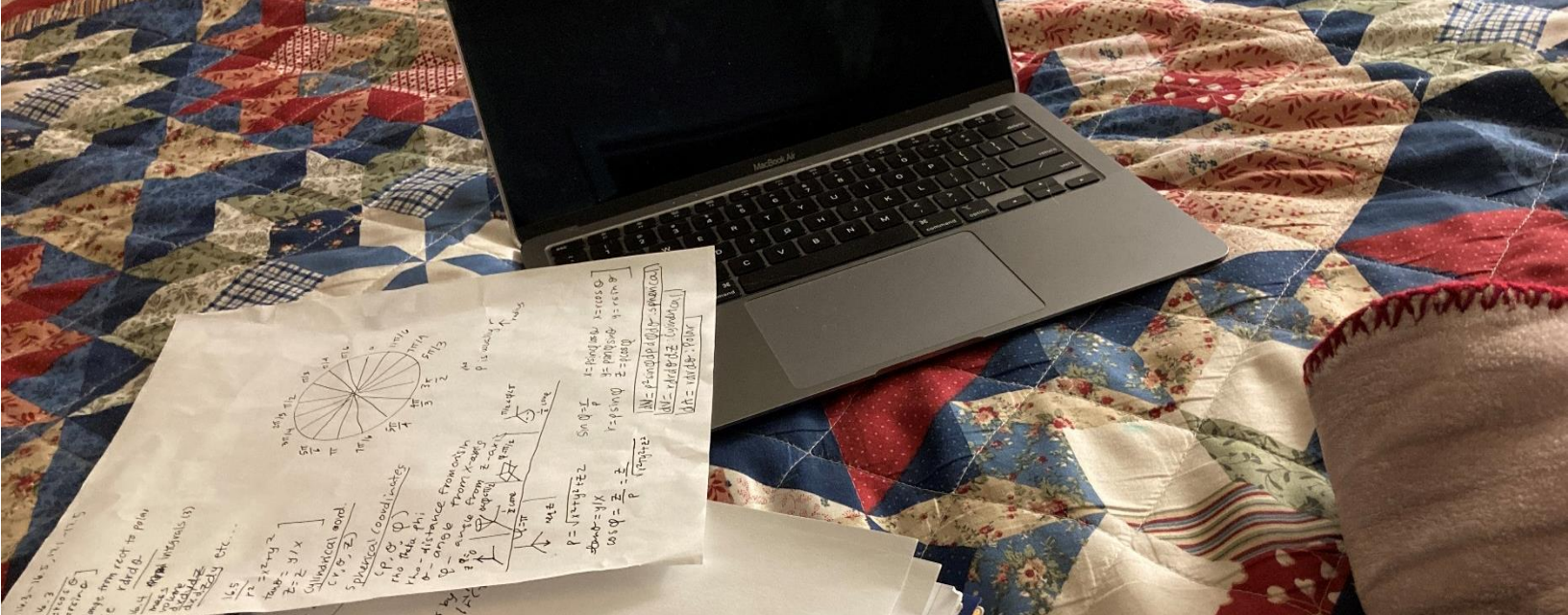
	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
I will have enough funds for college next year.	355 (56.5%)	436 (66.5%)
I am concerned about having enough funds to complete college.	401 (64.1%)	378 (57.9%)
I am unable to borrow money for college.	194 (31.1%)	185 (28.4%)

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 (see Table 3).

Table 3. Institutional Barriers for FGCS

	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
At my university, I face inequalities because of my social class.	187 (29.8%)	179 (27.5%)
At my university, I face inequalities because of my race.	87 (13.4%)	79 (12.1%)
At my university, I face inequalities because of my proficiency in English.	20 (3.2%)	18 (2.8%)
On average, my professors are knowledgeable in their field.	582 (92.2%)	615 (94.3%)

“Students are financially struggling to get by and need resources available. I don’t qualify for things based off of my parents’ tax returns, but my dad was severely injured at work and now our family is suffering.”



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 (October 2020) 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.	380 (60.4%)	562 (85.9%)
I have poor study habits.	350 (55.4%)	250 (38.1%)
I am not concerned about my academic eligibility.	356 (56.6%)	384 (58.8%)
My grades are lower than expected.	335 (53.3%)	137 (20.9%)

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.	348 (55.9%)	318 (48.9%)
I am experiencing loneliness.	447 (71.3%)	231 (35.5%)
I miss my friends from college.	437 (70.3%)	220 (34.0%)
I am homesick.	147 (23.6%)	141 (21.7%)
I feel overwhelmed.	546 (87.1%)	409 (62.5%)
I struggle with adjusting to college.	375 (59.6%)	240 (36.7%)

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 (66.0%) of surveyed FGCS indicated having access to useful resources today as compared to 87.2% before COVID-19. Also, fewer surveyed students (43.2%) agreed in having a great study environment in October 2020 compared to before COVID-19 (71.8%).

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.	377 (82.0%)	-
I have a great study environment.	273 (43.2%)	470 (71.8%)
I have access to resources that will help me excel in school.	414 (66.0%)	567 (87.2%)

“Give more access to emergency resources and funds for students who are not at home living and relying on family members. Some of us pay for school ourselves and have to work a job during this COVID crisis on top of online learning, civil unrest, an economic crisis, and a terrifying election.”

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, 15.3% of respondents felt connected with their peers while 32.0% 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.	73 (15.3%)	-
I feel connected to my instructors.	177 (32.0%)	-
I am emotionally close with my family.	465 (73.6%)	499 (76.3%)
I am physically close to my family.	387 (61.5%)	401 (61.4%)

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 (32.5%) mentioned being accountable for most of their care. In addition, 41.8% 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 October 2020 as compared to before the pandemic. Interestingly, close to half of survey respondents (48.3%) indicated being responsible for the emotional needs of their family in October 2020. 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.)	296 (47.1%)	292 (44.7%)
An immediate family member has a mental health condition not related to COVID-19.	265 (42.0%)	256 (39.2%)
My family obligations make it difficult to attend college.	221 (35.1%)	137 (20.9%)
I am responsible for the emotional needs of my family.	303 (48.3%)	265 (40.8%)
I am responsible for the physical needs of my family.	170 (27.1%)	138 (21.2%)
I have a personal health problem not related to COVID-19 (e.g., cancer, diabetes, etc.)	119 (19.2%)	114 (17.5%)
I have a mental health condition not related to COVID-19.	260 (41.6%)	239 (36.7%)

Health – Physical and Emotional Discomforts

Overall, FGCS agreed that COVID-19 affected their mental health (68.5%) and physical health (43.8%) negatively. In a few instances, 11 students (1.7%) reported someone in their household experienced hospitalization due to COVID-19. Overall, 74.9% 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 did 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?

- Offer more asynchronous course content delivery and provide more interactive application of material to reduce Zoom fatigue.
- Extend the hours for public student areas like the libraries and union.
- Patience with technical errors and realizing some students have to work to stay in school.
- More breaks. The semester shouldn't be shortened with no breaks. That creates more stress on the students.
- Give us personal time to grieve.
- Be more considerate of the workload.
- I would say better prepare the professor to use resources like zoom.
- There should also be a budget for students who do not have adequate access to technology/WIFI necessary for remote learning.

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.
- I feel that COVID has made the experience a lot harder workload rise with no real reward for students as homecoming, spring break, etc.
- It has made it harder to connect with people since there is very minimal face to face interaction.
- It's really tough to balance all the classwork especially since it feels like we are getting more than before.
- It has made me almost drop out but also pushed me to finish more.

What currently motivates you to continue with schooling?

- A future career that excites me, returning to school post COVID-19.
- The end goal, my degree. Literally nothing else, it is so hard to find motivation in this time.
- Honestly, the motivation is barely there but what keeps me going are my parents.
- I do not want to disappoint my family.
- Financial obligation, preparing for future.
- Being able to one day achieve my dream career and helping people in need.
- [I'm] graduating in December.

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 faced emotional and physical discomforts due to the uncertainty of the pandemic.



This research is supported by the National Science Foundation – funded Social Science Extreme Events Research (SSEER) network and the CONVERGE facility at the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder, the North Carolina Scholars Strategy Network and the Faculty of Color and Indigenous Faculty Fund at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH).

The authors wish to thank Maura Elise Holt-Ling, Aimee Yan and Amani Lizama McHarris for their work as contributing authors as they assisted the team with pulling this document together. The authors also thank the FGCS who shared their voices with the research team and the universities' administrators who entrusted us with this project. Lastly, we wish to thank the Center for First-generation Student Success, The UNC-CH Lookout Scholars Program, Rowan University's Flying First, GenFirst! and the Engineering Success Alliance at Bucknell University, The Federal TRIO Programs at the University of Pittsburgh, FAMU's Office of Sponsored Programs and all individuals as well as organizations who support FGCS.

The authors are solely responsible for any remaining errors.

For more information about this study, email Cassandra R. Davis at cnrichar@email.unc.edu