

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

Rowan University

Site Report – Summary of Fall 2020 Data Collection

Harriet Hartman, PhD, *Rowan University*  
Jason Méndez, PhD, *The University of Pittsburgh*  
Dara Méndez, PhD, *The University of Pittsburgh*  
Cassandra R. Davis, PhD, *The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Terri Norton, PhD, *Bucknell University*  
Julie Sexton, PhD, *The University of Colorado Boulder*  
Milanika Turner, PhD, *Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University*

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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 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 in other cases 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 sites and compares them to results from Rowan University.



### 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

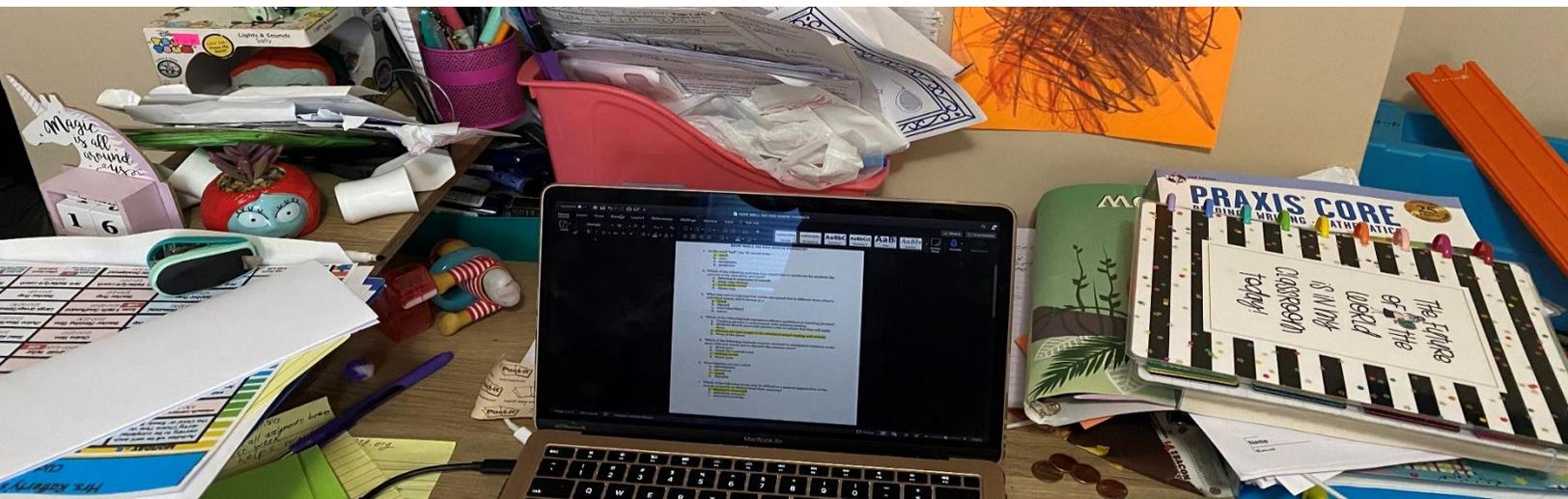
In fall 2020, 227 Rowan FGCS completed the initial online survey at Rowan University. Approximately 50.5% of respondents were White, 68.0% identified as a woman and 32.0% described their households as low-income. Additionally, most respondents represented in-state residents (96.4%) and roughly 52.0% transferred from another college.

**Table 1. Demographics of Survey Respondents**

	ALL N (%)	Rowan N (%)
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White, Non-Hispanic	261 (40.2%)	112 (50.5%)
Hispanic/Latin American	127 (19.6%)	41 (18.5%)
Black, Non-Hispanic	119 (18.3%)	26 (11.7%)
Asian/ Asian American	67 (10.3%)	13 (5.9%)
Multiracial	40 (6.2%)	20 (9.0%)
Middle Eastern/ Middle Eastern American	13 (2.0%)	n/a
American Indian/Native Alaskan	n/a	n/a
Other Race/Ethnicity	n/a	n/a
Prefer not to answer	12 (1.9%)	n/a
<b>Gender</b>		
Woman	470 (71.4%)	153 (68.0%)
Man	156 (23.7%)	65 (28.9%)
Genderqueer or gender non-conforming	10 (1.5%)	n/a
Questioning	n/a	n/a
Transgendered Man	n/a	n/a
My identity is not listed	n/a	n/a
Prefer not to answer	n/a	n/a

	ALL N (%)	Rowan N (%)
<b>Family Income</b>		
Lower-middle income	217 (34.0%)	64 (29.2%)
Low-income	207 (32.4%)	70 (32.0%)
Middle income	167 (26.1%)	65 (29.7%)
Upper-middle income	40 (6.3%)	17 (7.8%)
High income	n/a	n/a
Prefer not to answer	n/a	n/a
<b>Class Year</b>		
Junior	194 (29.4%)	81 (35.7%)
Freshman	168 (25.5%)	68 (30.0%)
Senior	163 (24.7%)	31 (13.7%)
Sophomore	118 (17.9%)	43 (18.9%)
<b>Status</b>		
In-state	581 (89.9%)	212 (96.4%)
Full-time during Spring 2020	453 (69.9%)	195 (87.8%)
Transferred from another college	231 (35.7%)	116 (52.0%)

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



## Barriers

The research team asked Rowan 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, and slightly more likely to be concerned about having enough funds to complete college as well as being 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**

	ALL		Rowan	
	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
I will have enough funds for college next year.	355 (56.5%)	436 (66.5%)	112 (51.4%)	134 (59.0%)
I am concerned about having enough funds to complete college.	401 (64.1%)	378 (57.9%)	154 (70.6%)	152 (67.6%)
I am unable to borrow money for college.	194 (31.1%)	185 (28.4%)	59 (27.1%)	58 (25.9%)

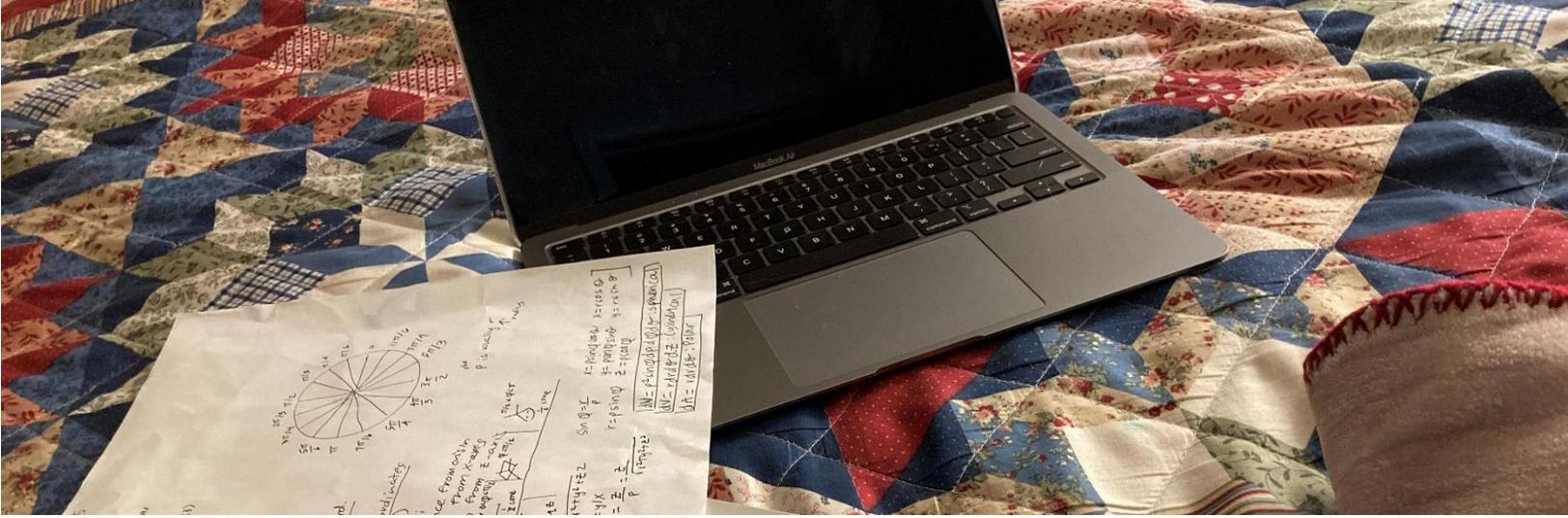
When asked about the extent COVID-19 has impacted Rowan FGCS’ **institutional barriers** to college, respondents saw a minimal difference between Before COVID-19 and today. Table 3 provides additional insight into FGCS’ perceptions on institutional barriers.

**Table 3. Institutional Barriers for FGCS**

	ALL		Rowan	
	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)	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%)	43 (19.7%)	45 (20.1%)
At my university, I face inequalities because of my race.	87 (13.4%)	79 (12.1%)	20 (9.2%)	17 (7.5%)
At my university, I face inequalities because of my proficiency in English.	20 (3.2%)	18 (2.8%)	n/a	n/a
On average, my professors are knowledgeable in their field.	582 (92.2%)	615 (94.3%)	195 (89.5%)	209 (92.9%)

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

*“COVID-19 has placed a big burden on my learning experience...now I have to think about whether getting an education is more important than trying to make ends meet.”*



When asked how the pandemic exacerbated **academic barriers**, Rowan 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**

	ALL		Rowan	
	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
I like school.	380 (60.4%)	562 (85.9%)	137 (63.4%)	190 (84.4%)
I have poor study habits.	350 (55.4%)	250 (38.1%)	61 (56.0%)	98 (43.2%)
I am not concerned about my academic eligibility.	356 (56.6%)	384 (58.8%)	125 (57.9%)	135 (59.7%)
My grades are lower than expected.	335 (53.3%)	137 (20.9%)	112 (51.6%)	41 (18.1%)

Survey respondents also shared their **personal barriers**. Overall, Rowan 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**

	ALL		Rowan	
	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
I struggle with low self-esteem.	348 (55.9%)	318 (48.9%)	118 (54.1%)	114 (50.7%)
I am experiencing loneliness.	447 (71.3%)	231 (35.5%)	139 (64.4%)	87 (38.8%)
I miss my friends from college.	437 (70.3%)	220 (34.0%)	117 (54.9%)	74 (33.3%)
I am homesick.	147 (23.6%)	141 (21.7%)	36 (16.7%)	31 (13.8%)
I feel overwhelmed.	546 (87.1%)	409 (62.5%)	186 (85.7%)	146 (64.6%)
I struggle with adjusting to college.	375 (59.6%)	240 (36.7%)	128 (58.7%)	76 (33.6%)

## Resources

The research team asked Rowan students to describe the types of resources they used during the pandemic. The team defined resources as Wi-Fi, academic tools (e.g., books), personal supplies (e.g., food), space and time. Over half (71.4%) of surveyed FGCS indicated having access to useful resources for school today as compared to 84.4% before COVID-19 (see Table 6). Also, surveyed students (48.9%) were less likely to agree that they had a great study environment in October 2020, compared to before COVID-19 (67.3%).

**Table 6. Access to Resources**

	ALL		Rowan	
	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)	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%)	-	200 (88.1%)	-
I have a great study environment.	273 (43.2%)	470 (71.8%)	106 (48.9%)	152 (67.3%)
I have access to resources that will help me excel in school.	414 (66.0%)	567 (87.2%)	155 (71.4%)	190 (84.4%)

*“It’s just been harder to excel in school. I don’t have the best access to technology and good internet connection.”*

## Relationships

The research team explored how Rowan 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, 18.5% of respondents felt connected with their peers while 41.0% felt connected with their instructors.

**Table 7. Feelings of Connectedness**

	ALL		Rowan	
	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
I feel connected to my fellow students.	73 (15.3%)	-	42 (18.50%)	-
I feel connected to my instructors.	177 (32.0%)	-	93 (40.97%)	-
I am emotionally close with my family.	465 (73.6%)	499 (76.3%)	163(74.77%)	170 (75.2%)
I am physically close to my family.	387 (61.5%)	401 (61.4%)	157(72.02%)	173 (76.6%)

## Caregiving Responsibilities in the Home

The research team assessed the degree Rowan 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, a little over one-third (39.8%) mentioned being accountable for most of their care. In addition, 44.8% 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 Rowan FGCS**



The team asked Rowan 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 (47.0%) indicated being responsible for the emotional needs of their family in October 2020. FGCS also asserted that their family members faced physical (46.0%) and mental (33.2%) health challenges before the pandemic. Results show that these challenges were also present for family members seven months into the pandemic.

**Table 8. Family Obligations on Health**

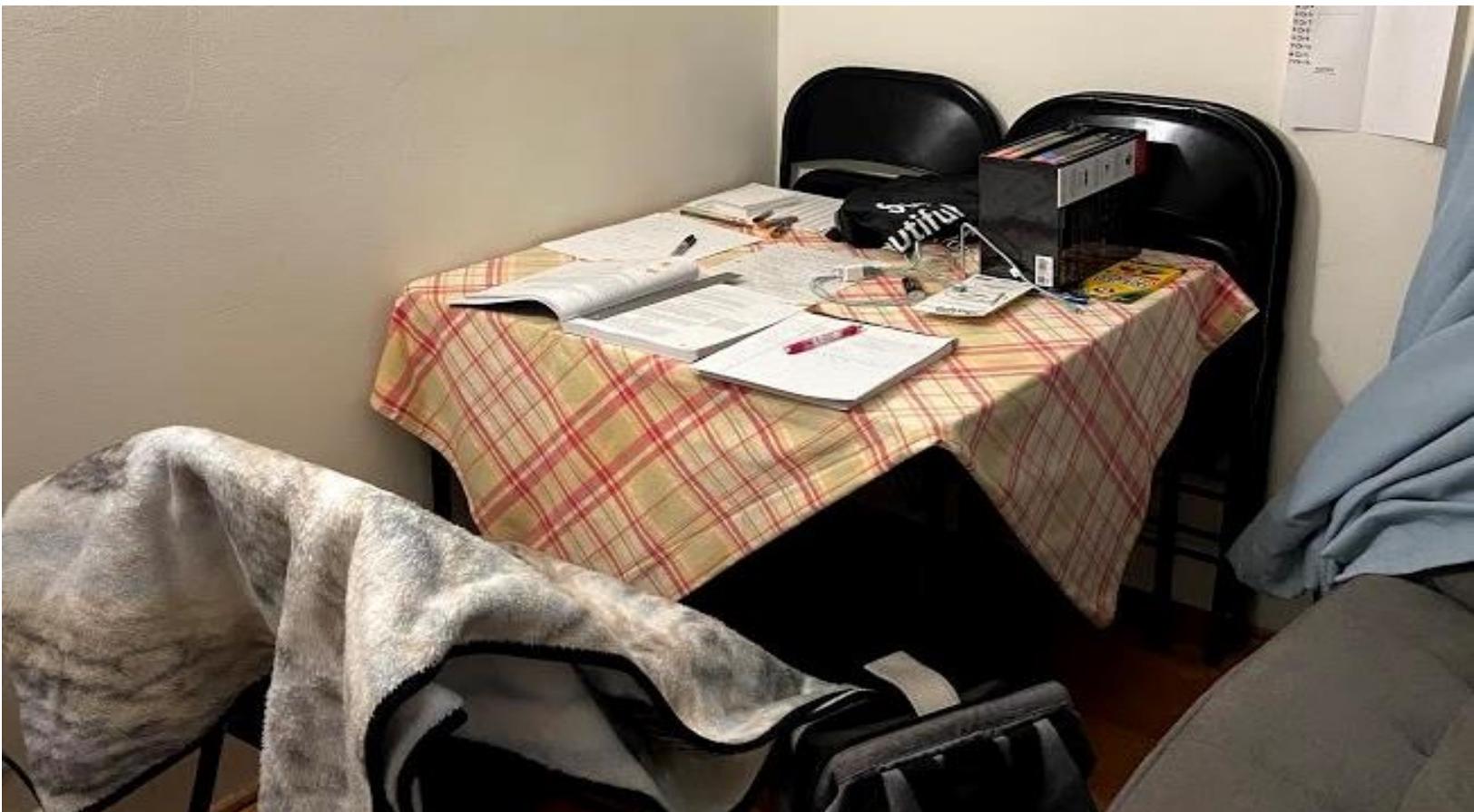
	ALL		Rowan	
	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)	Today Agree N (%)	Before COVID-19 Agree N (%)
An immediate family member has a physical health problem not related to COVID-19 (e.g., cancer, diabetes, etc.)	296 (47.1%)	292 (44.7%)	106 (49.3%)	104 (46.0%)
An immediate family member has a mental health condition not related to COVID-19.	265 (42.0%)	256 (39.2%)	81 (37.2%)	75 (33.2%)
My family obligations make it difficult to attend college.	221 (35.1%)	137 (20.9%)	82 (37.8%)	67 (29.6%)
I am responsible for the emotional needs of my family.	303 (48.3%)	265 (40.8%)	102 (47.0%)	95 (42.6%)
I am responsible for the physical needs of my family.	170 (27.1%)	138 (21.2%)	69 (32.1%)	65 (29.0%)
I have a personal health problem not related to COVID-19 (e.g., cancer, diabetes, etc.)	119 (19.2%)	114 (17.5%)	41 (18.2%)	39 (17.3%)

## Health – Physical and Emotional Discomforts

Overall, Rowan FGCS agreed that COVID-19 affected their mental health (58.9%) and physical health (37.8%) negatively. In fewer than 10 instances, students reported someone in their household experienced hospitalization due to COVID-19. Overall, 76.2% 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 Rowan 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



## Rowan FGCS' Open-Ended Recommendations

### How can university officials improve your distance learning experience?

- By understanding this is not a normal period and everyone's situations are not the same so the same expectations cannot be put on students.
- To make things more clear on what we have to do.
- Teachers be more engaged and organized.
- Help us adjust and work with us more.
- Provide professors who are understanding to the current situation of society, pressures and stress levels.
- Allow more flexibility with grades and encourage professors to be more interactive with students.
- Offer to set students up with comfortable workstations at home (i.e., desk, computer chairs, lamps, internet, etc.).

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

- Having better conditions with professors and students.
- More outreach and communication would be great.
- Offer/promote more jobs for students to earn income, be a little forgiving for students who may be late on payments, provide more counselors and mental health services.
- By making it easier for us to access materials without paying for them due to limited access because we are off campus.
- Require testing for those who are staying on campus.
- Reminding Rowan staff and faculty to be available and timely when responding to students' emails and concerns because that is how students are most likely going to get in contact due to social distancing.

### What currently motivates you to continue with schooling?

- The only thing still motivating me to continue schooling is making more money. I am in a bad situation with money, so I hope to find my career after college to lessen my struggles with finances.
- That I am working on my degree.
- I like seeing a good result. When I get good grades on things and receive good feedback, it pushes me to keep working.
- Knowing everything is temporary and that I'm paying for this, quitting doesn't feel like an option.
- I just want to finish for my parents. So they can be proud of me.
- I have some very special people helping me with college and I want to make them proud.
- Providing for my family by achieving a better opportunity.

## 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.



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The authors are solely responsible for any remaining errors.

For more information about this study, email Harriet Hartman at [Hartman@rowan.edu](mailto:Hartman@rowan.edu) or Cassandra R. Davis at [cnrichar@email.unc.edu](mailto:cnrichar@email.unc.edu).