

COVID-19 Impact on the Academic Motivation of First-Generation College Students of Color*

Erin S. Griggs, PURPOSE Research Fellow

Khyati Verma, M.S., Lyds Sherman, M.S., & Laura Reid Marks, Ph.D.

Introduction

Abstract

This study examined the academic experiences associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in first-generation college students of color. We interviewed four self-identified first-generation college students of color and asked them questions about their academic experiences during the pandemic and the factors that influenced them. Six themes emerged: (1) Lack of motivation, (2) Lack of resources, (3) Loss of social interaction through school, (4) transition to online learning, (5) Mental health, and (6) academic satisfaction/resilience as a first-generation student. Implications, limitations, and future directions are discussed and highlight the impacts of the pandemic.

Background & Aims of the Research

- First-generation college students are often defined as those whose "parents did not obtain a 4-year college degree" (Pratt et al., 2017).
- These students face "pressure of being the first in the family to attend school, serving as a role model for younger siblings and in some cases continuing to help support the family" (Moody, 2019).
- Students at the University of Colorado Boulder, discovered through a survey that "the so-called campus life feeds their sense of academic motivation and even their overall well-being" (Nell et al., 2020).
- Stressors of COVID-19 such as financial burdens, depression, and stress are notable factors in individuals that have been associated with the decline of academic motivation in first-generation students (Lederer et al., 2020).
- The aim of this study was to determine the factors that influence the academic experiences of students of color during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Question

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the academic motivation/experiences of first-generation students of color?

Method

Participants

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participant #	Age	College Class	Major	Race	Gender
1	20	Junior	Psychology	Black	Female
2	19	Junior	Psychology	Black	Female
3	18	Senior	Elementary Education	Latinx	Female
4	21	Senior	Sociology	Black	Female

Research Design and Data Collection

- After IRB approval, participants were recruited via a College of Education undergraduate subject pool and Instagram for this qualitative study.
- Participants must have experienced either hybrid or remote learning in the past year.
- Zoom interviews were conducted with four participants who identified as African American or Latinx who are currently enrolled in a four-year accredited university, ages 18-25. See Table 1 for demographic information.
- Participants were compensated a \$25 Amazon gift card.
- Interviews were recorded, transcribed and three coders individually developed a list of themes in response to the proposed research question.
- After developing themes individually coders met to reach consensus on a final list of themes. See Table 2 for final themes that emerged from the data.

Data Analysis

Table 2. Summary of themes

Themes	Categ.	Quotes	Freq.
Lack of Motivation	NA	"Cause the whole, my whole senior year was all zoom and I had like over a hundred absences. Mm. I don't know how I graduated, but I'm glad I did. I had over a hundred absences."	4
Lack of Resources	Financial	"I had a work study job on campus, which work study doesn't pay that much, but it was something to help while I was in school, which was money to have. And so, I wasn't able to get paid for work-study anymore, which kind of sucked because I had to go home."	2
	Academic	"...Not emailing me about resources like tutoring and stuff. I didn't get none of that. So, I didn't know about tutoring until I came up here and we have a chem lab in"	2
	Mental Health	"But as COVID got worse, it kind of died down because they have their own lives to live. My advisor, they're student advisors. So, my girl, she has a daughter. So, she was worried about her daughter, and she was graduating, so she was graduating in COVID and stuff like that, moving back home."	1
Loss of Social Interaction through School	NA	"It was really hard to stay in contact with everyone as well, because I was either always working or trying to keep up with schoolwork."	2
Transition to Online Learning	NA	"Like I couldn't, I didn't want to get up in the mornings and I didn't want to get on Zoom."	4
Mental Health	NA	"Zoom is just so draining because not only are we online in class, but then we have our work online. So, it just makes me feel like I'm just trapped in my computer. Trapped in my computer, I'm trapped at my desk in my room."	2
Academic Satisfaction/ Resilience as a first-generation student	NA	"I disciplined myself. I looked at my grades from the previous semester and I told myself I need to do better. And I told myself I can do it. So, what's important is to like really believe in yourself like COVID-19 was just the obstacle that came very unexpectedly, but I'm kind of happy it came because it taught me a lot, it was like a blessing in disguise."	3

Results

Conclusion

- Lack of Motivation and Transition to Online Learning were the two leading themes that participants identified as causes of academic decline.
- Three of four students reported that adjusting to the COVID-19 guidelines and new learning environment, built resilience.
- The pandemic affected the mental health of 50% of participants.
- The COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have mostly negative impacts on the academic experiences of first-generation students of color, resonating with Lederer et al. (2020) who state, "Students' college experience both in and outside of the classroom...is fundamental to their well-being and success"

Discussion

- There were a few limitations to this study which may have affected the interpretation of the results. First, all four participants were females, not being able to analyze gender effects. Second, optimally, we would have wanted to interview more than four participants.
- Consistent with the literature (Lederer et al., 2020), our results show that high levels of change in learning environments due to the pandemic impact academic experiences in first-generation students of color.
- Future research should examine the ways in which first-generation college students of color coped during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key References

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