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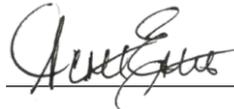
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON  
FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

A Scholarly Research Project

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:



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## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is a deadly pandemic that caused many colleges and universities to send students home and move courses online or to a hybrid of online and in-person learning. This qualitative study provides research on the impact of COVID-19 on the motivators and barriers of first-generation college students (FGCS). The study used a sample of FGCS enrolled in college in Fall 2021 from two private, four-year institutions in Washington, DC. The results of this study indicate that COVID-19 impacted the challenges and obstacles FGCS face in enrolling in college and staying in college. Family and financial aid were the factors that most influenced students' desire to attend college and stay enrolled. Students identified family as both a motivator and a stressor. Students indicated they need additional support transitioning to college. These students faced social and academic pressures when they returned to in-person learning and preferred learning online. These findings suggest that higher education institutions need to understand what barriers and motivators these students faced during the pandemic to make informed changes to eliminate or lessen these barriers and increase the motivation for those students to attend college. Improving communication and interaction with families, expanding financial aid, creating additional resources specific to FGCS, and fostering inclusion and building a sense of community in the classroom will help these students stay in school and graduate.

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## DEDICATION

To Pete, Patrick, Kelley, Quinn & Jack

Pete, thank you for supporting me through this journey by staying up late while I obsessed about my writing, bringing me caffeine and martinis when I didn't know I needed them, and being my biggest fan.

Patrick, Kelley, and Quinn, thank you for believing in me and cheering me on, even when I was ready to quit. Kelley, thank you for always telling me dropping out was an option. That was the best motivator. Jack, thank you for making me a grandma and giving me the incentive to finish strong.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is a deadly health crisis that continues to spread across the globe. The virus has disrupted everyone's lives, and the number of cases and deaths continue to rise. As of October 2020, there were over 7,000,000 cases of COVID-19 in the United States and over 200,000 deaths (Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Data Tracker, 2020). As a precaution, in Spring 2020, many colleges and universities sent students home. They moved their courses online or to a hybrid of online and in-person learning to limit the number of students on campus (Hodges et al., 2020).

This disruption in learning may drastically impact college admissions. Colleges and universities anticipate a substantial decline in enrollment. Over 80 percent of university presidents surveyed by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Friga, 2020, April 3) expect a decrease in enrollments for new and returning students. These enrollment declines could exacerbate existing inequities in higher education.

Inequities and systemic racism have existed for decades in the United States. From the beginning of our nation's history, Native Americans were subject to severe forms of oppression by European settlers. Their way of life was under relentless attack, resulting in substantial losses in American Indian resources, land, and lives (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). Jim Crow laws were passed at the state and local levels throughout the South to restrict African Americans' civic and economic rights after the United States abolished slavery in 1865. The 1896 Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld the Jim Crow laws by declaring the separate but equal doctrine constitutional. In reality, separate was not equal when it came to education. Facilities

built for African Americans were inferior in quality and grossly underfunded. This further institutionalized African Americans' economic and social inequity (Hammond et al., 2020).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were created in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in the segregated South to allow black Americans to attend college. The 1944 G.I. Bill provided payments to cover tuition expenses for all veterans on active duty, including African Americans. By the 1940s, nearly all black college students attended college at HBCUs, the only accredited institutions that allowed black Americans to earn undergraduate and professional degrees in many states. Desegregation became the focal point of legal battles across the nation, with strong resistance in the South. Desegregation efforts encountered violence, death threats, and riots. The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* that declared racial segregation of children in public schools as unconstitutional did little to reduce racial segregation, especially in the South. Desegregation is a slow process that continues today (Hammond et al., 2020).

Research has shown there is a high level of poverty in majority-minority schools due to school segregation (Reardon & Owens, 2014). More minority students attend high-poverty schools, which traditionally have fewer resources and lower student achievement. Because most children attend schools near or in their neighborhood, economic segregation increases in those schools (Reardon & Owens, 2014).

The increased support of public opinion for the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 magnified the focus on diversity in higher education enrollment. COVID-19 brought new scrutiny to the ongoing disparities in higher education. Higher education must address these disparities to reflect the diversity of future students (Cohn & Quealy, 2020, June 10).

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

My father and I are the only members of my immediate family to graduate from college. I faced barriers to the college admissions process that I was able to overcome, but this is not the case for all students. I focused my work on the inequities and barriers that first-generation students face today because institutions need to address those inequities. A large body of research indicates that first-generation students face significant challenges accessing postsecondary education (Bennett et al., 2015; Chen, 2017; House et al., 2020). These students are often minorities, children of immigrants, and individuals from a low socioeconomic background, and they face more significant hardships related to the financial costs of attending college (Bennett et al., 2015; House et al., 2020). Their families may be encouraging and supportive, but they lack the college experience knowledge to help their children navigate the college admissions process (Chen, 2017).

Cataldi et al. (2018) used data from 2002 to 2012 to study first-generation students' enrollment characteristics. The study defined first-generation students as students whose parents had not attended college, students with at least one parent who earned a bachelor's degree, and students with at least one parent who attended college. The number of 2002 high school sophomores, first-generation students, enrolled in postsecondary education in 2012 was 72 percent. Conversely, 93 percent of non-first-generation students did enroll (Cataldi et al., 2018).

The virus's effect is worsening the socioeconomic disparities in higher education. The impact of COVID-19 on these marginalized students has recently been the focus of research. This study examined how COVID-19 has impacted the challenges and barriers first-generation students routinely face. It also addressed how the inequities have changed due to COVID. Are they worse or have the injustices decreased in any way? Hearing directly from students about

how COVID-19 has impacted their access and enrollment in higher education garnered valuable information and brought new issues and concerns to light. This study interviewed first-generation students who enrolled in higher education for Fall 2021 to determine what barriers or motivators informed their decision. This information is crucial for higher education administrators to develop new processes, programs, and policies to increase access for first-generation students to higher education and assist them once they are enrolled.

### **Purpose Statement**

This study used a qualitative methodology to address how COVID-19 impacted first-generation college enrollment. The study explores the college admissions process after COVID-19 with first-generation students who applied and enrolled in higher education between Fall 2021 and Fall 2022.

### **Research Questions**

The central research question guiding this study was, what factors do FGCS identify as significant contributors to their decision to enroll or not enroll in college during COVID-19. The survey and interview questions were open-ended to gain as much information as possible from all participants. Sub questions that came out of the central question included:

1. What impact did family have on FGCS college enrollment decision?
2. Was there one factor that dominated the enrollment decision process?

### **Literature Review**

Racial diversity and inequity in higher education is not a new concept. There continues to be a significant national disparity in Black and Hispanic students enrolled at more selective colleges. While Latino enrollment in higher education has increased as the Latino population has grown, Latinos have the lowest educational attainment rate of any racial or ethnic group. The

increase in diversity across American culture creates challenges and opportunities for increasing diversity in higher education. The considerable rise in public opinion supporting Black Lives Matter since George Floyd's death in May 2020 has put diversity at the forefront (Cohn & Quealey, 2020). Colleges and universities consider diversity to be part of their mission to create a better society, but there is still a widespread pattern of underrepresentation of different racial and ethnic groups, specifically at more selective colleges (Chen, 2017; Cohn & Quealey, 2020; de Brey et al., 2019; Monarrez & Washington, 2020; Nunez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2012).

College accessibility for first-generation students reinforces the inequities that continue to exist within higher education. More first-generation students are applying to college but earn bachelor's degrees at a lower rate than their peers (Murphy et al. 2006). First-generation students face unique barriers to enrolling in higher education (House et al., 2020). Most tend to be minorities, children of immigrants, and from low-income families. Their parents have no institutional knowledge of the college admissions process and cannot help their students navigate it. The admissions process can include factors that favor students from privilege over first-generation students, including legacy admissions and emphasizing standardized test scores. The college choice of first-generation students largely depends on family responsibilities and financial hardships rather than school reputation, program specialization, or institutional fit (Garza et al., 2018; House et al., 2020; Lozano-Partida, A. 2018; Murphy et al., 2006; Rosinger et al., 2020).

Additional studies have focused on the assets and motivators of first-generation students in higher education (Hands, 2020; Mitchall et al., 2018). Parents can strongly influence first-generation students' motivation during the college planning process by supporting their students' decisions on their choice of college and encouraging them to better their lives. Parents who set

high standards early for their students to succeed academically increase their children's confidence to attend and succeed in college. Many first-generation students are optimistic, goal-oriented, civic-minded, and proactive. These motivators and assets contribute to first-generation students' success (Hands, 2020; Mitchall et al., 2018).

The disruptive effects of COVID-19 have impacted higher education in many ways, forcing institutions to abruptly switch to online learning, sending students home from campus, and negatively impacting enrollment. The socioeconomic disparities in higher education have been made worse by students' financial hardships and emotional challenges due to COVID. However, a catastrophic event like a recession or pandemic is a change agent that can offer an opportunity to achieve a new equality level (Aucejo et al., 2020; Blankenberg, B. et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020).

### **Deficiencies in Studies**

The impact of the disruptive effects of COVID-19 may add additional challenges and barriers that students have not yet faced. Despite the growth in the number of first-generation students in higher education, research has focused chiefly on racial and gender diversity. While these studies' results are informative, they do not consider the specific experiences of first-generation students and higher education (de Brey et al., 2019; Monarrez & Washington, 2020; Nunez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2012). The research on first-generation students focused on the barriers and challenges those students face during the college admissions process and their transition to college in a non-pandemic world (Garza & Fullerton, 2018; Lozano-Partida, 2018; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018; Murphy & Hicks, 2006). The data from these studies is pre-COVID. More current research is needed to see if the results are still valid.

The current research has been on the initial impact of COVID when most, if not all, higher education institutions closed their campuses and sent students home, offering virtual learning for the semester. COVID-19 is a relatively new crisis and continues to evolve (Aucejo et al., 2020).

COVID-19 has disrupted the American way of life in every possible way. The impact has been felt most by those in lower socioeconomic groups. Many cities and states were on lockdown, and travel was not allowed except in extreme emergencies. Non-essential businesses closed, and many did not reopen once the lockdown ended. The economy has taken a downturn, impacting higher education (Martin et al., 2020).

Research of previous higher education crises found that those crises did not have the same universal impact on everyday life as COVID-19. Gansemer-Topf et al. (2018) studied the effect of the 2008 recession on higher education. The study found that low-income families are usually most impacted in a downturn; therefore, access and retention for students from a low socioeconomic status should also be affected. This study will determine whether this applies to the effect of COVID-19 on low-income families.

A significant result of COVID-19 has been the abrupt change to online learning or a hybrid of online/in-person learning. While some colleges and universities offer online learning as a regular part of their curriculum and could easily make the change, many others were scrambling to figure it out. Online learning could have a more significant impact on student outcomes, especially for first-generation students. Studies conducted on students' experience with online learning did not focus on first-generation students (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). Research into the effects of online learning on first-generation students is needed to determine the long-term impact on their access to higher education.

This study will focus on the impact COVID-19 had on college enrollment for first-generation students. Ongoing research on the residual effect of the virus will need to be conducted to determine the long-term implications for first-generation students.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative methodology design was used for this study. In the literature review, it was learned that this is the best method to collect detailed data to understand a research problem from multiple perspectives (Rutter et al., 2020). Students participated from two private universities in Washington, DC, because both institutions have programs that identify and support FGCS. This study aimed to create research that these institutions can use to enhance first-generation students' lives effectively. The research results produced valuable information that these institutions will use almost immediately to effect change.

Qualitative research was used to explain the barriers or motivators related to college admissions during COVID-19. It was important to hear directly from students to fully understand their obstacles and challenges in the college admissions process. The decision to enroll in college during COVID-19 was researched through a survey of students who applied and enrolled in higher education between Fall 2020 and Fall 2021. Independent variables included COVID-19 and student status of first-generation and non-first generation. Dependent variables consisted of Fall 2020 enrollment, Fall 2021 enrollment, change in school choice, failure to enroll in Fall 2020, and failure to enroll in Fall 2021.

The initial survey questions asked specific information that was answered either through a checklist or as yes or no. A contextual paragraph was provided in the survey explaining the onset of COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines, and information on universities moving from on-campus learning to online or a hybrid of in-person/virtual learning.

This information was necessary to group the responses into the appropriate category for analysis.

The second set of questions asked about the participants' demographics and specific experiences with COVID-19 and higher education. The questions included a demographic question on their year in school. Additional questions consisted of their enrollment or intention of enrollment for Fall 2021 and Spring 2022. These questions were open-ended to gain as much information as possible from all participants.

### **Significance of the Study**

The emphasis on diversity in college admissions grew exponentially in 2020 due to the Black Lives Matter movement. Higher education is taking a more strategic look at increasing diversity in its student body, including first-generation students. Prior research has shown that first-generation students face barriers and challenges that differ from those of non-first-generation students in higher education. This research identifies specific obstacles and challenges that first-generation students faced during COVID-19 and if these changed due to the pandemic. This study compared the barriers and challenges that first-generation students faced during each phase of COVID-19 to determine if any changes to those barriers and challenges occurred.

### **Conclusion**

Understanding the barriers and challenges unique to FGCS and how those might have changed during the pandemic is essential for higher education administrators. This information can identify the specific needs that first-generation students routinely face, how those needs have changed during and post-COVID, and how those needs differ from those of non-first-generation

students. Knowing how these barriers and issues changed for FGCS will allow higher education institutions to develop resources to address these specific areas of concern. Institutions may need to update their policies, programs, and processes to serve first-generation students better. This focus on creating a welcoming community for students based on their needs may result in more first-generation students enrolling in their institution.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

COVID-19 is a deadly health crisis that continues to affect higher education. As a precaution, in Spring 2020, many colleges and universities closed their campuses and moved their courses online. Other universities opted to offer a hybrid of online and in-person learning to limit students on campus (Hodges et al., 2020). The pandemic is ongoing, forcing higher education to continue remote learning, causing significant changes to enrollment and access to higher education, specifically to first-generation college students (FGCS). This research study defined FGCS as students who do not have a parent that graduated from a traditional four-year college. It builds on existing studies to identify the challenges and issues FGCS face due to COVID-19 at a private, Jesuit, Catholic university and a private non-denominational university that offers resources and programs specific to FGCS.

This literature review focused on the virus, the history of diversity in the United States, the current state of diversity in higher education, the barriers and challenges FGCS face, and how the virus has impacted FGCS access to higher education. The review confirmed that FGCS have unique challenges in their access to and success in higher education and that these challenges are increasing due to COVID-19.

#### **Research Questions**

The central research question guiding this study was, what factors do FGCS identify as significant contributors to their decision to enroll or not enroll in college during COVID-19. The survey and interview questions were open-ended to gain as much information as possible from all participants. Sub questions that came out of the central question included:

3. What impact did family have on FGCS college enrollment decision?
4. Was there one factor that dominated the enrollment decision process?

## **COVID-19**

Understanding the history and timeline of COVID-19 is essential to understanding the virus's impact on higher education. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) provides the timeline of the virus and the latest information on new cases, vaccines, and distribution. CDC COVID Data Tracker. (n.d.) was updated daily with the latest news on the number of cases and deaths by state.

The impact of COVID-19 on college admissions and diversity is just beginning to be studied. While many studies were not peer-reviewed, the information is timely and informative. Friga (2020) surveyed 285 presidents and chancellors who are members of the Presidents' Trust of the Association of American Colleges & Universities in March 2020 when colleges and universities across the country closed campuses and implemented virtual online learning. The majority of those surveyed, 84 percent, anticipated a decrease in enrollment for both new and returning students. A decline in enrollment would hurt expected revenue, but the participants seemed optimistic. Just over 50 percent expected decreases in revenue between 10 and 20 percent, with only 18 percent of respondents saying they expect revenue losses greater than 20 percent (Friga, 2020). Additional studies must be conducted throughout the pandemic to continue measuring this impact.

Kim et al. (2020) used data sets from a student survey completed in April 2020 to determine the impact of COVID-19 on college enrollment. The authors concluded that students' ability to succeed in remote learning differs significantly by income level. Over 60 percent of students from lower-income households reported not getting the necessary equipment for remote

learning. Almost 35 percent of students from low-income families did not have reliable internet access. Over 55 percent said their home environment did not support remote learning. The authors will continue to research this topic.

McCarthy (2020) provided real-time analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on FGCS through a webinar panel of student affairs administrators. The panel found that students are experiencing the following issues: 1. Anxiety about the availability of housing and summer bridge programs; 2. Access to computers and study space; 3. Delayed graduation when a family needs extra income; and 4. Lack of community when learning is virtual. The opinions and solutions offered are based on what the panelists observed and implemented in their institutions. Several panelists saw the pandemic as an opportunity to address access and equity in higher education.

COVID-19 has made the socioeconomic disparities in higher education worse. Aucejo et al. (2020) surveyed the causal effects of COVID-19 on enrollment and graduation decisions, academic performance, choice of major, study and social habits, remote learning experiences, current labor market participation, and expectations about future employment. The study focused on how these effects differ between existing socioeconomic divides and whether the pandemic has worsened those existing inequalities. The authors confirmed that lower-income students were 55 percent more likely to delay graduation due to COVID-19, and 41 percent were more likely to report that COVID-19 impacted their choice of major. COVID-19 almost doubled the gap between higher and lower-income students' expected GPAs. Addressing the economic and health impacts of COVID-19 could prevent the widening of existing gaps in higher education. This study is one of the first peer-reviewed papers on the effect of COVID-19 on college students' experiences. It confirms the conclusions from the non-peer-reviewed literature from Kim (2020).

### **Student Finances**

Soria et al. (2020) reported on the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium COVID-19 Survey. They concluded the pandemic has negatively impacted first-generation students enrolled at large public research universities. Over 28,000 undergraduate students participated in the nine universities' survey from May through July 2020. The survey concluded that FGCS were more likely to experience food and housing insecurity and less likely to live in safe environments conducive to remote learning (Soria et al., 2020). FGCS were more likely to experience financial difficulty during the pandemic than their peers. FGCS were also twice more likely than their peers to be concerned about paying tuition in the fall of 2020. These findings support the research conducted by Bentrin et al. (2020) through a survey of 1,165 students nationwide enrolled in higher education. FGCS students comprised 46 percent of the respondents. Over 40 percent of all respondents indicated they were challenged to finance their education during the pandemic.

Manspile et al. (2021) concluded that the pandemic has disproportionately affected people of color, immigrants, and low-income households. First-generation students often come from low-income populations, immigrant families, or identify as a person of color. This research brief supports the findings of Soria et al. (2020).

One of the economic challenges students may face in pursuing higher education is the high tuition cost. Higher education costs are increasing while real median income decreases, causing students to repay more significant amounts of student debt, which can harm economic growth (Siripurapu et al., 2021). Bennett et al. (2015) studied the impact of the financial burden of the high cost of a college education on students' academic performances. The authors concluded that financially stressed students were more likely to be employed, work longer hours,

and receive significantly lower grades in principles of economics courses. These students were disproportionately females, minorities, and FGCS, who attend college at a below-average rate. The research indicated that students' financial stress needs to decrease to help them get the education they need to be successful members of the economy. The authors suggested improving students' financial literacy on financial aid and loans at both the high school and college levels. Increasing financial assistance at the federal level would help students from low-income families afford college. States need to improve their higher education funding so colleges can stop the higher than inflation-adjusted tuition increases (Bennett et al., 2015). Further study on the economic impact of COVID-19 on students' access to higher education may offer additional solutions.

### **Economic Impact**

Researchers are just beginning to study the economic impact of COVID-19. The socioeconomic implications of COVID-19 may influence the virus's impact on higher education. Martin et al. (2020) created and used a microeconomic model to estimate the direct effect of distancing on household income, savings, consumption, and poverty over two periods: a crisis period during which individuals experience a drop in revenue and use their savings to maintain consumption; and a recovery period when households save to replenish their depleted savings to a pre-crisis level. The study concluded that the virus would lead to a massive economic downturn without social protection, increasing the poverty rate from 17.1% to 25.9% during a simulated 3-month lockdown. The average recovery time for households is almost one year. Government benefits at the state and federal levels would decrease the magnitude and longevity of the crisis. However, consumer behavior changes and a general economic activity slowdown may impact long-term recovery (Martin, 2021).

Gansemer-Topf et al. (2018) used data sets to investigate the 2008 recession and its impact on higher education tuition, enrollments, revenues, and expenditures. The study concluded that institutions impacted by external economic changes adjusted revenues, staffing, and spending during economic transitions. The study also determined that the economic recession did not severely impact higher education institutions from an enrollment and retention perspective. The study did not consider subpopulations of students or how students paid for college. The authors acknowledged that additional research is needed to determine how expenditures and revenues during a crisis impact retention rates for students from different income levels and ethnicities and if the situation altered students' college choice process or how they paid for college.

### **Online Learning**

Blankenberg et al. (2020) used Gaus's ecological approach to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on higher education. This approach identified catastrophic events as change agents that force systems to react to achieve a new equilibrium. This finding mirrors McCarthy's (2020) analysis that the pandemic is an opportunity for institutions to address access and equity in higher education. Because of COVID-19, higher education had to shift from traditional delivery to distance instruction. The switch to online learning was also a mitigating factor of COVID-19. Student demand for online education has been growing, and the impact of COVID-19 could increase that growth. Some institutions have already used online education but may need to expand and adjust what they already do. Other institutions may need to adapt at a larger capacity. Large-scale studies of community college students have shown that students with lower GPAs, males, and African American students suffer steep educational declines in fully online courses. Enrollment declines could escalate these inequities, especially for students of lower

socioeconomic status. The study concluded that universities must be prepared to deliver additional services to address the potential adverse outcomes.

Hodges et al. (2020) discussed the necessary elements of planned online learning and what was missing from emergency remote teaching due to COVID-19. Lack of traditional support resources and lack of a sense of community were two areas that were missing. The authors concluded that conventional online learning could not be compared to the emergency remote learning that was taking place due to COVID-19. While this article is not peer-reviewed, it is timely, and the information provided on the differences between planned online learning and emergency remote teaching is essential. It will inform what is missing from the online experience for students.

It is essential to understand how students are reacting to online learning due to COVID-19. Aguilera-Hermida (2020) used student surveys to focus on college students' challenges and opportunities after COVID-19 forced them to learn virtually. The author defined three themes of challenges related to COVID-19:

- situational and environmental challenges – difficulty separating home and school, financial hardship, lack of social interaction, and sudden changes in their lives (death of a family member, being pregnant)
- online educational challenges – too much screen time, lack of supporting resources like peer tutoring and a library, communicating with a professor, lack of internet connection because so many were using it at once, increased workload, and being unfamiliar with some online tools
- emotional challenges – lack of motivation and negative emotions, stress, anxiety, and worrying about getting COVID-19

The study also looked at positive changes related to COVID, including increased family time and the opportunity to try new activities. Most students found increased time with family a positive, with only two out of 66 saying it was not favorable due to conflicts. Most students liked the ability to try new things, gain new skills, and focus on professional development. Some students did not find any positive changes (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). This article is one of the few peer-reviewed studies on the impact of COVID-19 and virtual learning. It gives timely information backed up by quantitative data.

Hands (2020) looked at the impact of the abrupt transition to online education for FGCS due to COVID-19, focusing on the students' cultural assets instead of a deficit lens. The six cultural assets are reflexivity, optimism, academic resilience, goal orientation, civic-mindedness, and proactivity. The author discussed issues confronting FGCS, including the digital divide where there is no access to reliable internet or a computer. The article used the concept of community cultural wealth (CCW) as its theoretical frame of reference for giving structure to how educators and libraries could draw on FGCS assets during times of transition. Suggestions for librarians included building alliances with trusted staff and advisors to educate staff within FGCS' networks on library resources; partnering with faculty to create assignments using transparent assignment design; creating opportunities where students can reflect on how their research process has changed due to sudden online-only access; and working with FGCS to share with their peers' tips and tricks based on their post-transition library, research and online experiences (Hands, 2020). This article is peer-reviewed and focuses on solutions to issues faced by FGCS due to COVID-19. Institutions can implement these solutions quickly.

### **History of Diversity in the United States**

The impact of COVID-19 could exacerbate existing inequities in higher education. It is essential to understand the history of systemic racism in the United States to address these injustices. Noltemeyer et al. (2020) reviewed the inequality in education based on race and ethnicity, linguistic diversity, gender, and disabilities. This book chapter tied the history of race and ethnicity in America to justice and equality. The authors gave examples of oppression and unequal access to quality education for American Indians, Chinese Americans, and Latinos, emphasizing the discriminatory treatment of Black students. From the 1960s through the mid-1980s, American schools have become more integrated. This trend has dissipated in recent years. Contributing factors include changes in residential patterns, increased school choice, and recent court decisions that reversed earlier improvements.

Inequality in education is not a new concept. Reardon et al. (2014) looked at school segregation trends since the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Before *Brown*, segregation of schools by race was universal in the South and elevated in other parts of the country. The study found that *Brown* had a minimal immediate effect on school segregation. The most significant decline in black-white school segregation occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s following the Supreme Court's 1968 *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* decision, requiring school districts to adopt more effective integration plans. Racial tolerance has also increased over time, but the opposition to busing and other school desegregation practices has increased.

Hammond et al. (2020) also discussed inequality over time in education for African Americans. The authors took this a step further and focused on the implications of that inequality. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were created in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>

century in the South to allow black Americans to enroll in higher education. The 1944 G.I. Bill included tuition benefits for vocational schools or undergraduate programs for all veterans on active duty. The benefits were not equally distributed to African American veterans due to racial discrimination. The Supreme Court's decision in 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, established the precedent of "separate but equal" that essentially legalized racial segregation in the public school system. *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled in 1954 that racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional. This ruling was met with strong resistance, especially in the South.

Desegregation was a slow process, and many schools remained racially segregated for decades following the court's decision. The authors also address the disparity in public school funding. This funding varies from state to state and across communities due to variations in income, property values, and tax rates. Lower-income neighborhoods suffer the most and disproportionately affect African Americans. Years of racial inequality resulted in the disparity in academic performance between students of different races. The authors refer to this disparity as the achievement gap due to the disproportionate number of people of color living in low-income neighborhoods with less access to adequately funded schools and less access to educational resources at home. The psychological burden of this achievement gap on students of color contributes to perpetuating the gap.

Public opinion on criminal justice issues and race has been moving left since the first protests erupted over Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown's fatal shootings. Events in 2020 have had an impact on public opinion. Cohn et al. (2020) reviewed the effect of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement on support for racial diversity. The authors used data from a daily tracking poll of registered voters to assess support for BLM. During the last week of May 2020 and the first week of June 2020, BLM support increased 28 percent, almost as much as between

2018 and 2020. This increase skyrocketed after the death of George Floyd in police custody on May 25, 2020. The authors referred to a Monmouth University poll that found 76 percent of Americans considered racism and discrimination a problem, up 26 points from 2015. Additional polls reviewed in this study showed that most Americans believed that police were more likely to use deadly force against African Americans and that there is much discrimination against black Americans in society. When BLM began in 2013, most voters did not believe this was true. This article is not peer-reviewed, but the data analysis validates the increase in BLM's support and attention and the change in public opinion on racial issues.

### **Diversity, Equity, and Access to Higher Education**

Evidence shows that there is still a significant national disparity in diversity, equity, and access to higher education. De Brey et al. (2019) used statistics to examine current conditions and changes in educational activities and outcomes for different racial/ethnic groups in the United States. The study used demographic population data from 1990 to 2016. The study found that the total college enrollment rate for Asian 18-24-year-olds was higher than their White, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska peers. A more significant percentage of undergraduates were female than male across all racial/ethnic groups. The gap was widest for Black and American Indian/Alaska Native students. More than 60 percent of the students identified as female, and just under 40 percent identified as male. The gap was narrowest for Asian students, with 52 percent identifying as female and 48 percent identifying as male. The study concluded that some traditionally disadvantaged racial/ethnic groups had made strides in educational achievement over the past few decades, but that gaps persist. This article provides valuable background information on demographics before COVID-19.

Monarrez et al. (2020) used data from 2009 to 2017 to focus on a narrow pool of students who might attend a given school to measure the difference in a racial or ethnic group's share of enrollment from that group's percentage of the college market population. The authors defined a market for each college based on the distance most students were willing to travel to attend different institutions. The racial and ethnic composition of the college was compared with that of the college's market. The results indicated that factors that affect a college's student body composition goes beyond local demographic design. Admissions and tuition policies, state appropriations for higher education, beliefs about the value of college, and a local labor market demand all play a role. The study identified vital enrollment patterns of over-and-underrepresentation among different racial and ethnic groups. Black students continued to be severely underrepresented at more selective colleges. Black representation at public and private universities was nearly identical. Hispanic students have increased at less-selective public colleges and community colleges since 2009, but the number of Hispanic students was still low at more selective universities. White students continued to be overrepresented at more selective colleges and have become more underrepresented at community colleges. Asian students were also overrepresented at more selective institutions. Native American students have become more underrepresented at more selective colleges. Pacific Islanders were slightly underrepresented at public and private universities across all sectors. All minority groups were increasingly overrepresented at for-profit institutions. The study did not address the inequity within higher education. However, the review used data sets from surveys conducted annually by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. It provided information on the under-and-overrepresentation among racial and ethnic groups before COVID-19.

Admissions criteria used by colleges and universities may impact the institutions' diversity. Rosinger et al. (2020) used data sets from 2008 to 2016 to examine how the importance of various admissions criteria relates to enrollment among racially and economically marginalized students. The findings indicated that ambiguous measures that compromise a more comprehensive approach to admissions do very little to eliminate existing enrollment inequities and, in some cases, may increase these inequities. The criteria included subjective assessments of interviews, essays, and recommendations. These ambiguous criteria led to lower Pell Grant recipient enrollment at some institutions. Specific evaluation criteria that focused on test scores related to race and class could reproduce the existing inequalities. Extracurricular involvement and subjective evaluations could advantage privileged families but may do little to alter other students' enrollment. First-generation student status may not boost enrollment among other marginalized students at public and less-selective colleges. The authors concluded that moving away from legacy admissions that give students preference with family connections to the institution, de-emphasizing standardized test scores, and considering academic rigor could be strategies to support low-income student enrollment at public colleges.

Latinx students face specific challenges to college access. Rutter et al. (2020) used qualitative data from high school counselors on their role in disseminating college information to Latinx students. The report highlighted the critical role of social capital. School counselors serve an overwhelming number of students. Parental involvement is vital, and early intervention is crucial. Parents and students have misperceptions about college. Finances are the most significant roadblock to college access. Fear of leaving home is also a barrier for Latinx students. The study concluded that school counselors faced challenges in addressing inequality in college access, especially for first-generation Latinx students.

The lack of diversity in higher education faculty is a factor in the diversity of students who enroll in college. Nunez et al. (2012) used data on Latinos' demographics in higher education to focus on Latinas, the discrimination, and the harmful stereotypes they face because they are both female and Latina. The authors found that Latino enrollment is increasing, and Latinos outnumber African Americans in the population. Latinos usually start in community colleges or less selective 4-year institutions with lower persistence and completion rates. The political climate in the U.S. is hostile to Latinos. Some key states have banned affirmative action policies. Stereotypes about Latinos, as depicted in the media, can harm Latino students' academic achievement and completion rates. The success of Latina faculty is directly linked to the success of Latina students.

Chen (2017) reinforces the research conducted by Nunez et al. (2012) on the need for more diverse faculty. This study provided a qualitative analysis of diversity in higher education and effective practices in instructional leadership. The article also suggested that institutional leaders integrate diversity into their campus culture. Three standards defined higher education institutions' role and the relationships between higher education and diverse communities:

- developing trust and engaging individual cultures
- developing new admissions and hiring policies that promote equality
- introducing diversity into the university through a systematic approach

The authors concluded that increasing the number of diverse faculty, staff, and students on campus must be prioritized and start with instructional leadership. Institutions must integrate diversity into their general curriculum. Leadership must develop educational policies and teaching practices that foster diversity. Instructional leadership should include all community

stakeholders to create a learning environment where people know diversity's effects on learning outcomes.

### **First-Generation College Students**

To understand the impact COVID-19 has on FGCS, we must first understand the unique challenges these students regularly face. Murphy et al. (2006) surveyed students attending a doctoral-granting public four-year historically black university to determine whether differences exist in the academic expectations of FGCS and non-FGCS. The article gives background information on the differences between FGCS and non-FGCS in academic preparation and integration. The authors defined FGCS as students with parents with no college experience and students with at least one parent with some college experience but no college degree. Non-FGCS were defined as students who had a parent with a bachelor's degree. Students who had parents with no college experience were more likely to expect to stay at their institution until graduation instead of transferring. They were also more likely to expect to spend less time socializing with friends than other students. The other academic expectations were similar between the two groups of students. This information was used to compare how these characteristics have changed or stayed the same due to COVID-19.

The stressors that FGCS face are unique compared to non-FGCS. House et al. (2020) studied students from a midsize public university that completed at least an intake session at the counseling center. Just over 25 percent identified as FGCS. The study found that FGCS reported significantly more academic distress, work hours, and financial distress than non-FGCS. They also had the highest dropout rates in postsecondary education and were recognized as an at-risk group. FGCS must work more to cover their expenses and have more responsibilities and obligations than non-FGCS. The study found that FGCS show more resilience and determination

to be successful despite an environment that underestimated their efforts. FGCS can overcome their feelings of incompetency and perform as well academically as non-FGCS. Higher education institutions must understand the unique needs of FGCS and accommodate them as much as possible. The authors collected data in Fall 2016, Spring 2017, and Fall 2017, so it does not include the impact of COVID-19.

FGCS also have unique motivators. Cataldi et al. (2018) used existing data sets to examine the personal, enrollment, academic, and career characteristics of FGCS. The report described the experiences of FGCS during and after school enrollment, focusing on enrollment and labor market outcomes, compared to their peers whose parents enrolled in or completed college. The authors compared the experiences and outcomes with those of two groups who had attended college: students with at least one parent who earned a bachelor's degree and students with at least one parent who attended college but no parent who had earned a bachelor's degree. Among high school sophomores in 2002, 72 percent of students whose parents had never attended college had enrolled in postsecondary education by 2012, compared to 84 percent of students whose parents had some college education and 93 percent of students whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree.

Martinez (2018) confirms the findings of Cataldi et al. (2018). The research studied the experiences of first-generation undergraduate Latino students to determine what factors help support these students in pursuing graduate degrees to become professors. The author conducted semi-structured interviews, analyzed surveys, recorded monthly webinars, and observed participants to understand their lived experiences in their pursuit of graduate degrees. The data collected provided evidence that early exposure to information on the graduate school

application process, access to role models, having a supportive family, and peers with similar ambitions motivated first-generation Latino students to pursue graduate school.

First-generation students show more resilience and determination to succeed, overcome their feelings of incompetency, and perform as well academically as their peers (House et al., 2020). These findings reaffirm the results of the study conducted by Alvarado et al. in 2017. That study used a quantitative, non-experimental design to compare the resilience and emotional intelligence level between FGCS and their peers. The authors collected data from 100 college students. The study found that first-generation students who have been exposed to stressful situations in the past may bring developing resilience to their college experience. This resilience will help them deal with the ever-changing college environment and the pressures of college life. Students that have developed resilience are better equipped to deal with stressors in a new environment. They are also open to new experiences, adapt to change, and are more emotionally stable when facing adversity.

The lived experiences of high-achieving FGCS from low-income backgrounds were the focus of a qualitative research study by Hébert (2018). The author used a phenomenological interview research design to determine the psychological and social factors influencing higher education success. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to understand low-income students who overcame hardship to reach high levels of academic achievement. The findings suggested that students benefit from emotionally supportive K-12 educators and high school programs that are academically rigorous. Family pride, intellectual engagement at their university, and influential mentors also helped keep students focused on reaching their goals (Hébert, 2018).

It is also essential to understand what factors influence FGCS when they choose a college. Garza et al. (2018) used existing data sets to examine the factors influencing FGCS' college choice. These factors included family responsibilities, financial hardships, and other environmental considerations. The study also focused on whether these factors impacted GPA and degree attainment. The article found that more FGCS attended colleges closer to home than students whose parents are college-educated. More FGCS recognized the importance of living at home while going to school than non-FGCS. Living at home while attending college benefited socioeconomically disadvantaged students because of the reduction/savings in tuition, rent, utilities, or commuting expenses. Students' family roots and cultural norms also accepted living at home or close to family while in college. However, FGCS living at home participated less in student organizations and other areas of campus life.

The factors that increase access to higher education for FGCS need to be determined. Lozano-Partida (2018) analyzed data from interviews with FGCS from a midsize public university. The data were coded into themes and patterns to gain insight into the factors that students identify as key in increasing access to higher education. FGCS found motivation through their families through the desire to have a "better life" by going to college and changing their current economic situation. The author concluded that the K-12 college counseling process starts too late for most FGCS. FGCS that attended college failed to understand higher education's financial aspects and limited their college selection to affordable ones. Mitchall et al. (2018) confirmed family's impact on FGCS motivation to attend college. This article concluded that parents/guardians and other family members might greatly influence students' motivation during college planning. Parents/family members provided students with autonomy during college planning by supporting the student's college choice. Parents supported their students' choice of

major and encouraged them to "better their lives" by attending college. Parents reassured their students that they were "college material" by setting high academic achievement standards early. Their siblings could be influential by either following in their footsteps or because they wanted to be an example.

Universities and colleges can play a role in FGCS academic success. Petty (2014) conducted a literature review focused on institutions' role in motivating FGCS through intrinsic and external factors that encourage students to remain in college. The literature reviewed in this article discussed why it is essential for institutions to create Bridge Programs for FGCS. The author concluded that FGCS were not adequately prepared for college, and these programs helped students face their challenges and weaknesses. Overcoming intimidation and barriers were skills that FGCS lacked but needed to survive and succeed in college. Bridge programs can provide the assistance and resources FGCS require to be successful. This article is pre-COVID but explains why Bridge Programs are needed to address FGCS' challenges and issues.

Schelbe et al. (2019) studied the perceptions of FGCS in an academic retention program. This article builds on the research of Petty (2014), giving examples of how a bridge program can impact the successful transition to college and the academic success of FGCS. The article defined FGCS as students who are the first to attend college, and neither parent attended college or earned a college degree. The authors used focus groups and interviews of 25 students in GenOne, an FGCS academic retention program at a large southeastern public university of 40,000 students. The GenOne program aims to promote academic success and increase retention of FGCS. The cornerstone of the program is the Summer Bridge Program. This intensive eight-week program provides experiences to incoming FGCS to help them prepare for college's academic rigors. The students are given an orientation to the program, university, and

community. Other features of the GenOne program include mandatory study time, peer education, shared living, and academic advising. Students reported elements of the program that contributed to their academic success and retention, including:

- having a sense of responsibility in college and planning to succeed,
- personal growth and skill development,
- tools, institution connections, and financial assistance.

Students identified two areas as opportunities for improvement: (a) managing the changing needs of GenOne students throughout their academic careers and (b) addressing campus perceptions and reducing the stigma faced by FGCS. While the small sample of students limited the study, it contributed to the literature by calling attention to components of academic retention programs that students find most useful to increase their development and help them be successful.

Universities and colleges must go beyond enrolling FGCS and focus on supporting these students throughout college to build a sense of community, provide mentoring, and help students develop skills to meet their higher education expectations. This article is pre-COVID but confirms that programs designed to address the barriers that FGCS face can impact FGCS academic success and retention.

### **Conclusion**

COVID-19 is a new phenomenon that will continue to be studied as time progresses. The literature available confirms that the coronavirus continues to impact higher education. The literature also demonstrates that FGCS face unique challenges and barriers exacerbated by COVID-19. Some institutions have implemented programs for FGCS that contribute to their academic success and retention. These challenges and issues of FGCS need further qualitative

study to understand the changes universities and colleges need to make to increase FGCS' access to higher education and ensure they succeed.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

COVID-19 is a new phenomenon impacting college enrollment that has not been sufficiently studied; therefore, a qualitative approach is needed to explore and understand COVID-19 and its impact. Thus far, most of the research has been on the initial effects of COVID when most universities moved to virtual learning. This action research study identified the key factors that students found to impact their enrollment status during COVID-19. The experiences of first-generation college students (FGCS) during the pandemic should identify critical factors that affected their ability to enroll in college. As the literature review showed, FGCS do not have equal access to higher education. Some unique barriers and motivators impact their ability to enroll in college (Hands, 2020; Mitchall et al., 2018; Schelbe et al., 2019).

Knowing and understanding these key barriers or motivators FGCS identify as impacting their enrollment decision is essential in providing equitable access to higher education enrollment. This study should offer universities and colleges the necessary knowledge to identify changes that need to be made to programs and processes to address these factors to combat this inequity.

#### **Action Research**

Stringer and Aragon (2021) describe action research as a process of systematic inquiry where practitioners conduct research to address a specific problem they have seen in practice. The use of active research in education continues to increase because it can be performed anytime and provide immediate results. It also provides educators with a better understanding of their educational practices and how practitioners can improve these practices. Action research is

collaborative and reflective, allowing for the development of practical ideas and solutions (Beaulieu, 2013; Mills, 2018).

Several different types of action research can be used in a research study. Quantitative research methodologies require data collection and analysis of numerical data and are a deductive approach to reasoning (Ivankova et al., 2018). Quantitative methods are best when something is being measured or testing a hypothesis. Quantitative research tries to quantify a problem and understand how prevalent the problem is by projecting results to a larger population (Mertler, 2020; Morgan, 2018). Qualitative research methodologies require the collection and analysis of narrative data and are an inductive approach to reasoning. It is exploratory and is best used to explore the nuances of a research problem. A mixed-methods research design combines qualitative and quantitative research designs and data (Ivankova et al., 2018; Mertler, 2020).

### **Qualitative Research Study**

This action research qualitative study is a thematic analysis of data from first-generation college students (FGCS) to determine the factors influencing their college enrollment decision during COVID-19. Surveys and interviews of FGCS were conducted to understand the impact of COVID-19 on their enrollment in college. A qualitative, phenomenological research design was used because it is most appropriate for examining a phenomenon (COVID-19) and the experiences of (FGCS) who have all experienced the phenomenon (Beaulieu, 2013; Creswell, 2018). The purpose of a phenomenological study is to learn from the shared experience of a group of people about a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). Similar studies also used a phenomenological research design to understand the experiences of FGCS pre-pandemic.

Lozano-Partida (2018) used a phenomenological study to determine the barriers and successes of FGCS in the college admissions process. The author used interviews with open-

ended questions that allowed students to share their individual experiences. Understanding each student's experience enabled the researcher to identify motivators for FGCS in this process that higher education institutions might use to help other FGCS. The research identified motivators that are currently in use and provides further proof that the motivators work. Families can motivate FGCS to pursue higher education through positive experiences or the student's desire for a better life. The information provided by the K-12 school system does not start soon enough for most students, and the type of support is inconsistent across all schools. The study also found that FGCS fail to understand how to finance their education and limit themselves to what schools they can afford. The findings help FGCS navigate the college enrollment process and offer evidence on what educational systems can use to support FGCS (Lozano-Partida, 2018).

### **Setting**

This research focused on learning how COVID-19 impacted the college enrollment decision for FGCS. The qualitative research data was collected in a natural setting through surveys, and optional interviews with first-generation college students enrolled at a private Jesuit university (University A) and private non-denominational university (University B) in Washington, D.C. The surveys and interviews were created to gather the information, asking open-ended questions so participants could share their stories in their own words.

### **Research Questions**

The central research question guiding this study was, what factors do FGCS identify as significant contributors to their decision to enroll or not enroll in college during COVID-19. The survey and interview questions were open-ended to gain as much information as possible from all participants. Sub questions that came out of the central question included:

1. What impact did family have on FGCS college enrollment decision?

2. Was there one factor that dominated the enrollment decision process?

### **Researcher Role**

As Herr & Anderson (2015) state, researchers tend to pursue action research to generate new information that contributes to their study. The role of this researcher was to administer the survey and conduct the interviews. This researcher had affiliations with both research sites but had no direct interaction with the students in the first-generation programs.

### **Sampling**

The targeted population for this study was enrolled undergraduate students participating in FGCS programs at universities A and B in Fall 2020. A random, convenience sampling of FGCS at each university was used. Random sampling ensured that each FGCS had the opportunity to participate in the study. Random sampling is used when it is not feasible to survey every member of the targeted population, and the smaller sample will represent all members of the population (Cresswell, 2018). Convenience sampling engages participants based solely on convenience and accessibility and leverages individuals that can be accessed with minimal effort (Simkus, 2022). Using enrolled students participating in the FGCS programs ensured the participation of FGCS in the study. The student sample size was 48.

The research was conducted through surveys and optional follow-up interviews. These two methods provided observational data from the interviews to support the data from the survey questions. The FGCS program directors at universities A and B sent the link to the survey to their students via email and an online newsletter multiple times. Using various data collection methods was essential to determine any contradictions between data collected from the two sources.

After completing the survey, students were asked to participate in an optional interview. Students that responded yes were asked to click through to submit their email addresses. The click-through link had the subject line "Follow-Up Interview" and was automatically sent to the researcher's email address. Only students that completed the survey were invited to the optional interview.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at University A required proof of approval from the Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research (CUHSR) at Bradley University to allow their students to be part of the research. University B also required a CUHSR determination letter from Bradley University. No other IRB approval was necessary.

### **Data Collection**

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to learn from the shared experience of a group of people about a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). FGCS share unique barriers and motivators that impact their ability to enroll in higher education. COVID-19 has exacerbated this inequity. Qualitative surveys and interviews were essential to understanding better the factors that FGCS experienced during the pandemic. The open-ended questions allowed students to tell their college enrollment stories and identify shared vital motivators and barriers. These inquiry tools enabled this researcher to understand the students' experiences during COVID and identify themes and similarities in their ability to enroll in higher education.

### ***Participation***

The survey and interviews were anonymous, and there was no link between the participant and the research record. There was no individually identifiable information, remarks, comments, or other participant identification. The consent form was part of the survey

All participants were treated equally and clicked through a consent form acknowledging their consent to act as research subjects at the beginning of each survey. The consent form included the following information:

1. The study's goal and how the information will be used to show the students the importance of their responses to assisting future FGCS through the college admissions process.
2. A guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, with no individually identifiable information, remarks, comments, or other identification of participants, and results will be presented as aggregate, summary data.
3. By agreeing to participate in the study, each participant gave consent for their responses to be included in the data analysis.
4. Participation in the survey or interview was strictly voluntary, and participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time; and all survey and interview responses would be deleted, including the informed consent agreement; and
5. Participants could request a copy of the final study by contacting the researcher by email or phone.

The survey consisted of five open-ended questions to obtain as much information as possible from the students. At the end of the survey, students were given the option to reach out to the researcher via email or cell phone if they were interested in sharing more information.

The interview questions were similar to the survey questions, allowing respondents to elaborate on their previous responses. It was optional for students to follow up with any additional information beyond the survey or interview questions and was not required. Additional outreach was not a requirement to receive an incentive or participate in the study.

### *Surveys*

Surveys were offered through Survey Monkey between September 1, 2022, and February 28, 2022, allowing students to participate anytime during that time. The survey contained six questions on demographics and college enrollment decisions that took approximately 15 minutes to complete. (See Appendix A) Forty-eight students participated in the survey.

### *Interviews*

Interviews were conducted between September 15, 2022, and February 28, 2022. Interview participants were allowed to participate in a virtual or in-person interview. All participants chose to interview virtually and participated in one individual interview. The interviews were semi-structured. A semi-structured interview (SSI) is undertaken with one respondent at a time and includes closed- and open-ended questions. SSIs are used when open-ended questions require follow-up inquiries (Adams, 2015). Transcripts were created for each virtual interview. Twelve students participated in individual follow-up interviews.

### *Incentive*

An incentive was provided to all students that completed the survey or sat for an interview. The incentive was registration in a large gift card raffle for all respondents. Survey participants were entered into the raffle by clicking a link at the end of the survey that submitted their email addresses to the researcher. Participation in the optional interview was not required to be eligible for the raffle. The researcher used an incentive because it could increase the sample size of survey participants (Toepoel, 2012).

### *Data*

The data was reviewed and organized into codes and themes common to all data sources. Qualitative research is an emergent design that may change or shift as information is collected

(Creswell 2018). Questions can change, forms of data collection may shift, and individuals or sites used may be adjusted as necessary.

All survey responses were securely stored in two Security Operations Center accredited data centers that adhere to security and technical best practices. All data created and collected from the surveys and interviews will be saved on a password-protected laptop computer for five years, as recommended by the American Psychological Association (Creswell, 2018). The data was not tampered with, altered, or suppressed.

### **Data Analysis and Management**

Data analysis included identifying how the survey and interview responses connected to the research questions and common themes. Data were analyzed as the surveys and interviews were complete. Detailed notes were taken on responses to the interviews and surveys. The initial interpretations and assumptions were recorded and integrated into observations. This process was critical to data analysis.

The data analysis used a systematic process to arrange, understand and code the information collected. As Creswell (2018) states, qualitative data analysis is a process of sequential steps that should be followed. The data was organized and prepared for analysis by sorting and arranging the data based on survey responses and if a follow-up interview was conducted.

### **Coding**

Coding the data was the next step in the process. Coding links data to the research problem and other data (Gibbs, 2007). Coding in qualitative research involves identifying a passage in the text, identifying concepts, and finding relationships between them.

Codes were developed based on emerging information and were not predetermined. Data from the surveys and interviews was hand-coded through reading and re-reading the surveys and interview notes.

Common categories or patterns in the responses were identified and labeled with an in vivo term to reflect the responses' language. The coding generated common themes that were compared to determine similarities or differences. The notes taken during the review and coding process created a narrative to discuss the analysis's findings.

### **Timeline**

This proposal was submitted to Bradley's CUHSR in April 2021 and approved in July 2021. University A sent the survey to their students via email and online newsletter in early September 2021 and through a newsletter in October 2021. University B sent out the survey via email to its students in October 2021 and again in December 2022. Collecting data in the fall semester allowed time for the follow-up interviews to be conducted and concluded by the end of February 2022.

Data analysis began as the students completed the surveys and interviews. Data collection was completed by February 29, 2022.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in data collection is defined as the accuracy and believability of the data collected. The trustworthiness of the qualitative data collected was based on the standard practices and strategies suggested by Mertler (2020).

The multiple methods of collecting data included surveys and interviews of participants from two higher education institutions. The descriptive narrative clarified the barriers and

challenges first-generation students face in the college admissions process and how those challenges were affected by COVID-19.

Detailed notes were taken on observations of the data collected during the interviews and surveys. Initial interpretations and assumptions were documented and integrated into the observations. This process was critical to the data analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted in full compliance with the CUHSR guidelines at Bradley University and the IRBs at University A and B. All data collected will be saved on a password-protected laptop computer for five years, as recommended by the American Psychological Association (Creswell, 2018). No personal identifiers were used for the participants. This researcher understood that she was responsible for ensuring the participants' safety and security to maintain the participants' privacy and confidentiality. Participation in the survey was optional for all students.

The surveys were sent via email or online newsletter to the students in the FGCS programs at universities A and B with clear instructions that their participation was optional. Incentives were offered to students that completed the survey and distributed equally between the two research sites.

### **Conclusion**

This study addressed how COVID-19 has impacted college enrollment, specifically for FGCS. Increased support for Black Lives Matter and the onset of COVID-19 have increased awareness of the inequity in access to higher education. The emphasis on diversity in college admissions has grown exponentially, and universities are taking a more strategic look at increasing diversity in their study body, including first-generation students. Racial diversity and

inequity in higher education is not a new concept. However, the impact of COVID-19 on access to higher education for FGCS needs additional study since the pandemic is a recent phenomenon.

A phenomenological, qualitative research design was used to gain as much information as possible on the experiences of FGCS during COVID-19. Data collection was conducted through surveys and interviews of FGCS enrolled in two universities that offer programs designed explicitly for FGCS. Data were analyzed using a coding system to identify common themes and response patterns. The findings were reported in a narrative to provide universities and colleges with the necessary knowledge to identify changes that need to be made to programs and processes to address the barriers FGCS face in college enrollment.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

#### **Introduction**

This qualitative research study aims to examine the impact of COVID-19 on college enrollment for FGCS. FGCS enrolled at a Jesuit Catholic university and a private university in Washington, D.C., were asked to participate in a research study survey between September and December of 2021. Forty-eight students participated in the initial survey. A follow-up interview was optional for students that completed the survey. Twelve students participated in the follow-up interview.

The impact of COVID-19 on college admissions is a primary concern for colleges and universities nationwide. Higher education administrators and stakeholders feared that the shutdown of campuses and abrupt transition to virtual learning would cause students to rethink their decision to apply to college, causing enrollment rates to decline. Enrollment had already fallen, with a two percent drop in first-year enrollment in 2019 (Kovacs, 2021).

Friga (2020) surveyed 285 presidents and chancellors who are members of the Presidents' Trust of the Association of American Colleges & Universities in March 2020 when the pandemic caused colleges and universities across the country to close campuses and implement virtual online learning. The majority of those surveyed, 84 percent, anticipated a decrease in enrollment for new and returning students. Just over 50 percent expected revenue reductions between 10 and 20 percent, with only 18 percent of respondents saying they expected revenue losses greater than 20 percent. These concerns came to fruition, unfortunately. FGCS and low-income student college applications for Fall 2021 decreased by over 10 percent compared to Fall 2020, which is

five times the rate of decline for non-first-generation applicants (J. Rickard, personal communication November 20, 2020).

### **Research Questions**

The central research question guiding this study was, what factors do FGCS identify as significant contributors to their decision to enroll or not enroll in college during COVID-19. The survey and interview questions were open-ended to gain as much information as possible from all participants. Sub questions that came out of the central question included:

1. What impact did family have on FGCS college enrollment decision?
2. Was there one factor that dominated the enrollment decision process?

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Data Collection Sites**

Data was collected from two universities in Washington, DC, Universities A and B, that offered programs specifically for FGCS. Both universities closed their campuses in March 2020 and provided online learning for all undergraduate students. Campuses reopened for in-person learning in Fall 2021. University A offered FGCS programs with a mission of enrolling a more racially and economically diverse student body by providing additional educational opportunities. The experience begins with a five-week academic summer program before the student's first year to assist their transition to higher education. Students take classes for credit, attend orientation workshops, and begin forming bonds with each other, faculty, and administrators to help sustain them through college. The program supports students through advising, community building, mentoring, personal counseling, workshops, and seminars throughout their academic careers. All FGCS were invited to join the programs after being admitted to the institution in 2020.

University B is a private, non-denominational university with a total enrollment of 12,000 undergraduate students. The FGCS program welcomes incoming students to college life through pre-orientation activities on-campus and outings in DC. Students build community with other first-gen students, connect with faculty and staff, and learn valuable academic and campus resources.

### **Demographics**

Survey respondents and interview participants represented currently enrolled first-year, sophomore, junior and senior FGCS. Eighteen students identified as first-year, fifteen as sophomores, nine as juniors, and six as seniors. All participants were part of the FGCS program at their respective universities. The survey and interview questions are attached in Appendix A.

### **Survey Findings and Results**

Table 1 shows the academic status of the survey participants.

**Table 1**

*Student Academic Status (N = 48)*

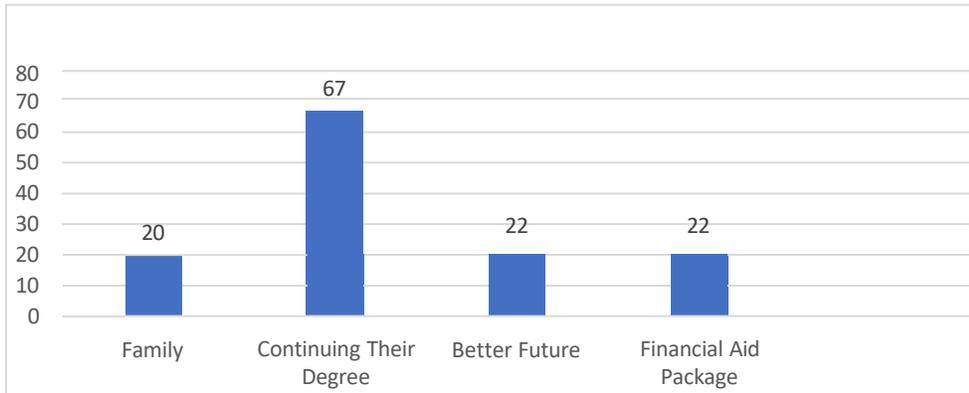
Status	Frequency, n (%)
First-year	18 (37.50)
Sophomore	15 (31.25)
Junior	9 (18.75)
Senior	6 (12.50))
Other	0 (0)

All respondents identified as undergraduate students.

The following responses are to the survey question: What factors influenced your enrollment decision for Fall 2021?

**Figure 1**

*Influencers for Fall 2021 Enrollment*



Students’ desire to continue their degree was most influential on their enrollment decision for Fall 2021 when campuses reopened for in-person learning. Over 66 percent of students said they could not afford to take a gap year and needed to stay in school to get their degree. The influence of family, the hope of a better future, and financial aid were factors for over 20 percent of respondents. The students responding that family was a factor also indicated they enrolled because they wanted a better future for themselves and their families. Financial aid was a factor for many students because they could not rely on their families for financial assistance.

The following results answer the survey question: If your choice of attending an institution changed during the pandemic, please explain why.

Only 38 students responded to this question, and 31 said that their attending institutions did not change. Six students responded that their attending institution changed during the pandemic due to a higher financial package offered by a different institution. One student responded that they changed institutions because they needed hands-on learning, and one decided to go to an institution closer to their home. Another student said they did not fit in at

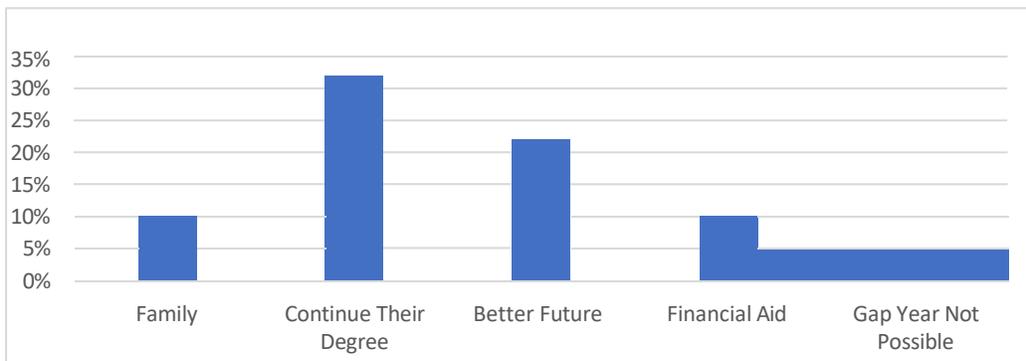
their original institution and enjoyed staying home during the pandemic. Several students said they returned to the institution because of their program of study.

The following results correspond to the survey question: Please explain what influenced your enrollment decision for Spring 2022 (see Figure 2).

Over 32 percent of students responded that completing their degree on time was a factor in their Spring 2022 enrollment decision. Twenty-two percent cited the desire for a better future for themselves and their family. Over 11 percent responded that family influenced their decision. Two students stated that taking a year off was not financially possible due to their financial package.

**Figure 2**

*Influencers for Spring 2022 Enrollment*



The following results correspond to the survey question: If you enrolled for Fall 2021, how likely are you to stay enrolled at your current institution for Spring 2022?

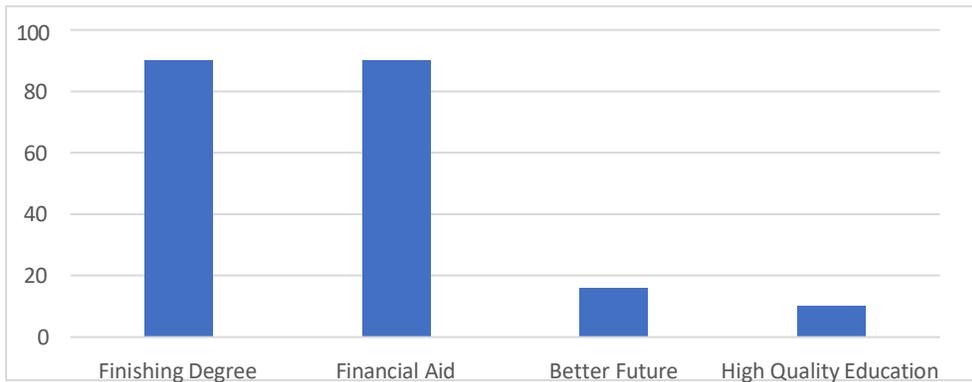
All but one student responded that they were likely or very likely to stay enrolled in their current institution. Over 84 percent of students answered that they were very likely to remain

enrolled, and 14 percent said they were likely to stay enrolled. One student responded it was very unlikely they would stay enrolled.

The following results correspond to the survey question: Please explain what influenced your enrollment decision for Spring 2022.

**Figure 3**

*Influencers for Spring 2022 Enrollment for Returning Students*



This question was for students that enrolled in Fall 2021 and intended to enroll in Spring 2022. Finishing their degree on time and keeping their financial aid package were cited as influencers for over 90 percent of respondents. Sixteen percent of respondents said they enrolled to better themselves and give their families a better life. Over 10 percent cited the high quality of the education at their current institution as a motivator. Other factors mentioned by at least one respondent included family pressure, the location of the institution, and their program of study. The student who responded that it was very unlikely they would stay enrolled in the previous question cited the "tremendous socio-economic gap" they felt was why their school choice decision for Spring 2022 changed. This student also felt unsafe due to the institution not enforcing pandemic mandates.

**Interview Findings and Results**

The following results answer the interview question: What factor was most influential on your enrollment decision for Fall 2021 and why?

As shown in Table 2, the responses were split between family pressure to go to college and wanting to continue their degree to graduate on time as the most influential factor in the Fall 2021 enrollment decision. Family pressure included building a better life for themselves and their family, acting as role models for younger siblings and relatives, and representing the dreams of older family members. Completing their degree on time would give students a better chance to help their families and themselves.

**Table 2**

*Influential Factors on Fall 2021 Enrollment (N = 12)*

Factor	Example Quote	Frequency, n (%)
Family pressure	“I need to set an example for my younger siblings.”	7 (58.3)
	“I have two nephews that look up to me as a role model. I can’t let them down.	
	“It has been my grandmother’s dream to see me graduate from college. I want to make that happen.”	
	“I need to go to college to get a good job so I can build a better life for myself and my family.”	
Complete their degree on time	“I want a better life for my family.”	5 (41.6)
	“I can’t take time off because I need to get a good-paying job to help my parents.”	
	“I need to finish my degree as quickly as possible to get a good job and help my family.”	

The following results correspond to the interview question: Was family an influencer? Why? All respondents said that family was an influencer. One student had older siblings in college and felt pressure to do the same. Two students said they felt pressure from family to go to college "no matter what." Over 90 percent of students said they wanted a better life for themselves and their families. Many felt they represented the dreams of older family members who could not attend college. Others identified as role models for younger siblings and wanted to be proof that a college degree was attainable.

The following results answer the interview question: Thinking back to what influenced your Fall 2021 enrollment decision, did any of those factors influence your enrollment decision for Spring 2022? Students cited factors including family and peer pressure, online and virtual classes, wanting to graduate on time, and the financial aid package already in place. Many students felt pressure to create a better life for their families. Students felt pressured to act as role models for younger siblings and other young relatives. These responses were very similar to the survey responses and were prevalent among participants in the interviews.

**Table 3**

*Influencers for Spring 2022 Enrollment*

Factor	Example Quote	Frequency, n (%)
Family/Peer pressure	“I need to go to college so I can get a high-paying job to help support my family.”	10 (83.33)
	“My options were to go to college or go to work.”	
	“I need to finish my degree as quickly as possible to get a good job, so I am financially independent from my parents.	
Complete their degree on time	“Taking a year off was not an option for me because my financial aid package would go away.”	8 (66.66)

Factor	Example Quote	Frequency, n (%)
Online/Virtual Learning	“I did not do as well in my online courses as I did in the classroom.”	7 (58.33)

The following results are participant responses to the interview question: What is the most important change universities could make to mitigate the barriers you faced in enrolling in higher education? Students' responses included connecting incoming FGCS to other enrolled FGCS. One student stated, “The transition was scary, and I needed more support from people like me.” Responses suggested expanding programs for FGCS and advertising the support available to FGCS. One student claimed they did not know what resources were available to them or how to find them. Not all students are aware of the support. Several students chose their institution because of the FGCS programs and expected more support from the programs after enrollment.

**Table 4**

*Changes to Mitigate Barriers*

Suggested Changes	Frequency, n (%)
Connect incoming FGCS with enrolled FGCS	12 (100)
Offer more courses online to ease the transition back to in-person learning	3 (25.00)
Offer more support for FGCS and ensure students know how to access the support	10 (83.33)
Address FGCS’s financial insecurities	8 (66.66)

The following results are in response to the interview question: What impact has the pandemic had on your Fall 2021 higher education experience? All students responded that the pandemic harmed their experience in some way. The transition back to campus and in-person

learning was difficult. The classroom dynamic was new to some students, making it hard to adjust. Socialization was complex in person. They liked the anonymity of online learning, but their grades were lower, and they lacked motivation.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study indicated that COVID-19 impacted the college admissions process for FGCS and supported pre-pandemic research that shows FGCS face distinct barriers and motivators to higher education (Cataldi et al., 2018; House et al., 2020; Martinez, 2018; and Murphy et al., 2006). Those barriers and motivators increased during the pandemic.

The findings from the survey and interviews confirmed that family is the most influential motivator for FGCS to go to college. These findings supported the pre-pandemic research of Lozano-Partida (2018) and Mitchall et al. (2018), which found that family was a significant motivator for FGCS to enroll in college. The desire to create a better life for themselves and their families was an essential motivator for FGCS during the pandemic.

The data from this study showed that families could also add stress to the admissions process for some FGCS. This data reinforced the research of House et al. (2020), Monnarre & Washington (2020), and de Bray et al. (2019) reported that FGCS face unique barriers to college enrollment. Many students felt pressure to be role models for younger siblings and relatives and fulfill older relatives' dreams. Not going to college was not an option for these students because of the insistence and perseverance of their families. Dropping out would have let down their families, so these students felt intense pressure to continue their education. Communicating and offering opportunities to engage directly with families of FGCS could increase families' positive effect on their students.

This research showed that FGCS need sufficient support and resources that are easily accessible to be successful. Programs specifically designed for FGCS can help students transition to college and provide support and resources unique to FGCS. The need for additional support for FGCS supports the findings of Petty (2014) and Schelbe et al. (2019).

This data also supported previous research that indicated FGCS endure more financial stress than non-FGCS (Bentrim et al., 2020; House et al., 2020; and Soria et al., 2020). Students' desire to finish college on time was driven by financial aid and the desire for a better life for students and their families. Financial assistance was cited almost as much as family as a motivator to attend college. Students offered financial aid packages were more inclined to stay in school because they could not afford the cost of tuition on their own. If these students dropped out, they would lose their financial aid and be unable to return to school.

Financial aid also played a role in students' choice of institution and whether students stayed at their institution during the pandemic. A student would change institutions if another institution offered them a better financial aid package. Students in this study could not rely on their families to pay for their education and looked to institutions to provide financial support.

The findings indicated that once students enrolled in college, the desire to continue their education and graduate on time was a significant factor in their decision to stay in college. The desire for a better life for themselves and their families was a critical factor that motivated them to continue their education. Dropping out of school or taking a year off was not an option for these students because they relied on financial aid and needed to graduate on time to get a high-paying job to help their families financially.

The resilience of FGCS was a significant factor in their ability to stay enrolled and finish their degree. This finding supports the earlier research of Alvarado et al. (2017) and House et al.

(2020) that describes the resilience FGCS bring to the college experience. FGCS face barriers and challenging situations that build their strength to persevere. None of the participants in the survey or interviews considered dropping out of college. They were determined to finish despite the obstacles and barriers they faced.

The most interesting result of this research is that the pandemic continued to affect the FGCS college experience as they returned to on-campus learning. These students found it challenging to return to in-person learning because of the social and peer pressure they felt while learning in the classroom. Many FGCS felt inadequate financially and culturally to their peers. FGCS felt equal to their peers while learning online because they could blend in by turning off their cameras. The transition back to in-person learning had been difficult academically and socially, showing the need for additional support and resources for FGCS. The anonymity of online learning made it easier for FGCS to blend in with their peers. Students could shut their cameras off and still participate in course discussions. These findings support the research conducted by Hodges et al. (2020) and Aguilera-Hermida (2020).

Learning online made it easier for students to participate in classroom discussions because they could speak freely without being judged by their appearance or perceived social status. Many FGCS felt more comfortable because of the anonymity of learning remotely on a computer. Non-FGCS judgment of FGCS became an issue when students returned to campus and the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

This research provided information on what motivates FGCS to attend college and what barriers those students face in that process. Higher education institutions can use this information to ensure they provide support and resources for these students to succeed.

Family and financial aid were the factors that most influenced students' desire to attend college and stay enrolled. Financial aid packages were a strong motivator in the college selection process for FGCS. Increasing financial aid for FGCS will escalate the likelihood that FGCS will enroll in an institution. Students will choose the institution providing more financial aid. Financial aid also motivated FGCS to stay enrolled. FGCS rely on institutions to provide financial assistance that their families cannot. Providing increased financial aid to FGCS will increase student retention rates for that population.

Families are a motivator and a stressor for FGCS to enroll in college and complete their education. Families of FGCS can encourage their children to enroll in college and stay enrolled. This encouragement can also be stressful for FGCS because they do not want to live up to their families' expectations and be role models for others. Dropping out of college is not an option for FGCS because they need a college degree to make a better life for themselves and their families. Increasing communication and opportunities for engagement for families of FGCS may increase the positive effect families have on FGCS.

This study confirms that FGCS students need additional support transitioning to college and navigating the college enrollment process. Creating a living/learning community for FGCS and offering more interaction with enrolled FGCS are two ways institutions can provide additional support and resources for FGCS.

FGCS students felt social and academic pressures when they returned to in-person learning. These stressors disappeared during virtual learning because FGCS students did not feel judged by their appearance or social status. Student-centered learning that includes multiculturalism should be incorporated into the curriculum for faculty and students to understand the inherent bias they may bring to their educational experience. Ensuring that professors and

peers know how culture can impact why and how others react to situations will help FGCS feel comfortable participating in classroom discussions and succeed academically.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Introduction**

FGCS routinely face significant challenges in accessing postsecondary education. These students are often minorities, children of immigrants, and individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and they face more challenges in financing a college education. Their families may be encouraging and supportive, but they lack the college experience and knowledge to help their children navigate the college admissions process. COVID-19 has brought added attention to the ongoing disparities in higher education, including the barriers and challenges of FGCS.

This study provides information on how the pandemic impacted the motivators and barriers FGCS face in attending colleges. FGCS at two private universities in Washington DC were offered surveys and optional interviews to determine what barriers, challenges, and motivators they faced during the pandemic. Higher education institutions can use these findings to implement changes to policies, processes, and procedures to eliminate or lessen these challenges for FGCS.

#### **Research Problems**

COVID-19 is a deadly health crisis that continues to spread across the globe. This study explored the college admissions process after COVID-19 with first-generation students who applied and enrolled in higher education between Fall 2021 and Fall 2022. FGCS faced unique barriers and motivators to college enrollment before the pandemic. As a precaution, in Spring 2020, many colleges and universities sent students home. They moved their courses online or a hybrid of online and in-person learning to limit the number of students on campus (Hodges et al., 2020).

**Research Purpose**

This study examined how COVID-19 has impacted the challenges and barriers First-Generation Students routinely face. It also addressed how the inequities have changed due to COVID.

**Research Questions**

The central research question guiding this study was, what factors do FGCS identify as significant contributors to their decision to enroll or not enroll in college during COVID-19. The survey and interview questions were open-ended to gain as much information as possible from all participants (see Appendix A). Sub questions that came out of the central question included:

1. What impact did family have on FGCS college enrollment decision?
2. Was there one factor that dominated the enrollment decision process?

**Summary**

It is essential to understand what barriers and motivators FGCS faced during the pandemic for institutions to make informed changes to eliminate or lessen the barriers and increase the motivation for those students to attend college.

**Implications for Practice**

There are several ways the findings of this research can be used in higher education to mitigate or eliminate the barriers FGCS face.

**Financial Aid**

Reducing financial barriers for FGCS should be a priority for higher education institutions. Increasing scholarships, grants, and work-study opportunities are a good start. Institutions must ensure students know about the financial assistance available and how to apply for it. The financial aid office should reach out directly to FGCS to offer workshops on what aid

is available and how to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA). Work-study opportunities should be provided across the institution to ensure FGCS have meaningful employment opportunities aligned with their academic and career goals. Human resource personnel should work closely with FGCS to understand their employment opportunities and the application process.

### **Families**

Increasing the communication and interaction with families of FGCS can help families be a positive influence on their students during the college enrollment process. Communication should be coordinated and structured so that it is purposeful and effective. Giving families information about their student's college experience will help them understand how they can support their students instead of being a stressor—creating a parent portal that contains information on financial aid, upcoming events, and opportunities for parents to participate in workshops and webinars is a good starting point. Creating opportunities for parents and families to feel connected to the institution will help them understand their student's experiences and be a positive influence.

### **Resources**

Adding additional programs and resources for FGCS is imperative for those students to succeed. Creating opportunities for FGCS to build social and cultural capital will help FGCS feel part of the campus community.

The academic transition could be more accessible because of interactions with faculty members and the ability to use residence hall resources. A supportive living environment also correlates to an easier social transition. Creating a living/learning (LL) program for enrolled FGCS is one way to do this. Hosting workshops and presentations on the resources and programs

available to FGCS should be part of the LL program. These structured activities provided by the LL can positively influence FGCS and their college transition.

### **Culture**

Fostering inclusion and building a sense of community in the classroom will help bridge the cultural divide that FGCS feels in the classroom. This can be achieved in a variety of ways.

Social media can be used to develop a sense of community for FGCS. These students use social media platforms for different purposes. How the platforms are used depends on how close the student's relationship is to the person they are interacting with. Faculty can create a Facebook group for each course that will allow students to communicate with each other about deadlines and group work. This interaction will foster collaboration and build a community among students in the class.

Active learning should be integrated into the course curriculum. Active learning focuses on real-world scenarios for students to apply their knowledge, skills, and experience. This approach increases collaboration and critical thinking skills and provides a more meaningful learning experience. Adding problem-based learning to the curriculum will develop empathy between students and create a more inclusive environment.

Our knowledge base is continually growing and changing. Students have different needs, interests, and goals. Course content should be developed to adapt to those needs, interests, and plans to give students control over their learning and increase their motivation and positive learning outcomes.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Further research needs to be conducted on the current support and resources offered to FGCS to determine what programs or policies need to be changed or expanded. Student focus

groups with currently enrolled FGCS and admitted but not enrolled FGCS would be excellent to use.

Additional research should be conducted on the continued impact of COVID-19 on FGCS. As new variants appear and people continue to test positive for the virus, it is essential to understand if FGCS continue to be affected and if that impact changes. Future research should also focus on the experience of FGCS at public universities and community colleges to determine if those experiences differ from FGCS that attended private institutions.

### **Limitations**

COVID-19 is a highly contagious virus that forced universities across the country to close their campuses and revert to remote learning in March 2020. There is not a significant body of research on the impact of COVID-19 on FGCS because this phenomenon is so new. Therefore, expectations for the findings of the surveys and interviews could not be based on prior research. There was research on how other national disasters had impacted higher education, but those disasters were not nationwide and impacted a specific area of the United States.

This study used participants from two private universities and did not provide data on the impact of COVID-19 on FGCS that attended public universities or community colleges. Future research should be conducted with students at public universities and community colleges to determine if the impact was different for FGCS attending those institutions compared to private universities.

Students who participated in the optional follow-up interviews provided information on how COVID-19 impacted them when they returned to in-person learning. This researcher did not expect interview participants to share that returning to in-person learning was difficult. The question about the continued impact of the pandemic on FGCS was not part of the survey

questions. Asking this question on the survey would have allowed more students to provide information on how the pandemic continued to impact their learning experience.

### **Conclusion**

This research confirms that FGCS continue to face unique barriers and motivators to college enrollment. The pandemic brought these inequities in higher education for FGCS to the forefront and created additional obstacles for FGCS when they returned to in-person learning. Institutions of higher education should use this data to make informed programmatic and policy changes to address these students' barriers and challenges to ensure they succeed.

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[https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-hard-choices-presidents-will-have-to-make/?cid2=gen\\_login\\_refresh&cid=gen\\_sign\\_in](https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-hard-choices-presidents-will-have-to-make/?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in)

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**APPENDIX A****SURVEY/INTERVIEW QUESTIONS***Survey Questions*

1. What year are you in school?
2. Did you decide to enroll in higher education for Fall 2021? Yes or No
3. What factors influenced your enrollment decision for Fall 2021?
4. If your choice of attending institution changed during the pandemic, please explain why.
5. How likely are you to enroll in higher education for Spring 2022? (Likert Scale)
  - a. Please explain what influenced your enrollment decision for Spring 2022.
6. If you enrolled for Fall 2021, how likely are you to stay enrolled for Spring 2022?
  - a. Please explain what influenced your enrollment decision for Spring 2022.

*Interview Questions*

1. What year are you in school?
2. What factor was most influential on your enrollment decision for Fall 2021, and why?
3. Thinking back to all the factors that influenced your enrollment decision in Fall 2021, have any of those factors influenced your enrollment decision for Spring 2022?
  - a. Please explain how those factors influenced your decision or why they did not influence your decision.
4. What do you think is the most important change universities could make to mitigate the barriers you faced enrolling in higher education?
5. If you were enrolled in remote classes in Fall 2020 and are currently enrolled in class in Fall 2021, how did the pandemic impact your college experience?

**APPENDIX B**  
**EMAIL SCRIPT**

Dear Prospective Survey Participant,

My name is Jennifer Halpin, and I am a doctoral student from Bradley University. I am conducting a research study as part of my doctoral degree requirement entitled *The Impact of COVID-19 on College Admissions for First-Generation College Students*. This is an invitation to participate in this research study. The purpose of this study is to determine the motivators or barriers first-generation college students encountered when applying to college during the pandemic. All survey participants will be entered into a drawing to win a \$50 Amazon gift card.

An informed consent agreement will appear on the first screen page of the survey. You may request a copy of the results of this research study by contacting me at 571-246-1621 or [jhalpin@mail.bradley.edu](mailto:jhalpin@mail.bradley.edu). The survey will take no more than 10 minutes to complete. Your participation will contribute to the current literature on the subject of access to college admissions for first-generation students and identify barriers that need to be addressed by higher education institutions.

If you would like to know more information about this study, please email me at [jhalpin@mail.bradley.edu](mailto:jhalpin@mail.bradley.edu).

If you decide to participate, you can access the survey from this link [insert link]. Thank you,

Jennifer Halpin

**APPENDIX C**  
**NEWSLETTER SCRIPT**

Did COVID-19 impact your college admissions process? If you answered yes, you are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jennifer Halpin, a doctoral student from Bradley University. Ms. Halpin is conducting a research study as part of her doctoral degree requirement entitled, *The Impact of COVID-19 on College Admissions for First-Generation College Students*. The purpose of this study is to determine the motivators or barriers first-generation college students encountered when applying to college during the pandemic. All survey participants will be entered into a drawing to win a \$50 Amazon gift card.

An informed consent agreement will appear on the first screen page of the survey. You may request a copy of the results of this research study by contacting Ms. Halpin at 571-246-1621 or [jhalpin@mail.bradley.edu](mailto:jhalpin@mail.bradley.edu). The survey will take no more than 10 minutes to complete. Your participation will contribute to the current literature on the subject of access to college admissions for first-generation students.

If you would like to know more information about this study, please email Jennifer at [jhalpin@mail.bradley.edu](mailto:jhalpin@mail.bradley.edu).

If you decide to participate, you can access the survey from this link (insert link).