

Meeting the Unique Needs of First-Generation College Students During COVID-19

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Introduction

In March 2020, colleges and universities around the world swiftly moved to remote learning and working environments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have lived under the cloud of COVID-19 for one year, and while some institutions are attempting to return to normal operating conditions, many classes are still taught remotely. Due to the pandemic, areas on campus that previously brought people together to experience the many opportunities of college life have become sites of worry, anxiety, and trepidation (Son et al., 2020). The wide range of campus support structures such as academic and financial advising and social and community-building events have moved to remote work conditions, making it more difficult for students to utilize services to help students navigate the challenges of college life.

COVID-19 has not only threatened students' academic outcomes and social support opportunities but has also increased mental health risk factors and other physical health concerns which can negatively affect college retention (Lederer et al., 2021). While this shift has not been easy for anyone, it has put extra strain on first-generation college students (FGCS) who may not understand or be adept at using the wide range of support structures available at most colleges and universities. FGCS not only represent 33% of the national undergraduate student population (Cataldi et al., 2018), they are also among the most vulnerable student populations, with a high risk of dropping or stopping out. Despite the challenges they face, FGCS often bring a wide range of assets that help them adapt to the college environment (Garrison & Gardner, 2012).

To better understand the compounding effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on FGCS, and to understand how universities can best facilitate support mechanisms for the unique needs and challenges of FGCS, this literature review will bring together insights from four areas of research: the FGCS experience, the assets and needs of FGCS, remote teaching and learning

during COVID-19, and student support services. By bringing together these areas of research, we will offer insights that will help universities better assist FGCS through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in a remote teaching and learning environment.

Methods

As students in the Ed.D. in Higher Education Leadership program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), we selected the topic for this literature review after discussing the challenges college and university administrators face to engage and retain FGCS during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Considering that we are just one year into this crisis, we understood that recent peer-reviewed literature on this issue would be limited. Therefore, we decided to focus on the aforementioned four areas of research: (1) FGCS experience, (2) assets and needs of FGCS (3) remote teaching and learning during COVID-19, and (4) student support services. We hope that our research in these four areas combined with our professional experience as higher education administrators will assist in the development of policy and practice recommendations for supporting FGCS during COVID-19 and beyond.

Each of the four members of our research group conducted independent literature reviews during the spring 2021 semester and met weekly to discuss our progress and results. Our group used the following electronic databases to search for articles related to our topic: VCU Libraries, University of Mary Washington (UMW) Libraries, ERIC – Education Resources Information Center, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. We found that researchers often use multiple and conflicting definitions of a FGCS, which can make it difficult to compare data and conclusions across studies. As a result, we used the following keywords in our searches: “first-generation students,” “first-generation college students,” “first-generation students covid challenges,” “first-generation students” and “COVID-19,” “covid and higher education,” “first-generation” and

“support services,” “first-generation students” and “support services,” and “first-generation college students” and “support.”

Following a review of article titles, dates of publication, and abstracts, we continued to narrow the scope of the project. To effectively frame our argument and conduct a review of literature within the project’s timeframe, we reviewed articles that supported retention and graduation efforts, as well as ones that illustrated how COVID-19 has created unique challenges such as remote learning and social isolation that complicate the contemporary college student experience.

To coordinate our research, we created a shared literature matrix of the articles we found. Team members decided to read articles about general characteristics of FGCS, the overall context of colleges and universities during COVID-19, and, most specifically, the FGCS experience during COVID-19. Due to the pandemic and with a focus on the most recent research on FGCS, we decided to include articles in our literature review published no earlier than 2012.

Review of the Literature

First-Generation College Student (FGCS) Experience

In an effort to offer some clarity to the challenge of defining what determines whether or not a student is a FGCS, Toutkoushian et al. (2018) discussed eight different definitions of the term, “FGCS.” These definitions range from students who are the first in their families to go to college to students whose parents had some postsecondary education experience but had not earned a degree to students that may not even know their parents’ highest level of education. As a result of these disparate definitions, Toutkoushian et al. determined that data from surveys that collect information on FGCS is not always all-encompassing when discussing this student population. Without a general agreement as to who qualifies as a FGCS, Toutkoushian et al.

found that it can be difficult for policymakers at colleges and universities to effectively examine the experiences and outcomes of students that may identify as FGCS.

Because FGCS are a very diverse set of students with a complex set of characteristics and experiences, we utilize a lens of *intersectionality* to capture the complex set of challenges that FGCS face when attending colleges and universities. Basic demographic data of FGCS provides a helpful context for understanding the types of support services offered by colleges and universities to address the needs of FGCS. As presented in Table 1, the highest percentage of FGCS are listed as White (49%), Hispanic (27%), and Black (14%); Asian students (5%) and other ethnicities account for the remaining 5 percent (Redford and Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017). However, compared to NFGCS, a lower percentage of FGCS were White (49% vs. 70%) whereas among Hispanic and Black students, the pattern was reversed (27% vs. 9% and 14% vs. 11% respectively).

Table 1.

Percentage of FGCS by race and first-generation status

	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian	Other
FGCS	49%	27%	14%	5%	5%
NFGCS	70%	9%	11%	6%	4%

FGCS also tend to come from lower-income families than NFGCS. In addition to coming from lower socioeconomic status families, FGCS are more likely to be female, older, Hispanic, and non-native speakers of English than NFGCS (Wang and Joshi, 2018; Redford & Mulvaney, 2017). Additionally, there is a large disparity between the graduation rates of FGCS and NFGCS

(Redford & Mulvaney, 2017). Ten years after sophomore year in high school, a lower percentage of FGCS had obtained a bachelor's degree compared to their NFGCS peers (20% vs 42%).

Given that FGCS represent approximately a third of the undergraduate student population in the United States (Cataldi et al., 2018), retention and graduation challenges are a significant concern for the students and institutions alike. Whereas FGCS reported requiring counseling service more than NFGCS, they also reported using those services less due to “inconvenient location, lack of awareness of services, inconvenient hours, and limited available personal time” (Wang and Joshi, 2018, p. 393). As a result, researchers have emphasized the importance of university administrators developing "a deeper understanding of the multiple disadvantages faced by these students" (Wang and Joshi, 2018, p. 392) so that they can best develop policies and programming that will help promote FGCS well-being.

Assets of FGCS

The sizable presence of FGCS on American college campuses has driven researchers to better understand their assets and attributes. Garriott (2020) pointed out that although research identifies the factors that contribute to FGCS college success, much of this literature is limited by its reliance on academic and career theory that was not developed with the needs of FGCS in mind. He also addressed the fact that the theoretical frameworks that have been applied to FGCS in the past, while helpful in addressing some of the challenges that this population faces, have their faults. Garriott addressed the common critiques of existing theoretical frameworks such as Bourdieu's theory of *cultural and social capital* (positioning marginalized students as “damaged”) and Tinto's *student integration model* (focusing on individual adjustment to existing higher education practices) before identifying the *critical cultural wealth model* (CCWM) as a more empowering model to conceptualize not only FGCS academic success but also career

development and well-being.

The CCWM (Garriott, 2020) presents four dimensions to capture the complex identities and experiences of FGCS. These four dimensions (structural and institutional conditions, social-emotional crossroads, career self-authorship, and cultural wealth) emphasize the importance of applying an asset-based approach to the FGCS experience at colleges and universities rather than a deficit-based approach. By identifying the systemic challenges that FGCS face at colleges (structural and institutional conditions), and recognizing the home-school tensions (social-emotional crossroads and cultural wealth) and the emotional toll of a student's decisions (career self-authorship), the CCWM supports the argument that colleges and universities should analyze institutional policies and practices that may pose a barrier to FGCS success. FGCS bring assets such as perseverance, resourcefulness, and critical consciousness to their college experience (Garriott, 2020). As Garriott stated, "Rather than focusing on what FGCS lack in preparation for college, practitioners should leverage their strengths and assets" (p. 90). As a result, universities are encouraged to focus on the cultural wealth that help FGCS succeed in addition to attributes that might hinder their progress.

The frameworks are recent developments that make a distinct shift away from the traditional deficit-based approach in understanding historically marginalized populations, including FGCS. To better understand the assets of FGCS, we will utilize the *community cultural wealth model* (CCW) to provide a holistic frame of reference for this population (Yosso, 2005). As a model originally intended to highlight the "array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts" for communities of color, the framework provides structure to see the fullness of FGCS. Yosso examines six forms of cultural capital that students experience. This literature review highlights three forms of capital: aspirational, familial, and resistant.

Aspirational capital is defined as the ability to maintain hope for the future in the face of barriers. According to Garrison and Gardner (2012), participants in their survey displayed optimistic perspectives that aided in student well-being, academic achievement, and college persistence. Through expressions of positivity, hopefulness, and self-confidence, FGCS demonstrated optimism as a strength that has aided in personal and academic settings. Secondly, FGCS bring *familial capital*, referring to the social and personal human resources students have in their pre-college environment. For FGCS, relationships with family are beyond a support network. Covarrubias et al. (2018) described the role reversal that many FGCS play in family households. Although there is increased responsibility at home, FGCS are resourceful, strategic thinkers, and self-reliant. Lastly, *resistance capital* originates in the experiences of communities of color in securing equal rights and collective freedom.

A review of the literature has highlighted that FGCS are more engaged in the college experience than their NFGCS peers (Campus Labs, 2018; Suarez-Orozco et al, 2015). In the area of campus engagement, Campus Labs (2018) highlighted that FGCS were more engaged in campus activities, increasing their ability to connect classroom and beyond the classroom experiences. In the area of civic engagement, Suarez-Orozco et al. (2015) asserted that FGCS outpace their NFGCS through service-based and community-based volunteer work. A foundational understanding of cultural capital among FGCS can help administrators see the “fullness” of the student experience from their lens and adapt accordingly.

Needs of FGCS

Though FGCS bring valuable lived experiences to the college environment, the needs of this population have been well-documented in the literature and require the attention of faculty and administrators alike. The most prominent need is for an examination of the intersecting

social identities that FGCS students may hold. American universities promote a sense of independence that negatively impacts the experience of low-income, first-generation college students (Stephens et al., 2012). Pervasive in American culture, the researchers argued that university norms and culture promote an independent sense of self that benefits middle-class and non-first-generation students. Culture, however, is malleable and administrators can examine cultural mismatch by revisiting institutional assumptions and norms.

Institutional financial aid and scholarship programs are strong drivers for FGCS' sense of belonging, retention, and success. However, exemplars show that the most effective FGCS financial aid and scholarship programs go beyond financial need. Means and Pyne (2017), through one-on-one interviews over 10 years, concluded that a comprehensive support program that focuses on cohort-based academic and social support helps retain FGCS. For FGCS, a sense of belonging is especially important as they navigate the transition to college, institutional support structures, and academic expectations. Although the shift to a remote environment as a result of COVID-19 has affected all students, practitioners should recognize the unique needs of FGCS to ensure student success for this vulnerable population.

Remote Teaching and Learning During COVID-19

While it is too early for much conclusive evidence to emerge about the ways FGCS responded to and were impacted by the remote learning environment of COVID-19, some early studies and articles outline the concerns professionals and scholars who work with or research FGCS have about the ways FGCS have been and will be impacted by the pandemic. The literature on the academic context of COVID-19 we reviewed operates in one of three ways. The writers or researchers 1) extrapolated concerns from previous, pre-pandemic research on FGCS; 2) speculated based on professional experience and knowledge about the likely impact the

remote learning environment will have on FGCS; or 3) surveyed FGCS about their experiences and perceptions of the way the remote learning environment will impact them. This final group represents a small but growing number of studies as researchers have time to carry out research on the impact of the pandemic more broadly as well as on FGCS.

The most fundamental challenge of the remote learning context, for students and faculty alike, is that students did not choose to learn in a remote, digital context and faculty were under-prepared to teach in digital context (Katz et al., 2021). While this challenge impacts nearly all students, the most visible emerging concern in the studies we reviewed is that the remote teaching and learning environment adopted by universities and colleges around the country and world presents differential and disproportionate challenges to FGCS.

As noted above, compared to other subgroups of students, FGCS tend to be under-represented minorities and/or from lower-income families. As a result, there is widespread concern that the remote learning environment will both disproportionately impact FGCS and will also serve to widen pre-existing gaps between FGCS and NFGCS both in terms of college educational experiences and post-college career and financial prospects (Aucejo, 2021; Katz, 2021; Lederer, 2021). Educational impacts of concern include diminished academic performance, the likelihood of dropping out, and the likelihood of delaying graduation timelines.

Beginning in the fall of 2020, public universities and colleges experienced a four percent decline in enrollment compared to the previous year due to COVID-19 (Current Term Enrollment Estimates Fall 2020, 2020). In addition to declining enrollments, researchers fear “that COVID-19 represents a significant disruption to students’ academic experiences, and is likely to have lasting impacts through changes in major/career and delayed graduation timelines” (Aucejo, 2021, p. 5). It is suspected that the disproportionate impact on vulnerable students, such

as FGCS, is due to their increased likelihood of experiencing financial and health shocks, both to themselves and to their families (Aucejo, 2021; Lederer, 2021).

Student academic needs are frequently impacted by and intersect with a range of physical and mental health needs, which may be elevated by the pandemic. FGCS may also experience an increased need for mental health support services due to COVID-19 (Lederer, 2021). Given that campus mental health services strained to meet increasing demand pre-pandemic, COVID-19 may further intensify the inability of institutions to meet new and unmet need for mental health support, further hindering the academic performance and health of FGCS (Lederer, 2021).

FGCS may struggle to adapt to the demands of the remote learning context. Pre-pandemic research shows that as a result of lower levels of digital preparation, FGCS tend to have lower levels of remote learning proficiency, prior to attending college and their digital skills are lower than those of their FGCS peers (Katz et al., 2021). Under normal operating conditions, preexisting connectivity problems some students might experience are mitigated by on-campus technology resources, but when students went home during COVID-19, these students may have been thrust back into previous states of under-connectivity (Katz et al., 2021, p. 3). Yet, research has also shown that FGCS are more likely than NFGCS to be willing to take online courses. This may, in part, be explained by the strong will and goal orientation of FGCS (see above). However, other well-established challenges faced by FGCS, such as difficulty communicating with professors may further inhibit their ability to adapt to the demands of the remote learning environment (Katz et al., 2021). Active campus support services can help FGCS overcome these challenges.

FGCS and Support Services

The needs and use of support services during the COVID-19 pandemic are areas of ongoing interest at colleges and universities. The pivot to online learning exposed the complexities of teaching and delivering support services during times of crisis. In the early developments of the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities had to develop ways to consistently and reliably communicate with their students. Many colleges and universities created websites to provide students with a single point of contact to help navigate college resources and support services (Blankstein & Frederick, 2020). Additionally, survey data collected from over 15,000 students from 21 colleges during the pandemic found that students wanted more communication and support from their financial aid, academic advising, and mental health departments (Blankstein et al., 2020).

Academic advising has long been used to support the curricular and non-curricular needs of students at colleges and universities. Described in the literature as a systematic and developmental process, academic advisors establish working relationships with students to facilitate decision making, resource identification, problem-solving, and goal-setting in the advisee's personal, professional, and academic endeavors (National Academic Advising Association, 2014). As a result, academic advising has a central role in the retention and graduation of FGCS.

Swecker (2014) found that for every meeting an academic advisor has with an FGCS, the retention odds increase by 13 percent. That is a significant return on investment for a university that spends tens of thousands of dollars recruiting at-risk students and providing other campus resources to serve their unique needs. While the variables of gender, race, and major showed no significance concerning retention, the number of advisor meetings ($n=3.4$) proved to be a reliable indicator of student retention (Swecker et al., 2014).

The move to a virtual learning environment has restricted access to mental health services that help support student well-being. Studies consistently find that a weak sense of belonging is associated with poor mental and physical health and even suicide (Gummadam et al., 2016). A strong sense of belonging is a predictor of flourishing (Fink, 2014). The temporary campus closures of many colleges and universities that provided this sense of belonging has put into jeopardy the social, psychological, and academic outcomes of college students (Gopalan & Brady, 2020).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In times of crisis, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important for universities and colleges to ensure that all students have the means they need to succeed. However, intentional efforts need to be made to protect and assist groups of students, like FGCS, who often face cultural and institutional barriers to successful college completion. Therefore, the purpose of this literature review is to understand the effect COVID-19 has had on FGCS and how colleges and universities can align academic and social support services to match the unique needs and address the unique challenges of this student population. Our conclusions and recommendations are grounded in the COVID-19 experience and address the four areas of research of our literature review: the FGCS experience, assets and needs of FGCS, remote teaching and learning during COVID-19, and student support services. We hope our recommendations will also serve the best interests of FGCS beyond the pandemic as well.

Conclusion: FGCS represent a third of all undergraduate students in the United States, but graduation rates were much lower than NFGCS prior to COVID-19. Without a focused effort to address the challenges facing FGCS, the pandemic threatens to exacerbate this disparity.

Recommendations:

- Develop standardized definition of FGCS, which will facilitate more targeted allocation

of resources and efforts

- Examine intersectionality of FGCS and other social identities (socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, age) to better understand population dynamics and distinguish unique, specific needs
- Monitor graduation rates of FGCS throughout the pandemic and beyond

Conclusion: It is likely that FGCS learning and academic performance will be disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 due to a disparity in digital competency and increased susceptibility to financial and health setbacks. Support initiatives should be designed to engage with FGCS assets and strengths.

Recommendations:

- Analyze institutional policies and procedures that may pose barriers to FGCS student success
- Strengthen existing financial aid initiatives to support holistic student well-being through cohort-based programming, including sense of belonging and social support
- Work with FGCS campus programs to create a professional development toolkit to educate faculty and staff about population-level data, FGCS assets, and post-pandemic challenges

Conclusion: FGCS tend to be more engaged than NFGCS and also more willing to enroll in online courses, but they are less likely to connect with campus support services designed to help them succeed in the remote learning environment.

Recommendations:

- Develop comprehensive digital student success frameworks that bridge orientation, financial aid, academic advising, involvement, wellness, and other support services
- Prioritize reliable and consistent communication and outreach to promote FGCS student services
- Utilize academic and social support services that engage FGCS in developing a sense of well-being and community that are vital in maintaining commitment through the degree completion process

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