

UCLA

UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Exploring the Effects of the Pandemic on the Experiences and Perspectives of First-Generation College Students

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3kj9q1cq>

ISBN

9798293836284

Author

Preciado-Hernandez, Brigitte Stacy

Publication Date

2025-09-12

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Exploring the Effects of the Pandemic on the Experiences and Perspectives of First-Generation
College Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Brigitte Stacy Preciado-Hernandez

2025

© Copyright by

Brigitte Stacy Preciado-Hernandez

2025

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Exploring the Effects of the Pandemic on the Experiences and Perspectives of First-Generation
College Students

by

Brigitte Stacy Preciado-Hernandez

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor Concepción Valadez, Co-Chair

Professor Mark Hansen, Co-Chair

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, prompting universities worldwide to close campuses and suspend in-person instruction, resulting in one of the largest disruptions in modern higher education (Crawford et al., 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020). The rapid shift to remote learning raised particular concerns for students who rely heavily on campus resources, including first-generation college students (Means & Neisler, 2021).

Guided by a dual conceptual framework integrating Schlossberg's (1981, 1984, 1989, 2011) Transition Theory and Buzzanell's (2010, 2018) Communication Theory of Resilience, this mixed-methods exploratory study examines the pandemic's impact on first-generation

students at a four-year public university. Transition Theory provides a lens to categorize changes in students' academic, social, and personal lives, while Communication Theory of Resilience highlights how students used or lacked communication to adapt, recover, and find meaning. Data were collected through surveys of 39 senior first-generation students and in-depth interviews with seven students to explore their experiences during the transition to remote learning and upon returning to campus.

This study's findings aim to inform programs supporting undergraduate students, particularly first-generation students, by enhancing strategies for academic engagement, campus integration, and adaptation to evolving educational models. Beyond benefiting students directly, the insights from this study can inform university administrators and policymakers. By understanding the specific challenges and resilience strategies of first-generation students during sudden transitions, administrators can make evidence-based decisions regarding resource allocation, academic support services, and hybrid learning policies. This will ultimately foster a more equitable and effective institutional response to future disruptions.

The dissertation of Brigitte Stacy Preciado-Hernandez is approved.

Megan Loef Franke

Oscar Felix

Concepción M. Valadez, Committee Co-Chair

Mark P. Hansen, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2025

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family whose unwavering support and encouragement have been instrumental throughout this journey.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Study Purpose	2
Summary of Methodology	3
Definition of Terms	3
Conceptual Framework Overview	5
Research Questions	6
Significance of Study	7
Conclusion	7
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	10
First-Generation College Students in the U.S.	11
Access to College and the Hidden Curriculum	12
Engagement and Persistence	13
Obstacles and Challenges	14
Federal and Institutional Support for First-Generation College Students	16
The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic	17
Emergency Remote Learning	18
Issues and Barriers Related to Learning Due to COVID-19	18
COVID-19 Mental Health Concerns	19
Conceptual Framework	20
Conclusion	26
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	27
Research Design Overview and Rationale	28

Study Setting	28
Study Participants	29
Recruitment and Access	30
Data Collection	31
Data Analysis	34
Ethical Considerations and Role Management	35
Credibility and Trustworthiness	35
Conclusion	36
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	37
Characteristics of the Sample	37
Findings Related to Research Question #1: Obstacles Faced by First-Generation College Students During First Academic Year	43
Findings Related to Research Question #2: Obstacles Faced by First-Generation College Students After Campus Re-Opening	54
Findings Related to Research Question #3: Perceptions of Change in Campus Life Following the Pandemic and Return to Campus	64
Conclusion	70
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	73
Connections to Prior Research and Theory	74
Complexity and Contradiction in Student Experiences	75
Study Limitations	76
Recommendations	78
Reflection	85

Conclusion	86
APPENDIX A: RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INVITATION.....	89
APPENDIX B: CONFIRMATION OF CONSENT	90
APPENDIX C: QUESTIONNAIRE	91
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	100
REFERENCES	103

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Integrated Conceptual Framework	25
Table 4.1: Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (n=39)	39
Table 4.2: Academic Majors of Study Participants (n=39)	40
Table 4.3: Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants (n=7)	41
Table 4.4: Challenges During First Academic Year Reported by Students in Questionnaire (n=39)	52
Table 4.5: Comparison of Satisfaction First-Year (Remote) vs. Returning to Campus (In- Person)	60
Table 4.6: Comparison of Reliance First-Year (Remote) vs. Returning to Campus (In- Person)	61
Table 4.7: Challenges During First Academic Year Reported by Students in Questionnaire (n=39)	63
Table 4.8: Survey Participants' Preferred Delivery Method for Attending, Participating, or Engaging in Various Aspects of Collegiate Life (n=39)	66
Table 4.9: Comparison of Difficulty First-Year (Remote) vs. Returning to Campus (In- Person)	68
Table 5.1: Summary of Emergent Themes, Theoretical Connections, and Practitioner Recommendations	81

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my dissertation co-chairs, Dr. Mark Hansen and Dr. Concepción Valadez, for their unwavering support, insightful guidance, and steadfast belief in my work throughout this journey. Your mentorship has been invaluable, and I am incredibly grateful for the time, care, and expertise you both invested in my development as a scholar and practitioner. I also want to thank my committee members, Dr. Oscar Felix and Dr. Megan Franke, for their thoughtful feedback, encouragement, and the unique perspectives each of you brought to this process. Your contributions not only strengthened this dissertation but also challenged me to think more deeply and critically about my work. It has been an honor to learn from and work with such an accomplished and dedicated committee. Thank you for your commitment to my growth and to the field of education.

My heartfelt appreciation also goes to my cohort mates, Lisa and Stephanie. Your unwavering support, encouragement, and camaraderie throughout this journey have meant the world to me. From long study sessions to moments of shared laughter and understanding, your presence made this challenging process not only manageable but genuinely rewarding. You have been more than just classmates, you've become some of my dearest friends. I will always cherish the bond we've formed and the memories we've created together. Thank you for walking this path with me.

I wish to thank Judy Miyoshi, the backbone of the ELP program and one of its greatest advocates. She was a firm believer in me throughout this journey and a constant source of encouragement and support, for which I am deeply thankful.

A mis padres, Marco y Alicia Preciado, que dejaron atrás todo lo conocido en busca de un futuro mejor para nuestra familia. Gracias por cada sacrificio silencioso, por cada noche sin

descanso, y por cada esfuerzo hecho con amor y esperanza. Su ejemplo de lucha, perseverancia y dignidad ha sido mi mayor inspiración. Ustedes siempre creyeron en mí, incluso en los momentos más difíciles, cuando yo misma dudaba. Este logro no es solo mío; es el reflejo de su esfuerzo, su fe, y su amor inquebrantable. Con todo mi corazón, gracias.

To my wonderful brothers, Hersson and Moses: Thank you for always standing by me with strength, humor, and encouragement. Your belief in me has been a source of quiet motivation throughout this journey. You've taught me resilience, loyalty, and the value of showing up for the people you love. Somos un equipo, por siempre.

To my dearest husband, Matthew: Thank you for your love, patience, and belief in me throughout this journey. Your constant support, whether in quiet moments of encouragement or in lifting me up during times of doubt, has been my foundation. This accomplishment would not have been possible without your steady presence, your sacrifices, and your endless faith in my dreams.

A special dedication goes to my all of nieces and nephews, with the hope that this achievement serves as a reminder that higher education is within reach, and that no dream is ever too big to chase. Athena and Alexander, may your light always shine bright and may you always believe in your potential and pursue your goals with courage and determination. Tete loves you to infinity and beyond!

VITA

EDUCATION

- 2012 M.S. Student Affairs in Higher Education
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO
- 2009 B.A. Film Studies
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA

EMPLOYMENT

- 2022- Current Director, Student Retention Programs
Student Success Initiatives, UC Irvine
Irvine, CA
- 2019-2022 Assistant Director, Student Engagement
Office of Student Engagement, Scripps College
Claremont, CA
- 2016-2019 Director, TRIO Scholars
Academic Preparation Programs, UC Riverside
Riverside, CA
- 2015-2016 Program Director, Thomas Jefferson High School & Nava College
City Year Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA
- 2012-2015 Resident Director, Whelan and McKay
Student Housing, Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles, CA

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19, a highly contagious respiratory disease first identified in Wuhan, China, a global pandemic, resulting in the closure of businesses, establishments, and schools, along with widespread disruptions to daily life (Chriscaden, 2020; Ren et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). To mitigate the rapid spread of COVID-19, over 1,100 universities and colleges closed campuses, suspended in-person instruction, and cancelled events, including commencement ceremonies, causing one of the largest disruptions to higher education in recent history (Armoed, 2021; Davis et al., 2021; Pandit et al., 2021; Smalley, 2021). Initially anticipated to last “two weeks or so,” campus closures extended for months, with most institutions delivering instruction entirely online for the 2020-2021 academic year. University and college campuses became largely empty, with only essential staff working on site. This sudden shift raised questions about remote learning, student engagement, access to institutional support, enrollment, budgets, and the delivery of critical student services.

While the abrupt changes affected all faculty, staff, and students, first-generation college students (FGCS) were of particular concern due to their reliance on campus support structures (Taylor-Nolan, 2022). As a first-generation college graduate working in higher education retention programs, I sought to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced FGCS access to academic, career, and social resources. With tutoring, counseling, career services, and social programs moving to virtual learning environments, concerns arose regarding technological access, familiarity, and utilization of formerly in-person resources. Moreover, job and internship cancellations disrupted income sources and career development opportunities for students with

significant financial and social needs. Many FGCS rely on campus as a haven from home responsibilities and as a primary space to access technology and academic resources. These students often navigate the dual pressures of academic expectations and home life responsibilities, challenges that were amplified during remote learning. Concerns about the quality of remote instruction also emerged, particularly as students adjusted to synchronous and asynchronous learning formats (Smalley, 2021).

The first COVID-19 vaccine received emergency use authorization in December 2020, and by March 2021, educators became eligible for vaccination. This development provided hope and supported plans for reopening. By Spring 2021, institutions communicated vaccination requirements and hybrid or in-person reopening strategies for Fall 2021. Move-in days, orientations, and welcome weeks resumed, though operations were not fully restored. Many activities remained restricted, with classrooms and campus spaces operating at limited capacity. By Fall 2021, institutions employed various instructional modalities, including fully online, hybrid, and fully in-person instruction (Smalley, 2021). While campuses technically reopened, student engagement and access to support services were still constrained compared to pre-pandemic conditions.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on first-generation college students, focusing on the stressors and resilience strategies of students who already face the added pressures of being first-generation or low-income. The study emphasizes the experiences of FGCS as they transitioned from remote high school learning to in-person college instruction. While previous research has explored pandemic effects on students and specifically on FGCS (Kiebler & Stewart, 2021; Scharp et al., 2021; Taylor-Nolan,

2022; Booker et al., 2022), there remains a need to understand the long-term effects on engagement, persistence, academic achievement, and social integration. This study provides in-depth narratives of FGCS navigating both remote learning and the return to campus, highlighting ongoing challenges and adaptation strategies.

Key questions include how FGCS relied on institutional support and social capital, how they adapted to hybrid and remote learning modalities, and how their perceptions of campus life have evolved. By focusing on lived experiences, this study contributes to understanding the structural, social, and academic challenges faced by FGCS and identifies opportunities to enhance support programs, services, and policies to meet their evolving needs.

Summary of Methodology

This mixed methods research study aims to provide summaries of personal stories from a prototype sample of first-generation undergraduate students enrolled during the COVID-19 pandemic. Study participants were students recruited from The University of California system. The target population of the study was traditionally aged students, defined as those who are between the ages of 18-21, who self-identify as first-generation college students. Eligible participants started as first-time freshmen in Fall 2020 while university operations were remote and were seniors during the 2023-2024 academic year. Participants were asked to reflect on the impact of the pandemic, a few weeks prior to graduation, providing insight into their lived experiences as well as into their perspective after the fact.

Definition of Terms

Asynchronous learning involves educational activities and coursework completed on the student's own schedule without real-time interaction, allowing flexibility but requiring greater self-discipline (Wighting et al., 2008).

Continuing-generation students are defined as students who have at least one parent with some postsecondary education experience, regardless of whether that parent completed a degree. This broader definition acknowledges that continuing-generation students may benefit from familial familiarity with higher education processes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Coronavirus fatigue refers to the emotional and physical exhaustion experienced as a result of prolonged exposure to and disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to diminished motivation and resilience in coping with pandemic-related challenges (Pandit et al., 2021).

First-generation college students (FGCS) are undergraduate students whose parents or guardians have not earned a bachelor's degree. In other words, these students are the first in their immediate family to pursue a four-year college education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). This group often faces unique challenges due to a lack of familial experience with higher education systems (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Hybrid learning (Blended instruction) combines face-to-face classroom sessions with online learning components, offering a flexible approach that includes both scheduled in-person meetings and self-paced digital coursework (Singh, 2017; Singh et al., 2021).

Remote learning refers to instruction delivered entirely through online platforms without any physical classroom interaction, a modality widely adopted during the pandemic to maintain educational continuity (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Social distancing is a public health practice aimed at reducing close contact between individuals to limit the spread of infectious diseases. This practice has significantly affected

traditional campus life and interpersonal interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pandit et al., 2021).

Synchronous learning is real-time online instruction where students and instructors engage simultaneously, replicating live classroom interaction via video conferencing tools (Singh et al., 2021).

Traditionally aged students are those between the ages of 18 and 21, typically entering college directly after high school graduation (Wang & Sedlacek, 2009).

Virtual learning environment describes a fully remote educational setting where instruction and learning occur online, either synchronously (live) or asynchronously (on-demand), facilitated through digital technologies such as computers and the internet (Wighting et al., 2008).

Conceptual Framework Overview

The conceptual framework for this study integrates Schlossberg's (1981, 1984, 1989, 2011) Transition Theory and Buzzanell's (2010, 2018) Communication Theory of Resilience to understand the experiences of first-generation college students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Both theories help address the research questions by focusing on transitions, resilience-building, coping mechanisms, and the role of communication in navigating obstacles. The framework provides a lens to explore how first-generation students encountered and responded to various challenges, the ongoing obstacles they face upon returning to campus, and their perceptions of the evolving academic and social landscape in the post-pandemic world.

The dual-framework approach enhanced the explanatory power of this study. Schlossberg's (1981, 1984, 1989, 2011) Transition Theory provided a way to categorize the multifaceted changes in students' lives—academic, social, personal—by evaluating the situation,

self, support, and strategies involved. The Communication Theory of Resilience (Buzzanell, 2010, 2018) complemented this by illuminating how students used (or lacked) communication to recover, adapt, and find meaning.

Research Questions

Together, the frameworks help explain not just *what* challenges students faced, but *how* and *why* they responded to those challenges in different ways. The integration of both theories emphasizes that resilience is not a fixed trait but a communicative, relational, and situationally dependent process. This dual framework informs the following research questions:

1. What obstacles (i.e., resilience triggers) did first-generation college students experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. How did first-generation college students navigate/respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What obstacles do first-generation college students continue to face after returning to campus?
 - a. How did first-generation college students navigate/respond to these challenges after returning to campus?
3. How has campus life (academic and social) changed?
 - a. What are the perceptions of first-generation college students of academic and social life on campus in a post-pandemic world?
 - b. What type of additional support may first-generation students benefit from?

The research questions address and integrate aspects of both theories offering a comprehensive approach to understanding how first-generation college students navigated the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and their transition back to campus life.

Significance of Study

This study aims to enhance the understanding of the unique challenges faced by first-generation college students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The exploration of the experiences, obstacles, and coping strategies of first-generation students during the pandemic and their transition back to campus throughout this study helps to fill some gaps in the literature regarding their academic, social, and emotional needs. Research on how first-generation students respond to pandemics and other significant disruptions is limited and while the COVID-19 may be under control now, other circumstances in the future could arise that merit remote education at a large scale. The findings of this study contribute to a growing body of knowledge of how underrepresented student populations adapt to crisis situations, contributing a framework for resilience in higher education during and after a crisis. The study also offers a theoretical contribution to how resilience is communicated and enacted in transitions in the context of higher education through its application of the Schlossberg's (1981, 1984, 1989, 2011) Transition Theory and Buzzanell's (2010, 2018) Communication Theory of Resilience. It is my hope that the findings will be used to inform efforts to build a more supportive and equitable higher education environment for this population of students, ensuring they receive the resources and assistance they need to thrive both during times of crisis and beyond, keeping in mind the long-lasting impacts of the pandemic on their learning and collegiate experience.

Conclusion

This chapter established the context, purpose, significance, and conceptual framework for this mixed methods study examining the experiences of first-generation college students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The unprecedented disruptions to higher education introduced a unique set of academic, social, and emotional challenges, particularly for students

with limited access to institutional resources and support systems. The integration of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) and Buzzanell's (2010) Communication Theory of Resilience provides a lens through which to understand how these students navigated significant change and adapted over time. This study seeks to address gaps in literature by documenting the lived experiences of first-generation students who began their college careers during the height of the pandemic and completed their studies in a post-pandemic environment. Findings from this research have the potential to inform institutional practices, enhance support services, and contribute to more equitable and responsive educational policies for first-generation college students in times of crisis and beyond.

The chapters that follow will provide a detailed exploration of this study's focus and findings. Chapter Two offers a comprehensive review of the literature surrounding first-generation college students, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, and the unique academic and social challenges faced by marginalized student populations during times of crisis. Chapter Three outlines the mixed-methods research design, detailing participant recruitment, data collection through surveys and interviews, and the analytical procedures used to interpret both qualitative and quantitative data, along with ethical considerations to ensure the study's credibility. Chapter Four presents the study's findings in two parts, beginning with students' perceptions of changes in campus life and academic engagement after returning to in-person learning, followed by an examination of the obstacles experienced during the pandemic, resilience strategies employed, and ongoing challenges. Finally, Chapter Five offers an in-depth discussion of these findings in relation to the research questions and existing literature, highlighting implications for institutional policies and practices that can better support first-generation college students in a post-pandemic world, while also providing recommendations for

future research and concluding reflections. Together, these chapters will illuminate the multifaceted experiences of first-generation students during a time of unprecedented disruption and change, contributing valuable insights for enhancing equity and success in higher education.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the first months of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic descended at such speed that almost immediately, universities closed campuses and moved classes to remote learning and virtual learning environments. Students had to rapidly adapt to different learning modes, including synchronous and asynchronous learning, in addition to managing stress prompted by the pandemic. The effects of COVID-19 intensified existing disparities that set first-generation college students (FGCS) apart from continuing-generation students, particularly in terms of academic, social, and financial resources (Kiebler & Stewart, 2021). Empirical research on FGCS in the U.S. has begun to focus on issues of enrollment, access, retention, and obstacles. However, research regarding the effects of the pandemic, of remote learning, and more specifically, on the long-term effects on learning, engagement, and college experience of FGCS remains minimal. This chapter includes an overview of the literature defining characteristics of first-generation college students as well as the transition to hybrid, remote, and virtual learning environments resulting from the pandemic and its effect on the higher education system and students, including FGCS at a four-year public institution.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for college students, especially for those from underrepresented backgrounds including first-generation college students. To understand how these students have navigated changes in this study, Schlossberg's (1981, 1984, 1989, 2011) Transition Theory and Buzzanell's (2010, 2018) Communication Theory of Resilience can be applied. Both theories provide valuable frameworks for understanding the obstacles students faced, their response, and the support structures they need to thrive in a post-pandemic world.

First-Generation College Students in the U.S.

First-generation college students are students whose parents' formal education has been limited to at most a high school education. These students are disproportionately overrepresented in the most disadvantaged groups relative to participation in higher education and less likely to attend and succeed in college (Engle, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Engle & Tinto, 2008). FGCS face a greater risk of being behind academically, socially, and financially compared to their peers who are continuing-generation students, making it more difficult to get into and through college (Engle, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004). According to a multivariate analysis, parents' education remains significant for gaining access to postsecondary education and for persistence and attainment of bachelor's degrees at four-year institutions (Choy, 2001). Studies suggest that FGCS are largely motivated to enroll in college as an attempt to improve their social, economic, and occupational standing (Ayala & Striplen, 2002). Unfortunately, the transition is not always smooth, as these students frequently experience culture shock through a different cultural experience with norms they are not accustomed to (Irlbeck et al., 2014). FGCS are more likely to be female, older, Black, or Hispanic. They tend to have dependent children and come from low-income families compared to their non-FGCS peers, each of these characteristics being independently associated with lower rates of college attendance and degree attainment (Engle, 2007).

Previous studies by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) indicated that FGCS are more likely to start at two-year institutions, reducing their chances of advancing and graduating from four-year institutions (Maietta, 2016). However, more recent research shows that FGCS account for a larger share of four-year enrollments, with 41.2 percent of 2016 NACE survey respondents identifying as FGCS (Eismann, 2016; Engle, 2007). As the

population of FGCS continues to grow, increasing awareness of their unique challenges is essential to effectively support their success. This section focuses on FGCS in relation to access, enrollment, and persistence in higher education and the obstacles faced as it pertains to access and retention. It will also provide insight into federal and institutional support currently in place to assist this population

Access to College and the Hidden Curriculum

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), only 48% of FGCS persisted in their studies from first to second year. This rate is lower compared to 67% for students whose parents earned a bachelor's degree and 53% for students whose parents completed some college (continuing-generation students). FGCS face significantly more challenges contributing to higher dropout risks, including delayed college entry, commuting, part-time enrollment, full-time employment, and the need to complete remedial coursework (Engle, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Additionally, FGCS are less likely than their continuing-generation peers to enroll in postsecondary education at all. For example, a longitudinal study found that 43% of students whose parents had no postsecondary education enrolled in college, compared to 74% of students whose parents earned a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001).

Gable (2021) explores the challenges FGCS face at elite institutions, focusing on the "hidden curriculum," the unspoken academic and social norms that influence success in higher education. Based on over 100 in-depth interviews, Gable finds that FGCS often lack access to informal knowledge such as building faculty relationships, navigating internships, and seeking academic support. This knowledge gap can contribute to feelings of imposter syndrome and unpreparedness. However, many FGCS develop adaptive strategies, especially when institutions provide mentorship, targeted programs, and inclusive policies.

Structural and cultural barriers significantly affect FGCS, a perspective particularly relevant when assessing the impact of remote learning, virtual learning environments, and social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Delgado (2020), through 25 in-depth interviews at a large Southern California research university, reveals that Latino/a FGCS often act as educational brokers for their younger siblings, redistributing cultural capital within immigrant families. This expands the concept of hidden curriculum to family dynamics, highlighting how FGCS transmit cultural capital despite emotional tensions and how these familial strategies may evolve under remote and hybrid learning conditions.

Engagement and Persistence

Student engagement and persistence are central to academic success, particularly for first-generation college students (FGCS) who may face unique social, cultural, and institutional barriers. Tinto's (1975, 1993) Theory of Student Departure explains why students leave college before completing their degree, highlighting the importance of academic and social integration in a student's college experience. Tinto's theory is often used to design support programs that improve retention, particularly by enhancing belonging and engagement. Tinto (2012) emphasizes that academic and social integration are central to student retention, with institutions bearing the responsibility to structure environments where students—especially underrepresented populations such as FGCS—can thrive.

Astin's (1984) Student Involvement Theory further underscores the critical role of engagement by linking student learning and development to the degree of physical and psychological energy invested in academic and extracurricular activities. His model illustrates that institutions must create structured opportunities that foster meaningful engagement. Kuh (2009) reinforces this perspective, noting that student engagement is strongly associated with

learning outcomes and persistence, and that institutions play a key role in shaping environments that promote deep involvement. This framework is particularly valuable for understanding how FGCS, who may face social or cultural barriers, can be disadvantaged if they are not guided or supported in involvement opportunities. Gable (2021) highlights that the hidden curriculum, unspoken academic and social norms, can further limit FGCS engagement by making it difficult to navigate resources, build faculty relationships, and access informal knowledge. Research shows that implementing intentional, transformative practices, such as scaffolded learning experiences, culturally responsive pedagogy, and structured mentorship, can enhance engagement, learning outcomes, and persistence for FGCS (Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021). Participation in structured federal and institutional programs, such as TRIO Student Support Services, has also been shown to improve persistence and academic achievement for FGCS, reinforcing the effectiveness of targeted support (Engle & Tinto, 2008; The Pell Institute, 2009).

This perspective is especially important when examining remote, hybrid, and virtual learning environments during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many traditional channels for engagement were disrupted, highlighting the critical need for intentional, equity-focused institutional practices. Despite these supports, many FGCS continue to encounter persistent obstacles that can limit their ability to fully benefit from engagement opportunities.

Obstacles and Challenges

First-generation college students often encounter unique barriers that influence academic persistence and engagement. Utilizing Social Cognitive Career Theory, Gibbons and Shoffner (2004) highlight several important findings regarding first-generation college students (FGCS) and their perceived barriers and supports while adjusting to college. The study finds that participants face challenges during the application process due to a lack of parental experience

and are more likely to leave college to attend to family obligations or for financial reasons. These students receive less emotional, informational, and financial support from their parents compared to continuing-generation or legacy students (Padgett et al., 2012). Using a mixed-methods design, Wittner et al. (2023) analyze both quantitative data on network structures and qualitative insights into students' experiences mobilizing resources such as information, emotional support, and mentorship. Their study demonstrates that FGCS often encounter both structural and navigational barriers in accessing and mobilizing social capital, which are critical for academic persistence. These challenges likely intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic as remote learning limited in-person interactions, underscoring the need to examine how digital environments impact FGCS social capital mobilization.

Kiebler and Stewart (2021) employ a creative Photovoice method to contrast pandemic experiences between first-generation/low-income and continuing-generation students. Their findings reveal that FGCS face significant environmental, psychological, and institutional challenges, ranging from inadequate study spaces and diminished support to heightened uncertainty about peer experiences. This study underscores how socioeconomic disparities shape COVID-19 learning environments and informs the current work by illuminating the multifaceted struggles FGCS endure during remote learning transitions.

Nguyen et al. (2024) examined how FGCS navigated institutional resources such as advising and programmatic support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their mixed-methods study of 524 undergraduates revealed that FGCS faced barriers including limited awareness, lack of access, and time constraints in using available resources. The authors also found that transparency about resources, proactive outreach from institutional figures, and holistic support for academic, personal, and professional development were especially helpful in supporting

FGCS. These findings highlight how equity-oriented practices in advising and programs can strengthen FGCS college experiences. Together, these studies illustrate how FGCS encounter persistent structural and institutional barriers that limit their access to resources, underscoring the importance of examining how broader federal and institutional support systems address these challenges.

Federal and Institutional Support for First-Generation College Students

The responsibility of preparing for major education disruptions and providing support to students falls on the institution, which should be aware of the unique challenges that can exacerbate existing barriers and have structures to provide programs that meet the needs of FGCS (Davis et al., 2021). Federal TRIO Programs, which provide services and benefits to high school and college students who are low-income and/or first-generation, are among the largest initiatives aimed at supporting college retention (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The TRIO Programs, including Student Support Services (SSS), emerged out of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and focus on retaining college students, providing academic, social, and mentoring support from first year through commencement (Bailey & Duquette, 2014; Bennett et al., 2021; Engle & Tinto, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). SSS participants experience improved persistence, retention, and academic achievement, highlighting the effectiveness of structured support for FGCS (The Pell Institute, 2009; Engle & Tinto, 2008). These outcomes underscore the obligation of colleges and universities to proactively invest in programs that close equity gaps for first-generation students rather than relying solely on federal initiatives. Research shows that transformative institutional and classroom practices, such as targeted mentorship, inclusive pedagogies, and structured academic support, can significantly enhance FGCS academic success and persistence (Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021). Understanding this

institutional responsibility provides critical context for examining how the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted support structures and magnified challenges for FGCS.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

At the micro level, epidemics of acute contagious diseases can disrupt families and communities by creating economic hardship, increasing caregiving burdens, and reducing access to education and social supports (UNICEF, 2020), while also straining educational systems and limiting students' opportunities for consistent learning (Kekić & Miladinović, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected daily life, with education being one of the most disrupted sectors (Karaköse, 2021; Hodges et al., 2020). Government-mandated social distancing, school closures, and the transition to remote learning dramatically changed teaching and learning across K-12 and higher education (Keyserlingk et al., 2022; Kiebler & Stewart, 2021). Students faced challenges in remote learning, including limited access to technology, lack of quiet study spaces, and reduced social interaction (Bao, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020). The pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting FGCS, low-income, and minority students who experienced greater financial stress, food insecurity, and mental health challenges (Crawford et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020). The sudden shift disrupted academic engagement and persistence, complicating students' ability to maintain motivation. Quarantine measures introduced significant psychological strain, including stress, confusion, and anger (Brooks et al., 2020). These stressors, compounded by inadequate information, financial strain, and social isolation, created a context in which many FGCS navigated academic and personal challenges, highlighting the urgent need for targeted support systems. Research suggests that access to social support can mitigate some of these mental health challenges, buffering stress and reducing internalizing problems during the pandemic (Balkundi & Fredrick, 2023).

Emergency Remote Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic quickly interrupted education, resulting in the reshaping of the delivery of education. The global education community had to adapt to the emergency remote learning environment while meeting the teaching and learning needs of teachers and students (Karakose, 2021; Tesar, 2020). The traditional landscape of teaching and learning changed due to COVID-19 as face-to-face interactions moved to online learning formats (Armoed, 2021). Institutions with higher rates of residential students and minimal online curriculum caused the most dramatic shifts and required significant adaptation by students; first-generation college students (FGCS) had to adjust to moving and living back home and then continue their learning in an often 100% online format (Kiebler & Stewart, 2021).

Out of the necessity created by the pandemic, there was enhanced digitalization of teaching and learning practices, which may be promising for hybrid learning environments that offer student autonomy and flexibility (Armoed, 2021). In fall 2020, a survey of 3,000 institutions found that 44% were fully or primarily online, 21% operated in a hybrid format, and 23% were primarily in person (Nierenberg & Pasick, 2020). While the rapid shift to digital and hybrid learning environments presented opportunities for greater flexibility and autonomy, it also highlighted significant disparities in access and preparedness, particularly for FGCS navigating remote learning under economic, familial, and mental health pressures.

Issues and Barriers Related to Learning Due to COVID-19

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium conducted a survey of almost 29,000 undergraduates from nine institutions who identified as first-generation college students (FGCS) and found that these students experienced more challenges adapting to emergency remote learning in addition to financial hardships, food insecurity, and mental health

concerns (Soria et al., 2020). Barber et al. (2021) highlight that while the shift to remote research-based learning during COVID-19 posed universal challenges, such as increased workloads and reduced focus, it disproportionately affected FGCS and underrepresented minority students through greater familial responsibilities, economic and food insecurity, and digital inequities. This study also demonstrates the importance of incorporating student voice in designing remote curricula. Öztok (2019), drawing on critical pedagogy and ethnographic research, demonstrates that online learning is not always as fair or inclusive as it seems. Using interviews and observations, Öztok found that students from marginalized backgrounds often feel pressured to hide parts of their identities to fit in. In virtual classrooms, the culture of the majority (usually white, middle-class) is treated as the “normal” way to be. This makes students who are different feel like they do not fully belong, a phenomenon Öztok calls social absence.

Ferri et al. (2020) analyze global expert input and Italian educational data to demonstrate that emergency remote teaching during COVID-19 was hampered by technological, pedagogical, and social barriers. These challenges included poor internet, limited device access, low digital literacy, fragmented instructional design, weakened motivation and social interaction, and home environments unsuitable for sustained learning. It is important to consider how institutional decisions, including training, infrastructure, and policy, shape learner outcomes, which are essential when examining FGCS support. Bissessar (2021) compiles global case studies on emergency remote education, underscoring the interplay between learner experience, instructor readiness, and institutional governance. Common issues such as lack of digital training, isolation, and quality concerns mirror those impacting FGCS during the pandemic.

COVID-19 Mental Health Concerns

Gupta and Agrawal (2021) provide qualitative evidence of significant mental health challenges faced by college students during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the psychological toll of academic uncertainty and social isolation. Balkundi and Fredrick (2023) further emphasize that social support can buffer the effects of COVID-related stress and internalizing problems, which is particularly relevant for FGCS navigating economic and familial responsibilities. For FGCS, these stressors may be compounded by economic and familial responsibilities, emphasizing the need to consider mental health impacts when assessing pandemic-related effects on student success. A recent longitudinal survey at a large public institution found an overall increase in study-related stress levels following the pandemic's onset, which impacted students' learning environments, increasing ambiguity while limiting controllability of life events (Keyserlingk et al., 2022). The disruption of being sent home from college unexpectedly, signaling "a new and unusual danger" in addition to dealing with staying healthy and meeting the increased demand for technology to continue learning caused stress, becoming a mental health challenge (Kiebler & Stewart, 2021). With this rising danger, keeping themselves and their families healthy became a major concern. While COVID-19 did not discriminate who became infected, family economic resources largely influenced exposure, treatment, and protection (Armoed, 2021).

Conceptual Framework

This study employs an integrated conceptual framework that combines Schlossberg's (1981, 1984, 1989, 2011) Transition Theory with Buzzanell's (2010, 2018) Communication Theory of Resilience (CTR). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens to examine the transitional experiences and reintegration of first-generation college students during the

COVID-19 pandemic. The framework foregrounds the interplay of individual characteristics, social support, adaptive strategies, and communication processes, enabling a nuanced exploration of how students navigated disruptions, developed resilience, and adapted to changes in both academic and social environments.

To illustrate the application of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to this context, Table 2.1 presents an integrated conceptual model that maps the theory’s key components—the “4 S” model of situation, self, support, and strategies—across two phases: the pandemic period and the post-pandemic transition. The framework highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted academic routines, social interactions, and personal circumstances; how students’ internal resources and coping mechanisms (self) were mobilized; the critical role of social and institutional support systems (support); and the adaptive strategies employed to manage these unprecedented challenges.

Given evidence that quarantine and pandemic-related restrictions contributed to long-lasting psychological strain (Brooks et al., 2020), exploring how first-generation students developed resilience during this period aligns with theoretical approaches that emphasize coping with transitions and constructing pathways to adaptation. As students transitioned into the post-pandemic phase, the framework shows how these elements evolved, with a shift toward returning to campus under altered academic and social dynamics. This shift required continued adaptation of coping skills and strategies, while support systems also changed in form and function to reflect ongoing institutional adjustments and renewed peer and faculty engagement.

Readers are encouraged to consult Table 2.1 to understand how these theoretical components interact with the lived realities of first-generation students, offering insight into the

complex and dynamic nature of their resilience and academic persistence through disruptive change.

Communication Theory of Resilience

The Communication Theory of Resilience (CTR) posits that resilience is activated by a trigger event such as disaster, loss, or trauma and explains the communicative processes individuals engage in to establish a “new normal” (Buzzanell, 2018). In this study, the COVID-19 pandemic represented such a trigger when, in March 2020, educational institutions worldwide closed and shifted to emergency remote learning, a disruption deemed the largest education crisis in modern history (Karaköse, 2021; Kiebler & Stewart, 2021; Smalley, 2020). This shift raised concerns about access, quality of education, and student performance.

CTR emphasizes that resilience is not an innate trait but a communicative process by which individuals, families, and communities “snap back” from adversity through shared meaning-making and interaction (Buzzanell, 2010, 2018; Coutu, 2002). Buzzanell (2010) identifies five core communicative processes during disruption: (a) crafting normalcy, (b) affirming identity anchors, (c) maintaining and using communication networks, (d) putting alternative logics to work, and (e) legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action.

Building on this, Scharp et al. (2021) used Thematic Content Analysis to explore resilience triggers and processes among 44 first-generation college students (FGCS). Their findings reveal resilience triggers including financial hardship, inadequate university infrastructure, canceled social or career opportunities, and home-school conflicts. The pandemic amplified existing inequities, compelling students to engage in communicative resilience practices to craft new normalcies.

CTR's multi-layered model situates the individual at the center of interacting layers of family, community, and socio-cultural systems with resilience shaped through belief systems (meaning-making, hope), organizational processes (flexibility, resources), and communication practices (emotional sharing, problem-solving). This dynamic framework highlights resilience as evolving through ongoing communicative interactions within social and environmental contexts. In higher education, CTR offers a powerful lens for understanding how FGCS use dialogue, storytelling, and relational support to interpret challenges, manage stress, and sustain academic persistence amid the pandemic's disruptions.

Transition Theory

Schlossberg's (1981, 1984, 1989, 2011) Transition Theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals adapt to significant life changes or transitions. This theory is especially useful for examining how FGCS managed the sudden and multifaceted transition triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Central to the theory is the "4 S" model—situation, self, support, and strategies—which emphasizes that both individual characteristics and contextual factors influence how people experience and cope with transitions.

For FGCS, the pandemic-induced shift to emergency remote learning was not merely an academic change but a complex life transition intensified by factors such as limited social capital, increased family and caregiving responsibilities, and systemic institutional barriers. These factors often created additional stressors that complicated their adjustment. Schlossberg's framework allows for a nuanced analysis of how these students perceived their situation, the personal and psychological resources they brought to the transition (self), the availability and quality of social and institutional supports (support), and the coping strategies they employed.

By applying this theory, the study gains insight into both the obstacles FGCS encountered and the adaptive responses that facilitated their academic persistence during emergency remote learning. This approach highlights the interplay between challenges and resilience, underscoring the importance of targeted support systems and adaptive strategies in promoting successful outcomes.

To provide a clearer understanding of how Schlossberg’s Transition Theory applies to the experiences of FGCS during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, Table 2.1 presents an integrated conceptual framework. This framework maps the key elements of the “4 S” model—situation, self, support, and strategies—onto two distinct phases: the pandemic period and the post-pandemic transition. The table highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted multiple facets of students’ lives, including academic routines, social interactions, and personal circumstances. It also illustrates the personal resources and coping mechanisms (self), the critical role of social and institutional support systems (support), and the adaptive strategies students employed to manage these unprecedented changes.

As students moved into the post-pandemic phase, the framework shows how these elements evolved. The situation shifted toward a return to campus with altered academic and social dynamics, requiring students to continue adapting their coping skills and strategies. Meanwhile, support systems also changed in form and function, reflecting ongoing institutional adjustments and renewed peer and faculty engagement.

Table 2.1 illustrates how the theoretical components of transition interact with the practical realities faced by FGCS, clarifying the multifaceted nature of their experiences and resilience throughout these phases.

Table 2.1*Integrated Conceptual Framework*

Transition	Element	Details
COVID-19 Pandemic	<i>Situation</i>	COVID-19 pandemic disrupts academic, social, and personal lives.
	<i>Self</i>	First-generation students' coping strategies, resilience, and personal resources.
	<i>Support</i>	Social networks (family, peers, faculty) and institutional resources.
	<i>Strategies</i>	Adaptive strategies (e.g., emergency remote learning, virtual communication, mental health coping mechanisms).
Post-Pandemic	<i>Situation</i>	Return to campus with changes in academic and social dynamics.
	<i>Self</i>	Students continue to rely on and adapt their coping mechanisms.
	<i>Support</i>	Institutional support systems, peer interactions, and faculty/staff engagement.
	<i>Strategies</i>	New adaptive strategies for navigating post-pandemic academic and social environments.

Key constructs in this study include resilience triggers, communication, adaptation, and perceptions of campus life. Resilience triggers refer to the major challenges FGCS faced during the pandemic and in their return to campus, such as isolation, health concerns, and academic struggles. Communication plays a crucial role in resilience-building, with peer support, faculty interaction, and family communication helping students navigate these challenges. Adaptation involves the evolving coping strategies that students developed to manage transitions, including adjustments to new learning environments and social dynamics. Finally, perceptions of campus life focus on how students view academic and social changes in a post-pandemic world, particularly regarding institutional responses and the support they receive from their college or university. These constructs are central to understanding how FGCS managed the disruptions caused by the pandemic and adapted to the changes in campus life afterward.

Conclusion

In summary, Chapter 2 reviewed the existing literature on first-generation college students, focusing on their unique challenges related to access, persistence, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While significant insights have been gained into the barriers these students face, such as limited social capital, financial constraints, and the complexities of emergency remote learning, there are still gaps in understanding how these factors interact over time and across different contexts. Additionally, the evolving nature of support systems and adaptive strategies during and after the pandemic calls for further exploration. Chapter 3 will build on this foundation by outlining the research design and methods used in this study to explore these questions in greater depth.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

This mixed-methods study aimed to explore and share the personal, academic, and social experiences of first-generation college students whose education and lives were abruptly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The abrupt disruption not only affected higher education but all aspects of life across the world and merits consideration of the magnification of the already existing needs, obstacles and challenges facing first-generation college students. This study provides in-depth look into the experiences and reflections of first-generation college students (FGCS) during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter presents the methodology pertaining to how the following research questions were studied:

1. What obstacles (i.e., resilience triggers) did first-generation college students experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. How did first-generation college students navigate/respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What obstacles do first-generation college students continue to face after returning to campus?
 - a. How did first-generation college students navigate/respond to these challenges after returning to campus?
3. How has campus life (academic and social) changed?
 - a. What are the perceptions of first-generation college students of academic and social life on campus in a post-pandemic world?
 - b. What type of additional support may first-generation students benefit from?

Research Design Overview and Rationale

A mixed methods design was suited for this study as it provides the “breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” to understand the individual experiences of FGCS students and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 123). Recognized as the third major research method, along with qualitative research and quantitative research, mixed methods research is an intellectual and practical synthesis; it involves mixing qualitative and quantitative elements within a single study (Johnson et al., 2007). The strength of a mixed methods research design derives significantly from drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research resulting in better contextualized measurement instruments, different perspectives, and a “more complete understanding of changes needed for a marginalized group” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 298). An exploratory sequential design involves three phases: qualitative data collection and analysis, identifying features for testing, and quantitatively testing the feature designed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Initial exploration through qualitative analysis can be expected to result in quotes, codes, and themes to produce a culturally sensitive instrument (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Study Setting

The study sought students from selective public institutions in California. The third largest state in the U.S., California, with a population of almost 40 million and has over 146 public colleges and universities. The University of California System, established in 1869, consists of 10 campuses, five medical centers, over 150 academic disciplines, and 600 graduate degree programs with more than 238,000 students and over 1.7 million alumni; it is one of the best and most selective public university systems (The Regents of the University of California). In U.S. News & World Report’s 2020 rankings, five UCs stood among the top 10 public

universities in the country for undergraduate education; all nine UCs are among the nation's top 50 public universities. In fact, UC campuses stood out with respect to "advancing social mobility." UC Riverside, UC Santa Cruz and UC Irvine sweeping the top three spots in this category, and other campus also ranked: UC Merced at No. 7, UC Davis and UC Santa Barbara tied at No. 9, UCLA at No. 13, UC San Diego at No. 21, and UC Berkeley at No. 70. (UC Newsroom, 2019). University of California campuses have a significantly higher proportion of first-generation students than other selective public universities and more than the national average of four-year colleges. Roughly 42 percent of undergraduates throughout the University of California are first-generation students (UCOP, 2017). There is a unique value of a UC degree; it is expected to enhance one's job prospects and income. In 2015, UC first-generation graduates surpassed both the median income of California residents with a high school degree alone two years after graduation and the median for all of California bachelor's degree holders after seven years.

Study Participants

Participants for this study were enrolled at the target institution while pursuing a bachelor's degree with senior standing or graduating by Summer 2024. These students experienced their first year remotely during the pandemic and did not experience an open campus until their sophomore year. Transfer students were excluded, since these students would have had less time to experience the institution. The eligibility criteria were as follows:

- First-generation college student (neither parent/guardian has earned a four-year college degree)
- Entered UC Irvine as a First-Time Freshman
- Current senior standing

- Enrolled at UC Irvine both before the pandemic closure and after the re-opening/return to campus

The target sample size for the qualitative portion of the study was 7-8 students, while the target sample size for the qualitative part was 40-50 responses. Qualitative data collection was smaller than quantitative; “the goal of qualitative data collection is to obtain information from a small sample and develop an instrument to sample a larger N to infer meaningful statistical results from samples to a population” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 301).

Recruitment and Access

Originally, the Director of Student Success Initiatives (SSI) sent the invitation to 2,474 students who met the eligibility criteria: first-generation, currently enrolled as seniors, entered the university as freshman in Fall 2020. Students received an email with a link to fill out the survey and be entered in a random drawing for a chance to win one (1) of twenty (20) \$10 Amazon electronic gift cards. The communication also included information about the option to participate in an interview to receive a \$25 Amazon electronic gift card. Unfortunately, after several weeks, this approach yielded zero responses. Therefore, I pursued an alternative approach in which all individuals who completed the survey would receive a gift card. The SSI Director of Student Success Initiatives (SSI) sent an updated study invitation (see Appendix A) message to batches of randomly selected students. A total of 280 students were re-contacted, and 39 of these students (14%) completed the survey. Oral consent (see Appendix B) was obtained from the seven students who completed the individual follow-up interview. Throughout the recruitment process, confidence was maintained that all individuals contacted would be eligible.

Data Collection

Qualitative data collection was conducted through surveys and interviews of recent graduates who identify as FGCS. The major topics addressed in both the questionnaire and interview questions included the following: Pre-pandemic: First-Generation College Student Experience, Disruption: COVID-19 and Remote Learning, “New Normal”: Return to Campus, and Reflection: Resilience and A New Campus Experience. Methods are further described in the following sections.

Structured Questionnaire

The structured questionnaire used in this study was designed to gather both demographic and experiential data from participants who began their undergraduate studies at UCI in Fall 2020 as first-generation college students. The survey was conducted on Qualtrics and included a mix of multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions. It took approximately 20 minutes to complete and was divided into several key sections to capture students’ academic, personal, and social experiences during and after the COVID-19 campus closure.

The questionnaire began with four eligibility screening questions to confirm participants met the study criteria, followed by a single item of voluntary consent and seven demographic questions (e.g., age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, residency status, graduation term, major, and minor). Participants were then asked to provide an email address for incentive distribution.

The main body of the questionnaire was structured around two time periods: (1) participants' first academic year at UCI (2020–2021) during the pandemic campus closure, and (2) their experiences after campus reopened beginning in Fall 2021. Each section included a consistent set of themes to allow for comparison over time:

- Academic and social difficulties (e.g., navigating campus, finding community)

- Utilization of campus resources and support services
- Perceived quality of experience with resources and networks
- Support from individuals and social networks
- Satisfaction with availability and access to services
- Preferred modality of engagement (e.g., in-person, remote, hybrid)

Each of these thematic categories contained a series of Likert-style questions, totaling over 60 items per time-period, to assess the frequency of use, satisfaction, and quality of experience with various campus services and personal support systems.

In addition to these closed-ended items, the survey included two open-ended questions—one about challenges encountered during the participants' first academic year at UCI and another about challenges faced since returning to campus post-pandemic. These questions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences in their own words, offering context and depth to the quantitative data.

At the conclusion of the survey, participants were invited to indicate their interest in participating in a follow-up one-on-one interview. They were asked to provide contact information (email and phone number) for scheduling purposes. All students who completed the survey questionnaire received a \$10 Amazon electronic gift card.

In total, the questionnaire consisted of 143 distinct items, covering both eligibility and consent, demographic information, structured Likert-scale responses, open-ended questions, and follow-up interest. This comprehensive instrument was designed to capture a wide range of student experiences, supports, and challenges related to the transition into and out of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Student Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven of the students who had completed the questionnaire. This approach allowed for probing and expansion into individual experiences. The intent was to gain insights into first-generation students' experiences in relation to how their personal, academic, and social lives were impacted by COVID-19 and answer the three main research questions including the sub-questions. The interviews were conducted via Zoom; participants had the option of turning their camera on or off (but the interviewer remained on camera throughout). Each interview lasted up to 60 minutes and was recorded on two devices; notes were also taken by hand. The real-time AI transcription service, *OtterAi*, was utilized to capture audio from the Zoom meeting and generate transcripts within 24 hours, allowing the transcripts to be compared against handwritten notes. Questions were made available through the chat feature in Zoom, allowing participants to follow along and support any persons with auditory issues. Students who completed the interview process received a \$25 Amazon electronic gift card.

During interviews, participants were asked about their academic and social experiences during college, pre- during and post-pandemic. The semi-structured interview protocol included 29 questions organized in four parts: First-year and First-Gen Experience, COVID Closure & Remote Learning, Return to Campus, and Reflection (see Appendix D). Participants were asked about their transition to UCI and their experience as a first-generation college student. There were questions about the emotions, obstacles, and changes experienced because of the pandemic closure; students were asked about their housing situation, campus involvement and academics. Finally, participants were asked to reflect on the “new normal” having returned to campus and share about their experiences as well as suggestions to administrators.

The interview protocol was piloted with 3 current students from different years who completed at least one full year of college virtually to gather insight for survey and interview questions.

Data Analysis

Analysis of Structured Questionnaire

The quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using the statistical software program JASP (JASP Team, 2025). Responses were summarized with frequency distributions. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to examine differences in perspectives (ratings of satisfaction, supports, and challenges) during the students' first year (when instruction was remote) and after returning to campus.

Analysis of Student Interviews

The audio from individual interviews was recorded and transcribed using Otter AI. The data was analyzed for themes and patterns related to the research question constructs. All information gathered from interviews and surveys were coded and categorized using Microsoft Excel. The responses were summarized and organized across the following themes: Navigation, Social Integration, Mental Health, Major/Career Development/Success, Remote Learning/Academics or In-Person Learning/Academics, and COVID-19 Concerns.

The analysis consisted of looking for themes and patterns across the surveys and interviews in relation to the impacts of the pandemic as well as the RQs. The quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using JASP. Responses were summarized with frequency distributions. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to examine differences in perspectives (ratings of satisfaction, supports, and challenges) during the students' first year (when instruction was remote) and after returning to campus.

Ethical Considerations and Role Management

I worked diligently to build and maintain relationships and to establish my primary role as a researcher to ensure success and credibility. To safeguard participants' confidentiality, participants' identifying information—name, title, email, phone and school name—has been omitted from all final reports. All interviewees and survey participants consented to participate. The audio recordings, transcripts, and any other documents with potentially identifying information will be deleted upon study completion.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The biggest threats to this study include personal bias, the validity of self-reported data, reactivity, and the small sample size, which limits generalization to other settings. As a former first-generation college student, I am very invested and passionate about the subject matter. I came into this study with my own bias regarding the impacts of the pandemic, remote learning, hybrid delivery of education and events and what constitutes adequate support during global disruption. That said, it was important to not influence the participants or the evaluation process of the information during the data collection process. Furthermore, since my study deals with perceptions of students, it was important to obtain first-hand, self-reported data. I was extremely intentional about the questions I asked and how I delivered them, in particular, I sought to avoid leading questions. There may have been some reactivity, as students may have been embarrassed or intimidated to be honest about their struggles or obstacles during the pandemic. Students may have responded in the way they expected the interviewer wanted. Throughout the study, I tried to be clear about my intent and alleviate any perceived pressure or hesitation. For the survey, I limited the number of open-ended questions and used 5-point Likert scale questions. Lastly, since this study is to be a mixed methods research study, the goal was to acquire a greater

response sample from the survey questionnaire while having a smaller sample size for the interviews. Given the size and composition of the sample, I am not able to generalize these results to rural, small, private, or community colleges. To ensure systematic data analysis, I used standardized protocols and coding procedures.

Conclusion

This chapter presents the methodology for this mixed methods study, which explored first-generation graduates' experiences and their perception of the level of support and resources with the specific context of the pandemic and subsequent return to campus. This study will enhance the understanding of not only how first-generation college students were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the abrupt transition to remote learning, but also serves to indicate, how institutions can better equip themselves to create an engaging and supportive environment in a post-pandemic world.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from this study, which explores the challenges faced by first-generation college students (FGCS) during their transition to online learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and their subsequent return to in-person campus life. Data were collected through a mixed-methods approach employing surveys and interviews with students who started college in Fall 2020. Students who began their collegiate journey as first-time freshmen in Fall 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic faced a unique set of challenges and adaptations with lasting effects on their academic and social experiences. The findings address the three research questions which explore: (1) the obstacles encountered during the transition to remote learning, (2) the difficulties faced upon returning to campus, and (3) the overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic closures on campus life and collegiate experiences.

Characteristics of the Sample

A total of 2,297 students met the eligibility criteria, which involved being a first-generation college student who first attended the institution as a first-time freshman in Fall 2020 and was currently at senior standing. A total of 280 students were randomly selected from the pool of eligible students and were sent an invitation to participate in the study. Students were given one week from the time of the invitation to complete the survey before the link expired. The questionnaire was completed by 39 respondents (14% of those invited), and 30 of those respondents also indicated interest in being interviewed. All 30 interested respondents received an invitation to sign up for an interview via SignUp Genius. Ultimately, only seven students responded and scheduled interviews.

Of the 280 eligible FGCS invited to participate in the survey, 39 completed it, yielding a 14% response rate. While modest, this rate is not uncommon for online surveys in higher education, which typically range from 10% to 30% depending on recruitment methods and participant populations (Siegle, 2024). In some meta-analyses of education research, average response rates are higher, around 44.1%, particularly when strategies such as pre-contact and reminders are used (Wu et al., 2022). Importantly, the mixed-methods design of this study—with both quantitative survey and qualitative interviews—supports the robustness of findings through methodological triangulation (Carter et al., 2014).

Survey Participant Overview

Table 4.1 presents the demographic breakdown of the 39 study participants. All participants entered the university in Fall 2020 and were California residents for tuition purposes. The majority were 21 years old (59%), with 41% being 22 years old. Gender identification was predominantly female (79.5%), followed by male (15.4%) and non-conforming/gender variant/non-binary (5.1%). Ethnic diversity was notable, with 43.6% identifying as Asian, 35.9% as Hispanic or Latino, 5.1% as White, and 15.4% identifying with two or more categories.

Table 4.2 outlines the academic disciplines of the participants, highlighting a strong inclination toward majors in the life sciences and behavioral and social sciences. Among the 39 students, 29 pursued a single major, nine a double major, and two a triple major. The most common majors included Biological Sciences (17.9%), Sociology (15.4%), Criminology, Law, and Society (12.8%), and Psychological Science (12.8%). This distribution reflects the participants' academic interests and can provide context for interpreting their experiences and perspectives.

Table 4.1*Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (n=39)*

	n	%
Entry Term		
Fall 2020	39	100.0
Graduation Term		
Spring 2024	33	84.6
Fall 2024	1	2.6
Winter 2024	2	5.1
Summer 2024	4	10.3
Age		
21 years old	23	59.0
22 years old	16	41.0
Residency Status		
California resident for tuition purposes	39	100.0
Gender Identification		
Female	31	79.5
Male	6	15.4
Non-conforming/Gender Variant/Non-binary	2	5.1
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	17	43.6
Hispanic or Latino	14	35.9
White	2	5.1
Two or more categories	6	15.4

Table 4.2*Academic Majors of Study Participants (n=39)*

	n	%
Biological Sciences	7	17.9
Sociology	6	15.4
Criminology, Law, and Society (CLS)	5	12.8
Psychological Science	5	12.8
Psychology	4	10.3
Business Administration	3	7.7
Computer Science	3	7.7
Political Science	3	7.7
Public Health Science	3	7.7
Chemistry	2	5.1
Chicano/Latino Studies	2	5.1
Anthropology	1	2.6
Biomedical Engineering	1	2.6
Comparative Literature	1	2.6
Computer Engineering	1	2.6
Earth System Sciences	1	2.6
Education Sciences	1	2.6
Environmental Science and Policy	1	2.6
Film and Media Studies	1	2.6
Informatics	1	2.6
Social Policy & Public Service	1	2.6

Note. 9 students indicated a double major; 2 students indicated a triple major

Interview Participant Introductions

This section introduces the seven participants who were interviewed as part of this study. Each introduction includes participant's pseudonym, age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, major and graduation term. Table 4.3 provides detailed profiles of the seven interview participants, offering a more in-depth understanding of individual backgrounds. The participants varied in age, gender identity, race/ethnicity, major, and graduation term, reflecting a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. This diversity enriches the qualitative data collected and enhances the study's ability to capture a broad spectrum of student experiences.

Table 4.3

Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants (n=7)

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity	Major	Graduation
Benjamin	21	Non-Conforming / Gender Variant / Non-Binary	Asian	Computer Science	Spring 2024
Kayla	22	Female	White	Biological Sciences	Spring 2024
Caleb	21	Male	Asian	Business Administration	Summer 2024
Sofia	21	Female	Asian	Environmental Science and Policy	Spring 2024
Amaya	21	Female	Asian, Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	Psychological Sciences	Spring 2024
Janelle	21	Female	Asian	Computer Science	Spring 2024
Olivia	21	Female	Hispanic / Latino	Social Policy & Public Service; Sociology; Chicano Latino Studies	Spring 2024

Benjamin was 21-years old, Asian, and identified as non-conforming/gender variant/non-binary. They are a computer science major with a graduation term of Spring 2024.

Kayla was a 22-year old White female with a major in Biological Sciences; their graduation term was Spring 2024.

Caleb was a 21-year old Asian male with a major in Business administration; their graduation term was Summer 2024.

Sofia was a 21-year old Asian female majoring in Environment Science and Policy with a graduate term dater of Spring 2024.

Amaya was 21-year old whose race/ethnicity was Asian and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and whose gender identity was female. Her major was Psychological Sciences and she planned to graduate in Spring 2024.

Janelle was a 21-year old Asian female with a Computer Science major, graduating in Spring 2024.

Olivia was a 21-year old Hispanic/Latino female triple majoring in Social Policy & Public Service, Sociology, and Chicano Latino Studies; her graduation term was Spring 2024.

The demographic and academic data presented in Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 are crucial for contextualizing the study's findings. They provide a clear picture of the participant pool, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the research results. Understanding the backgrounds of participants helps in identifying patterns and variations in experiences, ensuring that the study's conclusions are both valid and applicable to the broader student population.

Having established the demographic and academic profile of the participants above, the stage is set to explore the core findings of this study. These demographic insights provide essential context to understand how first-generation college students navigated the unprecedented shift to remote learning. With this foundation in place, the following section addresses Research Question #1: What obstacles did first-generation students face during their

first academic year under pandemic conditions? The analysis will examine key challenges such as the abrupt transition from high school to college, reduced academic rigor, social isolation, limited awareness of available resources, technical difficulties, and the varied perceptions of remote learning's benefits and drawbacks.

Findings Related to Research Question #1: Obstacles Faced by First-Generation College Students During First Academic Year

The first research question examines the obstacles first-generation college students (FGCS) encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic as they navigated the transition to online courses. The shift to remote learning posed multiple challenges for FGCS, including a lack of a meaningful transition from high school to college, reduced academic rigor, social isolation, unawareness of available resources, technical difficulties, and mixed perceptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of remote learning.

Transition Challenges

A theme amongst participants was the “unexpected” nature of the pandemic and the resulting “lack of transition.” Amaya stated, “It wasn't something that I would have expected or something that I knew how to handle as like the pandemic was starting.” Students indicated that the transition to remote learning felt like an extension of high school rather than significant shift. They did not feel a true transition from high school to college as all classes were remote which they attended from home, just as they did while in high school. The experience of attending classes from home meant that the usual concerns about transitioning to college were mitigated to some degree, as students were able to maintain familiar routines and, in some cases, stay connected with high school friends. Caleb indicated, “It wasn't much of a transition, because it just kind of felt like I was going back to high school online because all my classes are on

Canvas,” while Sofia said, “there were no major life changes that I went through during the transition from high school to college because it was just me staying home.” Many students looked forward to a traditional first-year college experience of living on-campus and attending classes in-person, but the pandemic depleted all hope of what was expected.

Lack of Social Connections and Social Isolation

The traditional college experience typically consists of living on-campus, attending in-person classes, and developing connections with peers, staff and faculty, elements that were largely inaccessible to students during Fall 2020. Several students reported challenges in establishing social connections at UCI during their first year while courses were remote. Amaya vividly described the immense impact of the pandemic on their social life: “my social life was basically dead under the pandemic.” They added how they really “missed out on a real freshman experience,” reflecting on how

I never got to live on-campus. So, I never really got to dorm I never really got to have like a dorm mate or like floor made stuff like that. And I never really got to do like the little things like have an RA or you know, use the community restroom and go downstairs to like the dining hall and stuff like that.

Sofia mentioned, “I was the most challenged socially just because I was very looking forward to like going on campus and walking to classes and talking to classmates and hopefully making new friends here. But I wasn't able to do that.” Benjamin said, “I didn't really make any friends through college because it was, you know, after the Zoom is done everyone just disconnects.” The terms “alienating” and “lonely” came up often during interviews, with Amaya sharing,

I feel like I never really felt like a sense of community. My first year, it just felt like I was going through high school 2.0 without any of like, the social benefits of high school like I couldn't really make friends. I couldn't see friends. It was very alienating and so I spent a lot more time just like, just like online and trying to find ways to entertain myself there.

However, a few students pointed out that it was comforting and helpful to make connections with people who shared a similar experience and that some courses or advisors would create opportunity for them to connect with others online. Caleb discussed how “the career advisors and other staff had group meetings with breakout rooms where you would like, just meet people... I think just being able to meet people through those resources was a way that helped me.” The transition to remote learning had a significant impact on students' ability to form meaningful social connections and integrate into the campus community. While students acknowledged the attempts made by the institution, staff and faculty, the findings emphasize how essential in-person interactions are for social and academic development.

Family Dynamic

Unlike the traditional college experience, students had to complete their first year of college at their family homes while managing family life, academics, and social life. For some students, the pandemic intensified family-related stressors beyond academics. One student described how their first-year experience was shaped less by COVID-19 itself and more by the 2020 election, with many responses centering on political disagreements with parents. The campus closure amplified the salience of these conflicts, as in-person engagement outside the home was not possible.

Students' family members, particularly those without college experience, often did not understand the challenges of remote learning. This frequently led to a lack of support or

understanding. Five out of the seven interviewees referenced their parents' lack of knowledge and experience as a challenge in navigating college, particularly in the first year. Caleb shared, "I kind of had to navigate most of the things myself as my parents didn't necessarily have that expertise," and Janelle reflected, "It's very difficult for me to relate to my parents and like tell them what's going on a lot of times because they have very different experiences than I have." While living at home offered financial relief and a sense of security, it also brought challenges such as lack of privacy, interruptions during classes, and difficulty separating academic and personal life. For example, Amaya reported, "I feel like a lot of the time like even though I was in Zoom meetings, my parents would open the door and come in, not really understanding." The lack of understanding and support from family members compounded the challenges of navigating college, leading first-generation college students to manage their academic and social lives largely on their own during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Support and Access to Resources

The online nature of not only courses, but also programs and services, resulted in students feeling like they did not know what was available. Sofia admitted, "I didn't necessarily seek out like, on campus resources just because I wasn't aware of any of them during my first year." Similarly, Olivia shared, "I did statistics my first year, so I need to help on that because my professor, well, I couldn't really like talk to him. I couldn't ask questions in class because everything was through zoom."

Support systems during the first year of college, particularly amid the pandemic, were multifaceted and crucial for students' well-being. Even in cases where not previously strong, family connections became a source of significant emotional and practical support. Hometown

and high school friends provided continuity and comfort through virtual means. Caleb shared that their high school friend who attended different colleges were also home and

even though we were like quarantine we, I was able to like call them and, you know, just, I guess, share my experiences of like the first few weeks of college with them, and just be able to just hear how they're doing to it.

These experiences underscore the importance of both personal connections and institutional support in navigating the transition to college life.

Academic Adaptation and Remote Learning

The transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly shaped students' early academic experiences, often undermining the rigor and engagement they had anticipated in college. Several participants shared that their first-year coursework did not align with the expectations set by their high school teachers, who had warned them that college would be far more difficult. Instead, students described a lack of challenge, basic content, and minimal engagement. As Kayla explained, "There was an expectation that was set by my high school teachers where they're like, 'You might think you're the smartest now, but when you get to college, you'll be average.'" However, remote learning did not meet those expectations.

A major contributor to this perception was the structure and format of remote instruction, which relied heavily on asynchronous lectures, passive content delivery, and online assessments. Many students expressed that the content felt like an extension of high school, rather than a significant academic shift. Benjamin, a computer science major, remarked, "A lot of the beginning classes, especially for CES, were just like learning very basic syntax. ... It honestly just felt like I was taking more high school classes just in a different topic." Similarly, Amaya described much of her academic work as "a bunch of busy work," and reflected on the daily

monotony of remote learning: “I spent all day in like my pajamas at my desk with my Zoom camera off.”

Students also highlighted the lack of hands-on or practical learning experiences, which diminished the depth of engagement with course content. Kayla noted, “I think it’s definitely the lack of certain hands-on practical learning. ... There’s just less connection.” This absence was especially impactful in STEM and lab-based courses, where remote learning could not replicate the benefits of in-person experimentation or physical collaboration.

Another theme that emerged was the inconsistency in faculty expectations and teaching approaches, which further complicated students’ perceptions of academic rigor. Some professors were lenient, adapting to the new learning format with flexible deadlines and open-note exams, while others enforced strict testing protocols. Benjamin explained, “Learning was a lot easier, not just grades-wise. I just mean that when you’re taking a test where you are actively having to like look through your notes and understand it.” Yet he also noted that some instructors were “extra strict” and focused on catching cheating, which created a stressful and distrustful atmosphere. These inconsistencies across courses led to uncertainty about what was expected and how seriously students needed to engage.

Many students also experienced technical and navigational challenges in adapting to university digital systems. First-generation students, in particular, found themselves unfamiliar with platforms such as Canvas and Zoom, which were central to the learning experience. Amaya recalled

Professors kind of expected you to know how to navigate Canvas. ... I never used Canvas before college. Just kind of like getting a quick rundown on how to do all of these things would have been really, really helpful.

Benjamin admitted that while his reliance on online materials was somewhat tied to his computer science major, the remote format pushed him to lean more heavily on the internet and self-teaching than he might have in an in-person environment.

Despite these challenges, some students recognized positive aspects of remote learning, particularly in terms of flexibility and convenience. Sofia shared that she had no major problems adapting to the remote format and found it “pretty comfortable to get used to.” Amaya echoed this, saying, “One of the benefits of remote learning was that I could go more at my own pace rather than like my professor’s pace.” Additionally, living at home allowed some students to save money on housing and commuting expenses. However, these benefits often came at the cost of reduced engagement, less accountability, and fewer opportunities for connection with faculty and peers.

In sum, students’ reflections reveal that it was not just the course content that felt lacking, but the entire remote learning environment. The structure, delivery, and limited interaction contributed to a diminished sense of academic rigor. For first-generation college students, the disconnect between their expectations of college and the reality of online learning created a sense of academic and social stagnation. The remote format disrupted learning routines and weakened the perceived legitimacy of college-level education, making it more difficult for students to build confidence, remain engaged, or develop a strong collegiate identity. These challenges were further compounded by existing barriers such as unfamiliarity with institutional systems, limited family understanding of college demands, and reduced access to mentorship. As a result, many students felt that they were enrolled in college but not fully immersed in the college experience.

Major/Career Exploration

First-generation students often navigate uncertainty when selecting a major, especially when they lack exposure to career pathways or guidance from family members with college experience. Research shows that this group frequently encounters challenges in translating their interests into academic or career goals, which can delay or complicate major exploration (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Wang et al., 2017).

Olivia reflected on this struggle when describing her initial decision-making process:

Because I didn't know how to choose a major, I chose political science. But then I talked to this one friend and then like he told me to like look into my majors and see like what I actually like liked and was interested. ... I realized like poli sci wasn't what I wanted. It was more social policy and for like service, which is my major now.

Her account highlights how peer support, rather than formal advising, shaped her eventual choice, a finding that aligns with prior research indicating that first-generation students frequently rely on informal networks for academic guidance when institutional structures fall short (Nguyen et al., 2024; Wittner et al., 2023). Janelle shared a similar sense of dissatisfaction with institutional advising:

I also did utilize my counselor, but I didn't have a great experience with that because I went in like asking for help on how to plan my classes for my four years and the call lasted like seven minutes. She didn't really help me she just like pointed me to the website with like the list of classes instead like choose whatever you want.

Janelle's frustration reflects broader patterns in research showing that inconsistent advising quality can heighten feelings of marginalization among first-generation students, especially when guidance is minimal or transactional (Kiebler & Stewart, 2021; Gibbons &

Shoffner, 2004). Without proactive, equity-oriented advising, these students may struggle to make informed choices about majors and career pathways, a difficulty further compounded during the pandemic, when many advising sessions were brief and remote. Together, these accounts illustrate how challenges in major and career planning intersect with the broader psychological strains of the pandemic, creating a clear link between academic decision-making and students' mental health and well-being.

Impact on Mental Health and Well-being

The transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic had substantial consequences for students' mental health and well-being. While only a small number of survey respondents (n=2; 5%) explicitly cited mental health challenges in their open-ended responses (see Table 4.4), these responses, along with qualitative interview data, revealed broader issues related to depression, isolation, lack of motivation, and difficulty managing academic stress.

One survey participant succinctly described their experience as involving “mental health (depression) and no motivation to do work.” Another student shared that the “culture shock was truly debilitating to my motivation and emotional state,” referencing the added burden of navigating college life as a first-generation student.

These insights were reinforced in interviews with students who described the emotional toll of pandemic-related disruptions. Caleb reflected on the isolating nature of remote learning, stating, “I wasn’t able to, you know, meet my friends as often and [was] always cooped up at home.” Sofia discussed how they coped emotionally, explaining, “I would lay in my bed, sometimes cry about it, because you just have to let it out sometimes.” They also noted the sense of stagnation during lockdown: “It felt like time never passed, because every day was just the same.”

Table 4.4*Challenges During First Academic Year Reported by Students in Questionnaire (n=39)*

Challenge	n	% Sample Student Responses
Navigation	10	25% Navigating a space that neither I nor my immediate family were familiar with. Navigating campus and adjusting to college life in general.
Remote Learning/Academic	22	56% The fact that remote courses forced me into environments that are inherently distracting. I think my freshman grades were the lowest of all my years because each lecture was basically done in my room, rather than a dedicated space. Having to endure my first year of high education through remote learning which is very challenging for me in terms of focusing. The fact that remote courses forced me into environments that are inherently distracting. I think my freshman grades were the lowest of all my years because each lecture was basically done in my room, rather than a dedicated space.
Social Integration	22	56% I think the biggest challenge I encountered was trying to make new friends and connect with peers. The entire first-year was online; I did school from my hometown. The challenge was satisfying the feeling of wanting to be a part of the community and be a part of different organizations.
Mental Health	2	5% Mental health (depression) and no motivation to do work. The culture shock was truly debilitating to my motivation and emotional state.
Major/career development and success	3	7% Staying ahead of what classes I needed to take for my major(s). Having a lack of comradery with others in my major.
COVID-19	2	5% I also lost my father to Covid my first year and my studies significantly were affected. I felt like Covid made me a bit of hermit crab so I was socially anxious to talk to others.

Note. Categories in this table reflect the primary challenge identified by each student respondent. While some students may have experienced multiple challenges, each has been categorized based on their most emphasized concern.

Amaya described a pervasive sense of boredom, stating, “The main emotion during COVID-19 really was boredom.” They also shared how they addressed their mental health needs: “I was going to telehealth therapy. I was able to talk with a mental health professional, my therapist, through these feelings of like anxiety and depression that I was having during the pandemic.”

While mental health was not among the most frequently reported challenges in the survey data, the interviews reveal that emotional well-being was a significant underlying concern for many students. The relatively low rate of mental health disclosure in written responses may reflect students’ hesitancy to share personal struggles in a non-anonymous format, or a tendency to prioritize more immediate and tangible obstacles, such as academic difficulties or social isolation. However, when viewed holistically, the emotional and psychological impacts of remote learning during the pandemic become clear and warrant further institutional attention.

As shown in Table 4.4, social integration and remote learning were the most frequently reported challenges, each cited by 22 out of 39 students (56%). Navigation issues followed, with 10 students (25%) referencing challenges related to unfamiliar environments and limited guidance. Fewer students mentioned challenges related to mental health (n=2; 5%), COVID-19–specific concerns (n=2; 5%), or major and career development (n=3; 7%). Importantly, these categories represent distinct respondents, though some students’ experiences may overlap across themes (e.g., a student affected by COVID-19 may also struggle with mental health). Each category in Table 4.4 reflects the primary concern expressed by each respondent in their open-ended response, rather than multiple overlapping issues. This clarification helps to better isolate which types of challenges were most salient to students in their first year at UCI.

The convergence of survey and interview data strengthens the credibility of the findings. For instance, Caleb remarked that “it felt like I was going back to high school online,” reflecting the remote learning challenges reported by 56% of survey respondents. These experiences align with broader trends among first-generation students in post-pandemic contexts, including difficulties with academic adjustment and social reintegration (Deng & Yang, 2022; Soria et al., 2020). Similarly, narratives of social isolation reinforce survey themes, even though mental health concerns were less frequently reported quantitatively. This layered approach highlights the value of integrating numerical data with rich, qualitative insights (Carter et al., 2014).

Overall, the responses reveal a multifaceted set of challenges, with a predominant focus on social integration, remote learning, and navigation. There was a relatively low number of responses in the *COVID-19*, *major/career development*, and mental health areas. However, those themes arose in the interviews, suggesting that these issues may be significant to some but not as pervasive as others. Students seemed to focus on the more immediate and tangible obstacles they encountered, those directly affecting their day-to-day experiences. Additionally, the impacts of COVID-19 on personal circumstances, mental health and career development might have been less frequently articulated in the survey responses, possibly due to the personal nature of these issues or a perceived lack of relevance to the general experience of first-year students.

Findings Related to Research Question #2: Obstacles Faced by First-Generation College Students After Campus Re-Opening

With respect to the second research question (What obstacles do first-generation college students continue to face after returning to campus?), the return to campus presented several challenges for first-generation college students, stemming from both the transition back to in-person environments and the residual impacts of the pandemic.

Campus Navigation Challenges

Many students struggled with navigating the campus, including finding their way around and accessing necessary resources. Caleb wished for more guidance upon the return to campus: “More guidance in terms of where to go on campus. Even with maps, going back to campus, first time, it is still kind of hard to navigate, you know where to go and what classes to be at.” This experience aligns with research showing that first-generation college students often face orientation and spatial challenges when transitioning to complex campus environments, which can affect their academic confidence and engagement (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004).

Additionally, post-pandemic studies highlight that returning students may experience heightened disorientation due to both physical and procedural changes on campus, exacerbating pre-existing navigation difficulties (Nguyen et al., 2024; Ogidigben et al., 2021). These challenges suggest a need for targeted support, such as structured orientation programs, campus mapping tools, and peer mentorship initiatives that facilitate smoother integration into campus life.

Academic Adjustment Challenges

Another significant challenge was the adjustment from remote or hybrid learning back to fully in-person instruction. Students described this transition as disruptive, requiring them to readapt their study habits and classroom engagement. Benjamin reflected on this shift: “For the first quarter or two there were a lot of hybrid classes, and then they slowly trickled out to fully being in person.” Despite the difficulty, some students acknowledged and appreciated the flexibility and accommodations provided by professors during this period. Kayla noted that her

professors' willingness to adapt was helpful, mentioning "flexibility" and "accommodations" as important supports during the transition.

These experiences are consistent with research indicating that first-generation students often encounter challenges in readjusting academic routines following disruptions, such as remote learning during the pandemic. Difficulties include re-establishing time management skills, adapting to synchronous learning, and engaging actively in class discussions (Deng & Yang, 2022; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Additionally, studies show that tailored faculty support, including flexible policies and proactive communication, significantly mitigates transitional stress and supports academic persistence among first-generation students (Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kim & Sax, 2009).

Incorporating structured academic support programs, such as supplemental instruction, peer-led workshops, and mentorship, can improve outcomes for students returning to fully in-person instruction (Bennett et al., 2021; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kim & Sax, 2009).

Social Re-Integration Challenges

Students expressed frustration with the difficulty of forming new social connections and engaging in networking opportunities as campus life transitioned back from remote learning. Caleb, a Business Administration major, shared that he "did join a club in my fall semester, just to experience it. So that was interesting," reflecting a desire to reconnect socially through organized activities. Research has shown that ethnic and interest-based student organizations can play a pivotal role in fostering social integration and cultural adjustment for underrepresented students at predominantly White institutions (Museus, 2008). However, others faced more barriers. Benjamin, a non-binary Computer Science student, noted that lingering health protocols

and pandemic-related disruptions complicated efforts to build friendships and professional relationships. Similarly, Janelle, also a Computer Science major, described hesitations in participating fully in in-person social activities, which reduced networking opportunities. Structured co-curricular programs that integrate academic, social, and professional support can enhance first-generation students' engagement and persistence (Oliver & King, 2018). Research indicates that online platforms and social media can help first-generation students maintain social connections and access informal mentoring networks, supporting social inclusion and engagement during transitional periods (Gonzalez & Deng, 2023).

These experiences align with research showing that first-generation students often face unique social reintegration challenges, including difficulties in forming peer networks and accessing informal mentoring opportunities, which can contribute to feelings of isolation and lower engagement in campus communities (Inkelas et al., 2007; Stephens et al., 2012; Terenzini et al., 1996). Investing in low-pressure, inclusive opportunities for social engagement, such as interest-based clubs, informal study groups, and community-building workshops, can support both academic persistence and psychosocial well-being for first-generation students returning to campus. Digital and hybrid spaces can further enhance social connectedness, particularly for students navigating post-pandemic reintegration (Gonzalez & Deng, 2023; Hausmann et al., 2007; Museus, 2008).

Additionally, the pandemic's disruption of social norms has disproportionately affected first-generation students, who may have less pre-existing social capital or fewer established peer networks to facilitate reintegration (Carter et al., 2017; Soria et al., 2020; Wittner et al., 2023). Studies further suggest that structured campus programs, such as learning communities, peer mentorship, and inclusive student organizations, can help mitigate social isolation and foster a

sense of belonging among first-generation students (Inkelas et al., 2007; Museus, 2008; Stephens et al., 2012).

COVID-19 Health and Safety Compliance and Concerns

COVID-19 safety measures created an environment in which students often felt cautious and isolated. Health protocols, including masking, social distancing, and vaccination requirements, influenced students' mental health, sense of safety, and academic engagement (Ogidigben et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

Amaya, a Psychological Sciences major, reported that she “personally was masking up every day [and] really appreciated people masking up,” but noted that “sometimes they wouldn’t really enforce [masking]... they’d have their masks under their nose or they wouldn’t wear one,” and “the professor wouldn’t always remind people to wear masks.” Inconsistent enforcement of health policies has been associated with heightened stress, feelings of vulnerability, and social tension on campuses (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Fruehwirth et al., 2021).

Other students expressed anxiety regarding exposure notifications and the uncertainty of potential transmission. Sofia, an Environmental Science and Policy major, described worry about possible exposure, while Kayla, a Biological Sciences student, reported being cautious in attending in-person classes. Such stressors have been linked to decreased motivation and engagement, particularly among first-generation and underrepresented students, illustrating the broader psychosocial impact of pandemic protocols (Balkundi & Fredrick, 2023; Cao et al., 2020; Gillis & Krull, 2020).

Taken together, these findings suggest that while COVID-19 safety measures were necessary for public health, inconsistent implementation and ongoing exposure concerns contributed to heightened anxiety, reduced social participation, and challenges in academic

engagement. Institutions should prioritize transparent communication of health policies, consistent enforcement, and accessible mental health resources to mitigate these effects (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020).

Reacclimating to Campus Life and Access to Resources

The transition from remote to in-person learning posed significant challenges for first-generation students, particularly regarding their awareness of and access to campus resources. Many students reported difficulty navigating essential services, which contributed to the complexities of returning to campus life. Structured career development programs, including workshops, mentoring, and internship opportunities, help first-generation students navigate professional pathways and build confidence in career decision-making (Maietta, 2016; Oliver & King, 2018; Pulliam et al., 2017). Research indicates that first-generation students often face heightened challenges in accessing institutional resources due to limited prior exposure to higher education environments, which can affect both academic performance and social integration (Bui, 2002; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008)

To support students' reacclimation, targeted interventions such as structured orientation programs, peer mentorship, and accessible campus mapping tools have been shown to improve awareness of resources, facilitate social integration, and increase confidence in navigating complex campus systems (Inkelas et al., 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

This section examines shifts in students' satisfaction and reliance on various support systems, as detailed in Tables 4.5 and 4.6, to provide a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. Table 4.5 presents a comparison of students' satisfaction with academic experiences during their first year in a remote setting versus their return to in-person learning. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests reveal statistically significant increases in satisfaction with the availability of

in-person courses, access to UCI faculty, access to major/college staff, and the ability to work with classmates after reopening. These findings align with prior research highlighting that in-person engagement positively impacts student learning, sense of belonging, and motivation, particularly for students who may have limited social capital in higher education (Almeida et al., 2021; Kilgo et al., 2015; Museus, 2008).

Table 4.5

Comparison of Satisfaction First-Year (Remote) vs. Returning to Campus (In-Person)

	Median Rating		Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test			
	First Year	After Return	Location	W	z	p
Availability of in-person courses	3.0	4.0	-2.0	11	-4.276	< .001
Access to UCI Faculty	3.0	4.0	-1.0	28.5	-2.482	.010
Access to major/college staff	3.0	4.0	-0.5	42	-2.133	.029
Access to classmates/ Ability to work with classmates	3.0	4.0	-1.5	44	-3.188	.001
Academic support resources	3.0	3.0	-0.5	45	-1.764	.065
Access to Academic Advisors	4.0	4.0	0.0	80	0.166	.884
Availability of courses in general	4.0	4.0	0.5	125	1.207	.207
Availability of hybrid courses	3.0	4.0	-0.0	141.5	-0.565	.572
Availability of remote courses	4.0	4.0	1.0	289	3.404	< .001
Availability of in-person courses	3.0	4.0	-2.0	11	-4.276	< .001

Table 4.6 examines changes in students' reliance on various support networks. Students reported decreased reliance on UCI faculty and increased reliance on classmates, roommates, or peers. This shift is consistent with research demonstrating that peer networks often serve as

critical sources of social and academic support for first-generation students, particularly when transitioning back to campus after disruptions (Brouwer et al., 2022; Stephens et al., 2012).

Table 4.6

Comparison of Reliance First-Year (Remote) vs. Returning to Campus (In-Person)

	Median Rating		Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test			
	First Year	After Return	Location	W	z	p
UCI Faculty	1.0	2.0	-1.5	3.5	-2.446	.014
UCI Staff	2.0	2.0	-2.0	6.5	-4.896	< .001
Off-campus community club/organization	1.0	1.0	-0.5	22.0	-1.334	.182
Parents(s) / guardian(s)	4.0	3.0	1.0	58.5	1.530	.091
Other family, apart from parent(s) / guardian(s)	3.0	2.0	1.0	63.5	0.691	.491
Student Organization	1.0	2.0	-1.0	64.0	-1.531	.102
Hometown friends	3.0	3.0	1.0	92.0	1.817	.053
UCI classmates / roommates / peers	2.0	3.0	1.0	289.5	2.895	.003

These findings underscore that while in-person interactions enhance academic and social experiences, first-generation students continue to face challenges accessing institutional resources. Universities should implement proactive support strategies, including peer mentoring programs, orientation refreshers, and structured guidance for resource navigation, to facilitate smoother transitions (Pascarella et al., 2004; Tinto, 2012).

Major/Career Development and Success

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted students' academic pathways and career development by limiting access to essential campus activities and hands-on learning experiences. These disruptions align with research showing that first-generation students experienced

significant losses in experiential learning opportunities, including internships, research, and networking, all critical for career readiness (Nguyen et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022).

Students in majors requiring experiential learning were especially affected. Caleb, a Business Administration major, described joining a club “just to experience it,” highlighting the importance of extracurricular involvement for professional development. Olivia, a Hispanic/Latino female triple major, noted that the pandemic restricted her ability to utilize career resources before graduation, reflecting how timing influenced engagement with opportunities. Such interruptions can have lasting consequences, including delayed graduation, reduced employability, and constrained professional networks, particularly for first-generation students who may already face structural inequities (Ishitani, 2006; Stephens et al., 2012).

Table 4.7 illustrates these challenges across multiple domains. Academic difficulties, reported most frequently, primarily involved transitioning from asynchronous remote learning to in-person classes, participating in discussions, and balancing school with work commitments. Navigation challenges, reported eight times, reflect ongoing disorientation and hesitation to seek support within the campus environment. Social integration, though mentioned less frequently, remained a concern as students worked to rebuild peer connections. Mental health concerns, career development issues, and ongoing COVID-19 anxieties, while reported by fewer students, underscore the multifaceted stressors experienced by first-generation students.

Table 4.7*Challenges During First Academic Year Reported by Students in Questionnaire (n=39)*

Challenge	n	Sample Student Responses
Navigation	8	Everywhere I turned to I felt lost and confused and being afraid to seek resources and ask for help did not make things any easier. Navigating college in person as a second year when it was such a drastic change from remote to in-person. I tried my best to familiarize myself with the campus the best I could, but it wasn't much help because everything was closed.
In-Person Learning/Academic	17	Getting used to asynch classes becoming in-person. It was a challenge interacting with classmates in person because nobody was used to speaking up during discussions since everyone was used to being remote Transitioning to life in person after a whole year of online university, finding an on-campus job and being able to do well in classes while maintaining work-life balance.
Social Integration	9	Since the pandemic, I think I have become even more shy. Finding friends and a community to thrive with.
Mental Health	6	Mental health (depression) and lack of motivation. Finding the motivation to attend classes
Major/career development and success	5	Feeling like I lost a year of opportunities to get involved on campus and pursue research opportunities. I felt like it was too late to take advantage of those resources or opportunities because I'm about to graduate so there's no real reason.
COVID-19	4	Still worrying about COVID and other respiratory illness. Having to learn to deal with notifications of having close contacts with someone who has COVID. A big challenge was having to live with and follow the strict COVID guidelines for student housing.

These findings emphasize the enduring effects of the pandemic on first-generation students' academic experiences, social reintegration, and career development. Beyond adapting to a transformed educational environment, students faced lost opportunities for professional growth and networking. Addressing these interrelated barriers requires institutions to provide

enhanced academic advising, structured mentorship, mental health resources, and expanded experiential learning opportunities. Without such supports, equity gaps may widen, limiting long-term academic and career outcomes (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Proactive institutional measures, including career-oriented programming, mentorship, and access to internships and research opportunities, can mitigate the pandemic's long-term impact on career readiness while supporting first-generation students in achieving equitable outcomes in higher education.

Findings Related to Research Question #3: Perceptions of Change in Campus Life

Following the Pandemic and Return to Campus

This section presents an overview of several key findings related to students' perception of the aftermath of the pandemic on the collegiate experience, reflecting on how campus life (academic and social) has changed since the pandemic closures and upon the transition back to in-person.

Impact of the Pandemic on Anticipated College Experience

Sofia reported how they perceived that the pandemic upended their college experience:

I was very excited to start new and like, have a fresh start and like, enter a new chapter of my life of like, being one step closer to being an adult. My high school experience wasn't the best and I didn't have like a good time in high school, like socially and academically and so with four years of that, I was like so ready to move on from it. But then I get hit with this pandemic that just like, completely delayed everything.

Academics and Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional academic routines, creating new challenges for students' learning habits, motivation, and engagement. Research indicates that

first-generation college students often face unique barriers in navigating academic expectations, including limited access to guidance and structured support (Astin, 1984; Padgett et al., 2012; Terenzini et al., 1996). The sudden shift to remote learning further amplified these challenges, as students were required to manage their time independently, adapt to online platforms, and maintain self-directed study habits (Bao, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020).

Benjamin reflected on his own experience during the pandemic, noting the impact on his academic performance:

With academics and learning, I do think that the pandemic negatively impacted that overall. Just because it I feel like the year living in the pandemic sort of set me up for failure in the sense that it made me used to being lazy. I had all that time to myself I learned all of the material in like two weeks and then slacked off the rest of the year. So, when I came back, I felt like I wasn't really in the habit of studying and that did affect my grades.

The disruptions caused by the pandemic challenged students' self-regulation and study routines, consistent with findings that the shift to remote learning often hindered engagement and academic persistence among first-generation students (Gillis & Krull, 2020; Singh et al., 2021). These experiences illustrate the tension between maintaining academic rigor and adapting to new modes of learning and lead directly to an examination of how students perceived the trade-offs between in-person engagement and remote flexibility.

In-Person Engagement and Interaction vs. Remote Flexibility

The analysis of the data collected from the question regarding the delivery method preferences for various aspects of the collegiate experiences reveals general favoring of in-person interactions for activities involving personal engagement and direct interaction, while

remote options are valued for the flexibility they provide.

Table 4.8 presents the preferred delivery methods of the 39 survey participants for different aspects of collegiate life. The table categorizes preferences into five modes: Remote Live, Remote Asynchronous, In-Person, Hybrid, and No Preference. The data highlight the balance students seek between the benefits of in-person interaction and the flexibility offered by remote and hybrid formats.

Table 4.8

Survey Participants' Preferred Delivery Method for Attending, Participating, or Engaging in Various Aspects of Collegiate Life (n=39)

	Remote Live		Remote Asynch		In-Person		Hybrid		No Preference	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Class lecture	0	0.0	12	30.8	13	33.3	13	33.3	1	2.6
Class discussion	2	5.1	8	20.5	17	43.6	8	20.5	4	10.3
Educational/career/leadership workshop	6	15.4	5	12.8	12	30.8	7	17.9	9	23.1
Study session	1	2.6	1	2.6	23	59.0	7	17.9	7	17.9
Social/celebratory event	0	0.0	1	2.6	34	87.2	1	2.6	3	7.7
Faculty speaker	7	17.9	3	7.7	13	33.3	8	20.5	8	20.5
Job interview	13	33.3	1	2.6	13	33.3	8	20.5	4	10.3
Work project or shift	4	10.3	3	7.7	20	51.3	10	25.6	2	5.1
Groups project	7	17.9	2	5.1	14	35.9	14	35.9	2	5.1
Counseling session	7	17.9	0	0.0	15	38.5	7	17.9	10	25.6
Academic advising session	13	33.3	3	7.7	11	28.2	5	12.8	7	17.9

The responses show a clear preference for in-person participation in activities that emphasize social engagement and interpersonal connection, including social and celebratory

events (87.2%), study sessions (59.0%), and class discussions (43.6%). These findings indicate that the disruption of face-to-face interactions during the pandemic heightened students' desire to reestablish social networks and a sense of community on campus. In line with previous research, first-generation students generally preferred in-person formats for social activities, which foster belonging and peer connection (Hausmann et al., 2007; Inkelas et al., 2007; Museus, 2008), while appreciating the flexibility of remote or hybrid options for professional and academic tasks (Deng & Yang, 2022; Gregg & Shin, 2021; Singh et al., 2021; Soria et al., 2021).

In contrast, activities such as job interviews (33.3% preferred remote live), academic advising sessions, and faculty speaker events demonstrate a more even distribution of delivery preferences, with substantial proportions of students valuing remote or hybrid options. This pattern indicates that students recognize the practical advantages of flexible formats for certain academic and professional engagements. Additionally, the notable selection of hybrid and no preference options for group projects and workshops suggests that students appreciate a blended approach that balances engagement with convenience.

Table 4.8 reveals that while the pandemic has normalized remote learning modalities, first-generation students express a clear desire to reclaim in-person experiences for social and interactive activities, while still valuing the flexibility of remote formats where appropriate. These findings reinforce the need for institutions to develop multimodal, adaptable delivery methods that cater to diverse student needs and preferences, thereby enhancing both academic success and social integration in the post-pandemic era.

Perceived Difficulty during First-Year vs. Return to Campus

Table 4.9 presents the median ratings of perceived difficulty for various aspects of collegiate life, comparing students' experiences during their remote first year with those after

returning to in-person learning. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was employed to assess the statistical significance of changes in perceived difficulty between these two periods.

Table 4.9

Comparison of Difficulty First-Year (Remote) vs. Returning to Campus (In-Person)

	Median Rating		Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test			
	First Year After Return	Location	W	z	p	
Deciding on a major	2.0	4.0	-2.5	62.5	-3.635	< .001
Navigating college policies and expectations	3.0	4.0	-1.5	120.0	-3.035	.002
Navigating campus	3.0	4.0	-1.0	134.0	-2.431	.014
Finding academic resources	3.0	4.0	-1.0	183.5	-1.949	.049
Finding cultural/identity resources	3.0	3.0	-0.5	169.5	-1.767	.074
Finding mental health resources	3.0	3.0	-0.5	180.0	-1.333	.175
Making friends	4.0	3.0	1.0	322.0	2.710	.006
Finding community	5.0	3.0	1.5	464.0	3.279	< .001

Increased Perceived Difficulty Post-Return

The analysis revealed statistically significant increases in perceived difficulty in the following areas:

- Deciding on a Major: Median ratings increased from 2.0 (remote) to 4.0 (in-person), with Wilcoxon signed-rank test statistic of $W=62.5$, a z-value of $z=-3.635$, and p-value of $p<.001$. This indicates a significant increase in perceived difficulty in making decisions about a major.
- Navigating College Policies and Expectations: Median ratings increased from 3.0 (remote) to 4.0 (in-person), with $W=120.0$, $z=-3.035$, and $p=.002$. This suggests that

students found it more challenging to understand and navigate college policies and expectations upon returning to campus.

- Navigating Campus: Median ratings increased from 3.0 (remote) to 4.0 (in-person), with $W=134.0$, $z=-2.431$, and $p=.014$. This reflects increased difficulty in physically navigating the campus environment after the return.
- Finding Academic Resources: Median ratings increased from 3.0 (remote) to 4.0 (in-person), with $W=183.5$, $z=-1.949$, and $p=.049$. This indicates a significant rise in perceived difficulty in locating academic resources on campus.

These patterns are supported by studies showing that first-generation students reported heightened academic and navigational challenges after transitioning from remote to in-person learning (Balkundi & Fredrick, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024). Balkundi and Fredrick (2023) further suggest that perceived stress associated with these academic and navigational difficulties can contribute to internalizing problems, while social support may help buffer these effects.

Decreased Perceived Difficulty Post-Return

Conversely, the following areas showed significant decreases in perceived difficulty:

- Making Friends: Median ratings decreased from 4.0 (remote) to 3.0 (in-person), with $W=322.0$, $z=2.710$, and $p=.006$. This suggests that students found it easier to make friends after returning to campus.
- Finding Community: Median ratings decreased from 5.0 (remote) to 3.0 (in-person), with $W=464.0$, $z=3.279$, and $p<.001$. This reflects a significant improvement in students' perception of finding a sense of community on campus.

These findings illustrate a complex landscape of student experiences. While students reported increased challenges in academic and navigational aspects of college life upon returning

to campus, they also experienced significant improvements in social integration, particularly in making friends and finding community. This dual pattern underscores the multifaceted impact of the transition from remote to in-person learning and highlights areas where targeted support may be beneficial.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the complex and multifaceted challenges encountered by first-generation college students during their transition to remote learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their subsequent adjustment to returning to in-person collegiate life. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach that integrated quantitative survey data with qualitative interview responses, this study captured a holistic view of the students' lived experiences. These students, who began their academic journey as first-time freshmen in Fall 2020, faced unprecedented disruptions that affected not only their academic progress but also their social integration, mental health, and career development.

The findings indicate that the pandemic's effects extended far beyond the shift to online classes. Students reported ongoing difficulties related to campus navigation, adjusting to in-person academic expectations, and rebuilding social relationships. Many described feeling disoriented on campus, uncertain about how to seek help, and unprepared for active classroom participation after prolonged asynchronous learning. Forming new friendships and professional connections also proved challenging, especially for students who had limited opportunities for on-campus involvement during their early college years. Concerns about inconsistent enforcement of COVID-19 safety protocols added further stress and confusion to the learning environment.

This chapter also revealed the long-term implications of the pandemic on students' academic trajectories and career preparation. Participants frequently expressed concerns about missed opportunities for internships, research, and experiential learning. These missed experiences left some students feeling underprepared for the workforce or graduate education, especially as they neared graduation. For first-generation students, whose access to professional networks and guidance is often already limited, the lack of structured engagement exacerbated existing inequalities and increased uncertainty about future paths.

A consistent pattern emerged across the data: challenges were interconnected and cumulative. Difficulties in academic adjustment were often tied to mental health struggles, while limited social integration contributed to feelings of isolation and reduced motivation. Students' educational, emotional, and professional development were affected simultaneously, illustrating how the pandemic disrupted multiple areas of their college experience.

The pattern of results also highlights how systemic inequities, particularly those affecting first-generation students, were intensified during this period. Restricted access to campus resources, reduced mentorship opportunities, and unclear institutional communication created additional barriers to success. These findings underscore the importance of comprehensive institutional support that includes academic advising, mental health services, career counseling, and opportunities for meaningful campus engagement.

Ultimately, while the resilience of these students is evident throughout their narratives, the findings point to critical institutional gaps that must be addressed to ensure more equitable outcomes. This chapter lays the foundation for the final discussion and recommendations, which focus on strategies for improving support for first-generation students as they navigate both ongoing challenges and future uncertainties in higher education.

Building on these findings, the next chapter will delve into a detailed discussion of the implications for policy and practice, offering evidence-based recommendations for higher education institutions. It will explore how universities can better support first-generation students through enhanced academic advising, mental health resources, career services, and community-building initiatives. Additionally, the following chapter will consider the limitations of this study and suggest directions for future research to further understand and address the evolving needs of first-generation college students in a post-pandemic educational landscape.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The study most notably highlights that the transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the return to campus following the campus closures have had lasting effects on first-generation college students' academic and social experiences. The integrated conceptual framework—drawing from Schlossberg's (1981, 1984, 1989, 2011) Transition Theory and Buzzanell's (2010, 2018) Communication Theory of Resilience—served as a lens through which to interpret the students' experiences. It allowed for a multidimensional understanding of how students navigated these transitions by examining the situational contexts, their personal resources, the support systems available to them, and the adaptive strategies they employed. The findings emphasize the need for targeted support strategies to address the following areas of improvement:

- **Support Systems:** Institutions should create and implement comprehensive support systems, including detailed orientation programs and continuous resources, to help students navigate both remote and in-person learning environments effectively.
- **Social Integration:** Institutions should actively create and promote social connections and community building in both virtual and physical spaces to address the isolation experienced during remote learning.
- **Resource Accessibility:** Institutions must ensure that students receive clear, accessible information about available resources and provide explicit guidance on how to access and use them.

Although institutions worked diligently to adapt programs during the constraints of remote learning, gaps persist in student support, social integration, and access to resources. As

higher education continues to recover and evolve in the post-pandemic era, addressing these areas is essential for enhancing the experiences of first-generation college students. This highlights the importance of institutions intentionally cultivating environments that provide academic, emotional, and social support.

First-generation students require more than generalized programs such as orientation or advising. The study highlights the need for direct, targeted, hands-on support. This includes structured mentorship, individualized check-ins, and guided interventions that actively connect students with resources, support networks, and opportunities. Without such proactive engagement, students may continue to experience misalignment between institutional offerings and their lived realities, reinforcing feelings of being “stunted” or left behind (Gonzales, 2021; Margolis, 2001; Wang et al., 2017).

Connections to Prior Research and Theory

The study’s findings align closely with prior research on student engagement, Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure (Tinto, 2012), and Astin’s Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984), both of which emphasize the importance of academic integration, social belonging, and institutional support in student retention. The observed difficulties in navigating remote and hybrid modalities reinforce Tinto’s (2012) assertion that departure is often linked to a lack of academic and social integration.

Additionally, literature reviewed in the first two chapters pointed to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on underrepresented groups, including first-generation students, who often lack familial guidance and social capital (e.g., Gonzales, 2021; Means & Neisler, 2020). This study reinforces those conclusions and adds nuance by illustrating how even post-pandemic

transitions present new hurdles, such as re-establishing peer networks and navigating hybrid campus norms.

Some novel insights emerged, particularly around the emotional toll and sense of stunted development students described, something that prior studies had not fully captured. This “missed milestone” phenomenon is especially relevant for first-generation students, who already face reduced access to generational academic experience. The emotional weight of this lost time adds another layer of challenge that institutions must consider in developing interventions.

Complexity and Contradiction in Student Experiences

One noticeable aspect of this study was the variation across student narratives. While some participants described the pandemic as a time of increased flexibility and personal growth, citing the convenience of online classes, time saved from commuting, and the ability to focus without distractions, others expressed profound disconnection, academic struggle, and social isolation. This divergence challenges simplistic assumptions about the impact of remote learning and underscores the need for more differentiated approaches to student support. For instance, one student credited the remote format with helping them balance school and caregiving responsibilities, while another described falling behind academically because they lacked a quiet study space at home. These conflicting experiences point to structural inequities that intersect with individual circumstances. They also complicate traditional theories of student engagement that assume uniform pathways to belonging and success. What became clear through these narratives is that resilience is not just about individual grit; it’s about how well institutional structures respond to different forms of need. As such, the variation in student outcomes is not merely anecdotal but points to systemic issues in how higher education accommodates diversity in student life, particularly during moments of crisis.

Another important insight that emerged was how students conceptualized “loss.” For some, the most painful losses were academic: missed classes, delayed graduation, or lower grades. For others, the real loss was social or emotional: the inability to form friendships, experience rites of passage like orientation or graduation, or develop a sense of identity as a college student. One participant noted that they didn’t feel like a “real student” until returning to campus in their third year. This absence of belonging and identity formation appears to be a developmental gap that traditional metrics, GPA, retention, graduation, fail to capture. It is also tied to the notion of feeling “stunted,” a term used repeatedly across interviews to describe a delay not only in learning, but in growing into adulthood. These insights suggest that institutions must think beyond academic outcomes when assessing the long-term impact of the pandemic and create strategies that acknowledge the holistic nature of student development.

Study Limitations

Sample Selection

While the sampling frame included 2,297 eligible students, there were only 39 survey respondents and seven interview participants. Even though qualitative interviews provide rich and in-depth insights, the small number of participants limits the generalizability of the findings. The small sample may not capture the diversity of experiences among students, particularly across different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Furthermore, the selection process for participants introduces potential sources of bias. The study primarily relied on voluntary participation and a self-selected sample. Students who chose to participate may have had specific motivations or experiences that differ from those who did not, potentially skewing the data toward more engaged or vocal individuals. This limitation

raises concerns about the representativeness of the findings and the extent to which they can be applied to other contexts.

Interview Modality

It may have been more optimal to conduct interviews in person. Despite the prevalence and convenience of Zoom and it being the cultural norm after the COVID-19 shift to remote operations, it lacks some of the advantages of face-to-face interactions. In-person interactions allow for deeper connections and better interpretation of nonverbal cues (i.e., body language, facial expressions). These aspects of interaction enhance the rapport between the interviewer and participant, leading to more increased comfortability as well as open and honest responses.

Unexamined Influences on Student Experience

By making first-generation status one of the primary criteria for inclusion, this study could not control for the many differences in student experiences shaped not only by socioeconomic status and academic ability but also by culture, race/ethnicity, and family dynamics (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Kiebler & Stewart, 2021; Wang et al., 2017). As a result, numerous other variables complicated the analysis, highlighting that first-generation students are not a monolithic group. Among the seven students who were interviewed, there were few similarities, and each experience was highly individualized. Some students faced heightened challenges due to limited family understanding of college life, while others contended with social isolation or differences in access to technology and learning resources (Gillis & Krull, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2024). Despite these unexamined influences, the patterns and insights identified across participants provide meaningful guidance for supporting first-generation students. The diversity of experiences underscores the need for flexible, equity-oriented strategies that account for varying backgrounds, needs, and challenges (Buzzanell, 2010; Schlossberg, 2011).

These findings point directly to actionable steps institutions can take to better support first-generation students, forming the basis for the practical recommendations presented in the next section.

Recommendations

This section presents practical recommendations based on the findings of the study for practitioners and researchers. These recommendations reflect what first-generation students shared about their post-pandemic college experience, highlighting areas where institutions can better support student transition, resilience, and success.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Practitioners play a direct role in shaping student experiences and institutional responses. The following recommendations are designed to help improve the academic and social integration of first-generation students in a post-pandemic context.

Recommendation #1: Establishment of Structured Transitional Programs

In general, transition programs like Summer Bridge are essential, particularly for first-generation college students. Research indicates that structured transition programs, such as Summer Bridge initiatives, can significantly improve retention and academic success for first-generation and underrepresented students by providing early exposure to academic expectations, campus culture, and social networks (Swail et al. 2003). While orientation programs attempt to support student transitions, they can sometimes feel overwhelming as they cover a lot of information in a short amount of time. In the event of a global pandemic that results in students' transition being impacted, institutions should create mandatory re-orientation or re-entry programs for students returning from remote learning. These programs could address academic expectations, mental health resources, and social re-integration. This recommendation stems

from participants expressing confusion about post-pandemic expectations and feeling left to “figure it out on their own.”

Recommendation #2: Implementation of Multi-Modal Communication

Instead of relying on students to seek out resources, institutions should adopt a proactive approach to communicating support services. A consistent, multi-modal outreach, including emails, text messages, social media, and peer mentors, could help bridge the knowledge gap students described.

Recommendation #3: Community-building programs for Underrepresented Populations

Intentional, inclusive community-building programs, especially those that target commuter students and non-traditional learners, can rebuild social capital. Students emphasized the difficulty of reconnecting and “starting over” socially, underscoring the need for facilitated social environments. Commuters and non-traditional learners including student parents, could miss out on the community aspects of college life more than others.

Recommendation #4: Invest in Faculty Development for Remote and Hybrid Pedagogy

One evident finding from this study was that students encountered varying levels of faculty engagement, flexibility, and effort during remote learning. While some students benefited from compassionate, adaptable professors, others felt neglected or unsupported, leading to frustration and disengagement. This inconsistency in instructional quality contributed to unequal academic experiences and emotional strain during a period that already tested students’ resilience.

To address this, institutions should prioritize ongoing faculty development programs focused on inclusive, adaptive, and trauma-informed teaching practices, not only during

emergencies, but as a permanent part of instructional design. These programs should offer practical guidance on:

- Designing engaging online and hybrid coursework
- Communicating clearly and consistently across modalities
- Balancing academic rigor with empathy and flexibility
- Creating opportunities for interactive and socially rich learning experiences
- Recognizing and responding to the specific needs of first-generation and underrepresented students

Additionally, establishing clear institutional guidelines around instructional expectations in remote settings can help ensure a more equitable experience for all students, regardless of who is teaching the course.

Recommendation #5: Direct, Targeted Hands-On Outreach

Institutions should implement proactive, individualized support strategies that go beyond generalized advising or orientation. This includes structured mentorship programs, case management approaches, and task-oriented guidance that directly connects students to academic, financial, social, and mental health resources. First-generation students often lack familial or peer guidance familiar with higher education systems; therefore, institutions must provide guided check-ins, personalized follow-ups, and step-by-step assistance with critical academic and administrative processes (Gonzales, 2021; Margolis, 2001; Wang et al., 2017). Such hands-on interventions can bridge the gap between resource availability and meaningful utilization, reducing the feeling of being “stunted” and promoting equitable student success.

To further synthesize the findings from this study and their practical implications, Table 5.1 provides a visual summary of the major emergent themes, how they align with the integrated

theoretical framework, and the corresponding recommendations for practitioners. This table is intended to offer a clear, accessible overview of how student experiences relate to existing theory and how institutions can respond effectively to support first-generation students in post-pandemic contexts.

Table 5.1

Summary of Emergent Themes, Theoretical Connections, and Practitioner Recommendations

Emergent Theme	Theoretical Link	Finding Summary	Recommendation / Implication
Stunted emotional and academic development	Schlossberg's Transition Theory – Identity, Support	Students described feeling “stuck,” having missed milestones and developmental growth during remote learning	Create structured re-entry programs and ongoing support to address developmental and emotional gaps
Disconnect between resources and awareness	Buzzanell's Communication Theory of Resilience – Meaning-Making, Normalizing Identity	Students often didn't realize resources existed, despite needing support	Implement proactive, multi-modal communication strategies to make support services visible and approachable
Inconsistency in faculty engagement	Schlossberg – Support & Strategy; Buzzanell – Communication as Resilience	Students experienced uneven instructional quality and support from faculty	Invest in ongoing faculty development for inclusive, adaptive, and trauma-informed remote/hybrid teaching
Challenges with social reintegration	Schlossberg – Situation, Support; Buzzanell – Social Capital	Students had difficulty rebuilding connections and navigating changed social norms	Facilitate intentional community-building programs for underrepresented and commuter students
Divergent views on remote vs. in-person learning	Buzzanell – Flexibility, Identity Negotiation	Some students thrived with autonomy; others missed structure and stimulation	Tailor communication and programming strategies to diverse student needs and learning preferences

As shown above, this study uncovered a range of student experiences that were deeply shaped by both institutional structures and interpersonal dynamics. These themes point to a need

for more student-centered, resilient, and inclusive approaches in higher education policy and practice.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study offered valuable insights into how first-generation students navigated the post-pandemic transition, but there's still more to explore. Future research can build on the integrated conceptual framework used here by looking more closely at how communication, resilience, and transition interact in different student experiences and types of institutions.

Intersectionality of Identities

In this study, the focus was students who were the first in their families to attend college. While that lens revealed a lot, it did not leave much room to explore how other aspects of identity, like race, gender identity, class background, or immigration status, shaped their experiences. These overlapping identities likely affect how students handle change and bounce back from challenges. Future research could use intentional sampling strategies to dive deeper into these intersections. The exploration of how different identity combinations influence students' ability to adapt or access support, could give a more complete picture. The same framework used here can be applied to compare across diverse student populations to see what helps or hinders their transitions.

Staff and Faculty Perspectives

Additional research that considers the experiences and perspective of staff or faculty could be extremely helpful in capturing the more holistic effects of this global event causing the closure of campuses worldwide and leading to remote learning. Buzzanell's (2010, 2018) Communication Theory of Resilience depends on relational dynamics, not just how students reach out, but how others respond. Professors, advisors, and support staff play a key role in

whether students feel seen, supported, and encouraged. The recommendation would be to conduct qualitative interviews or ethnographic case studies with faculty and staff to explore how they perceive and respond to students' post-pandemic needs, and how institutional communication flows (or fails) across units.

Additionally, future research should explore how faculty members navigated the pedagogical shift to remote and hybrid teaching, particularly in relation to supporting first-generation students. Comparative studies across departments or institutions could examine the impact of faculty training programs, institutional expectations, or personal teaching philosophies on student outcomes during and after the pandemic. It would be especially valuable to analyze how variations in faculty communication, flexibility, and course design influenced students' perceptions of support, academic success, and belonging. These insights could inform the development of standardized, equity-focused teaching practices that ensure consistency without compromising instructor autonomy.

Long-term Effects of COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 on educational outcomes is hard to deny. An issue of great interest to explore is the long-term effects for COVID on educational persistence, graduation and career advancements. Many students in this study talked about feeling like their academic and/or professional growth was interrupted. That sense of being stuck or behind deserves closer attention, particularly over time. Theories of transition and resilience both point to the importance of long-term adjustment, not just short-term coping. The recommendation for further study would include designing longitudinal studies that follow first-gen students for several years after the pandemic tracking aspects like graduation rates, career paths, and confidence in

decision-making. It is crucial as understanding how early setbacks shape later outcomes can help institutions offer better, more targeted support.

Hidden Curriculum and Communication

A recurring theme in the data was that many first-generation students were unaware of the resources and support services available to them. This lack of awareness did not reflect disengagement, but rather a systemic issue rooted in the hidden curriculum of higher education. The hidden curriculum refers to the unspoken rules, expectations, and cultural knowledge embedded in college systems that students are assumed to understand without explicit instruction (Margolis, 2001). First-generation students, who often lack familial role models familiar with higher education, are particularly vulnerable to these unspoken barriers (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Wang et al., 2017).

Institutional communication represents one concrete area where the hidden curriculum manifests. Students may fail to access important resources not because they are unavailable, but because information is inconsistently conveyed across campus (Nguyen et al., 2024; Wittner et al., 2023). This breakdown can result in underutilization of services, missed opportunities for academic or career development, and heightened stress (Kiebler & Stewart, 2021). Future research could apply organizational ethnography or network analysis to map how information flows through institutions and identify points of disconnect. By making communication strategies more transparent and intentional, colleges can reduce the hidden barriers that disproportionately affect first-generation students, supporting their academic engagement, persistence, and well-being (Allen & Smith, 2023; Harackiewicz et al., 2014). Building on the analysis of hidden curriculum, communication gaps, and variable access to support, the next section turns to students' personal reflections, revealing how these systemic challenges translated

into a profound sense of missed opportunities and stunted development during the pandemic.

Reflection

One of the most impactful reflections that students shared was this notion of feeling stunted. All the moments missed from the pandemic are irreplaceable, but the biggest loss seems to have been the missed milestones and development as it pertains to social life, career goals and knowledge. As a practitioner and scholar, one of the most powerful takeaways from this research was the repeated comment from students that they *wished* certain resources existed, which in fact, actually did exist. This disconnect is not just about communication failure; it's about misalignment between institutional messaging and student realities. The inconsistency in faculty engagement and instructional quality during remote learning further contributed to this misalignment. Some students benefitted from professors who adapted their teaching methods and extended compassion, while others faced rigid expectations or minimal support. This variability intensified the sense of uncertainty and unevenness in the remote learning experience. Students' reflections also revealed a divide: those who valued the convenience and autonomy of remote formats contrasted sharply with peers who craved the social and intellectual stimulation of in-person interaction. These contrasting perceptions suggest that institutions must pay closer attention to how different pedagogical and communication strategies land with diverse student populations. This speaks to a systemic communication breakdown that must be addressed and serves as a reminder that support systems must be not only available, but visible, approachable, and embedded into the student experience in meaningful ways.

Additionally, the findings underscore the need for support that goes beyond traditional academic advising or orientation programs. First-generation students benefit most from proactive, targeted, and hands-on outreach that guides them through concrete tasks, introduces

them to specific resources, and provides ongoing check-ins (Gonzales, 2021; Margolis, 2001; Wang et al., 2017). Such support should be structured, persistent, and personalized to address individual circumstances, helping students navigate not only academic expectations but also social integration, career planning, and access to essential services. This reinforced the importance of designing student-centered policies and ensuring inclusive communication strategies. This analysis provides a foundation for the conclusions drawn from the study, highlighting the interplay between institutional practices, student experiences, and the enduring effects of the pandemic while setting the stage for recommendations that can inform future research and practice.

Conclusion

While many aspects of campus life became more difficult upon the return to in-person learning, such as understanding new policies and navigating institutional systems, social integration notably improved. This contrast reinforces what has long been understood about the power of in-person engagement in building community and belonging, especially for students with limited prior exposure to higher education environments. At the same time, the findings also underscore how post-pandemic transitions created new barriers, often as disorienting as those encountered during remote learning.

The study reaffirmed well-established theories of student retention and success, such as those from Tinto (2012) and Astin (1984), while also offering new insight into how a global crisis can compound existing inequities. Importantly, it surfaced the emotional and developmental impacts that may not be visible in academic metrics alone. Students described a sense of being “stunted” in many aspects of life, including academically and personally. This

adds a new dimension to the literature—one that highlights the long shadow the pandemic continues to cast on students' identity development and long-term aspirations.

In addition, the findings call attention to a recurring disconnect between institutional resources and student awareness. Many students expressed frustration that they didn't know where to turn for help, even when those resources existed. This perception gap suggests that institutions must think critically not only about *what* support is offered, but *how* and *through whom* it is communicated.

This study sought to understand how first-generation students experienced the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and adapted to the transitions that followed. These students entered college in Fall 2020 which was marked by uncertainty, remote learning, and widespread isolation. The pandemic not only disrupted academic and social development but also interrupted key rites of passage that typically mark the beginning of the college journey including high school graduation and moving into on-campus housing. The goal was to document these experiences and explore how institutions can better support students like them now and in the future. Through the integrated use of Schlossberg's (1981, 1984, 1989, 2011) Transition Theory and Buzzanell's (2010, 2018) Communication Theory of Resilience, this study was able to offer layered insight into how these students managed shifting environments, leveraged support systems, and attempted to regain control over their educational paths. The findings confirmed and extended earlier research by showing that while structural support is necessary, the feeling of being seen, heard, and socially connected is equally critical to students' success.

As with any study, limitations exist. The small qualitative sample and the reliance on voluntary participation mean the findings are not fully generalizable. Additionally, while the focus on first-generation status brought clarity, it also excluded the examination of how

intersecting identities—race, class, immigration status, etc.—further shaped students’ experiences. Future research would benefit from broader and more intersectional samples, as well as from faculty and staff perspectives that were beyond the scope of this project. Longitudinal research could also provide insight into the long-term implications of the pandemic on academic persistence and career outcomes.

The key takeaway from this research is the incredible complexity of transition—not just in the logistical sense, but in the emotional and developmental sense as well. For first-generation students, whose entry into higher education already involves navigating uncharted territory, the pandemic layered on new challenges that continue to ripple through their college experiences. The fact that many students were able to persist, adapt, and still find moments of connection speaks to their resilience but also underscores the urgency of institutional responsibility. It is also imperative that we empower first-gen and/or underrepresented students in remote learning contexts and incorporate their feedback.

In closing, this dissertation does not offer a simple solution to the challenges facing first-generation students in a post-pandemic world. Rather, it offers a framework for better understanding those challenges, a case for listening more closely to student voices, and a call to action for institutions to respond with both empathy and intentionality. Most importantly, it highlights the urgent need for proactive, hands-on support that goes beyond traditional advising or orientation. First-generation students require structured mentorship, personalized check-ins, guided interventions, and targeted outreach to ensure that institutional resources are not only available, but actively accessible and meaningful. The road ahead may still be uncertain, but with continued research and more responsive practice, higher education can be made more inclusive, equitable, and understanding for all students, particularly during unprecedented world events.

APPENDIX A

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INVITATION

Date:

Dear XXX:

My name is Brigitte Preciado and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at UCLA. I am conducting a qualitative research study exploring the academic, social, and community experiences of first-generation college students during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. You have been identified as a potential participant based on your status as a first-generation college student and having started at UCI in Fall 2020. I would like to invite you to participate in my research project. You are eligible to participate if you:

- are a first-generation college student (neither parent/guardian has earned a 4-yr. college degree);
- entered UCI as a First-Time Freshman;
- first attended UCI in Fall 2020; and
- were enrolled at UCI during Fall 2020, Winter 2021 and Spring 2021.

There are two phases to this study. The *first phase* is an online questionnaire, which will only take about 10-15 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the survey, you will receive one (1) \$10 electronic gift card. **Please respond to the survey by DEADLINE. Survey Link: << >>**

The *second phase* is a one-on-one interview, conducted over zoom. At the end of the questionnaire, you will have an opportunity to indicate whether you would be interested in participating in that interview. Upon completion of the interview, participants will earn a \$25 Amazon gift card. Participation in both phases is voluntary. Additional information about the study can be found here.

I appreciate your consideration in becoming a research participant. Your academic, social, and community experiences as a first-generation college student during this unprecedented and uncertain time are very important. Information gained throughout this study is intended to inform and improve the development and delivery of programming and support services to first-generation college students.

I can also be reached via email <<EMAIL>>. You may also reach out to my dissertation advisor, Dr. Mark Hansen (<<EMAIL>>) if you have additional questions.

Sincerely,

Brigitte Preciado (she/her)
<<EMAIL>>

Certified Exempt Study (10/24/2023)

APPENDIX B

CONFIRMATION OF CONSENT

Participant Confirmation I agree to participate in this qualitative research study and per the invitation, I understand the nature, duration, and requirements associated with my participation. I have also read and agree to the following.

Confidentiality Statement: As a volunteer participant in this qualitative research study, keeping your identity, interview documents, and information confidential is of the utmost importance. I plan to provide you with an alternative name and way of identifying you as a research participant. All interview recordings, notes and associated documents will be maintained in accordance with the university's data security guidelines with any physical notes stored in my locked home office. At any point in time, you may request access to this information or request a change in identification. Your active participation and verification of information collected throughout the interview process is essential and appreciated. You may also elect to stop participating in the research process at any time and for any reason. I now request your verbal acknowledgement of this statement and agreement to participate.

APPENDIX C

QUESTIONNAIRE

I am conducting a qualitative research study exploring the experiences of first-generation UCI students during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional information about the study can be found here. You have been identified as a potential participant based on your status as a first-generation college student and having started at UCI in Fall 2020.

You are eligible to participate if you:

- are a first-generation college student (neither parent/guardian has earned a 4-yr. college degree);
- entered UCI as a First-Time Freshman;
- first attended UCI in Fall 2020; and
- were enrolled at UCI during Fall 2020, Winter 2021 and Spring 2021.

Your responses to the questions below will be used to confirm your eligibility.

If eligible, there are two phases to this study in which you can participate. The first phase is this online questionnaire, which may take about 10-15 minutes to complete. Upon completion, you will receive a \$10 Amazon electronic gift card, provided your responses is completed by the deadline in the email you received. The second phase is a one-on-one interview, conducted over zoom. Participants who complete the interview process will receive a \$25 Amazon electronic gift card. At the end of the questionnaire, you will have an opportunity to indicate whether you would be interested in participating in the second phase, the interview. **Participation in both phases is voluntary.**

Please answer the following questions, which will determine whether you are eligible to participate.

Are you a first-generation college student (i.e., neither parent/guardian has earned a 4-yr. college degree)?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Did you enter UCI as a First-Time Freshman (rather than as a transfer)?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Were you enrolled at UCI during all of the following quarters: Fall 2020, Winter 2021, and Spring 2021?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Did you first attend UCI in Fall 2020?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Based on your responses above, it appears that you do not meet the requirements to participate in this study. To exit this survey, please click "Next" or close your browser.

If you believe you are eligible, please click "Back" and check your responses.

Thank you for your time!

Voluntary Consent

I acknowledge that I have been informed of the nature and purpose of this research project. I have read and understand the information presented in the study information sheet (linked here and also attached to the invitation email).

I give my voluntary consent to participate in this study.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Current Age:

- ☐ 18
- ☐ 19
- ☐ 20
- ☐ 21
- ☐ 22

Gender Identity:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Transgender Male
- ☐ Transgender Female
- ☐ Non-Conforming/Gender Variant/Non-Binary
- ☐ Prefer Not to Say

Race:

- ☐ Asian: a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native: a person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment
- ☐ Black or African American: a person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino: a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands
- ☐ White: a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa
- ☐ Prefer Not to Say

Which best describes you?

- ☐ California resident for purposes of tuition
- ☐ Out-of-state resident
- ☐ International student

Select your (expected) graduation term:

- ☐ Fall 2023
- ☐ Winter 2024
- ☐ Spring 2024
- ☐ Summer 2024
- ☐ Winter 2025
- ☐ Spring 2025

Please list your current major(s): _____

Please list your current minor (if applicable): _____

Please enter the email address you would like your \$10 gift card sent to for completing this survey: _____

Experiences During Your First Year of College

For the next several questions, you will be asked to reflect on your first academic year at UCI (i.e., 2020-21, while the campus was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

How difficult did you find each the following during your first academic year at UCI?

	Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely
Navigating campus	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Navigating college policies and expectations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Deciding on a major	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Finding community	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Making friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Finding mental health resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Finding academic resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Finding cultural / identity resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How often did you utilize or rely on the following resources/offices during your first academic year at UCI?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Basic Needs Center	☐	☐	☐	☐
Campus Libraries	☐	☐	☐	☐
Campus Social Workers	☐	☐	☐	☐
Center for Student Wellness & Health Promotion	☐	☐	☐	☐
Counseling Center	☐	☐	☐	☐
College / Major Academic Advisor	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cultural/identity resource center	☐	☐	☐	☐
Division of Career Pathways (DCP)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Financial Aid	☐	☐	☐	☐
RISE Suite	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Housing	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Success Initiatives	☐	☐	☐	☐

What was your experience with each of the following resources/offices during your first academic year at UCI?

	Completely Neg	Mostly Neg	Neutral	Mostly Pos	Completely Pos	No Experience
Basic Needs Center	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Campus Libraries	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Campus Social Workers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Center for Student Wellness & Health Promotion	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Counseling Center	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
College / Major Academic Advisor	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cultural / identity resource center	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Division of Career Pathways (DCP)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Financial Aid	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
RISE Suite	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Housing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Success Initiatives	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How often did you rely on the following people, network(s), and/or community during your first academic year at UCI?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Parent(s) / guardian(s)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other family, apart from parent(s) / guardian(s)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Hometown friends	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Organization	☐	☐	☐	☐
Off-campus community club / organization	☐	☐	☐	☐
UCI classmates / roommates / peers	☐	☐	☐	☐
UCI Staff	☐	☐	☐	☐
UCI Faculty	☐	☐	☐	☐

What was your experience with each of the following resources/offices during your first academic year at UCI?

	Completely Neg	Mostly Neg	Neutral	Mostly Pos	Completely Pos	No Experience
Parent(s) / guardian(s)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other family, apart from parent(s) / guardian(s)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Hometown friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Organization	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Off-campus community club / organization	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
UCI classmates / roommates / peers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
UCI Staff	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
UCI Faculty	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How satisfied were you with the availability of and access to the following resources or services during your first academic year at UCI?

	Completely Dissatisfied	Mostly Dissatisfied	Neutral	Mostly Satisfied	Completely Satisfied
Availability of courses in general	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of hybrid courses	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of in-person courses	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of remote courses	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Academic support resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to major/college staff	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to classmates / Ability to work with classmates	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to Academic Advisors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to UCI Faculty	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

What, if any, were the biggest challenges you encountered during your first academic year at UCI:

Experiences Since Fall 2021

*For the next several questions, you will be asked to reflect on your experiences **since the UCI campus reopened (i.e., Fall 2021 to present).***

How difficult have you found each of the following since campus reopened (i.e., Fall 2021 to present)?

	Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely
Navigating campus	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Navigating college policies and expectations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Deciding on a major	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Finding community	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Making friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Finding mental health resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Finding academic resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Finding cultural/identity resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How often have you utilized or relied on the following resources/offices since campus reopened (i.e., Fall 2021 to present)?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Basic Needs Center	☐	☐	☐	☐
Campus Libraries	☐	☐	☐	☐
Campus Social Workers	☐	☐	☐	☐
Center for Student Wellness & Health Promotion	☐	☐	☐	☐
Counseling Center	☐	☐	☐	☐
College/Major Academic Advisor	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cultural/identity resource center	☐	☐	☐	☐
Division of Career Pathways (DCP)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Financial Aid	☐	☐	☐	☐
RISE Suite	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Housing	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Success Initiatives	☐	☐	☐	☐

What has been your experience with each of the following resources/offices since campus reopened (i.e., Fall 2021 to present)?

	Completely Negative	Mostly Negative	Neutral	Mostly Positive	Completely Positive	No Experience
Basic Needs Center	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Campus Libraries	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Campus Social Workers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Center for Student Wellness & Health Promotion	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Counseling Center	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
College/Major Academic Advisor	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cultural/identity resource center	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Division of Career Pathways (DCP)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Financial Aid	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
RISE Suite	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Housing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Success Initiatives	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How often have you relied on the following people, network(s), and/or community since campus reopened (i.e., Fall 2021 to present)?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Parent(s) / guardian(s)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other family, apart from parent(s) / guardian(s)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Hometown friends	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Organization	☐	☐	☐	☐
Off-campus community club / organization	☐	☐	☐	☐
UCI classmates / roommates / peers	☐	☐	☐	☐
UCI Staff	☐	☐	☐	☐
UCI Faculty	☐	☐	☐	☐

What has been your experience with each of the following people, network(s), and/or community since campus reopened (i.e., Fall 2021 to present)?

	Completely Negative	Mostly Negative	Neutral	Mostly Positive	Completely Positive	No Experience
Parent(s) / guardian(s)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other family, apart from parent(s) / guardian(s)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Hometown friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student Organization	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Off-campus community club/organization	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
UCI classmates / roommates / peers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
UCI Staff	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
UCI Faculty	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How satisfied have you been with the availability of and access to the following since campus reopened (i.e., Fall 2021 to present)?

	Completely Dissatisfied	Mostly Dissatisfied	Neutral	Mostly Satisfied	Completely Satisfied
Availability of courses in general	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of hybrid courses	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of in-person courses	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of remote courses	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Academic support resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to major/college staff	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to classmates/Ability to work with classmates	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to Academic Advisors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to UCI Faculty	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

You have attended UCI during and since the campus closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic and have experienced different modalities of interaction. Based on those experiences, what is your preferred delivery method for attending, participating, or engaging in the following aspects of collegiate life?

	Remote-Live	Remote-Asynchronous	In-Person	Hybrid	No Preference
Class lecture	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Class discussion	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Educational/career/leadership workshop	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Study session	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social/celebratory event	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Faculty speaker	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Job interview	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Work project or shift	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Group project(s)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Counseling session	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Academic advising session	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

What, if any, were the biggest challenges you encountered since returning to campus after the pandemic closure?

That was the final question. Thank you for your responses!

I will be conducting a small number of one-on-one interviews during the next 2 months. These interviews will be held via Zoom and will last up to 60 minutes. Participants will receive a \$25 gift card. Are you interested in participating in these interviews?

Please provide the best ways to reach you to setup a Zoom interview:

Email: _____

Phone: _____

That's the end of the questionnaire. If you would like to review or change any prior responses, please click "Back." To submit your response, please click "Next" (this will end the survey).

Thank you very much for your time and responses!

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW SESSION

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Today, we will discuss your academic, social, and community experiences during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. This interview is scheduled for up to 60 minutes and will be recorded on Zoom. You will also notice an additional participant, this is a transcription service. Only audio recordings will be used for research purposes. I may also pause briefly to take notes.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Explain the overall interview. I have 4 different topics and about 5-7 questions per topic to ask. If you need me to repeat anything or if you need a break let me know.

WARMUP	How is your quarter at UCI going?
WARMUP	What are your post-graduation plans?
1	What was your transition to UCI like during the pandemic?
2	What was your transition to UCI, like particularly your experience as a first-generation college student?
3	Describe your support system during first year?
4	Which on- or off-campus resources, if any, did you use in college during first year and how did they support you in regard to academically/socially?
5	What, if any, are the biggest challenges did you experience during your first year? What helped you through these challenges?
6	How do you feel you were impacted by the COVID closures during the pandemic?
7	What, if any, were the biggest challenges/benefits from remote learning?
8	Is there anything that the institution or professors could have done differently?
9	Describe your experience following the closure of university due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I am interested in any changes you experienced in the following aspects of your life:
	A. Living Situation
	B. Work/Internships/Campus Involvement
	C. Personal/Social
10	What type of feelings/emotions did you experience during the COVID-19 pandemic closures?
11	How did you manage these feelings/emotions?
12	Tell me about any support or resources you sought or utilized to help you through any related challenges?
13	Share about any new routines or interactions did you experience/create?
	A. Personal/Social

	B. Academics
14	What was your experience upon returning to campus after the pandemic closures?
15	Which, if any, were the biggest changes you noticed on campus once it fully reopened?
	a. Access to programs/services/offices
	b. Social
	c. Academic
	d. Policies & Procedures
16	Overall, how did you feel about these changes due to campus reopening and what if anything could have been done differently?
17	Tell me about your academic experience in an in-person learning environment. What, if any, were the biggest challenges and benefits with transitioning from remote learning to in-person?
18	What type of emotions/feelings did you experience while transition to campus after the pandemic and how did you manage these emotions/feelings?
19	How do you feel the pandemic affected your overall college experience? I am interested in any changes you experienced in the following aspects of your collegiate life:
	A. Living situation
	B. Work/Internship/Campus Involvement
	C. Personal/Social
	D. Academics/Learning
20	Any experience(s) you feel you missed out on as a direct result of the pandemic and/or university closure?
21	Anything you would want to keep from closures/remote learning?
23	What recommendations, if any, in relation to lessons learned from the pandemic, do you have for the university or for higher education in general?
24	Are there any resource/services/info that could have better supported you during closures and throughout transition back to campus?
25	Describe your support system while in college?
26	Are there any specific values or beliefs kept you motivated during the pandemic?
27	How was your overall experience as first gen college student throughout the pandemic?
28	During your overall college experience, which services/offices/programs if any supported you?
29	Anything the institution could have done differently or better to support first-generation college students during closures and transition back to campus?
30	How might the university better support first-generation college students overall?
31	Is there anything else you would like to share?

Follow-up/clarifying/probing questions to make sure that your interviewees have opportunity to talk about how they navigated challenges (not only discuss the challenges, but also discuss what helped them through)

As a token of appreciation for completing the interview, you will receive a \$25 Amazon electronic gift card which I will send to the email provided in the survey.

Do you have any questions?

Thank you again and good luck with finals!

REFERENCES

- Almeida, D. J., Byrne, A. M., Smith, R. M., & Ruiz, S. (2021). How relevant is grit? The importance of social capital in first-generation college students' academic success. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 23(3), 539–559. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025119854688>
- Aristovnik, A., Keržič, D., Ravšelj, D., Tomaževič, N., & Umek, L. (2020). Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on life of higher education students: A global perspective. *Sustainability*, 12(20), 8438. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208438>
- Armoed, Z. (2021). The COVID-19 pandemic: Online teaching and learning at higher education institutes. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 654(1), 012026. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/654/1/012026>
- Astin, A. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4), 297–308.
- Ayala, C., & Striplen, A. (2002, November). *A career introduction model for first-generation college freshmen students* (ED469996). ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED469996>
- Bailey, M., & Duquette, N. J. (2014). How Johnson fought the War on Poverty: The economics and politics of funding at the Office of Economic Opportunity. *The Journal of Economic History*, 74(2), 351–388. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050714000291>
- Balkundi, S., & Fredrick, S. S. (2023). Students' perceptions of COVID-19 stress and internalizing problems: Is social support a buffer? *School Mental Health*, 15(3), 503–514. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-023-09581-7>

- Bao, W. (2020). COVID-19 and online teaching in higher education: A case study of Peking University. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 2(2), 113–115.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.191>
- Barber, P. H., Shapiro, C., Jacobs, M. S., Avilez, L., Brenner, K. I., Cabral, C., Cebreros, M., Cosentino, E., Cross, C., Gonzalez, M. L., Lumada, K. T., Menjivar, A. T., Narvaez, J., Olmeda, B., Phelan, R., Purdy, D., Salam, S., Serrano, L., Velasco, M. J., ... Levis-Fitzgerald, M. (2021). Disparities in remote learning faced by first-generation and underrepresented minority students during COVID-19: Insights and opportunities from a remote research experience. *Journal of Microbiology & Biology Education*, 22(1), 1–8.
<https://doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.v22i1.2457>
- Bennett, D., Hsiao, E.-L., Dees, D. C., Kim, D., & Bochenko, M. J. (2021). The impact of TRIO Student Support Services on academic performance of non-traditional students at a public state college in Georgia. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 27(2), 157–174.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1477971420915938>
- Bissessar, C. (Ed.). (2021). *Emergency remote learning, teaching and leading: Global perspectives*. Springer.
- Booker, J. A., Ell, M., Fivush, R., Greenhoot, A. F., Pasupathi, M., McLean, K. C., & Wainryb, C. (2022). Early impacts of college, interrupted: Considering first-year students' narratives about COVID and reports of adjustment during college shutdowns. *Psychological Science*, 33(11), 1928–1946. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976221108941>
- Brooks, S. K., Webster, R. K., Smith, L. E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. J. (2020). The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: Rapid review

- of the evidence. *The Lancet*, 395(10227), 912–920. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30460-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8)
- Brouwer, J., de Matos Fernandes, C. A., Steglich, C. E. G., Jansen, E. P. W. A., Hofman, W. A., & Flache, A. (2022). The development of peer networks and academic performance in learning communities in higher education. *Learning and Instruction*, 80, 101603. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2022.101603>
- Bui, K. V. T. (2002). First-generation college students at a four-year university: Background characteristics, reasons for pursuing higher education, and first-year experience. *College Student Journal*, 36(1), 3–11.
- Buzzanell, P. M. (2010). Resilience: Talking, resisting, and imagining new normalcies into being. *Journal of Communication*, 60(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01469.x>
- Buzzanell, P. M. (2018). Communication theory of resilience: Enacting adaptive transformative processes when families experience loss and disruption. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 98–109). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315204321-9>
- Cao, W., Fang, Z., Hou, G., Han, M., Xu, X., Dong, J., & Zheng, J. (2020). The psychological impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on college students in China. *Psychiatry Research*, 287, 112934. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.112934>
- Carter, N., Bryant-Lukosius, D., DiCenso, A., Blythe, J., & Neville, A. J. (2014). The use of triangulation in qualitative research. *Oncology Nursing Forum*, 41(5), 545–547. <https://doi.org/10.1188/14.ONF.545-547>

- Castillo-Montoya, M., & Ives, J. (2021). Transformative practices to support first-generation college students as academic learners: Findings from a systematic literature review. *Journal of First-Generation Student Success*, 1(1), 20–31.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/26906015.2021.1890948>
- Cataldi, E. F., Bennett, C. T., & Chen, X. (2018, February). *First-generation students: College access, persistence, and postbachelor's outcomes* (NCES 2018-421). National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018421.pdf>
- Choy, S. P. (2001). *Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment* (NCES 2001–126). National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001126.pdf>
- Chriscaden, K. (2020). *Impact of COVID-19 on people's livelihoods, their health and our food systems*. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-10-2020-impact-of-covid-19-on-people%27s-livelihoods-their-health-and-our-food-systems>
- Collier, P. J., & Morgan, D. L. (2008). “Is that paper really due today?”: differences in first-generation and traditional college students’ understandings of faculty expectations. *Higher Education*, 55, 425–446. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-007-9065-5>
- Coutu, D. L. (2002). How resilience works. *Harvard Business Review*, 80(5), 46–56.
- Crawford, J., Butler-Henderson, K., Rudolph, J., & Glowatz, M. (2020). COVID-19: 20 countries’ higher education intra-period digital pedagogy responses. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching*, 3(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2020.3.1.7>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.

- Davis, C. R., Hartman, H., Turner, M., Norton, T., Sexton, J., Méndez, D., & Méndez, J. (2021). “Listen to the feedback of students”: First-generation college students voice inequalities in schooling brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 26(1), 151–175.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251211066302>
- Delgado, V. (2020). Decoding the hidden curriculum: Latino/a first-generation college students’ influence on younger siblings’ educational trajectory. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 22(2), 624–641. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2020.1801439>
- Deng, X., & Yang, Y. (2022). Technology access and financial stress: Post-COVID-19 academic challenges of first-generation college students. *MDPI Education*, 15(7), 881.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15070881>
- Eismann, L. (2016). First-generation student and job success. *NACE Journal*, 77(2), 11–18.
<https://www.naceweb.org/job-market/special-populations/first-generation-students-and-job-success/>
- Engle, J. (2007). *Postsecondary access and success for first-generation college students*. The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED498370.pdf>
- Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students*. The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.
https://pellinstitute.org/downloads/publications-Moving_Beyond_Access_2008.pdf
- Ferri, F., Grifoni, P., & Guzzo, T. (2020). Online learning and emergency remote teaching: Opportunities and challenges in emergency situations. *Societies*, 10(4), Article 86.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/soc10040086>

- Fruehwirth, J. C., Biswas, S., & Perreira, K. M. (2021). The COVID-19 pandemic and mental health of first-year college students: Examining the effect of COVID-19 stressors using longitudinal data. *PLOS ONE*, 16(3), e0247999. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0247999>
- Fusch, P., & Ness, L. (2015). Are we there yet? Data saturation in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(9), 1408–1416. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2281>
- Gable, R. K. (2021). *The hidden curriculum: First-generation students at legacy universities*. Princeton University Press.
- Gibbons, M. M., & Shoffner, M. F. (2004). Prospective first-generation college students: Meeting their needs through social cognitive career theory. *Professional School Counseling*, 8, 91–97. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42732419>
- Gillis, A., & Krull, L. M. (2020). COVID-19 remote learning transition in Spring 2020: Class structures, student perceptions, and inequality in college courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 48(4), 283–299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X20954263>
- Gonzalez, E. & Deng, X. (2023). Social inclusion: The use of social media and the impact on first-generation college students. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 24(5), 1313-1333. <http://doi.org/10.17705/1jais.00792>
- Gonzalez, T., de la Rubia, M. A., Hincz, K. P., Comas-Lopez, M., Subirats, L., Fort, S., & Sacha, G. M. (2020). Influence of COVID-19 confinement on students' performance in higher education. *PLoS ONE*, 15(10), e0239490. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0239490>
- Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. K., & Anderson, M. L. (2006). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory* (3rd ed.). Springer.

- Gregg, D., & Shin, S. J. (2021). Why we will not return to exclusively face-to-face tutoring post-COVID: Improving student engagement through technology. *The Learning Assistance Review*, 26(2), 53–79.
- Gupta, R., & Agrawal, R. (2021). Are the concerns destroying mental health of college students?: A qualitative analysis portraying experiences amidst COVID-19 ambiguities. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 21(1), 621–639.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12232>
- Hausmann, L. R. M., Schofield, J. W., & Woods, R. L. (2007). Sense of belonging as a predictor of intentions to persist among African American and White first-year college students. *Research in Higher Education*, 48(7), 803–839. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-007-9052-9>
- Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educause Review*.
<https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>
- Huang, F., Craciun, D., & de Wit, H. (2022). Internationalization of higher education in a post-pandemic world: Challenges and responses. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 76(2), 203–212. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12392>
- Inkelas, K. K., Daver, Z. E., Vogt, K. E., & Leonard, J. B. (2007). Living-learning programs and first-generation college students' academic and social transition. *Research in Higher Education*, 48(4), 403–434. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-006-9031-6>

- Irlbeck, E., Adams, S., Akers, C., Burris, S., & Jones, S. (2014). First-generation college students: Motivations and support systems. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 55(2), 1540166. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2014.02154>
- Ishitani, T. T. (2006). Studying attrition and degree completion behavior among first-generation college students in the United States. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 77(5), 861–885. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2006.11778947>
- JASP Team. (2025). JASP (Version 0.18.3) [Computer software]. <https://jasp-stats.org>
- Johnson, R. B., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Turner, L. A. (2007). Toward a definition of mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(2), 112–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689806298224>
- Karnbach, K., Witkowski, M., Ebrahimi, O. V., & Burger, J. (2024). Back to life, back to reality: A multi-level dynamic network analysis of student mental health upon return to campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Current Psychology*, 43, 12998–13010. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03196-7>
- Karaköse, T. (2021). The impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on higher education: Opportunities and implications for policy and practice. *Education Process: International Journal*, 10(1), 7–12. <https://doi.org/10.22521/EDUPIJ.2021.101.1>
- Karaköse, T. (2021). Behavioral and interpersonal effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on frontline physicians working in emergency departments (EDs) and intensive care units (ICUs). *Acta Medica Mediterranea*, 37(1), 437–444. https://doi.org/10.19193/0393-6384_2021_1_68
- Kekić, D., & Miladinović, S. (2013). Functioning of educational system during an outbreak of acute infectious diseases. In D. Kolarić, S. Milašinović, D. Simović, & B. Simeunović-

- Patić (Eds.), *Archibald Reiss Days thematic conference proceedings of international significance: Crime and penal and legal response* (pp. 269–276). Academy of Criminalistic and Police Studies.
- Keyserlingk, Y., Yamaguchi-Pedroza, K., Arum, R., & Eccles, J. S. (2022). Stress of university students before and after campus closure in response to COVID-19. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 50(1), 285–301. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22561>
- Kiebler, J. M., & Stewart, A. J. (2021). Student experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic: Perspectives from first-generation/lower-income students and others. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 22(1), 198–224. <https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12288>
- Kilgo, C. A., Ezell Sheets, J. K. & Pascarella, E. T. (2015). The link between high-impact practices and student learning: some longitudinal evidence. *Higher Education*, 69, 509–525. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9788-z>
- Kim, Y., & Sax, L. J. (2009). Student-faculty interaction in research universities: Differences by student gender, race, social class, and first-generation status. *Research in Higher Education*, 50(5), 437–459. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-009-9127-x>
- Kuh, G. D. (2009). What student affairs professionals need to know about student engagement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), 683–706. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0099>
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Maietta, H. (2016, November 1). Career development needs of first-generation students. *NACE Journal*. National Association of Colleges and Employers.

<https://www.nacweb.org/diversity-equity-and-inclusion/best-practices/career-development-needs-of-first-generation-students>

Margolis, E. (2001). *The hidden curriculum in higher education*. Routledge.

Marinoni, G., van't Land, H., & Jensen, T. (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on higher education around the world: IAU global survey report*. International Association of Universities.

Means, B., & Neisler, J. (2020). Suddenly online: A national survey of undergraduates during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Digital Promise*.

<https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/resources/suddenly-online-national-undergraduate-survey>

Means, B., & Neisler, J. (2021). Teaching and learning in the time of COVID: The student perspective. *Online Learning*, 25(1), 8–27. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v25i1.2496>

Museus, S. D. (2008). The role of ethnic student organizations in fostering African American and Asian American students' cultural adjustment and membership at predominantly White institutions. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(6), 568–586.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0039>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). *First-generation and continuing-generation college students: Undergraduate, 2011–12 (NCES 2018-421)*. U.S. Department of

Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018421.pdf>

Nierenberg, A., & Pasick, A. (2020, August 24). Schools briefing: The outlook for in-person classes. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/24/us/college-university-reopening-coronavirus.html>

- Nguyen, J., Estrada Phuong, A., & Salehi, S. (2024). Supporting first-generation student experiences in programs and advising: Lessons from a pandemic. *NACADA Journal*, 44(1), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-22-41>
- Ogidigben, M. E., Rivera, E. R., & Keyser, R. S. (2021). Return to campus? Amid the COVID-19 pandemic? *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 21(6), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v21i6.4369>
- Oliver, A. I. G., & King, C. A. (2018). Reaching Individual Success and Empowerment (RISE): A First-generation, Co-curricular, Academic, and Social Engagement Model. *Journal of Business Diversity*, 18(3). <https://doi.org/10.33423/jbd.v18i3.103>
- Otter.ai (n.d.). *Otter: Real-time transcription and meeting notes*. Otter.ai. <https://otter.ai>
- Öztok, M. (2020). *The hidden curriculum of online learning: Understanding social justice through critical pedagogy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429284052>
- Pandit, N., Monda, S., & Campbell, K. (2024). Anticipatory worry and returning to campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of American College Health*, 72(3), 805–811. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2057803>
- Padgett, R. D., Johnson, M. P., & Pascarella, E. T. (2012). First-generation undergraduate students and the impacts of the first year of college: Additional evidence. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53(2), 243–266. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2012.0032>
- Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *Journal of Higher Education*, 75(3), 249–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2004.11772256>
- Pulliam, N., Ieva, K. P., & Burlew, L. (2017). The relationship between perceived career barriers and career decision self-efficacy on initial career choice among low-income, first-

- generation, pre-freshman, college-bound students. *Journal of College Access*, 3(2), 78–97. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol3/iss2/7>
- Ren, L.-L., Wang, W.-M., Wu, Z.-Q., Xiang, Z.-C., Guo, L., Xu, T., ... Wang, J.-W. (2020). Identification of a novel coronavirus causing severe pneumonia in humans: A descriptive study. *Chinese Medical Journal*, 133(9), 1015–1024.
<https://doi.org/10.1097/CM9.0000000000000722>
- Scharp, K. M., Wang, T. R., & Wolfe, B. H. (2021). Communicative resilience of first-generation college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Human Communication Research*, 48(1), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqab018>
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 9(2), 2–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001100008100900202>
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1984). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory*. Springer Publishing Company.
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1989). Marginality and mattering: Key issues in building community. *New Directions for Student Services*, 48, 5–15.
- Schlossberg, N. K. (2011). The challenge of change: The transition model and its applications. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 48(4), 159–162. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2011.tb01102.x>
- Siegle, D. (2024, February 27). Survey research response rates. *Educational Research Basics by Del Siegle, University of Connecticut*. <https://researchbasics.education.uconn.edu/survey-research-response-rates/>

- Singh, J. (2017). Enhancing student success in health care programs: Active learning in a hybrid format. *Journal of Instructional Pedagogies*, 18, 1–14.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1182732.pdf>
- Singh, J., Steele, K., & Singh, L. (2021). Combining the best of online and face-to-face learning: Hybrid and blended learning approach for COVID-19, post-vaccine, & post-pandemic world. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 50(2), 140–171.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00472395211047865>
- Smalley, A. (2021). Higher education responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/education/higher-education-responses-to-coronavirus-covid-19.aspx>
- Son, C., Hegde, S., Smith, A., Wang, X., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on college students' mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(9), e21279. <https://doi.org/10.2196/21279>
- Soria, K. M., & Stebleton, M. J. (2012). First-generation students' academic engagement and retention. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(6), 673–685.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2012.666735>
- Soria, K. M., Horgos, B., Chirikov, I., & Jones-White, D. (2020). *First-generation students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic* [Report]. UC Berkeley, Center for Studies in Higher Education. <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/214934>
- Soria, K. M., Horgos, B., & Roberts, B. J. (2021). The COVID-19 pandemic and students' mental health. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2021(176), 37–45.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20404>

- Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Johnson, C. S., & Covarrubias, R. (2012). Unseen disadvantage: How American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(6), 1178–1197. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027143>
- Swail, W. S., Redd, K. E., & Perna, L. W. (2003). *Retaining minority students in higher education: A framework for success* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 30(2)). Jossey-Bass. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED483024>
- Taylor-Nolan, B. E. (2022). *An abrupt transition to remote learning: The tenuous educational experiences of first-generation college students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Vermont). ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Terenzini, P. T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T., & Nora, A. (1996). First-generation college students: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development. *Research in Higher Education*, 37(1), 1–22. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED387004>
- Tesar, M. (2020). Towards a post-COVID-19 “new normality?”: Physical and social distancing, the move to online and higher education. *Policy Futures in Education*, 18(5), 556–559. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210320935671>
- The Pell Institute. (2009). National studies find TRIO programs effective at increasing college enrollment and graduation. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED508928>
- The Regents of the University of California. (n.d.). *About the University of California*. University of California. Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/about>
- Tinto, V. (2012). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. University of Chicago Press.

UC Newsroom. (2019, September 10). UC campuses top the 2020 U.S. News & World Report rankings. University of California. <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/uc-campuses-top-2020-us-news-world-report-rankings>

UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti. (2020). *Impacts of pandemics and epidemics on child protection: Lessons learned from a rapid review in the context of COVID-19*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/reports/impacts-pandemics-and-epidemics-child-protection>

University of California Office of the President. (2017, August 23). UC kicks off systemwide effort to support first-generation students with new report, website. <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/press-room/uc-kicks-systemwide-effort-support-first-generation-students-new-report-website>

U.S. Department of Education. (2018). *First-generation students: College access, persistence, and postbachelor's outcomes*. National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018421.pdf>

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Federal TRIO programs*. Office of Postsecondary Education. <https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/ope/trio>

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Higher Education Act—Federal TRIO programs: Definitions*. <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/trio-hea-36584.pdf>

Wang, C., Pan, R., Wan, X., Tan, Y., Xu, L., Ho, C. S., & Ho, R. C. (2020). Immediate psychological responses and associated factors during the initial stage of the COVID-19

- epidemic among the general population in China. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(5), 1729. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17051729>
- Wang, X., & Sedlacek, W. E. (2009). The psychology of the traditionally aged college student. In L. Perna (Ed.), *Understanding the working college student: New research and its implications for policy and practice* (pp. 45–62). Stylus Publishing.
- Wang, X., Smith, A., Keller, B., & Sasangohar, F. (2023). A participatory study of college students' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, 1116865. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1116865>
- Wighting, M. J., Liu, J., & Rovai, A. P. (2008). Distinguishing sense of community and motivation characteristics between online and traditional college students. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 9(3), 285–295. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ875103>
- Wittner, B., Barthauer, L., & Kauffeld, S. (2023). Accessibility and mobilisation of social capital in first-generation students' social networks—A mixed-methods approach. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 25(2), 1521025120979643. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025120979643>
- World Health Organization. (2020). Naming the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the virus that causes it. [https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it)
- World Health Organization. (2020, March 11). WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19. <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches>

Wu, M.-J., Zhao, K., & Fils-Aime, F. (2022). Response rates of online surveys in published research: A meta-analysis. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, 7, Article 100206.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2022.100206>