

CONVERGE COVID-19 Working Groups for Public Health and Social Sciences Research

Research Agenda-Setting Paper

This paper was written to help advance convergence-oriented research in the hazards and disaster field. It highlights areas where additional research could contribute new knowledge to the response to and recovery from the pandemic and other disasters yet to come. Questions about the research topics and ethical and methodological issues highlighted here should be directed to the authors who contributed to this paper.

Working Group Name:

First-Generation Students and College Persistence during COVID-19

Working Group Description:

On January 21, 2020, the Washington State Department of Health confirmed the nation's first case of COVID-19. Less than two months later, university officials from across the U.S. suspended face-to-face classes and moved instruction to virtual platforms. By mid-March, universities faced a mass exodus of students from campuses. These university-wide closures prompted a collaboration between researchers and college administrators to assess the impact of COVID-19 on first-generation college students (FGCS) across six universities: Bucknell University, Florida A&M University, Rowan University, the University of Colorado Boulder, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Pittsburgh.

Research Questions:

Overall, the research team is interested in answering the following questions,

- What does college persistence to graduation look like for FGCS living through the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How, if at all, does COVID-19 exacerbate already existing inequalities?
- What factors improve or reduce the likelihood of college graduation for FGCS who face COVID-19?

The goal of the associated study is to assess the persistence of FGCS, identify barriers to persistence, use the results to affect change, and help administrators create meaningful interventions for students through an unforeseen event. Our work would feed into the existing programs used by university administrators to support socially vulnerable populations during a pandemic. Findings would ultimately benefit FGCS by ensuring they receive the appropriate supports for college persistence and graduation.

Ethical / Methodological Considerations:

Our research team is an interdisciplinary group that consists of scholars of color, FGCS, and members of underrepresented groups who intentionally investigate topics that affect marginalized communities. Team members collectively represent universities with diverse student body characteristics that ultimately enhance the overall study. These universities fall across five states, while four identify as public, one identifies as an

HBCU, and one as a private, liberal arts school. Team members are trained in various methodologies, such as qualitative approaches (counter-narratives, ethnographies, inquiry, and testimonios), quantitative approaches, mixed methods, and visual approaches (e.g., documentaries). Additionally, team members will use their expertise in applying various approaches and methods to explore the intersectionality between race, class, and income amongst FGCS attending higher education institutions.

The team intends to collect a compilation of mixed methods data from surveys, interviews, and visual aids to assess college persistence for FGCS during the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses from surveys and interviews will enable the team to gauge commonalities and differences amongst FGCS at sampled schools. Surveys and interviews will be administered in summer 2020, fall 2020, spring 2021, and fall 2021.

The team is also employing the photovoice methodology by asking students to submit a visual aid (e.g., photos) and summary form that captures their schooling environments during COVID-19. Photovoice is a qualitative and participatory method that allows participants to use photography to deconstruct existing problems in a community. The team will also collect images across subsequent periods and compare images and responses from data collected during the early stages of the pandemic.

Potential Ethical, Methodological, and Empirical Gaps Faced by the Broader Research Community

- The impact of COVID-19 on researchers. A couple of researchers within the team experienced COVID-19 scares and were called away to cope with these unforeseen health occurrences. As we continue to study the impact of COVID-19 on students, we have realized that the team is not impervious to the pandemic.
- The intersection of COVID-19 and social and racial justice protest. Given the recent events, we have decided to include questions about social justice into future protocols. We also acknowledge that the current protests may be a significant cause of added stress for students, faculty, and researchers, especially people of color.
- The research group is a majority of women. Women in Western society take on (or are burdened by) the bulk of care work (for both elders and children); additionally, they are relied upon to perform care work (emotional labor) in our universities. We also recognize that group members may take on the role of caretaker more often than their counterparts, given their gender identity.

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