

Lived Experiences of First-Year College Students During a Pandemic

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The Novel Virus, COVID-19, has changed many aspects of current lifestyles including school closures, remote learning, and shuttered businesses (Fegert et al, 2020). Data generated from this study focused on how current policy regarding the COVID-19 response for the university provided the supports needed for students. University response included mask mandates, remote learning, and limitations on all social activities. First year freshman students, who attended a 4-year institute in Southeast US, spent a year presenting their lived experiences of college life to researchers. Participants discussed the struggles and stress that the pandemic placed on their college experiences. Key results found that despite the many obstacles that the pandemic has caused, and limitations placed by safety policies, these students were demonstrating resilience to these obstacles and forging forward in their educational career. Implications of this research provided data to university leaders on the effects of their pandemic response as they move into the endemic.

The first year of college is an exciting time for many new students as it is a time to forge ahead toward independence, new horizons, and new social environments (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic has created a shadow over what should be an exciting experience for first-year college students. They faced isolation, scaled-back social activities, and remote learning (Leal Filho et al., 2021). In this study, seven college students attending a 4-year regional institution in Southeast U.S. during academic year 2020-2021 were interviewed about their experiences during their first year of college during a pandemic. Participants' responses about their experiences and obstacles during their school year were collected as a result of this study.

Problem Statement

COVID-19 created a unique situation for students as they finished their 2019-2020 school year online instead of in the classroom. This change in the normal school routine created more disruptions than just loss of in-person academic time; It caused the loss of social activities and interactions, extra academic time with the teacher, and end-of-the-year festivities (Friehwirth et al., 2021). There are concerns that adolescent social and emotional health will be negatively affected by the pressures of this pandemic (Copeland et al., 2021). This study has incorporated these concerns into the focus of the study, which was to identify how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected this group of first-year students. The following research questions were addressed in this study: (a) What are the lived experiences participants attending a 4-year regional institution in the southeast U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic expressed that are shaping their social and academic health? and (b) What understandings of the university response to pandemic concerns can provide further research on the effect of the pandemic regulations on college students' social and academic health?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The post-traumatic growth model was first published by Calhoun and Teseschi in 1995 and has continued to be researched since that time (Calhoun & Teseschi, 2010). Calhoun and Teseschi (2010) defined the model as an experience of positive change following a major crisis. Tian et al. (2016) discussed the model as an area where emerging adults who suffered from trauma are able to move past the traumatic experience and reemerge with the ability to function in their world more effectively. This post-traumatic growth occurs more often in young adults than adolescents and older adults (Tian et al., 2016). The students in this study have faced more challenges in their first year of college than past students, coupled with the traumatic end of their high school education (Schniders & Moore, 2021). In the analysis of the findings in this study, connections to the participant's response to the pandemic (traumatic) experience on the ability to function in college. This model presents the theory that

despite the impact of the pandemic on their education, participants can still maintain positive growth in their college experience.

Literature Review

Research has just begun to be available on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students (e.g., Friehwirth et al., 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2021; Schnieders & Moore, 2021; Sood & Sharma, 2021). These current studies on college students were reviewed along with the effect of past traumatic events (e.g., natural disasters, child abuse, and sexual abuse) on young people. From the gathered review of the literature, this section has been divided into two main categories: how other traumatic events affected college students and current research on COVID-19's effect on college students.

PAST TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Research was conducted following traumatic events such as natural disasters (e.g., Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Rita, and gulf oil spill), which could assist in identifying potential issues with stress factors on first-year college students (e.g., Bonanno, 2004; Kronenberg et al., 2010; Lai et al., 2018; Mearidy-Bell, 2013; Osofsky et al., 2015). A review of these research studies has identified the following effects these disasters had on the mental health of young people and children: the loss of social connections and post-traumatic stress disorder. However, the negative effects of the disasters decreased as the event became a past experience of the participants. The most prominent theme that emerged was the occurrence of resilience in the aftermath of the events (Mearidy-Bell, 2013).

Most college students enter school with at least a history of one traumatic experience (Boyras et al., 2015). However, it was hypothesized that this first-year student college class experienced stress, depression, or loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students' losses are not contained to disruptions of high school programs but also include losing control of their situations due to a pandemic (Freuhwirth et al., 2021). Studies done on students who believe they have control over their lives, not an external person or power, were more successful in college (Tian et al., 2016). Therefore, the students' experiences in this study should identify what supports have provided the controls necessary to succeed in their freshman experience.

CURRENT RESEARCH ON COVID-19'S EFFECT ON COLLEGE STUDENTS

Current research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the continual need to provide and monitor mental health services to college students as the pandemic progresses and moves forward into a post-pandemic world (e.g., Copeland et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Sood & Sharma, 2021). Liu et al. (2020)

highlighted a need for universities to provide access to mental health services for students, especially marginalized students (i.e., students of color or low economic status). Additional studies directed universities to monitor and provide mental health and wellness programs to their students as they continued to adjust to the many changes that have occurred due to the pandemic (Copeland et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Sood & Sharma, 2021).

Students attending college during a pandemic will need the ability to develop support systems that can assist in achieving success. Researchers (e.g., Holdsworth et al., 2018; Turner et al., 2017) have identified that college students who found success in their college life built support networks, stayed healthy, and kept positive perspectives. As they enter their first year in college, students are also presented with a change of coursework and the demand to be more independent in their learning. College students are required to take key responsibilities in their learning (i.e., study skills, time management, and seeking support). These responsibilities are not present in high school coursework for many students and can be overwhelming in the first year of college. Utilizing the college academic support systems and building their own support systems may be the way to handle this challenge (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013).

Students who can be resilient in traumatic situations have a stronger physical well-being, lower levels of distress, and greater growth (Sood & Sharma, 2021). Research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental welfare of college students has become more available in recent research studies (e.g., Filho et al., 2021; Fruehwirth et al., 2021). Social isolation, increased academic stress, increased anxiety, and increased depression are all mental health issues that have been identified in research studies on the effects of the pandemic (Filho et al., 2021). Further, students face new academic challenges that look different in a pandemic world as they now have online and hybrid courses. Strategies to assist college students in finding resilience and improvement in mental health concerns could be introduced through improvements in access to mental health services by colleges and universities (Liu et al., 2020).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study was created to address the effect of living through a pandemic while dealing with the pressures of starting college on students' social and academic health. The effect of the pandemic on students' social health, along with academic stress, was a key concern in the development of this study. The university's pandemic response was also a focal point because the way students responded to these pandemic protocols can provide valuable information for future crisis planning. Another significance of this study is the contribution to the growing body of research developed from this pandemic (e.g., Fruehwirth et al., 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2021; Schnieders & Moore,

2021; Sood & Sharma, 2021). This study has the potential to assist researchers as they continue to study the effects of the pandemic on higher education.

The growing literature on the pandemic and college students highlights the need to monitor students' mental health as they continue to move forward in their academic programs (Liu et al., 2020). Additional studies on college-level students' responses to traumatic events evaluate the support systems they maintain for social and academic health (Turner et al., 2017). The significance of this study is the collection of findings that reflect the lived experiences of a group of students living through the pandemic experience. The research highlights the needs and recommendations but not the actual experiences of college-level students. The findings in this study provided a unique view of life during a pandemic for the participants.

Method

The research design was qualitative with a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological approach is used in qualitative research when the purpose is to collect data that describes the effect of a phenomenon on participants by using their lived experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Therefore, their comments produced a set of data that is a snapshot of college life in 2020 and 2021.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The context of this study is a 4-year regional institution in Southeast U.S. Students who attended this university during academic year 2020-2021 experienced learning in the following settings: full remote classes conducted via Zoom and Blackboard and hybrid classes that consisted of both in-person and remote classes. To prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the university required that face masks be worn on campus. In addition, large gatherings and school events were either canceled, limited, or conducted in a virtual setting. For example, first-year students did not experience the traditional orientation programs done in the past due to restrictions on large gatherings.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Participants were selected using a simple random sample drawing from first-year students who attended a 4-year institution in Southeast U.S. during academic year 2020-2021. A total of 604 students were invited to join the study. The sample did not include students who had attended a prior university or community college. A recruitment process using student emails and phone numbers was developed to identify the maximum number of students who could participate in the study. Seven students responded to the requests, and six participated throughout the entire study.

The participants in the study consisted of six female students and one male student. As planned, all seven students were first-year college students and had graduated from high school in May 2020. The students were enrolled in nursing, education, music, and art programs. To protect their identity, pseudonyms were used when presenting comments provided by participants in the interview process.

INTERVIEW PROCESS

Qualitative interviews served as the means of all data collection. Each interview was conducted using an interview guide approach, where a set of specific open-ended questions were designed prior to the interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). All interviews were conducted via Zoom and consisted of six to seven questions designed to allow the participant the opportunity to provide an introspective look at their lived experiences in college. The questions were developed to allow participants to reflect on their challenges, successes, and the support systems they used throughout the academic year.

The students were interviewed three times over the course of the 2020-2021 school year: October 2020, January 2021, and April 2021. These time ranges were selected because they provided the opportunity to collect data from the beginning of the school year, the middle of the school year, and at the conclusion of the school year. The selection of interview times provided a depiction of the first-year student experience at key points in the academic year (Johnson & Christensen, 2020).

The questions developed for this study used the literature reviewed for topic direction. The theoretical framework selected for this study had connections to the ability of young adults to grow after a traumatic experience. Therefore, the questions were designed to provide opportunities for participants to further discuss the trauma of living during a pandemic on their social and academic health. Questions were asked about the academic demands and the stress students were feeling during the time period interviewed (Schnieders & Moore, 2021). One question asked the students to share their experiences with remote and hybrid learning. Additionally, based on the reviewed literature (e.g., Filho et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021), there was a need to identify the support systems these students used to handle the new demands both academically and socially (e.g., living away from home, making new friends, the college experience). Therefore, questions asked students to share their personal support systems and how they assisted them in college (Lee et al., 2021). All questions were developed with an open-ended approach which allowed the students to provide comments beyond “yes” or “no” (Johnson & Christensen, 2020).

DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed into a document that could be read and coded. Transcribed interviews were evaluated and coded using a coding scheme of initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding (Saldaña, 2016). Data was initial coding into categories (initial coding) after each interview session. At the conclusion of the study, focused coding was conducted where all of the categories were merged into formal codes that reflected these categories. Theoretical coding was the final process of the coding scheme, as all codes were reviewed to create major themes in the data. These themes will be further discussed in the subsection *Key Themes*.

Findings

Researchers have organized data in phenomenological studies by charting findings with common characteristics to create a stronger understanding of the similarities of the experience (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). In this study, common characteristics would be experiences that occurred at key times in the academic year (i.e., start of the academic year, end and start of semesters, and end of the academic year). The final subsection is *Key Themes* which were developed in the theoretical coding of the data analysis.

FIRST INTERVIEW

The first set of interviews began with a focus on experiences students had regarding the completion of high school in order to identify their level of pandemic-related trauma prior to starting their first year in college. There were several responses regarding missing end-of-the-year experiences such as prom, music concerts, graduation, and saying goodbye to students in lower grades. Participants expressed bitterness, sadness, and an overall sense that they had lost something they had been looking forward to for a long time. For example, Carey shared that many of these activities were events they had been looking forward to since they were babies.

There were positive remarks regarding the end of their high school year. Carey shared how their family tried to make an 18th birthday special despite the quarantine. Other participants described how schools attempted graduation even if it was not a traditional walk across the stage.

I ended up actually getting to walk across a stage, but it was at a football stadium, and it was like, really hot and gross and (laughs) um, but it was um, it was actually not a bad end to being at that high school. They uh, did a firework show at the end of our graduation, and it was like all, it just ended really happy. (Dawn).

The participants also focused on the highlights of their senior year, which were the events that happened before COVID-19. They described these experiences as the ones they want to remember regarding their high school experience.

I guess my last day of high school before the pandemic hit, um, we were on a band trip to Disney. So, I guess I could say I ended off my senior year on a high note, even though I didn't get a prom, I didn't get to walk off the stage traditionally. (Jared).

The positive highlights continued to focus on these events that occurred before school closures. Despite those happy moments, the final part of their senior year was different from their expectations.

And then they eventually canceled our band banquet, which is like the final, um, say goodbye to the seniors, say goodbye to the year kind of thing. So that was also really sad. But it was just a really weird year. 'Cause the first half was like really awesome. And then the second half was just like, well, this is kind of weird. (Rene).

The flow of the interview moved from high school experience to the participant's current world: their first year in college. They discussed adapting to remote learning, spending more time in their dorm room than on campus, and attempting to be social in a time of social distancing. Jessie shared that one day she sat on a blanket outside in a courtyard with her roommate and attended class there instead of in their dorm room. This provided a needed break from their dorm room and allowed them to feel a little more normal.

Overall, their expectations for college had completely changed. Most of the participants expressed concern over not being able to attend more social events and make new friends on campus. They expressed being upset over not having in-person student orientation or classes. Instead, these activities were conducted virtually.

Their responses focused a lot on being "trapped" in dorm rooms and being afraid to go out anywhere. Rene stated that being in a group "feels weird" and "kind of dirty" due to the virus. "It's pretty easy for me to say that I am not enjoying college so far" (Jared). More than one participant expressed that they expected to join student groups and make lifelong friends which has not happened due to social distancing restrictions and an overall fear of exposure to the virus.

Like that's kind of one of my main goals of college is like... My sister, she's a senior at [x]. She has, like, basically her best friends for life by now. And they're just like, they're like peak friend group. It's like I want that... You know? (Rene).

In addition to a new level of academic demands from college, these participants are struggling to learn in a world of remote education. Many of the responses focused on the negative side of remote learning which included not having access to professors for additional support and the feeling of little to no support in their learning. Some of the participants were enjoying the very independent side of remote learning, watching lectures at their pace and doing assignments. They felt more in control of their learning environment.

I really didn't think that, you know, college would be like that whenever I got here. I was like, "Oh, I'm gonna have to like, do like, live Zoom lectures," but none of my lectures are live or anything. They all post them to Blackboard and I just watch them on my own time, and I feel like that helps me a lot. And I'm actually doing really good in most of the classes that do that. (Jesse).

The negative responses did outweigh the positive ones, especially regarding the lack of support in their learning. The participants expressed stress over grades and difficulties with harder subjects such as college-level mathematics. "I felt kind of at a disadvantage compared to my fellow students who, you know, could actually understand. Because I'm not good at math. So for math it was especially hard just having to listen to videos and not being able to ask questions when I needed it" (Linda).

The participants were asked if they believed that disruptions to their senior year schooling were having effects on their academic coursework in college. One major concern from senior year disruptions stemmed from the Advanced Placement (AP) program. Jared shared that testing was interrupted and poorly administered. He believed that his score on the AP test should have been higher, and now he must take courses that may have been exempted by AP tests. Carey also shared that AP testing was chaotic for her. Carey went on to state that she had even considered taking a gap year before college because of the learning disruptions and wanted to feel more prepared for college.

SECOND INTERVIEW

The second interview was conducted at the start of the second semester. Participants had just completed a three-week break between semesters one and two. This timing was selected because the participants had fully completed their first semester, received semester-one grades, and had a break from university life.

Participants shared that while they were still facing stress from school, the pandemic, and life in general, there was acceptance of this stress and moving forward with their academic work. “You still don’t want to get COVID, but everyone’s so used to it being this thing now that even if you do get it, no one’s really freaking out about it as much” (Linda). Many of the responses resonated with the acceptance of restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants expressed that this was the reality of attending college during a pandemic.

Actually, it has to do with me being on my second semester... I know what’s going to happen. And also, like I said, it really helps that I came in during the pandemic. So, I wasn’t shocked by, “Oh no. Why aren’t we doing this? We always did this. (Kristy).

There was more acceptance of the restrictions and accepting the reality of college in a pandemic. The students were ready to accept the stress of the pandemic because they wanted to complete college.

I knew going into college during a pandemic that I would have to deal with the risk of getting sick or having to quarantine or whatever, but it is kind of stressful, because I want to be there. I want to go in person. I want to have a job. (Dawn).

The dominant factor in most discussions was stress related to college and coursework. A major change had occurred for many of these students between the fall and spring semesters; they were now able to attend more hybrid classes than in the fall 2020 semester. When asked about this experience, there were a mixed set of responses. Some students liked the idea of being back in the classroom but found hybrid classes difficult due to changing schedules, which involved following both a blackboard schedule and an in-person schedule. “Stuff can get lost and mistranslated and due dates can be confusing and stuff like that” (Carey). The emphasis on miscommunication was shared by most of the participants.

I feel like it’s better if the communication is good. For example, my [x] class is supposed to be hybrid like that. If there wasn’t COVID or anything like that, I would meet three days a week. But because it’s a hybrid model, I only meet one day a week, is what I thought... I missed four days of classes, because I was like, “Oh, I’m only supposed to go on this day,” only to realize that I had just missed four days of classes. (Dawn).

The participants were asked to share how they were doing in college and their stress levels since they were interviewed in the fall. The responses included several

comments regarding increased stress related to coursework and demands on their time. “A lot worse, to be honest, I’m taking a lot more classes this semester. I’m in 17 credit hours and... I feel like it wouldn’t be as bad if I wasn’t taking so much, but I need to in order to stay on track” (Jessie).

There were discussions regarding the vaccines, and some of the participants had already been able, due to employment, to start receiving their vaccinations. Some participants expressed hope that the vaccines would lead to more in-person experiences and a safer environment. They were all concerned with the spread of the virus and forced quarantines.

Quarantines occurred if a student was exposed to the virus through trace contact. Dawn was experiencing forced quarantine during the interview because one of her suitemates had tested positive. She shared the frustration of the entire situation from loss of work and class time. I reached out after the interview and was sent an update on the situation, which outlined more quarantines and loss of class time.

When we did our second interview I was put on quarantine because my suitemates tested positive. Two weeks after I got out of quarantine I got sent into another quarantine because my roommate tested positive... I was in quarantine the week before spring break and had to continue through break... Last week was my first week back and it is definitely taking some adjusting.

Participants were also asked to follow up on increased stress levels and share the support systems they used to handle pandemic-related issues. A few participants indicated that they used college resources (i.e., writing center and academic success center) and their professors for academic support. However, many participants turned to their friends, roommates, class group apps, and family to deal with increased stress.

I think the class group chats definitely help, because there are a lot of times where I’m looking at an assignment and I’m just like, “How do I do this? What am I supposed to do? What is the point of this assignment?” (Dawn).

THIRD INTERVIEW

The stress levels and the coursework situations were part of the third set of interviews because participants were asked to reflect on their first year of college. Participants were asked to reflect on their favorite and least favorite memories and how successful they personally felt about their college experience. Six of the seven participants were able to meet and discuss their final thoughts on their first year of college.

All but one expressed they felt that they had a successful first year of college. They all expressed difficulties with coursework and disappointment regarding a grade in a particular course, but they still personally expressed that the year was a success.

I definitely expected better out of myself, at least academically. And I know this year was hard enough as it is, but I genuinely do feel like I would have done a lot better had COVID not been a major thing where I couldn't attend class in person. But other than that, every other aspect of the year was pretty great. (Linda).

The only participant to express that it was not successful was Jared. In October, Jared stated that he was not enjoying college. In April, he communicated that his overall college experience was not beneficial due to online coursework. While he had some accomplishments in his major, he felt that it had been a waste of money to spend the whole year on remote learning, which he could have done for less money at a community college. However, with the prospect of more face-to-face learning occurring in academic year 2021-2022 and success in his major, he was planning to return to the same university for a second year.

The participants discussed their academic struggles as their least favorite memory of the first-year college experience. Grades, remote learning, and communication difficulties with professors were often mentioned in the responses.

a lot of times, at least for me, being able to communicate real time with my professors because it's kind of hard when you're watching a lecture online and you have a question and then you can't exactly email them and get the response right away. Or then you have a follow-up question, that's another email. (Linda).

Additional challenges to academic struggles were forced quarantines; two of the six participants were quarantined after a roommate tested positive for the virus. In addition to the pandemic, the region suffered a major ice storm in mid-February, which added new challenges for students' academics.

The reflections from the past year were not all negative. The participants talked in great deal about the positive events that happened over the year. These events included being able to have family visit the campus in outdoor areas (Carey), success in their chosen major (Jared and Rene), and making friends (Linda, Kristy, and Rene). The participants indicated that they are looking forward to the future and their second year in college.

KEY THEMES

A review of the data accumulated from the interviews generated five key themes that reflected the comments made by the participants. The themes reflect the collection of experiences for the purpose of identifying what helped them with the challenges and achievements that they shared from the college experience. These experiences are the enduring understanding of how this pandemic shaped the participants' academic and social health. These themes were: (a) support systems, (b) academic health, (c) social health, (d) activities, and (e) reflections. Comments that were collected, which demonstrated each theme, have been provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Themes That Reflected the Findings From Interviews on Lived Experiences in College During a Pandemic

Themes that reflected findings	Examples	Example Quote
Support Systems	Communication with Professors, Academic help, Classmates, Family, Roommates/Friends	(Dawn)- "Were so many miscommunications between me and another professor and now I'm having to like struggle to bring my grade up because he grades on attendance and that's not what he said at the beginning of the semester."
Academic Health	Remote learning, face-to-face learning, hybrid classes	(Jared)-"the concept of just getting up and doing it all over again, just to, again, sit in front of a computer screen is just not that fun. I have to force myself out of bed."
Social Health	Loss of social activities, making friends/connections	(Rene)-"talking to people online just doesn't have the same kind of connections that you can build when you have a physical person. So probably, especially as we're getting more into the technology age, probably just not taking that for granted, I think."

Table 1 CONTINUED

Themes That Reflected the Findings From Interviews on Lived Experiences in College During a Pandemic

Activities	Clubs, events at school, work	(Linda)-“My first year included a lot more limitations than other people’s because I couldn’t exactly go where I wanted or reach out to people in person when I wanted. Everything had to be scheduled. There was always a process for everything to ensure everyone’s safety. So I would just say definitely a lot of restrictions and limitations. It’s kind of hard when you get that freedom and you’re off to college and then you can’t have freedom
Reflections	Reflections on successes and failures of the academic year, vision of the future	(Carey)-“Think that even though that we’re in the middle of a pandemic and that COVID has altered the way that we do things tremendously, that when we get to the finishing points in our lives where I’m graduating from [x] school, or other people are just graduating from college, or going for the master’s degree that we’ll look back and we will finally realize it made us stronger.”

Discussion

The reflections of social experiences and academic experiences provided a rich description of the first-year student experience in academic year 2020-2021. After all interviews were coded, several themes emerged from the data which reflected both the positive and challenging experiences of participants. The following subsections reflect the experiences provided in this study in the responses to the research questions: *Support Systems; Academic Health; Activities; Social Health; and Reflections*. The following subgroups are listings of how these themes were reflected in the study.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The support of the participants’ family, friends, and classmates were the key support systems that these participants used to help them feel successful. The missing support systems were mostly academic. The participants’ comments focused on the struggle with remote learning and communication with professors.

ACADEMIC HEALTH

Participants often spoke of their class experiences, and the effects remote learning, hybrid learning, and face to face learning had on their academic success. Experiences reflected both the negatives and positives of remote learning: The participants who cited academics as the source of most of their stress expressed that some grades would have been better if they had more traditional schedules that had existed pre-pandemic.

SOCIAL HEALTH

This theme was a major concern as college generally has a large social community filled with activities and other social events. The participants expressed their bitterness over missing the traditional activities but discussed the ability to still try to join organizations and meet new people. Rene, who expressed fear over not making lifetime college friends in October 2020, shared in April 2021 that she had started to make friends. Kristy joined a diversity organization and was having a great time planning various campus activities. Dawn was able to join a sorority. Despite the many obstacles, these participants were still finding ways to be active and participate in a college social life.

ACTIVITIES

The loss of typical first-year student activities was upsetting to the participants. Most of the participants discussed that they had looked forward to new student orientation but were forced to complete this activity in a virtual space. They found that the move of activities into a virtual setting created limitations for their experiences as first-year students. They all expressed looking forward to the future with the removal of in-person limitations of social and academic activities.

REFLECTIONS

As with any phenomenological study, reflecting on how the participants experienced the phenomenon is key to creating an overall understanding of these lived experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Apart from one person, participants reflected on the year as successful. While they all shared struggles with academics, they still discussed activities that made their year special. Their experiences with making friends, activities, academic survival, and adjusting to college life were signs of college success.

Reflection on their current success was only one part of this final set of interviews. Participants were also asked to share reflections they would tell a first-year student in 20 years. These comments reflected not just the struggles but the lessons learned from the pandemic. However, despite limitations and struggles, the majority of reflections were positive. In addition, all participants were excited about academic year 2021-2022 and would be returning to the university.

Recommendations

The experiences provided by the participants in this study reflect how they addressed the challenges they were dealing with in college that were unique due to the pandemic (e.g., quarantines, remote activities, limited numbers in social settings). The data collected in this study provided a snapshot of how the students met these challenges, along with reflections on the university's response to pandemic concerns. As universities begin to move towards a post-pandemic world and evaluate their response to the pandemic, the following recommendations should be considered: (a) continue to study the effects of the pandemic on students who started their first year of college in 2020; (b) continue to monitor student mental and social needs; (c) create more efforts to encourage social opportunities as pandemic restrictions are lifted on college campuses; (d) provide more academic services to process academic loss that occurred with remote learning; (e) develop alternative ways to service new students' academic and social needs should another pandemic occur causing similar disruptions to college life; and (f) and conduct more research focused on a continual longitudinal study to identify how successful these students' college experiences are as they move forward when pandemic concerns end.

The current research that has been conducted on the effect of the pandemic on college students has identified that more support, especially mental health care, needs to be included in the endemic plans of colleges and universities (e.g., Friehwirth et al., 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2021; Schnieders & Moore, 2021; Sood & Sharma, 2021). Findings in these studies have demonstrated that students have experienced loneliness, social isolation, academic difficulties, and increased levels of stress and depression. These same findings were identified in this study. Therefore, colleges and universities must include increased mental health services in their endemic plans to meet the needs outlined in studies on the effect of the pandemic.

Additional recommendations are concentrated on students' academic and social needs in higher education. There was a continual reoccurrence of academic stress in all of the interviews conducted in this study. The participants faced stress in communication with professors, difficulty with content, and technology issues. Schnieders and Moore (2021) identified that 52% of the participants in their study indicated that online coursework was somewhat challenging. The comments made by the participants in this study demonstrated the need that endemic plans developed by colleges and universities must address the academic needs of their students as they progress further into programs. Additionally, planning developed for potential future pandemics must include strategies for remote learning to avoid this high level of academic stress.

Future studies on COVID-19 and college students should focus on the long-term effects of the pandemic on students' social and academic health. Longitudinal studies on graduation and drop-out rates for students who started college during the pandemic could provide research on the effects of the pandemic. These studies could aid colleges and universities with preparation should another pandemic of this type occur in the future.

LIMITATIONS

Data was limited by the small sample size, even though every attempt was made to generate a larger number of participants. The attempts made included emails, phone calls, and sharing the program information with first-year student professors. The number of participants was smaller than we had hoped but proved to be sufficient as the smaller number allowed for more time to interview each student. This participant number allowed for three in-depth interviews for each participant, which enabled the collection of lived experiences during the pandemic. It was also decided to focus on one higher education institution because it created a very focused study on the experiences of the participants.

DELIMITATIONS

The parameters of this study were first-year students attending a 4-year regional institution in the southeast U.S. First-year students that had previously attended college or community college were not included in the study. We did not want any influences on previous college experience in this study. The focus was on the first-year college experience in a pandemic and not a comparison study of college life before and in the midst of a pandemic.

Conclusions

When entering this study, the perception was that many of these students were facing high levels of stress due to the pandemic, loss of school time, loss of social activities, and an overall change in daily life. Instead, a group of resilient students demonstrated a willingness to continue with their education despite the challenges of the pandemic. Some students may have had experiences different from pre-pandemic or personal expectations. However, these experiences did not stop them from meeting their educational goals.

The research questions for this study focused on the lived experiences that shaped the social and emotional health of the participants in the study. These participants' experiences of social and academic support, including friends and family, were key

to shaping their survival in the first year of college. The miscommunications, lack of communication with professors, and personal struggles with remote learning contributed to many of the hindrances to their academic success.

The students' attitudes and ability to keep going despite many obstacles were a commonality of their experiences. As stated earlier, the assumption was that many of these students would be struggling. Instead, they are thriving despite the obstacles placed in front of them by the global pandemic. Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2010) theory of post-traumatic growth supports the success documented in this study. The participants have become stronger and had positive growth over the course of their first year of college by overcoming the challenges and restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their final thoughts were looking back and seeing all that was accomplished despite the pandemic.

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