



SERU COVID-19 SURVEY

First-Generation Students' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Krista M. Soria, Bonnie Horgos, Igor Chirikov, and Daniel Jones-White

The COVID-19 pandemic has negative impacts on first-generation students enrolled at large public research universities, according to the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium survey of 28,198 undergraduate students conducted May through July 2020 at nine universities. In the survey, 26% of respondents ($n = 7,233$) identified as first-generation students (those whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree).

First-generation students were more likely than continuing-generation students to experience **financial hardships** during the pandemic, including lost wages from family members, lost wages from on- or off-campus employment, and increased living and technology expenses. Compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation students are **nearly twice as likely to be concerned about paying for their education in fall 2020**.

Furthermore, first-generation students were also **less likely to live in safe environments** free from abuse (physical, emotional, drug, or alcohol) and **more likely to experience food and housing insecurity**. First-generation students also experienced **higher rates of mental health disorders** compared to their peers.

The results of our study suggest that first-generation students experienced more **challenges adapting to online instruction** compared to continuing-generation students, including encountering obstacles related to lack of adequate study spaces and lack of technology necessary to complete online learning. Compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation students were also less likely to be able to meet during scheduled virtual class times. As institutional leaders look forward to the fall 2020 semester, we encourage them to consider the impact different instructional modalities may have in perpetuating existing disparities for first-generation students.

Financial Hardships

The survey asked students which financial hardships, if any, they have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most first-generation students (87%) reported experiencing at least one financial hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a significantly ($p < .05$) higher rate than the percentage of continuing-generation students who experienced at least one financial hardship (76%).

We have reported a few common financial hardships experienced by first-generation students in Figure 1. Notably, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to experience the loss or reduction of income from family members (52%) compared to continuing-generation students (32%).

First-generation students were also significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than continuing-generation students to have experienced an increase in living expenses (39%) and unexpected increases in spending for technology (27%) (Figure 1). The unexpected increases in living expenses may be, in part, related to students' relocation expenses: 51% of the first-generation students in our sample relocated to a different location within the same state, 10% relocated to a different state, and 3% relocated to a different country during the pandemic.

While first-generation students were slightly less likely than continuing-generation students to experience the loss or cancellation of an *expected* job or internship offer (32% and 34%, respectively), they were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to have experienced actual lost wages through both on-campus and off-campus employment (Figure 1).

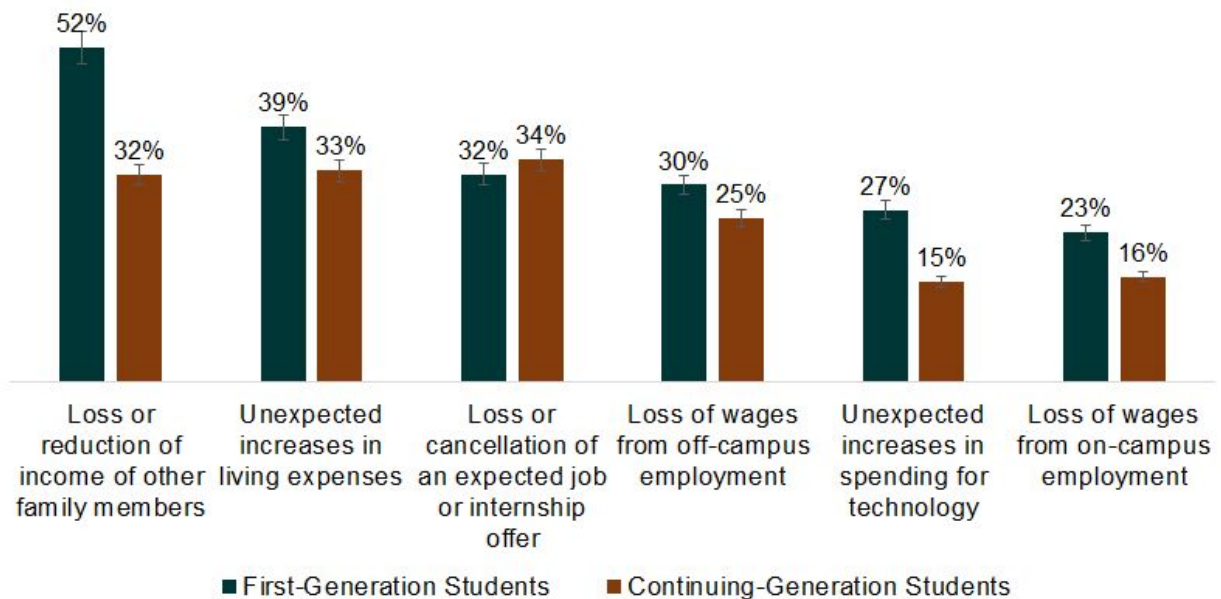


Figure 1. The most common financial hardships reported by first-generation and continuing-generation students.

Many first-generation students come from low-income backgrounds: in our survey, 57% of first-generation students identified as low-income, poor, or working-class compared to just 12% of continuing-generation students. The additional expenses associated with relocating, purchasing technology, and losing wages (both personal and family income) may have disproportionately impacted the already cash-strapped first-generation students. Concomitantly, first-generation students are almost twice as likely to be concerned about paying for their education in fall 2020: 59% of first-generation students indicated that they were concerned, very concerned, or extremely concerned about their ability to pay for their education in fall 2020 compared to 32% of continuing-generation students (Figure 2). The results suggest that first-generation students are significantly ($p < .05$) more concerned about their ability to pay for their education in fall 2020 compared to continuing-generation students.

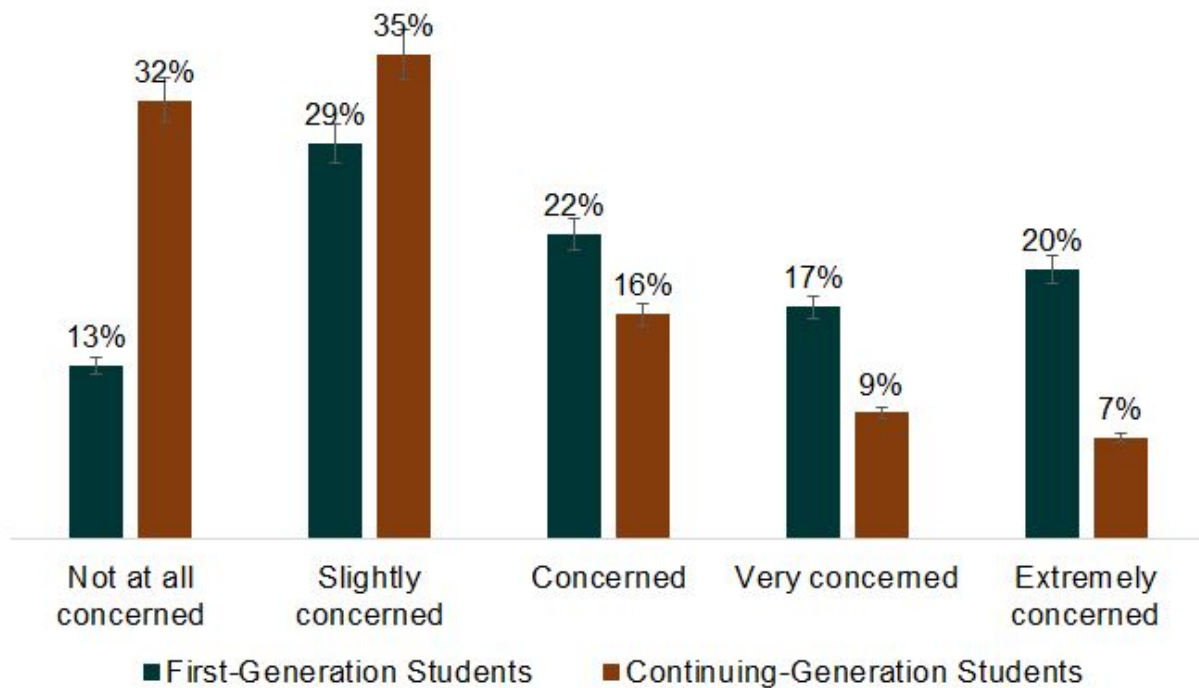


Figure 2. First-generation and continuing-generation students' concerns about their ability to pay for their education in fall 2020.

Safety, Food Insecurity, and Housing Insecurity

Our survey results suggest that first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than continuing-generation students to live in places during the pandemic that were not as safe or free from physical or emotional violence or abuse or drug and/or alcohol abuse (Figure 3).

Specifically, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than continuing-generation students to indicate that it was never or only sometimes true that they lived in a place that was free from physical or emotional violence or abuse (19%) and free from drug and/or alcohol abuse (14%). Further, 14% of first-generation students indicated that it was never or only sometimes true that they lived in places where their identity was respected and 17% indicated that it was never or only sometimes true that they felt safe and protected where they were living.

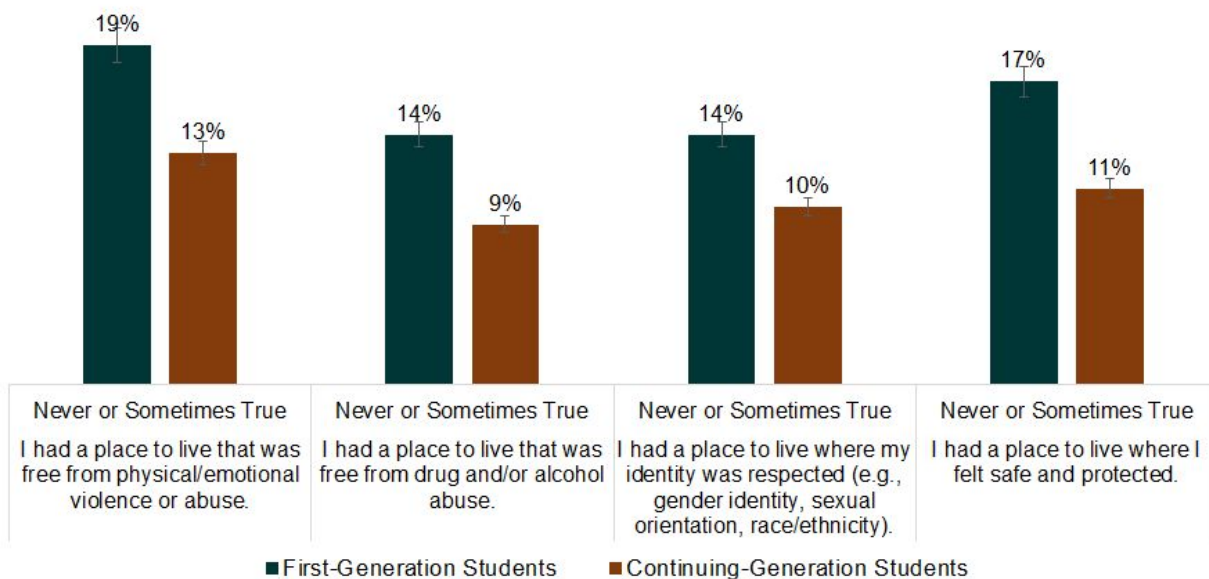


Figure 3. First-generation and continuing-generation students' safety during the pandemic.

Additionally, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to experience food insecurity during the pandemic (Figure 4): first-generation students were twice as likely as continuing-generation students to indicate that they were worried that their food would run out before they had money to purchase more (36% compared to 16%) and that the food they purchased did not last and they did not have money to purchase more (25% compared to 11%).

Similarly, there are also significant ($p < .05$) disparities in housing insecurity: 52% of first-generation students worried they would not have enough money to pay for the cost of their housing compared to 30% of continuing-generation students (Figure 5). First-generation students were twice as likely as continuing-generation students to indicate that they were unable to pay the cost of their housing on time (27% compared to 12%).

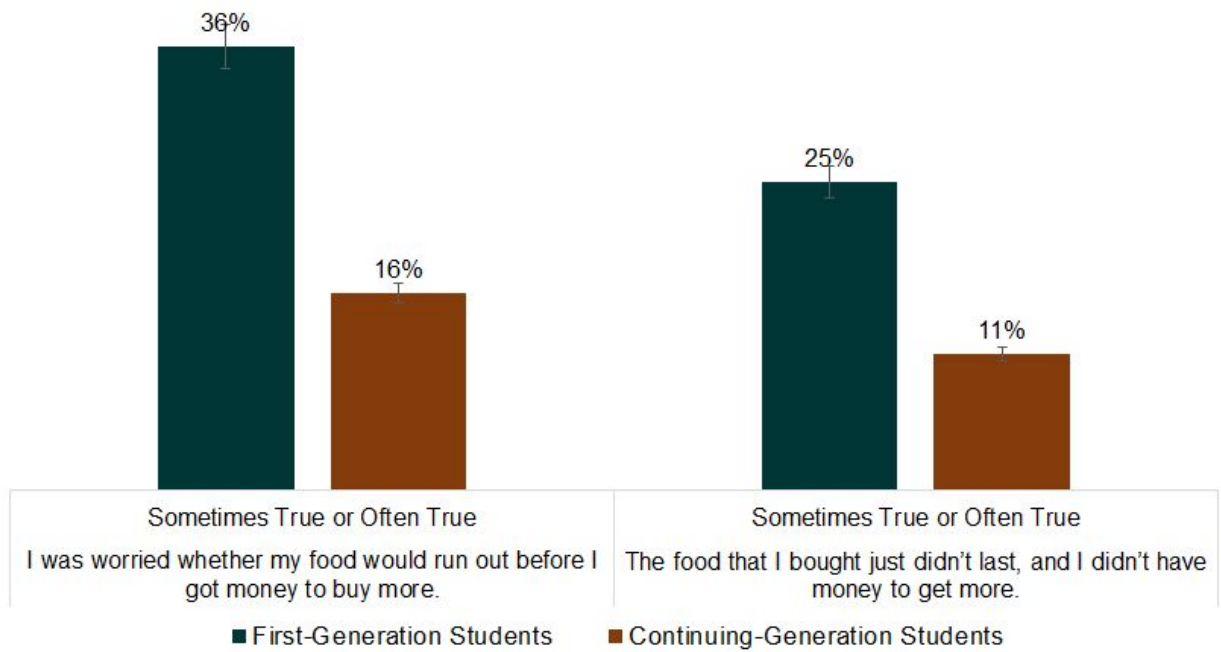


Figure 4. Students' food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

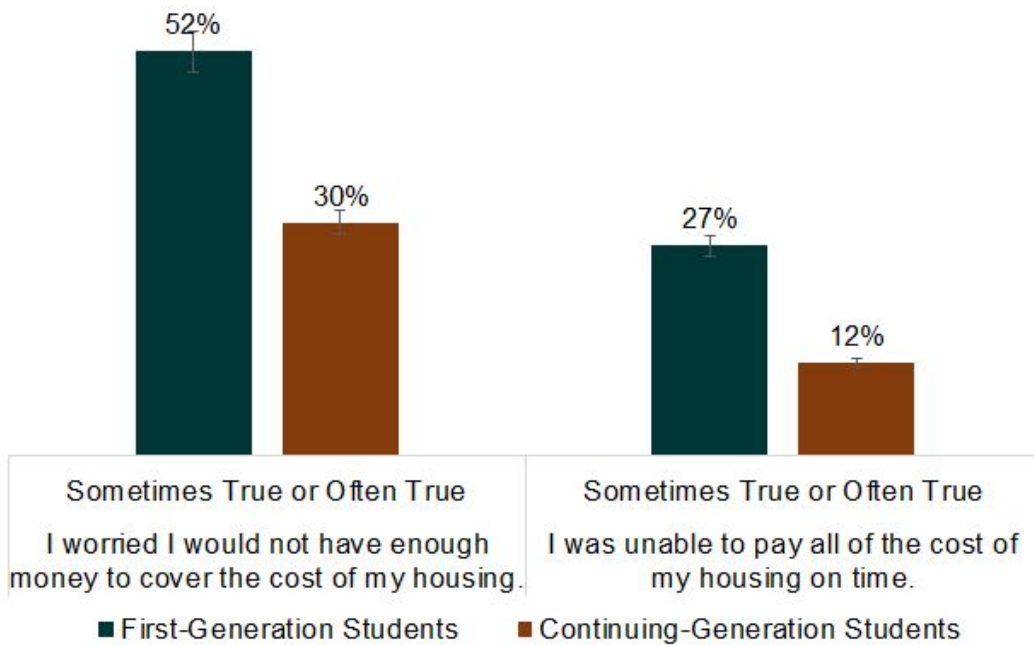


Figure 5. Students' housing insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mental Health

We used the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2) two-item scale to screen for major depressive disorder symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2003) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-2 (GAD-2) two-item scale to screen students for generalized anxiety disorder symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2007). The PHQ-2 asks two questions about the frequency of depressed mood over the past two weeks while the GAD-2 asks two questions about the frequency of anxiety over the past two weeks. Each question is scaled from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). The responses to two questions in each scale are summed and, if the score for PHQ-2 ≥ 3 (out of 6), major depressive disorder is likely. If the score for GAD-2 is ≥ 3 (out of 6), generalized anxiety disorder is likely.

Based on these screening tools, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to experience mental health disorders during the pandemic than continuing-generation students. The results suggest that 44% of first-generation students and 38% of continuing-generation students screened positive for generalized anxiety disorder and 40% of first-generation students and 33% of continuing-generation students screened positive for major depressive disorder (Figure 6).

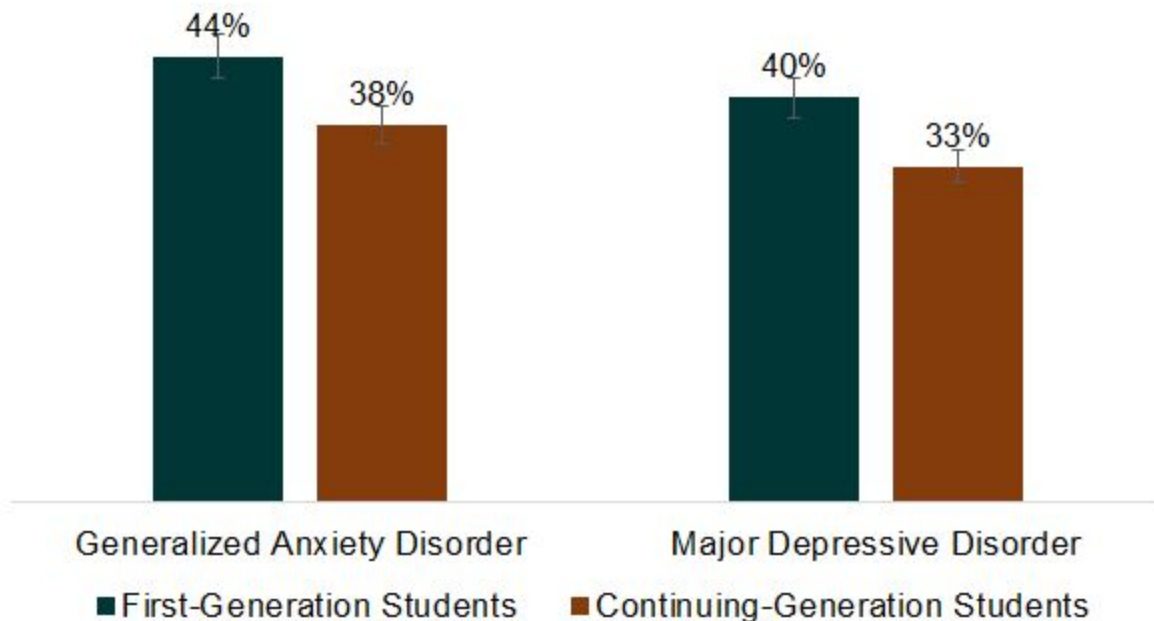


Figure 6. First-generation and continuing-generation students' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adapting to Online Instruction

First-generation students did not adapt as well to online instruction during the pandemic compared to continuing-generation students: 44% of first-generation students indicated that they adapted well or very well to online instruction compared to 52% of continuing-generation students.

Compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to experience several obstacles to their ability to transition successfully to online learning. For instance, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to report that they lacked access to an appropriate study space amid distracting home environments, lacked access to technology necessary for online learning, and lacked familiarity with technical tools necessary to online learning (Figure 7). Additionally, first-generation students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than continuing-generation students to report that they were unable to attend virtual classes at their scheduled meeting times (22% compared to 14%).

In our survey, we found that 14.7% of first-generation students were taking care of children during the pandemic (compared to 6.7% of continuing-generation students) and 18.6% of first-generation students were taking care of adults during the pandemic (compared to 11.7% of continuing-generation students). We surmise that those additional child and adult caretaking responsibilities were one of many factors that negatively impacted first-generation students' transition to online learning.

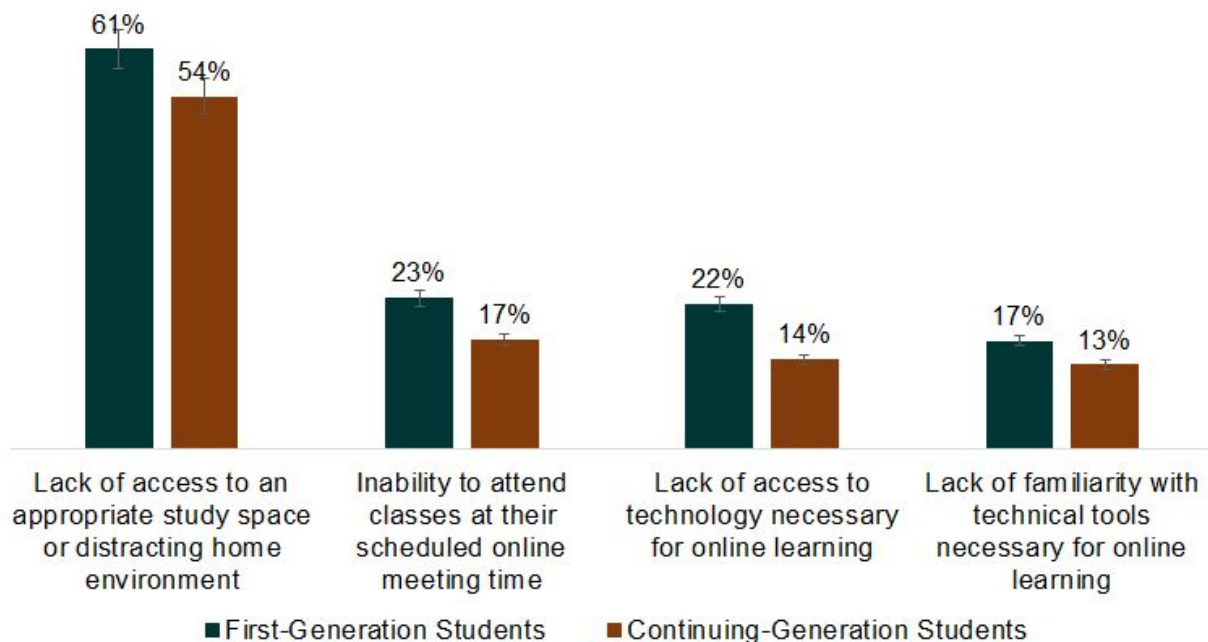


Figure 7. Obstacles to a successful transition to online learning reported by first-generation and continuing-generation students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of our study suggest that first-generation students reported experiencing significantly more challenges during the pandemic than continuing-generation students. Namely, first-generation students were more likely to report experiencing financial hardships, food and housing insecurity, mental health disorders, and obstacles to transitioning to online courses. Additionally, first-generation students were less likely to live in safe environments compared to continuing-generation students. Higher education institutions have an obligation to support their students, reduce barriers to students' educational achievement, and level the playing field for students from marginalized backgrounds. Below, we have several policy recommendations driven from our survey results that may help institutions to better support first-generation students.

Reduce Financial Barriers

For one, it will be important for higher education administrators to attend to the financial hardships experienced by first-generation students. Additional scholarship funding, institutional grant funding, or work study opportunities may prove beneficial for first-generation students as they enroll in fall 2020 courses. We recommend that institutional leaders be proactive in reaching out to first-generation students to share student employment opportunities available at colleges and universities, especially virtual work-from-home positions. Wages from such employment opportunities can help students to defray some of the additional living expenses incurred during the pandemic, assist students who need to provide financial support to their families, enable students to purchase much-needed technology, and, overall, provide students with financial resources to pay for their education. When those student employment opportunities are aligned with students' academic interests or future career fields, students stand to benefit more from those experiences (Soria, 2015); therefore, we recommend that human resources officers on campus work to connect first-generation students with meaningful employment opportunities.

Furthermore, given that over half of first-generation students also experienced the loss of income of family members, we recommend that colleges and universities broaden access to their career development resources to students' family members during the pandemic. For instance, career development counselors can offer free access to job board websites (such as Handshake), registration to virtual job fairs, and career resource guides (e.g., resume writing advice) to students' family members. We expect that some of these resources could be made more broadly available to students' family members without incurring significant expenses for institutions.

We also encourage financial aid officers to be more proactive in assisting students with completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Over one-quarter (27%) of first-generation students do not complete the FAFSA (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), although many are from low-income backgrounds and would likely qualify for financial aid (including federal and state grants). However, students often do not complete the FAFSA because they believe their families would be ineligible for financial aid (32%) and they do not have enough information about how to complete the FAFSA (23%) (Bahr et al., 2018). We encourage financial aid officers and academic advisors to actively reach out to first-generation students to educate them about their potential eligibility for financial aid and assist them with completing the FAFSA application.

Improve Safety and Reduce Food and Housing Insecurity

It is alarming how many first-generation students reported that they do not live in safe environments that are free from physical or emotional violence or abuse and alcohol and/or drug abuse. The pandemic has exacerbated many of the challenges experienced by first-generation college students. On-campus residential experiences have traditionally offered many first-generation students security, stability, and safety (Berg, 2020). The decision to send students home during the COVID-19 pandemic, while in the name of health and public safety, has disparately impacted first-generation students and, without those protective factors in place, many first-generation students may continue to falter. We recommend that housing administrators on college campuses set aside emergency housing locations to assist students who may be living in unsafe environments and provide pathways to help students transition to safe, stable housing when needed.

Additionally, while many colleges and universities have existing food pantries on campus, we recommend that they expand the hours and availability of those services to help students combat food insecurity and have more regular access to free nutritious food. During the pandemic, we also encourage colleges and universities to offer free no-touch pick-up options and free food delivery to students who live on campus or near campus. We also recommend that campuses help to connect qualifying students to resources in their local communities or provide assistance with completing state or federal applications for assistance (such as the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).

To combat challenges associated with housing insecurity, we recommend that campuses more readily communicate additional housing-related resources to assist students. For instance, some counties have offered residents rental assistance funding during the pandemic or have worked with landlords to prevent sudden evictions. Many colleges and universities have off-campus student liaison services or student legal services offices that can help students to negotiate with difficult landlords or learn more about their rights as tenants.

We also encourage campuses to consider reducing their rates for on-campus housing during the pandemic to make it easier for first-generation students to afford to live on campus. Additionally, we encourage campuses to alter their lease contracts and offer more flexible opportunities for students to stay on campus just a few days a week (like a hotel) so that they have a retreat from their distracting home environments to focus on their schoolwork (but are not obligated to pay full room and board rates).

Expand Mental Health Services

Colleges and universities should work to provide accessible mental health resources to first-generation students. As our results suggest, first-generation students were more likely to experience mental health disorders during the pandemic than continuing-generation students—a disparity that existed pre-pandemic as well (Stebbleton et al., 2014). Our research suggests that colleges and universities should actively work to eliminate some of the barriers to students' ability to seek mental health resources. For instance, administrators could invest in developing more targeted outreach efforts, partnering with programs such as TRiO or other programs directed toward first-generation students, and working with key faculty members to promote existing resources.

Many first-generation students experience additive burdens that compromise their mental health, such as the imposter syndrome, in which students feel an enhanced sense of self-doubt, fear of experiencing failure, and concerns about being a fraud—like they will be exposed as incompetent and unfit to belong in academia (Canning et al., 2020). As they prepare to offer counseling services to first-generation students, we encourage mental health providers to understand some of the unique challenges encountered by first-generation students.

Promote Successful Transitions to Online Learning

First-generation students struggled with adapting to online instruction and were more likely than continuing-generation students to report that they were unable to attend virtual classes at their scheduled meeting times. Many first-generation students are employed (and at a greater number of hours) while enrolled in higher education (Melguizo & Chung, 2012; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018; Nuñez & Sansone, 2016). In fact, 43.2% of first-generation students work between 20 and 40 hours a week and 36.4% work over 40 hours a week (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Additionally, many first-generation students have family responsibilities related to caretaking (Covarrubias et al., 2018), as also demonstrated in this research brief. It may be the case that some first-generation students were unable to attend scheduled virtual classes given their employment and family obligations—and that those responsibilities also created distracting home environments. Therefore, we recommend that faculty work to better understand the experiences of first-generation students, schedule their classes to better meet the needs of first-generation students, or record their courses and lectures so that first-generation students can access them if they are unable to attend classes during their scheduled virtual times.

We expect that the many disparities between first-generation and continuing-generation students that we outlined in this brief—financial hardships, food and housing insecurity, unsafe living environments, and mental health disorders—will exacerbate students' academic experiences in fall 2020. As campuses move forward in planning for the semester, we encourage institutional leaders, staff, and faculty to consider the unique needs and experiences of first-generation students and implement changes to eliminate barriers and pave the way for their success.

About the SERU COVID-19 Survey

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium administered a special survey on the impact of COVID-19 on student experience at nine U.S. public research universities. The SERU COVID-19 Survey assesses five areas to better understand undergraduates, graduates, and professional students' experiences during the global pandemic: 1) students' transition to remote instruction, 2) the financial impact of COVID-19 on students, 3) students' health and wellbeing during the pandemic, 4) students' belonging and engagement, and 5) students' future plans.

Sample

The survey was a census survey administered from May 18 to July 20, 2020 to undergraduate students at eight large, public research universities. The report uses data from 28,198 undergraduate students. The response rate was 14-31% at the respective institutions.

Methodology

All of the items we report in this research brief are categorical; therefore, we utilized Pearson's chi-square test to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the expected and observed frequencies of students' responses. We utilized the common probability level of $p < .05$, which serves as an a priori statement of the probability of an event occurring as extreme or more extreme than the one observed if the null hypothesis is true.

About the SERU Consortium

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium is an academic and policy research collaboration based at Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California – Berkeley (CSHE) working in partnership with the University of Minnesota and partner institutions. More information is available at <https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru>.

Contact Information

Krista M. Soria, PhD, Assistant Director for Research and Strategic Partnerships, SERU Consortium, and Director for Student Affairs Assessment, University of Minnesota.
ksoria@umn.edu

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