

Emerging from COVID-19: Student Involvement in Campus Activities and Young People's Success, Sense of Belonging, Health, and Well-being

NACA grant report

Reason for research

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted young people's academic, personal, and social lives in unprecedented ways at critical transitions to adulthood. For many, this disruption has had negative impacts on student academic achievement and physical and mental health and well-being. For those finishing high school and applying to college, the impacts were particularly acute. Ample evidence indicates that over the last two years the pandemic's impacts and reverberations have been widespread and significant for adolescents, touching their learning, well-being, and psychosocial development. For young peoples' education, the pandemic forced new ways of learning, disrupted routines and significant milestones, and prevented motivating and important daily interactions with peers and school staff

As these adolescents enter and progress through college, they must navigate potentially new education and career trajectories amid an unexpectedly different world and with lasting reverberations on their mental and physical health and academics. The transition guardrails that have historically been relied upon to promote academic and social integration into college (Tinto, 1993), such as summer preview days and orientation are also disrupted, causing concern about how transitions might be especially difficult as the pandemic continues to evolve. Therefore, it is important to understand how young people's experiences of COVID-19—and its challenges and lessons—will relate to their transition to and time in college.

Methodology

A cross-disciplinary research team of Marquette faculty collaborated on this on-going longitudinal multi-methods research study with first-year college students in the 2021-2022 academic year.

The research study included a quantitative survey instrument (administered through Qualtrics) focused on students' experiences of the pandemic, physical and mental health and well-being, and academic readiness. The survey was distributed to a representative one-third sample of the first-year class. In early Fall 2021, the first wave of survey data collection (N=109) when students had just arrived on campus also captured their feelings about the college transition and expectations for their first-year experience. The second wave of survey data collection (N=52) in April 2022 evaluated their college experience thus far, including their engagement in campus activities and organizations in their first year. Quantitative survey data were analyzed in SPSS by a subset of the research team for demographic breakdowns, descriptive statistics, and emerging trends related to the study's main foci.

This quantitative data provided an understanding of broader trends and themes across the first-year cohort, while qualitative interviews with a subset of first-year students provided a richness of detail around interviewees' expectations of college and the realities of their first-year experience. Interviews took place in late summer and early fall 2021 (N=36) and in early winter 2022 (N=19). The first interviews asked students to reflect in more detail on the impact of the COVID pandemic on their high school experience, their physical and mental health and well-being, and their anticipation and expectation for their first-year college experience. The second round of interviews, conducted during the height of the Omicron wave of the COVID pandemic, followed up with students about their experiences of the fall semester and of college thus far. The qualitative interview data were coded by a subset of the research team using NVivo qualitative coding software. The entire research team contributed their thoughts about initial reflections on the interviews and ideas for analytic themes for the coding process. Then two researchers open-coded the interviews for these themes and others related to the study's main foci. These researchers regularly met and consulted with one another on the coding process and emerging themes from the data. After initial coding, the researchers then engaged in another round of more analytically-targeted coding around themes related to students' resilience and meaning-making as well as students' academic readiness and college expectations.

The comparative analysis of Wave 1 and 2 quantitative and qualitative data continues and will soon integrate Wave 3 survey and interviews from this first cohort of students from 2021-2022 as sophomores, while adding a second cohort of first-year students from the 2022-2023 academic year.

Results (See attached infographics)

Wave 1 Survey Data – Fall 2021

Demographics

Gender - Two out of three respondents identified as female (66.7%).

Race/Ethnicity – 62.3% white; 14.75% Latino/a/x, Chicano/a/x, Hispanic; 8.2% Black/African American; 7.38% Asian/Asian American; 7.37% Other or Multi-racial

Socioeconomic status – 27.2% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch prior to pandemic

Education status – 77.2% had a parent/guardian who had completed a 4-year college degree

Physical and Mental Health

70% reported that the pandemic had worsened their anxiety, loneliness, or mood

29% were at-risk for depression and anxiety disorders (37.8% of students of color were at-risk)

70% reported that the pandemic had worsened their sedentary behavior

Expectations for Community Engagement and Campus Involvement

66.67% of students planned to take a leadership position in an on or off-campus organization

67.5% planned to join a campus, departmental, or hall organization

73.2% planned to get involved in volunteer work

Sense of Belonging on Campus

72.4% of respondents overall “felt a sense of belonging” on campus

This number fell to 58.% of students of color and 46.1% of first-generation college students

Wave 2 Survey Data – Spring 2022

Demographics

Gender – 73.81% of respondents identified as women.

Race/Ethnicity – 76.4% white; 9.3% Latino/a/x, Chicano/a/x, Hispanic; 2.33% Black/African American; 9.3% Asian/Asian American; 2.67% Other or Multi-racial

Socioeconomic status – 11.9% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch prior to pandemic

Education status – 85.71% had a parent/guardian who had completed a 4-year college degree

Academic achievement

71.4% were satisfied with their GPA in the Fall semester

90.5% of respondents had a Fall GPA of 3.0 or higher

Physical and Mental Health

35% at-risk for depression and anxiety disorders

92% do moderate physical activity at least once a week (with an average of 4 days per week)

Campus Involvement in First Year

62.2% of students had taken a leadership position in an on or off-campus organization

77.8% had joined a campus, departmental, or hall organization

60% had gotten involved in volunteer work

Sense of Belonging on Campus

79% of respondents overall “felt a sense of belonging” on campus

Findings

Wave 1 Interview Themes:

- 1) Experiences during the pandemic often led to growth in self-awareness and coping strategies
- 2) Physical exercise was seen as form of self-care, and often mentioned as important to their plans for the first year at college
- 3) Motivation was hard during high school; some felt this negatively impacts them while others became more organized and independent
- 4) Optimism and positive feelings thinking ahead to first year at college

Sample quotes from Wave 1 Interviews

The pandemic helped one interviewee with “forming habits to help with depression and anxiety and stuff. Like working out or talking to people or journaling or meditation.”

In contrast, another interviewee reported, “It made me almost very lazy when it came to schoolwork, just because we really did nothing all year. I feel like I'm going to the future with no work ethic from the past two years, just because I haven't been doing anything.”

Wave 2 Interview Themes:

- 1) Generally, students with mental health struggles were seeking help from a therapist or the counseling center
- 2) Students appreciated the ability to have in-person classes, even if that meant having to wear a mask
- 3) Students felt like COVID was not hampering their college experience too much, but also felt like their first year wasn't completely “normal” compared to pre-COVID times
- 4) Students who were not involved in campus activities primarily cited lack of time or awareness of opportunities/organizations as the main limitations to their involvement
- 5) Students who struggled academically in their first year noted insufficient preparation in high school, often due to the disruptions of the pandemic
- 6) These students also noted that their academic challenges also spilled over into other areas of their life, including lack of campus involvement and poor mental and physical health

Sample quotes from Wave 2 Interviews

“I feel like I was pretty active in the fall like I was kind of constantly doing something with my friends almost every day. And I felt like that was really nice because before, at the end of high school, during lockdown and everything I was sitting by myself being bored. It was just me and my mom in our apartment. And I didn't really see many other people. So it was really nice to be able to get out with friends and like hang out in their dorms and stuff. And just be around other people, even if we weren't really doing too much. So I think if I didn't have that last semester, I feel like I, like mentally probably wouldn't have done very well.”

“I don't, I don't really like to get involved in a lot of things. Because, like, they take a lot of time. And, if I'm not really behind something 100%, I don't really like to do it.”

“I think [the COVID pandemic impacted the fall semester experience] a little bit because I kind of avoided going to like big parties or anything, because I was worried like, nobody's wearing a mask. Everybody's really close together. So that makes me nervous. So I didn't really go to any of those or anything. I really only stuck to like, smaller, like, gatherings, I guess. So yeah, that definitely added to like that extra anxiety.”

“The first semester was just a little bit difficult because when in high school when we shifted online, I felt like it was easier to not pay attention in class. Being online, it's just, it's easy to get distracted and stuff. So it's definitely hard to regain my focus. And then like kind of relearn how to pay attention in class properly. I think that was probably the hardest thing for me was just focusing for like a straight hour on doing one assignment or one class.”

“I signed up for study groups. I was in tutoring and all of that, you know, going to office hours with my classes, studying in groups. You know, for me, the hardest part was obviously finals, cuz I haven't taken finals since my first semester of junior year of high school because of COVID. So that was my first time taking finals. So that was like, a shock.”

Conclusions

- 1) First-year students whose education and social life were disrupted by the pandemic demonstrate challenges with mental health and well-being, more so than previous cohorts.
- 2) First-year students who had considerable disruption to their education and online schooling demonstrate a bifurcation in their readiness for college. On the one hand, some students developed skills around time management and self-directed learning that may aid them in their transition to college courses, while on the other hand, some students felt unprepared for the rigors of college coursework and learning. Many students reported feelings of dissatisfaction with their academic performance in their first year as well as the need to pursue additional support, such as tutoring.
- 3) The students who are struggling academically are also those who are struggling with their mental and physical health and are less likely to get involved in campus activities.

Implications for practice and future research

Analysis of the data from the 2021-2022 first-year cohort of participants has several important implications for practice and future research:

- 1) Faculty, staff, and relevant university services need to consider new and innovative ways to support students in regard to their mental health and well-being.
- 2) Given the unequal ways that the pandemic impacted students schooling and some students' feelings of being less prepared for the academic rigor of college, considerations about tutoring opportunities and other activities to help students develop study skills and time management skills.
- 3) More effort and additional strategies may be needed to encourage student participation or different types of activities need to be considered going forward.

All these implications also beg further research on additional research questions, including

- 1) How does this cohort of students fare in their second year of college and beyond? Does their experience differ or become more similar to previous cohorts as they progress in their college careers?
- 2) What about the next cohort(s) of first-year students? As the pandemic continues, the next incoming cohorts of first-year students have also experienced disruption to their schooling and social lives. Does the first-year experience continue to look different than pre-pandemic and do first-year students continue to demonstrate similar trends?
- 3) Are these trends university-specific or do they hold true across universities in the area or around the country? Future research in the 2022-2023 academic year will also build on collaborations to include first-year cohorts from a variety of colleges and universities across the country.

Our own continued research into the 2022-2023 academic year seeks to address these three research questions.

Limitations

First of all, when we applied for this funding originally, we were in a moment in which COVID rates were on the downturn and the vaccines had become available for incoming college students. It was a moment of collective hope and optimism after the first 18 months of the pandemic. Like many people, we naively assumed that COVID was on the way out and that we were emerging from the pandemic. However, in early 2022, the Omicron variant drove a new surge in the pandemic that prompted Marquette University and other higher education institutions to postpone the spring semester. We had originally planned to complete the second wave of interviews at the end of the spring semester, but given the Omicron surge and the changing landscape around the pandemic, we moved our interviews up to January 2022 to capture students' feelings and experiences at that moment.

Secondly, in the spring wave of survey collection, we experienced a fairly significant drop-off in terms of response rate compared to the fall. We largely attribute this lower response rate to the collective burnout experienced by college students and faculty toward the end of the 2021-2022 academic year. For future waves of data collection, we are considering different ways to capture this information in the spring semester and toward the end of the academic year, instead of a survey.

Acknowledgements:

This project has benefited from the support of many people and offices across the Marquette University campus. In particular, we want to thank Demetria Anderson who helped us understand our project's fit with the NACA research agenda. We also would like to thank the many people who assisted with data collection and recruitment, including the Division of Student

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COVID-19 & THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE STUDY

ANALYSIS OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS IN FALL 2021

STUDY SUMMARY

In summer 2021, we began a project to explore the experiences of COVID-19 and transition to college. We investigated how the momentous shifts and challenges caused by the pandemic affected this formative time in students' lives. Our work began with Marquette University incoming students in the fall of 2021. More details on the study can be found on the [study website](#).

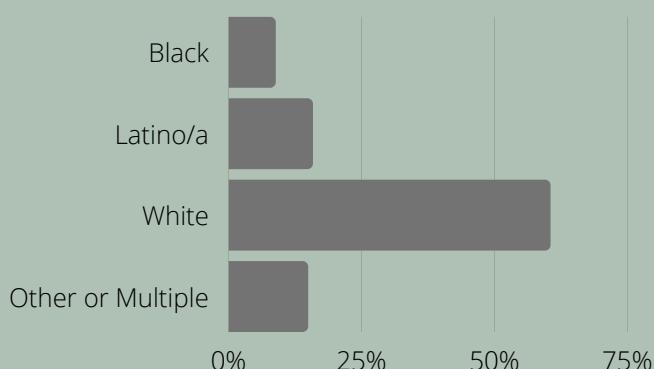
SURVEY SUBGROUP

SAMPLE

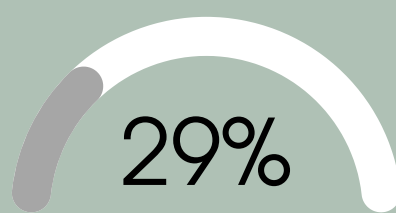
Total Participants: 109

- 66.7% identify as female
- 27.2% had free/reduced school lunch in high school
- 77.2% had parents with 4-year or graduate degree

RACE/ETHNICITY



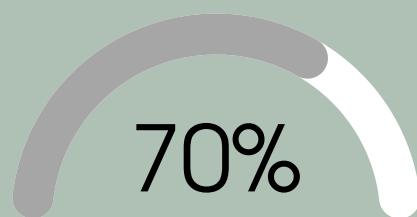
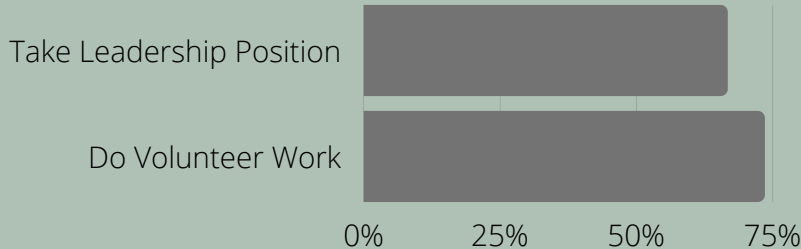
70% REPORTED THE PANDEMIC WORSENE THEIR ANXIETY, LONELINESS OR MOOD



AT RISK FOR DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY DISORDERS

NOTE: 37.8% OF STUDENTS OF COLOR WERE AT RISK

DESPITE PANDEMIC, PERCENT OF STUDENTS WHO PLANNED TO



REPORTED PANDEMIC WORSENE SEDENTARY BEHAVIOR

BELONGING

| | Overall | Students of Color | First Generation Students |
|--|--------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| I feel a sense of belonging at Marquette | 72.4 % Agree | 58.5 % Agree | 46.1 % Agree |
| I am happy to be at Marquette | 80.5 % Agree | 73.2 % Agree | 75.4 % Agree |

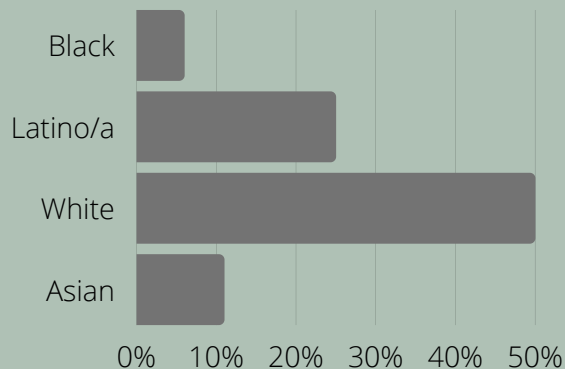
INTERVIEW SUBGROUP

SAMPLE

Total Participants: 36

- 25% had free/reduced school lunch in high school
- 75% had parents with 4-year or graduate degree
- 83% living on campus

RACE/ETHNICITY



Main Themes

- 1) Experiences led to growth in self-awareness and coping strategies
- 2) Physical exercise was seen as form of self-care, and often mentioned as important to their plans for the first year at college
- 3) Motivation was hard during high school; some felt this negatively impacts them while others became more organized and independent
- 4) Optimism and positive feelings thinking ahead to first year at college

Examples of Theme 3

"Forming habits to help with depression and anxiety and stuff. Like working out or talking to people or journaling or meditation."

"It made me almost very lazy when it came to schoolwork, just because we really did nothing all year. I feel like I'm going to the future with no work ethic from the past two years, just because I haven't been doing anything."

COVID-19 and the Transition to College Study Website:

<https://www.marquette.edu/education/centers-and-clinics-research/emerging-from-covid-research.php>

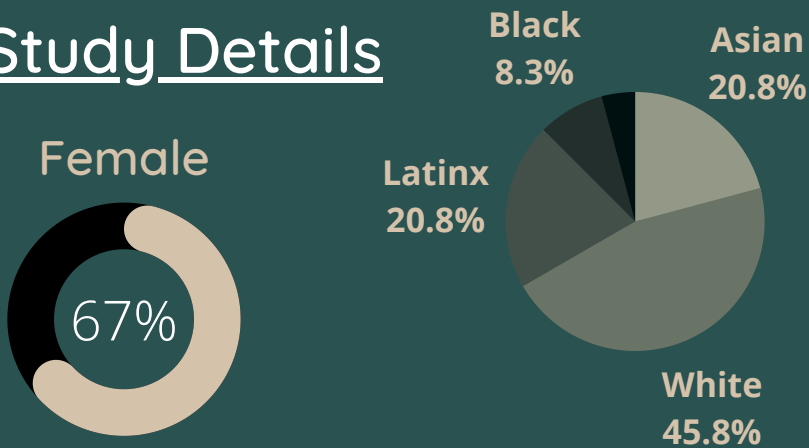
EMERGING FROM COVID-19: YOUNG PEOPLE'S HEALTH WELL-BEING, COLLEGE TRANSITIONS, AND DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES

Spring 2022 Interview Preliminary Takeaways

In spring 2022, we continued our project exploring the experiences of freshman transitioning to college in the midst of COVID-19. We conducted 19 interviews to follow-up with Marquette University students who participated in our survey in fall 2021.

More details on the study can be found on the [study website](#), and takeaways from the fall 2021 data collection can be found on [this infographic](#).

Study Details



| Time of Interviews | # of Participants |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| Fall 2021 | 36 |
| Winter 2022 | 19 |

Themes

01.

MENTAL HEALTH

- When students struggled with mental health difficulties, they sought help from the counseling center or had a relationship with a therapist.
- Several students highlighted the need for better advertised mental health services including online consultations and expanded access

02.

HEALTH PROTOCOLS

- Generally, people were supportive of vaccine and booster mandates, but no one particularly "liked" the mask mandate
- There were many comments like "It wasn't fun, but I get it" and "I'll just do it because it's the right thing to do"
- Almost all stressed the importance of being physically in class rather than virtual

03.

COVID IMPACTS AND CAMPUS EXPERIENCES

- Students generally did not feel like COVID affected their education, experience on campus, or social life
- COVID was not as present on students' minds as during fall 2021 interviews. Still, most talked about the campus being "not quite back" to sense of "normal"
- Many described either lack of time or information as reasons for not being more engaged in activities

04.

ACADEMICS

- Not many students struggled academically, but those who did mention this seemed to spill over into other areas of life (e.g., poor mental and physical health, lack of involvement on campus)
- Some noted strategies developed during high school and the pandemic that helped them now, such as time management, healthy habits, or self-motivated learning
- Support from faculty and staff was consistent throughout their first semester and important in success
- Generally, when students had difficulty in classes, they wondered about their preparation in high school and if it was sufficient.
- Students were excited to be back in the classroom if they had been virtual.

[COVID-19 and the Transition to College Study Website](#)

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