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## Experiences of First-Generation College Students Engaging in Online Learning Amid a Global Pandemic

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Anthony Capers Jr.

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Walden University  
2025

Abstract

Experiences of First-Generation College Students Engaging in Online Learning Amid a  
Global Pandemic

by

Anthony Capers Jr.

MS, University of Tennessee, 2016

BA, University of South Carolina, 2014

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

November 2025

## Abstract

The global pandemic, COVID-19, had an impact on the academic experiences of all college students. First-generation college students who often experience special challenges in adjusting to academia may have faced additional challenges given the transition to online learning. However, there has been little research focused on the impact of COVID on their adjustment to college. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of an unanticipated learning transition among first-generation college students pursuing higher education at a 4-year school, during a global pandemic. The theoretical framework for this study was based on an interactionist theory focused on the relationship between social interaction and collegiate retention. Eight participants were recruited for semi structured interviews that covered the participants' overall learning experience, amid the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. A thematic analysis of interviews was conducted to learn about their unexpected transition into online learning. Themes were identified: (a) online transition, (b) motivation, (c) mental health, (d) university support, (e) self-directed learning, and (f) perceived value of academic experience. Findings revealed insights about first-generation college students' overall learning experience when the learning environments unexpectedly change. A deeper understanding of students' experiences during this global health crisis may provide university officials with accurate information on how to best support student learning experiences and contribute to positive social change in similar situations in the future.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my mother and my wife for their unwavering support for so many years. Thank you, Mom, for believing in my dream and providing me with the tools and opportunities to achieve this dream. Thank you, Marg, for being with me every step of the way, for encouraging me to push through in my moments of weakness and frustration, and for reminding me of who I am and what I'm capable of when I needed it the most.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Adjusting to the rigors of higher education can be challenging for any type of student, and the process of adjustment can impact students in many ways. This impact can range from managing new routines to coping with a new level of independence. Gray et al. (2013) presented data supporting the notion that while students confront this process, they can experience significant changes in their mental, emotional, and/or physical health that can influence their development into adulthood. In 2020, a major global pandemic identified as SARS COVID-19 affected most of the world through rapid spread of infection, resulting in major shutdown and restrictions to regulate the spread and reduce infection rates (Suryasa et al., 2021). Many of the prominent restrictions heavily impacted academic institutions, and many colleges and universities had to transition from traditional in-person learning to virtual or distance learning (Neuwirth et al., 2021).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of an unanticipated learning transition among first-generation college students pursuing higher education at a 4-year school during a global pandemic. Understanding students' experiences during this time can help university officials better prepare for dramatic shifts in learning platforms and how to better support students during emergency-based environmental transitions. With better structured protocols in place to support faculty and students, unprecedented transitions prompted by an emergency situation can commence without disrupting student learning experiences. This chapter describes the implications

of a global pandemic, the value of learning experiences in higher education, and the theoretical framework that informed the study. I also discuss the assumptions of the qualitative study, the scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the research.

### **Background**

First-generation college students represent a population that poses a higher vulnerability to the rigors of the traditional collegiate experience (Peters, 2025). The absence of previous exposure to higher education can influence a student's initial perceptions and overall understanding of the academic and social expectations of college (Nayoung & Dalena, 2025). Students who identify within this population often report experiencing higher rates of isolation and anxiety while navigating higher education (Peters, 2025). These experiences can lead to serious mental health complications that can have a profound impact on the student's overall learning experience. Psycho-social issues like anxiety are commonly experienced by both first and non-first-generation college students, primarily due to the process of adjusting to the standards of the collegiate environment (Honors et al., 2024). For first-generation students specifically, an added pressure of adjusting to a steeper learning curve to collegiate expectations, increases the level of anxiety experienced (Bloomberg, 2024).

In January 2020, the United States experienced the first confirmed case of COVID-19, which rapidly spread across the several states over the next few weeks. The rate at which the virus was spreading prompted university officials from various colleges and universities to make the decision to not accept students back onto campus grounds

following the conclusion of Spring Break (Dutta & Agle, 2025). This widespread decision was influenced by the application of state-based mandates of social distancing procedures, to minimize the spread of the virus. An addition to this decision was that academic procedures would continue virtually; matters such as class meetings, coursework, and other academic services were facilitated online (Dutta & Agle, 2025). This shift in higher education operations had a significant impact on the learning experiences of several college students. The perceptions held by students about online learning varied prior to the impact of COVID-19, and these perceptions were influenced by the implications of the pandemic, when several universities limited academic procedures to just online learning (Zeng & Xin, 2025). This transition between learning formats impacted student learning experiences in different ways (Chaleila et al., 2024).

Since the peak years of the COVID-19 pandemic, literature on student learning experiences in online platforms amid a global issue, has expanded our understanding of the factors that influence traditional student learning experiences within virtual formats. Limbu and McKinley (2025) conducted a systematic review of various studies that measured student engagement with coursework, instructors, and learning tools, in online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of their review was to further understand why findings from several related studies were inconclusive, and how these data inform future directions in experiential research. The results of their review concluded that the most relevant factor to influence student engagement in online learning, were student focused elements like self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, attitude, and personality traits. These data shed light on the value of the student's role in their

overall learning experience; internal elements can influence the direction and depth of the overall experience.

Deep and Chen (2025) also conducted a review analyzing several peer reviewed articles that supported the notion that burnout significantly impacted student learning experiences during the peak pandemic years. They found that social factors experienced by students during that time such as financial instability, mental health struggles, and social isolation, contributed to significant burnout that impacted their online learning experience. This conclusion was drawn from evidence provided by student self-reports, stating that many students reported experiencing academic disengagement, decreased motivation, and lower performance. This data supports the notion that the social changes prompted by the pandemic, increased certain pressures on students that had a significant impact on their finances and mental health, which led to actions that had a negative effect on their online learning experience.

Research into the impact made on student learning experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic persists as more studies continue to investigate this phenomenon, but little research has been done on how first-generation student learning experiences were influenced by the transition to online learning. This population presents certain social and academic vulnerabilities not commonly associated with non-first-generation students, such as adjusting to collegiate rigor, balancing a diverse schedule, and adapting new social standards. The COVID-19 pandemic encouraged higher education institutions to temporarily change certain social and academic procedures, to accommodate safety concerns. Transitioning academic procedures into an online format influences how

students engage with their coursework, instructors, and peers. First-generation students were at a higher risk of experiencing struggles in adjusting to the online environment, which could have significantly impacted their overall learning experience.

### **Problem Statement**

Although recent literature focused on the learning and social experiences of college students in online environments during the peak COVID years (Moore et al., 2025), little research has focused on the experiences of first-generation students transitioning from traditional in-person learning to online learning during a pandemic. First-generation students are more susceptible to increased struggles with adjusting to the rigors and pace of the collegiate environment (Lecy et al., 2025). For many of these students, it requires significantly more time to understand the social and academic standards of higher education, as it relates to adjusting to the expectations established for traditional college students (Azpeitia et al., 2025). Navigating education and/or professional goals during a global pandemic can present several unprecedented challenges for young adults, particularly those adjusting to the structure of higher education with no prior example (Karalis & Raikou, 2020). Previous research explored the experiences of traditional college students during the pandemic, which revealed that several students expressed feeling isolated, unmotivated towards their studies, anxious about the future of their academic program (Wester et al., 2024).

The transition to online learning during the pandemic presented several challenges for college students that influenced their overall learning experiences in different ways (Moore et al., 2025). First-generation students represent a percentage of this population

and face the same challenges with an increased risk of a detrimental impact (Lecy et al., 2025). The lack of knowledge about how an unanticipated learning transition from a traditional in-person structure to an online structure influenced first-generation student experiences, presents a challenge to the development of supportive strategies. This study presented new information about how students perceived online learning, when it was no longer their choice, and how this component influenced their overall academic experience. The findings may inform those in leadership positions on how key social elements like motivation and mental health, impact first-generation students during times of crisis.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Many students enter college with some preconceived ideas regarding what their learning experience should be and will be, based on their understanding of higher education. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of an unanticipated learning transition among first-generation college students pursuing higher education at a 4-year school, during a global pandemic.

When students no longer have a choice in the structure in which they learn, it may have a significant impact on their overall learning experience. Although there has been extensive research on the experiences of college students with online learning, the current study may contribute to understanding how first-generation students specifically, experienced online learning and their experience of an unanticipated transition from traditional in person learning. The data produced from this research may provide a better understanding of how this impact influences students' actual learning experience. A

better understanding of how unprecedented changes in learning style can impact student learning experiences may assist university administrations in designing more meaningful response protocols for major events.

### **Research Question**

This study explored the experiences of first-generation students who encountered this transition, to determine how students describe the value of their academic experience amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific research questions were:

RQ1-Qualitative: How do first-generation college students describe the experiences of an unanticipated learning transition, amid the COVID pandemic?

RQ2-Qualitative: What are the socio-emotional experiences of first-generation college students during a global pandemic, with online learning being the full or primary format?

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Vincent Tinto's (1986) theoretical framework on social interaction and collegiate retention, as it relates to learning experiences was the underlying theory for my study. Tinto noted that students generate preconceived notions about college upon entering and use these perceptions as a baseline to manifest new experiences in a collegiate environment. The logical connections between this framework and the nature of my study include Vincent Tinto's theoretical framework on social interaction and collegiate retention, which emphasizes the value of the student-institution relationship, postulating that a student's overall academic experience is significantly influenced by their level of engagement in social and academic opportunities presented by the institution (Tinto,

1986). Tinto also suggested that increasing the value of the student-institution relationship, could positively impact retention rates, by building upon the perceived expectations held by incoming students about what the college experience can offer them (Tinto, 1986).

This theoretical framework applies to the nature of my study because student experiences are being explored to determine how their academic experience was impacted by an unprecedented shift in their learning environments. Based on Tinto's concept of the student-institution relationship, the level of connectedness between first-generation college students and the university could present varying perspectives on the quality of their overall educational experience, when there is an abrupt shift from in-person to online learning (Tinto, 1986). Elements of this theory also suggest that this relationship could also influence students' management of their mental health and physical well-being (Tinto, 2006).

### **Nature of the Study**

To address the research questions in this qualitative study, the research design included a generic qualitative inquiry, using thematic analysis (TA), to explore and further understand the experiences of first-generation college students and their unexpected transition into online learning resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. A quantitative approach was not selected because a basic qualitative approach allows a researcher to investigate how individuals define and attach meaning and value to their experiences. Other qualitative designs, such as a case study, were also considered for this study. A case study primarily focuses on one individual or a group of individuals who

share the same experiences and therefore was not appropriate for this study. Semi structured interviews were conducted with a randomly selected group of first-generation students from the University of South Florida. Interviews were chosen as the data collection method because it allows participants to share rich details that are unique to their individual experience.

A generic qualitative design examines the value and meanings of an individual's firsthand experiences by identifying key patterns and/or trends throughout their experiences (Fossey et al., 2002). The key source in most qualitative studies is the participant themselves, through firsthand accounts and recollections that describe their perspectives and perceptions throughout one or more experiences. Common tools for data collection are interviews, surveys, and questionnaires, because they are designed to allow an individual to express their thoughts and feelings about an experience, and how it influenced them mentally, emotionally, and socially (Fossey et al., 2002).

The current study focused on a small population of first-generation students. Students who endured the transition from traditional in person learning to online learning due to the COVID pandemic, shared details of their learning experience following this transition.

The data analysis process was based on Braun and Clark's (2006) TA method. It involved six key steps that detailed each action taken to determine the value and meaning of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). I recorded and documented the data collected from each interview using field notes and recordings. The data were then reviewed to determine any patterns and/or themes between participant responses. For the review, I

developed a codebook to categorize the data into sections, based on the structure of the interview questions. I used the codebook to analyze the coded data and draw conclusions about the relationships and connections within the data. I then identified and clarified the meaning of all themes and patterns within the data.

### **Definitions**

COVID-19: An infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

First generation: Students who are the first in their families to pursue higher education at a 4-year school.

Online learning: Instruction that is delivered electronically through various multimedia and internet platforms and applications.

### **Assumptions**

Alsharidi (2025) examined key factors that define philosophical assumptions in qualitative research: an assumption must be connected to a crucial element of the study, a basis is provided for assumption, and the assumption relates to an aspect of the study that is not within a researcher's control. Qualitative research focuses on participant experiences and subjective open-ended responses and requires a researcher to explore and analyze the data in an objective manner (Makateng, & Mokala, 2025). Awareness of the philosophical assumptions commonly associated with qualitative research allows a researcher to adequately address the beliefs and perspectives that inform the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Choosing the appropriate research design is based on four philosophical assumptions that shape the paradigms used to define the designs: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontology relates to people's understanding and perceptions of reality and the process in which they make various decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Completing your academic coursework within an online learning environment amid a global pandemic requires increased self-discipline and accountability for your learning experience, as well as being aware of the precautions related to the pandemic. An ontological assumption for the current study is that the students chose to continue their academic pursuit despite the structural changes prompted by the pandemic. Students chose to continue their academic pursuit because they have already paid tuition for the courses they were enrolled in at the time; I assumed that they are aware of the challenges of online learning and chose to navigate the barriers.

Epistemology refers to an individual's personal experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An epistemological assumption for the current study is that I knew what the students were expected to experience within the online course structure. By responding to open ended questions, students shared their experiences of continuing their academic journey virtually, amid an ongoing global pandemic. As the researcher, I maintained awareness and an unbiased perspective while collecting and reviewing their responses.

Axiological assumptions are related values and ethics based on a set perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The axiological assumption in the current research was that the students at the University of South Florida believed that despite the transition to online learning, their academic experience would still be fulfilling due to the trust they had in university officials and faculty, to support them during this time. Students understand the social differences between traditional in-person learning and online learning

environments and make decisions about their academic journey based on these differences. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional learning standards for 4-year institutions were altered to accommodate health precautions but led to confusion and frustration for many students.

My assumption for this study was that participants were open to discussing their overall academic experience, as it related to the impact made by COVID-19. This transition came with essentially no warning for most institutions, and many did not have a contingency plan in place for the continuation of student learning, at the beginning of the pandemic. Considering this issue, many students could have experienced significant pressure in preparing for and managing their learning experience as it transitioned into a virtual platform. Participants of this study were open to expressing personal perspectives on how the transition took place, and how their academic program was impacted by the transition. Despite online learning being a common option for an academic experience today, when it is heavily restricted, or no longer a choice, it may significantly influence how students perceive their overall learning experience.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This research design focused on learning how first-generation college students describe their experiences during the transition from traditional in person learning, to online learning, when the COVID-19 pandemic started. These experiences were explored through interviews conducted with each participant. The population was chosen because higher education was one of the many major disciplines to undergo dramatic structural changes, and it consequently impacted how students perceived the value of their

academic experience, as well as general academia. Considering the transition was unanticipated, many institutions and university officials (administrative staff, faculty, and operations staff) did not have an efficient procedure to facilitate the transition, where both students and faculty and staff would be well informed and equipped to sustain their academic experience with little disruption.

The source of the data in this research came from randomly selected college students, through virtual interviews where they described their overall learning experience based on the interview questions designed and selected by me. All data are qualitative in nature and were self-reported by the participants. A key delimitation of this study is the focus on first-generation students, within the population of traditionally aged college students, 20-22. This population was chosen because prior research suggests that first-generation students are more susceptible to stressors associated with adjusting to higher education, as well as unprecedented changes within higher education (Finny et al., 2022).

### **Limitations**

Despite this study offering insight into how an unanticipated transition between two different learning structures (traditional in person learning and online learning) can impact students' overall learning experience, it was only able to capture the experiences of a small population of college students. The study was conducted virtually, and eligible students were randomly selected for an interview through marketing the study using flyers on the campus of the University of South Florida St. Petersburg campus. Interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams.

Additionally, it has been 5 years now since the COVID-19 pandemic began, and since then, there has been a sense of regularity reestablished within society in that most people have found ways to proceed through life in what many consider to be the “new normal.” Considering this, many students may not clearly recall their thoughts and/or emotions they experienced when the initial transition was fresher.

### **Significance**

This study is significant in that up to 42% of students have indicated that once their courses moved to either fully or primarily online, their motivation to do well decreased significantly (Faize & Nawaz, 2020). These factors critically impacted the traditional collegiate experience for thousands of students and subsequently changed the way higher education was perceived and valued for many incoming students and graduating high school seniors. As the world continues to adjust to a new normal, higher education is currently undergoing a restructuring period that will attempt to maintain the elements that make it a worthwhile experience for students, while also catering to their personal and professional development. This study filled a gap in the literature by examining how first-generation college students between the ages of 20–22, navigated the challenges of an abrupt transition into an online learning environment, due to the ramifications of a global pandemic. The information gleaned from this study can provide university officials with additional data regarding how best to build effective online learning environments that address the needs of all students including those who are first generation.

The significance of this study is that it provides a deeper understanding of the experiences of first-generation students who have had to navigate an unanticipated transition into online learning due to a global pandemic, and the potential for more effective ways to transition learning environments, as well as create more efficient online learning communities. Given that first-generation students have shown higher rates of mental health issues primarily related to depression and anxiety, as a result of struggling to adjust to academic demands, and manage various school-related challenges and stressors (Ma et al., 2021), it is critical to examine the ways in which these students have met the challenges of this unexpected transition to online learning and how that transition has influenced them academically and psychosocially. The data uncovered from this study can help university officials and administrators better understand student learning experiences, as well as how to build and facilitate structural protocols that will pose the least amount of disruption.

### **Summary**

The transition to online learning presented various challenges for first-generation college students, during the peak years of the COVID-19 pandemic. This population of students can be more susceptible to the rigors of adjustment to higher education. The transition to online learning was enacted by many universities and colleges as a safety measure, but it inadvertently impacted several students' mental health and motivation towards their academic goals. Although previous research focused on the learning and social experiences of college students in online environments during the peak COVID years, little research has focused on the experiences of first-generation students

transitioning from traditional in-person learning to online learning during a pandemic. Chapter 2 provides a literature review of previous studies that explored online learning experiences across the past three decades. Additionally, Chapter 2 describes the characteristics that define first-generation college students, as well as the theoretical framework that supports the relationship between instructors and students within the learning environment.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of an unanticipated learning transition among first-generation college students pursuing higher education at a 4-year school, during a global pandemic. Previous research focused on the foundational structures that define online education, and how they are received and pursued by students in contrast to traditional in-person learning (Sun & Chen, 2016). Navigating education and/or professional goals during a global pandemic can present several unprecedented challenges for young adults, particularly those adjusting to the structure of higher education with no prior example (Karalis & Raikou, 2020).

In this chapter, I discuss the search strategies used for this research; the theoretical framework chosen to provide a foundational understanding of the phenomenon being studied; an analysis of studies examining student experiences in online learning, including first-generation students; and student perceptions of the influence of a global pandemic on academic, mental, and social experiences. The literature review is focused on information over time, that provides a thorough understanding of how various factors can impact the experiences of first-generation college students transitioning between learning environments, and how these experiences influenced the pursuit of their academic goals.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Walden University online EBSCO databases were used to search for literature relevant to this study. Specific online databases include APA Psycinfo, SAGE journals,

PSYCArticles, Taylor and Francis online, PSYCNET, and academic search complete. The following keywords were searched: *first generation college students*, *online learning*, *global pandemic*, and internet searches *included transitional experiences for college students*. A few articles from the Internet search presented information about how students discussed their experiences with online learning, and how they perceived the university's protocols and standards for online learning. The overall search using these keywords identified a number of recent studies that provided information on student experiences during abrupt transitions between in-person and online learning environments.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

#### **Tinto's Interactionist Theoretical Framework**

The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of my study include Vincent Tinto's (1986) theoretical framework on social interaction and collegiate retention, which emphasizes the value of the student-institution relationship, postulating that a student's overall academic experience, is significantly influenced by their level of engagement in social and academic opportunities presented by the institution (Tinto, 1986). Tinto noted that students generate preconceived notions about college upon entering and use these perceptions as a baseline to manifest new experiences in a collegiate environment. Tinto also suggested that increasing the value of the student-institution relationship, could positively impact retention rates, by building upon the perceived expectations held by incoming students, about what the college experience can offer them (Tinto, 1986).

This theoretical framework applies to the nature of my study, because student experiences were explored to determine how their academic experience was impacted by an unprecedented shift in their learning environments. Based on Tinto's concept of the student-institution relationship, the level of connectedness between first-generation college students and the university could present varying perspectives on the quality of their overall educational experience, when there is an abrupt shift from in-person to online learning (Tinto, 1986). Elements of this theory also suggest that this relationship could influence students' management of their mental health and physical well-being (Tinto, 2006).

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of an unanticipated learning transition among first-generation college students pursuing higher education at a 4-year school, during a global pandemic. This chapter will discuss the factors that have traditionally characterized first-generation students, and various social and academic elements that have influenced their learning experiences. The concept of online learning will also be discussed, with a historical analysis reviewing online learning experiences across three decades. Several studies will be explored to highlight data about online learning experiences for each decade. Additional studies will be reviewed that explored the impact of the COVID-9 pandemic on virtual learning experiences.

### **First-generation College Students**

Students starting higher education without a prior example set forth by a parent, sibling, or other immediate family member, are faced with certain challenges that can

potentially influence their overall experience (Brookover et al., 2022). The value of this prior example could represent a stronger knowledge base and understanding of collegiate structures, academic expectations, and career path assurance, for the student (Brookover et al., 2022). These students are held to the same expectations as those who do not identify as a first-generation student and are exposed to the same level of rigor within their academic discipline. Despite these factors, first-generation students pose a higher risk for experiencing social, mental, and emotional challenges in adjusting to a collegiate atmosphere (Finny et al., 2022).

The collegiate environment traditionally involves a reasonable level of independence on the part of the student. Students can govern the structure of their day, which can include but are not limited to the timing of their classes, personal work schedule, organizational involvement, and/or social events. The purpose of this structure is to foster the transition from adolescence to adulthood for students, through exposure and experience with consistent time management, thorough planning, and social accountability (Ricks & Warren, 2021). It is common for students to endure some degree of difficulty with adjusting to these dynamics, which can be attributed to a variety of different factors, including lack of collegiate exposure (i.e., college tours, brochures, presentations, college fairs), lack of knowledge for collegiate processes and sanctions (financial aid, registrar, student affairs), and lack of prior experience (no previous family members with 4-year collegiate experience; Ricks & Warren, 2021).

First-generation students especially can experience an increased pressure in adjusting to these dynamics. A significant factor that can influence this overall

adjustment is the process of adolescent development. At the traditional college enrollment age of 18, certain social elements such as perceived identity, self-esteem, and individual awareness are still in the prime of development. These biopsychosocial factors can influence how students understand and apply resources and aids for the transition into a higher education environment. Students who possess a higher level of self-efficacy are more likely to manage the standards and challenges that are presented in higher education, than those with lower self-efficacy (Ricks & Warren, 2021).

Garriott et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative study that examined the differences between first-generation and non-first-generation college student experiences, when associated with various social factors like self-efficacy, academic progress, and overall academic satisfaction. The researchers used Tent's social-cognitive model to analyze specific connections to these factors between both samples of students, to better understand how these relationships influence students' overall higher education experience. They also considered the impact of environmental conditions and supports for each student as it relates to these factors. They found that the effect of many of the social factors was dependent upon the strength of the connection to another factor, as determined by the student. For example, they found that environmental supports were a predictor of perceived self-efficacy, while self-efficacy was a predictor of perceived academic progression and satisfaction.

The findings from this study shed light on key factors that influence the experiences of first-generation college students in higher education. While the factors that were primarily examined in this study can have an equally significant impact on non-

first-generation students, the results suggest that first-generation students have a higher chance of experiencing challenges and/or barriers in connecting and adjusting to these factors. For instance, having parents that do not possess a 4-year degree, or have experience at a 4-year institution, can influence how one first-generation students perceive their ability to achieve success at a 4-year institution.

### **Online Learning Experiences for Students in the 1990s**

In previous decades, little was known about the effectiveness of online learning, or how first-generation students adapted to the structure and demands of higher learning. Doherty (2000) studied these very elements, as well as the specific tools and conditions that allowed these students to have more positive experiences during their respective academic journeys. Her research focused specifically on the relationship between student readiness and online learning, as a basis for how this learning structure influenced student experiences. She theorized that the more ready or prepared a student perceived themselves to be, the more successful and positive their learning experience would be (Doherty, 2000). The studied population were community college students, and she used a self-directed learning readiness scale, to determine certain intrinsic qualities that defined student preparedness.

The results of her study did not support her theory. However, due to inconsistencies in the depth of reported experiences by students within the subject population, she did find that many students self-reported that the instructor-student relationship represented a major component to their overall experience. Students within her study reported how valuable the connection between them and their instructor was

and how it positively impacted their academic experience, with most reporting feeling more confident in their ability to achieve their academic goals when they had a strong a positive relationship with their instructor. This sheds light on how instructors can shape and facilitate not only a student's overall learning experience, but also their perceived ability to perform well on their coursework and achieve their academic goals.

Shaw and Pieter (2000) explored the experiences, perspectives, and performances of college students and their use of asynchronous learning networks, specifically in a course on nutrition education. As online learning started to emerge as a new and innovative learning model, Shaw and Pieter conducted a qualitative study where they selected a small sample of students to take an online asynchronous course to gauge their perspectives and experiences on utilizing online material and receiving and facilitating course information online. They designed the study this way because their prior research indicated that most online learning models were being designed to facilitate more self-directed learning, and student control (Shaw & Pieter, 2000). They set out to explore student experiences within this model to determine how students preferred to learn, and how asynchronous learning offered students the opportunity to have more control of the pace of their learning.

Shaw and Pieter's findings confirmed that most of their sample had a positive experience and reaction to the model (Shaw & Pieter, 2000). Over 50% of the students believed that the online asynchronous learning model made the material easier to learn and retain and allowed them to have a more direct role in their overall learning experience. Over 60% of the sample also believed that this learning model allowed the

instructor to be more responsive to student needs (Shaw & Pieter, 2000). This factored heavily on students' experiences in that being able to have direct and more convenient access to the instructor made the facilitation of the course material easier to understand along with being able to pace their progression throughout the course.

A comparable study conducted by Jiang and Ting (2000), explored student learning experiences through various web-based courses, to determine key factors that influence student experiences in online learning. They implemented 19 online courses for a small sample of students to take and used a mixed methods analysis to specifically measure variables related to their overall satisfaction and perceived learning experience. Prominent variables were identified for both instructor and student behaviors throughout the courses, which showed a correlation that represents how these factors influence student learning experiences (Jiang & Ting, 2000). A strong correlation was found between instructor grading criteria and course discussion standards and students' perceived learning and overall satisfaction (Jiang & Ting, 2000). This finding indicates that overall student satisfaction in online courses is significantly influenced by the level of involvement and facilitation style of the instructor.

The results confirmed that the most crucial variable students reported as being highly influential in their overall online learning experience was online course discussion. Jiang and Ting used student self-reports following the completion of the online courses, to examine how students described their online learning experience and the factors that influenced it the most. The students expressed positive views towards instructor

involvement, and the instructor's ability to connect and facilitate discussion and social interaction between themselves and the students in the course (Jiang & Ting, 2000).

Smith et al. (2000) took a different approach to examining student experiences through online learning. They conducted a study that assessed the effectiveness of three traditional instructional styles through online administration: lecture, guided instruction, and collaborative discussion. They identified these methodologies as being the most traditional form of collegiate level instruction and provided a historical context on what made these styles so effective over the past decades. They examined a sample of students pursuing degrees in education, and applied a quasi-experimental mixed methods design to implement the delivery of coursework online, using these three traditional teaching models (Smith et al., 2000). Their results confirmed that there were no significant differences in the students' academic performance between the experimental or control groups. The students were able to grasp and understand the sample material well enough through either of the instructional styles, despite the delivery being online (Smith et al., 2000).

This study sheds new insight on student learning experiences through online learning, by providing context on the factor that exerts the most influence on student learning, namely the instructor. The researchers highlighted an interesting point about the link between teacher preparedness and student academic success through online learning. They postulated that online learning requires a level of skill and keenness of technology, as well as natural comfort in facilitating and administering information on the instructors' end. Most instructors do not receive specific training in online learning as a required skill

in their education and credentialing. It is usually an isolated skill that can be sought out by educators to expand their knowledge base and professional arsenal. Instructors who are trained for online learning can provide a positive learning experience for students, first-generation students specifically, by efficiently applying traditional teaching models to technology-based formats, which alternatively can accommodate a higher volume of students.

A similar study conducted by Johnson et al. (2000), investigated student perceptions of a course taught both online and through the traditional face-to-face method. These researchers set out to determine exactly how students perceived and described their learning experience through two different learning environments to further understand how these environments impacted the process of learning, as well as the goal of supporting and facilitating student academic needs (Johnson et al., 2000). They designed a series of instructional tasks associated with the course, for both the online and traditional settings, that each student were assigned to complete. A comparative analysis was then conducted to measure each student's perspective on their overall learning experience, instructor satisfaction, course quality, and resource accessibility, for both learning environments.

The results confirmed that the student sample that experienced the traditional face-to-face course expressed slightly stronger perceptions towards instructor satisfaction and overall course quality, as compared to the students in the online course (Johnson et al., 2000). The analysis also confirmed that there was no significant difference between the learning formats of both courses, though students in the traditional course expressed

perceptions about their overall experience that was not completely consistent with the perceptions of those who took the online course (Johnson et al., 2000). The students in the online course expressed indifferent perspectives on their experience, the more favorable being the convenience and accessibility of resources and course facilitation (Johnson et al., 2000). This data sheds light on the notion that face-to-face interaction is a key component to student learning, and that students value such interactions as being a major positive factor in their overall learning experience.

It is important to note that the studies discussed in this section reflect data and experiential information from a previous decade, the concept of online learning has evolved through technological accessibility, media-based tools and resources, and the social factors associated with students who pursue online education. Based on the data produced from these studies, online education was in its early developing stages during the 1990's. Various institutions began to experiment with the effectiveness of online learning, as an alternative option for students pursuing higher education (Harasim, 2000; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999; Rogers, 2000). Most of the studies reviewed provided data on how students described their learning experiences through different online structures. The sample population of students from each study expressed what they found to be most beneficial from the online format, as well as what was most challenging. This information provided a basis for what students valued within their academic experience, for example, one study presented data that conveyed why it was important for students to engage with their peers and professor when learning new content.

This information represents an early attempt to expand on how educational material is delivered to individuals, and how that method resonates with diverse types of learners. It can be interpreted that this was a pivotal time for the discipline of education, in that many institutions were exploring new ways to integrate the advancing technology of computer science into higher education.

### **Online Learning Experiences for Students in the 2000s**

Over time, educational technology became more advanced and accessible, offering more services and opportunities for students pursuing higher education. Colleges and universities across the country began experimenting more with online learning (e-learning) and hybrid courses, as an attempt to make students' learning experiences more engaging and versatile. During this time, online learning started to evolve beyond a few courses, with a few institutions now offering full degree programs online. Many universities also experienced a surge in first-generation student enrollment, which prompted a need for a better understanding of how to support this population of students, during a crucial time in higher education.

Mansour and Mupinga (2007) conducted a study that examined the positive and negative experiences of students taking both hybrid and online courses. The premise of their study was based on the changing dynamics of higher education at that time, specifically the significant increase in nontraditional student enrollment. As several universities began offering more hybrid and online course options for a wider array of students, they wanted to better understand these students' experiences in both hybrid and online courses, to determine how their overall learning experience can be improved

(Mansour & Mupinga, 2007). They had a small sample of students to take a hybrid course, and a slightly larger sample take an online course, and conducted brief interviews afterwards to understand the students' perceived experience of both course styles. Based on self-reported data from the interviews, students identified key factors such as convenience, instructor availability, and flexibility in course schedule, as positive elements of their experience, and factors like technology mishaps and computer illiteracy as negative elements. The researchers concluded that training in educational technology and online course facilitation for instructors would have the most significant impact on student online learning experiences.

A similar study conducted by Song et al. (2004) explored student perceptions and experiences of online learning to gauge a clearer understanding of how students viewed the structure, consistency, and value of online educational formats. They surveyed 76 graduate students, all of whom had substantial experience with online learning, to specifically identify which aspects of online learning were perceived as being both advantageous and challenging. The researchers noted that during this time, not only were universities and colleges across the country launching more hybrid and online courses/programs, student demand for these types of programs was increasing just as rapidly (Song et al., 2004). Their findings confirmed that most students perceive factors such as course design, learner motivation, time management, and online technological comfort, to be the most impactful on their overall online learning experience. Alternatively, most of the students also confirmed that factors such as technical issues, a perceived lack of community or social connection, time constraints, and difficulty in

understanding course objectives, are key challenges that have a more negative impact on their online learning experience (Song et al., 2004).

These particular student insights and perceptions on factors that influence the experience of online learning, sheds a new light on what exactly makes this learning experience significantly different from the traditional face-to-face learning environment. Intrinsic factors such as self-efficacy, motivation, and time management ability, have a significant influence on both the academic success rate of the student, as well as how fluid their overall experience would be in an online learning environment.

In a related study, Vonderwell (2003), examined student experiences and perspectives on asynchronous communication in an online course. Vonderwell wanted to determine if there were any significant differences in how students interacted and communicated with their peers and the instructor in an online asynchronous course in comparison to traditional face-to-face course. She used interviews, email and course discussion transcripts, and independent reviews, to collect the necessary data to have a thorough understanding of how students perceived and described the communication dynamics of an asynchronous online course. The results confirmed that students deem communication in this type of online course positive and effective, when they have a clear understanding of the expectations of the course, and possess the needed technological skills to effectively engage with their peers and the instructor (Vonderwell, 2003). The students also expressed that their overall experience can be positive and fulfilling when the instructor possesses a thorough knowledge of how to navigate

technological barriers, to facilitate a positive and consistent atmosphere for social interaction (Vonderwell, 2003).

A key finding from this study was the factor of instructor technological familiarity. This factor represents the notion that instructors set the pace for how communication and social interaction is governed and facilitated throughout an online course with the more skilled and familiar an instructor is in this, the more positive and fulfilling the students' overall online learning experience can be.

Paechter and Maier (2010) took a slightly different approach in exploring student experiences with online learning and conducted a study where they surveyed a large sample of college students, to gain a better understanding of student preferences between online and face-to-face learning. They identified a growing trend of universities implementing more online learning programs and courses across the country and wanted to determine how student preferences impacted their overall online learning experience. The survey consisted of questions that related to the structures and social components of both online and face-to-face learning (Paechter & Maier, 2010). The results confirmed that students had varying preferences between online and face-to-face courses that were based on the objectives of the course as well as their own personal learning goals (Paechter & Maier, 2010). Students who preferred online learning for their academic experience, valued structure and self-regulated learning as most important, while those who preferred face-to-face learning valued direct communication and fluid social interaction as most important (Paechter & Maier, 2010).

This study highlights a key factor related to online learning, self-regulation. Based on the way most online learning courses/programs are designed, students have more control over the pace of their learning experience. This warrants a higher level of accountability, which is influenced by the student's ability to manage their academic habits, as it relates to their overall success. Online learning environments usually offer more flexibility in terms of course engagement for students, which in turn encourages students to become more disciplined in their academic and social behaviors.

Conrad (2002) conducted a study where she examined the experiences and perceptions of students taking their first online course, to better understand how students perceived the value of online courses, and what they deem to be the most helpful in terms of their overall academic success. She surveyed a sample of students to determine key identifiers in how students described their first online course experience, and factors that influence the success rate of that experience. The key variables that she focused on were the students' perceived well-being, and level of social engagement (Conrad, 2002). The results confirmed that the students' perceived well-being was more dependent upon the accessibility of the learning materials, rather than the connection with the instructor or peers. The data also revealed that the students highly valued having significant time in advance to prepare for course assignments. An unexpected result was that students did not deem the role of the instructor to be highly influential on their overall success in the course.

Based on these findings, it appears that students strongly value having sufficient learning tools and materials that will facilitate their learning goals, when engaging in an

online learning environment (Conrad, 2002). This notion further suggests that the instructor role is more influential for student learning experiences in traditional face-to-face learning environments. For online learning environments, where the social element is not as crucial, learner preparedness plays a key role in a student's overall learning experience.

It is important to note that the studies discussed in this section reflect data and experiential information from a previous decade. During this time, online learning had become a more prominent avenue for academic exploration. Institution officials began testing new limits with educational technology, in ways that would support diverse student learning, while also adhering to the traditional standards of higher education (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Means et al., 2009; Song et al., 2004). As more studies were conducted to better understand how technology influenced student learning, an emphasis on the style of online learning became a more prevalent factor. For example, researchers examined the correlational differences between synchronous and asynchronous learning methods in which student learning is facilitated (DeNeui & Dodge, 2006; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The key difference between these styles is that with synchronous learning, the learning is guided and directed by an instructor. In asynchronous learning, learning is guided by the students in that most material is available through a given semester, with the expectation that students will complete all requirements for the course by its completion. This led to the early development of hybrid programs, which integrate both online and in person learning.

Based on the data presented from the articles, higher education was in a transitional period during this time in that the societal appeal to pursue higher education seemed to have grown, and students sought more out of their academic experience. As technology continued to advance, how students learned became more diverse and accessible. This in turn presented more opportunities for students, both traditional and non-traditional, to pursue higher education. Over time, students began to perceive their experience in different ways, such as expressing the value of a relationship with the instructor, positive and structured interactions with peers, and a diverse range of learning resources and tools.

### **Online Learning Experiences for Students in the 2010s**

In recent years, online learning has become a prominent domain for the implementation and facilitation of various academic programs. Technology has allowed these programs to advance in ways that closely resemble the layout and social structure of traditional face-to-face learning environments. The influence of more advanced technology, as well as shifts in the social dynamics of younger generations, has encouraged a much higher demand for online learning programs. This demand is associated with demographic factors like socioeconomic status, learning resource accessibility, technological experience, and financial preparedness. As this demand continues to grow, researchers continue to investigate the effectiveness of these programs, by examining students' experiences within them.

Chen et al. (2010) conducted a study that examined how students perceived the value of web-based technology within online and traditional learning environment, and

how it impacted their overall learning experience. They specifically identified first-generation students as a key population to focus on to further understand how these students interpreted and applied technologically based resources in both learning environments, and how it influenced their involvement in a course. The researchers used components of a national survey to explore the perceptions of first-generation students on the value of web-based learning tools, and the difference they make, if any, on their level of involvement with their instructor and peers.

Following their analysis of the survey data and student self-reports, the results confirmed a positive relationship between how students valued web-based learning resources, and their perceived involvement and overall success outcome in an online and/or traditional learning environment. This finding suggests that when there are adequate resources at first-generation students' disposal, with sufficient and consistent support from the instructor, students are more inclined to use these resources to aid in their overall learning experience. The researchers also identified potential patterns with smaller populations like minority students (such as motivation to continue education, and socioeconomic aids and barriers), and those enrolled only part-time, because they represented a significant proportion of online course enrollment. They thought this was a particularly interesting element in the data, because it revealed a potential relationship between these populations and the value of online learning, and web-based learning environments (Chen et al., 2010).

In a similar study, Soria and Stebleton (2012) examined the academic engagement efforts and retention rates of first-generation and non-first-generation students in

technologically based learning environments. They used a large-scale survey to record key elements of the experiences of just under 2,000 first-generation students, at a large public university in the United States. The results indicated that first-generation students have significantly lower rates of academic engagement and retention as compared to non-first-generation students. The researchers defined academic engagement as being the rate at which the student interacted with their instructor, participated in course discussions, contribute ideas from other courses during course discussions, and presented insightful questions and perspectives to the class (Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Considering this definition, the findings suggest that first-generation students may have a more challenging experience with adjusting to the standards and social/academic demands that come with higher education. Key components of this experience include interacting with both instructors and peers, as well as contributing to the overall learning environment by posing complex questions related to the course literature, and engaging in collaborative discussions. These challenges may in turn influence the retention rate of first-generation students, based on how class engagement and enrollment are correlated. The researchers noted that the findings from their study could be used to assist university officials in building upon their methods for supporting first-generation students.

Boling et al. (2012) investigated the effectiveness of online learning environments on overall student success and satisfaction. They interviewed students on key components of online learning, such as course content, assignments and tasks, pedagogical principles, and instructional styles. Their findings suggested that online learning programs that emphasize text-based instructional practices, contribute to a disconnect between the

instructor and the students in these online learning courses. This notion sheds light on a potential barrier in online learning programs that can have a significant impact on a student's overall experience. The researchers emphasized that these findings could initiate new research into how instruction styles and methods for sharing information, can influence a student's overall learning experience in online environments.

In a similar study, Jaggars (2014), examined the experiences of a sample of college students, to further understand and identify key factors that were deemed valuable by the students, as it relates to how they perceived online courses, and what would influence them to choose an online course over a traditional face-to-face course. The results confirmed that the students perceived online learning as being most appropriate for courses that were significantly low in difficulty (Jaggars, 2014). The students also expressed that for most of their online course experiences, there was not a strong instructor presence, and on several occasions they taught themselves, while adjusting to the structure of the online environment (Jaggars, 2014). She concluded that the insights gained from this research, could possibly aid in the development of more engaging and interactive online programs for students of all academic levels (Jaggars, 2014).

This research sheds light on a crucial element related to the overall learning experience of college students, and that is the degree of perceived difficulty between online programs and traditional face-to-face programs. The findings of Jaggars's research suggest that certain courses are limited to being online, due to their value and difficulty, whereas more important courses remain traditionally in-person. This notion further suggests that students choose online courses when the intent is to have a much easier

learning experience, where certain social and academic standards are not as rigorously upheld.

Cho and Heron (2015) conducted a study that examined how self-regulated learning influenced the online learning experiences of traditional college students. They selected a sample of 229 students to take an online remedial mathematics course, then followed up with a survey that allowed the students to describe their learning experience within the course. Cho and Heron wanted to determine how the association between self-regulated learning and intrinsic factors like motivation, emotion, and personal learning strategies, influenced the students' overall learning experience throughout the course. Their results confirmed that the students' motivation had a minimal impact on their performance in the course, but the association between motivation and emotion had a significant impact on the students' satisfaction with their experience in the course (Cho & Heron, 2015).

Cho and Heron (2015) believed that the relationship between motivation and emotion can significantly influence a student's ability to apply self-regulated learning. Their study findings suggested that the intrinsic element that drives a student's will to achieve their academic goals, along with how they feel about their experience achieving their goals, impacts their overall learning process (Cho & Heron, 2015). These findings point to the importance of self-regulated learning, which is the student's ability to control the impact of internal and external factors and their effect on the overall learning process. Due to the social structure and technological nature of online learning, factors like

motivation and emotion are prominent as it relates to a student's perceived experience in an online learning environment.

Intrinsic factors were also emphasized in a study conducted by Tsai et al. (2013) that explored how a college student's online learning experience is impacted by motivation and self-regulation. The researchers used a path analysis to identify key patterns in the relationships between academic motivation, self-regulation, and the social constructs of the online learning environment. The results confirmed that motivation had a positive impact on students' social awareness in online learning environments, as well as their ability to navigate through technological barriers while connecting with their instructor and peers. Their research also confirmed that self-regulation played a key part in bringing together a student's motivation, and level of social interaction within the online learning environment.

This data provides valuable information on how intrinsic factors influence how students engage and perceive their online learning experience. Since online learning environments do not possess the social elements traditional learning environments do, students are usually required to enact more discipline and efforts to engage in their learning environment and connect with their instructors and peers. Online instructors are tasked with the role of not only establishing an online social atmosphere that is conducive to student interaction and receptivity but also facilitating that atmosphere in a way that supports student needs, as it relates to their overall online learning experience. This task can be more challenging for instructors in online environments, in contrast to face-to-face environments, which points to the importance of training and skill development in

understanding and applying techniques that encourage motivation and confidence in their students.

It is important to note that the studies discussed in this section reflect data and experiential information from a previous decade. In this section, I explore studies focused on the integration of educational technology within the framework of contemporary higher education. Studies conducted in recent years recognized the role online learning played as it relates to the development and sustainability of academic programs in higher education. Many colleges and universities now offer a diverse range of academic programs online, some that even allowed international enrollment free of any tuition cost (Blayone et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2013; Nguyen, 2015). Researchers specifically wanted to focus on how students described their online experiences, when compared to traditional in-person programs. There was sufficient data on how the presence of instructors was especially important to students, in particular how instructors engaged with students, the frequency of engagement, and their ability to convey the learning material in effective ways, virtually.

Researchers in these studies discussed how students perceived the influence of social elements related to the online learning environment. The data also suggested that students valued instructors who were well-versed in educational technology and able to facilitate a virtual classroom atmosphere comparable to a traditional in-person classroom setting. The data further discussed the value of this skillset on behalf of the instructor, and how university officials worked with instructors in developing and facilitating online learning programs.

## **Online Learning Experiences for Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

For the past 3 years now, institutions of higher education have undergone unique transitions and have made unprecedented adjustments to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic (Errisuriz et al., 2022). While most colleges and universities have returned to in-person instruction, in the first year plus of the pandemic, institutions of higher education shifted to online learning, which consequently resulted in student enrollment rates simultaneously decreasing, while campus wide sanitation and testing costs impacted annual budgets (Romli et al., 2022). Reductions in student enrollment have hit community colleges especially hard, raising concerns about reversing progress on college access for socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

According to a study conducted by Aucejo et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on how students perceive their overall learning experience, and the value of their academic pursuit in higher education. They surveyed 1,500 students at a large university to identify and understand how students described their learning and social experience in college, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. They specifically wanted to examine how students perceived the impact COVID would or has had on various factors that influence their learning experience, and academic and professional goals.

The results indicated that a substantial portion of students described COVID as having a significantly negative impact on their overall learning experience, while a much smaller portion described a key benefit of the pandemic's impact on their learning experience (Aucejo et al., 2020). Students expressed having to delay graduation, due to taking less courses/credit hours after an influx in courses transitioning to online formats.

A major factor in this reduction in credit hours was the impact COVID had on the workforce, which hindered many students' ability to afford courses. A percentage of students also expressed that the severity of the pandemic actually encouraged them to improve their study habits, due to spending more time indoors. Simultaneously, a percentage of students expressed having to significantly reduce the number of hours spent on their studies, due to having to work more (Aucejo et al., 2020).

The data revealed from this study provides a deeper understanding on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the learning experiences of college students. A key element identified by Aucejo et al. (2020), were the statistical differences in socioeconomic factors between the sample student population. Students of lower socioeconomic status were more likely to report having to sacrifice time spent on their studies as the result of having to work more due to strained finances (Aucejo et al., 2020).

In a similar study conducted by Deng and Yang (2021), the experiences of first-generation college students in online learning environments were explored and compared to those of continuing education students to determine how influential the role of digital proficiency was on their psychological well-being, during the COVID-19 pandemic. They surveyed 309 first-generation/minority students, to measure and compare their digital proficiency skills as it relates to their psychological well-being and overall online learning experience. The results confirmed that first-generation college students underperformed on assessments designed to assess their digital proficiency skills, in comparison to continuing education students (Deng & Yang, 2021). Their data also

confirmed that the variable of digital proficiency had a significant effect on the students' psychological well-being.

These findings confirm that digital proficiency plays a key role in the experience of online learning, and that first-generation college students may experience greater challenges within online learning environments as compared to their continuing education counterparts, due to apparent struggles with digital skill application. This is a factor that university officials and course instructors should become more aware of as online education becomes more prevalent and demanded. First-generation college students are a growing demographic group for most colleges and universities, and with the rise of online learning programs, the data from this study could present potential insights into how these students can be better aided and supported in this type of learning environment.

As a result of the pandemic, one of the key things that really influenced student experiences was the restructuring of academia. This restructure influenced things such as budgets, departmental layouts, faculty and staff, student services, student resources, and grant funding, which are all pivotal aspects of what makes up the higher education experience as it is currently defined (Sarfranz et al., 2022). The severity of the pandemic impacted these factors because of how it limited the way we maneuver throughout society. In-person interactions were no longer considered safe, which is an element that thrives in the traditional experience for university institutions; without the ability to physically interact with individuals for a long period of time on a consistent basis, student interest and the perceived value of higher education can be negatively impacted (Wang et

al., 2022). With individuals unable to work in person and relying on remote work conditions, most services that are crucial for first-generation college students were either halted, delayed, or otherwise altered in some way (Besser et al., 2022).

Many students use online or virtual technology as an aid in their academic experience, due to its convenience and level of accessibility for research and information (Islam et al., 2022). When it became the prominent basis for most academic experiences, it really influenced how students navigated higher education. A key component in an individual's ability to retain and understand new information, is how the information is conveyed or relayed to the student. Traditional in person learning offers the opportunity and/or advantage of social connection, which allows students to connect with their peers and professors, while engaging within their learning environment.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The experiences of first-generation college students in online learning environments, can provide key insights into how educational technology and social engagement can influence a student's overall learning experience. The implications of a global pandemic can significantly impact the traditional processes for higher education, by limiting social contact and interaction. This in turn can influence students' overall learning experience, as well as the way they perceive the value of their academic program. The premise of this dissertation was to explore the experiences of first-generation college students who have had to navigate an unprecedented transition into online learning due to a global pandemic. The data generated from this study addressed a literature gap by providing a more thorough understanding of college student learning

experiences, specifically among first-generation students, when there is an unanticipated shift from in-person to online learning. The next chapter will discuss the methodology and study design plan that will be implemented to gather data for this premise. This chapter will include an in-depth breakdown of how data will be collected, reviewed, and analyzed, as well as an identification of key trends and/or patterns that could shed light on the future of higher education and educational technology.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

Facing academic struggles due to decreased motivation and connection to your program and educational goals, can have a significant impact on how you perceive the value of your overall learning experience. Adjusting to an alternative learning format can unprecedentedly increase feelings of stress, anxiety, confusion, and frustration, influencing how you engage with and manage the expectations and rigors of higher education. For first-generation students, these social factors can inflict a stronger impression on their learning experience, and could require a deeper understanding of how to develop efficient support plans for critical populations like first-generation students. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of an unanticipated learning transition among first-generation college students pursuing higher education at a 4-year school, during a global pandemic. This chapter presents the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology used in the study, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

To address the research questions in this qualitative study, the specific research design included a generic qualitative inquiry, using TA, to explore and further understand the experiences of first-generation college students and their unexpected transition into online learning resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The chosen qualitative design was structured to examine an individual's experiences during an event or activity, in this

case, an unanticipated transition from one learning environment to another (Vagle, 2018). Data was analyzed using the method of TA as described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Quantitative research involves the examination of patterns and relationships between variables, whereas qualitative research describes experiences with the intent to deepen understanding (Cleland, 2015). The purpose of this study was to explore first-generation college students, who experienced the transition from traditional face-to-face learning to predominantly online learning. A quantitative design would not have been the most efficient design for this study, because it would have limited the expression of student experiences. There were no specific variables being examined in relationship to a particular outcome, instead individual experiences were explored to further understand how various factors may impact the trajectory of those experiences and the individual encountering them.

A generic qualitative design examines the value and meanings of an individual's firsthand experiences by identifying key patterns and/or trends throughout their experiences (Fossey et al., 2002). The key source in most qualitative studies is the participants themselves, through firsthand accounts and recollections that describe their perspectives and perceptions throughout one or more experiences. Common tools for analysis are interviews, surveys, and questionnaires, because they are designed to allow an individual to express their thoughts and feelings about an experience, and how it influenced them mentally, emotionally, and socially (Fossey et al., 2002). This design is commonly used in the fields of psychology and sociology because elements of both disciplines involve the intent to further understand factors that influence human behavior

and thought processes. A qualitative design is an appropriate method to examine this phenomenon and present it in a way that would allow a researcher to investigate how individuals define and attach meaning and value to their experiences.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher for this specific study, was to explore the experiences of first-generation college students who were faced with the transition from traditional in person learning, to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this study, I conducted virtual interviews with eligible, willing, and consented participants, about their overall learning experience during this time. Following the completion of data collection, I analyzed the data for key patterns and trends that would support the value and purpose of the study. To mitigate and/or eliminate the chances of bias occurring during data collection, the concept of triangulation was applied. Triangulation is achieved when a phenomenon can be studied and thoroughly examined, from a variety of theoretical frameworks, research methods, and/or data sources (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009).

Achieving triangulation for this study can be done in two ways, through reflexivity and rich descriptions. Reflexivity in qualitative research represents a researcher's acknowledgement of the influence of their role in any formal research process involving data collection (Haynes, 2012). Providing deep rich descriptions of data with thorough detail, allows an individual to gain insights and/or form judgements that can be attributed to other experiences, environments, times, and people (Creswell & Miller, 2000). These approaches can be effective in identifying and applying an ethical position as a researcher.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

#### ***Participants***

First-generation students are defined as students pursuing higher education without a previous family member having experience or completing a collegiate level degree program. I selected participants for this study based on their experience with higher education, and their status as a student when the COVID-19 pandemic initially started. This would represent a sample population of students who are the first to pursue higher education in their family, and who also endured the unprecedented transition from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning.

The age range for the sample population assessed in this study was 20 to 22. This range enabled the identification of individuals who were attending college when the COVID pandemic began in March of 2020.

#### ***Sampling Technique***

The sampling technique I used for this study was a purposeful sampling strategy known as variation sampling (Suri, 2011). This is a type of sampling where participants are filtered or intentionally selected for a study, based on their knowledge and/or experience related to the premise of the study. Based on the premise of this research, students that were appropriate for this study were those who encountered the unprecedented transition from traditional in person learning to online learning.

Students who were interested in participating and met inclusion criteria (being a first-generation college student who experienced the transition from in-person learning to

online learning), were contacted via email to learn more about the study, and provide consent for participation. Following consent, a time was confirmed for the participant to be interviewed to provide further information regarding their academic experience. The interviews were conducted in a way that allowed the student to express their thoughts and perspectives on their experience thoroughly. The goal was to recruit 8 to 14 students, about their experiences within their academic journey, as it related to the transition from traditional in person learning to online learning. Saunders et al. (2018) described the concept of this recruitment strategy as sample to saturation, which dictates that a researcher continues to recruit participants until no additional data are needed, as defined by the premise of the study. Recruitment for this study continued until it was determined that data saturation had occurred. The interview questions were semi structured to allow for an in-depth exploration of students' perceived thoughts and feelings regarding various aspects of their overall academic experience.

### **Instrumentation**

As the sole researcher, I served as the instrument for data collection. I asked open ended questions in a semi structured interview format to maintain structure while encouraging participants to share their experiences. The interview questions were developed based on the aims of the research questions. The questions focused on exploring social factors for each student as related to the impact of the pandemic, such as mental health, motivation, and perceived social support. Based on the literature discussed in chapter 2, social factors such as motivation have been linked to student success and engagement in online learning. Other factors like mental health and perceived social

support were not consistently mentioned across various studies in the literature, partially due to the unique nature of the factors. Tinto's theory influenced the structure of the interview questions, by emphasizing how the relationship between students and their instructors was impacted by the transition to online learning. Tinto believed that this relationship played a major part in overall student success. While analyzing the data, this led me to focus on participant responses regarding their perspectives on instructor presence and engagement, and perceived social support, as it related to their mental health and motivation.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

#### ***Recruitment***

I posted a flyer on the campus of the University of South Florida to recruit interested students into the study. Following that, I confirmed with interested students via email, to provide them with more information about the study. After I confirmed their interest, I requested they review and sign an attached informed consent and email it back to me. Following the confirmation of consent, I established a time that worked best for both the participant and me, to conduct the virtual interview. Each interview was recorded and documented through notetaking, to compile all relevant information regarding the participants' overall experience.

#### ***Data Collection***

For this research, a 45–60-minute interview was conducted with students interested in participating, to collect information about their overall academic experiences during the unanticipated transition from traditional in-person learning to online learning,

due to the COVID pandemic. Appendix A provides a list of the questions that were asked in each interview.

All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. A key component in conducting an effective interview is making sure the participant feels comfortable with both the researcher and the environment of the interview. To ensure that this occurs, it is important for a researcher to establish rapport with a participant. This can vary based on the participant, but researchers can establish initial rapport by facilitating light dialogue (ice breakers) with the participant prior to engaging in the interview itself. This technique helps in minimizing some of the discomfort and potential anxiety that can manifest from experiences like an interview.

Once the actual interview begins, a researcher should be mindful of communicative attributes like nonverbal cues, facial expressions, tone of voice, eye contact, and reflective listening. These factors can have a significant impact on how participants answer the interview questions, due to how they can influence their comfort and connection with the interviewer. Each interview was recorded, and the interviewer took notes during each interview to ensure that all information was confirmed and accurately recorded. Each recording was transcribed and used for further data analysis.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Elements such as identification, connection, and interpretation, are key for researchers conducting qualitative based research. A thorough analysis of all data collected and recorded allows a researcher to uncover and identify key patterns and/or themes that can answer research questions, as well as determine the value and meaning of

the data as it relates to the premise of the research. The data analysis process was based on Braun and Clark's (2006) TA method. TA involves six key steps that detail each action the researcher takes to determine the value and meaning of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The first step was to record and document the data, which occurred primarily through the interviews using field notes and recordings. As data gets recorded, it is also important for the researcher to review it enough to become familiar with each detail. The second step was to further review the data to determine any patterns and/or themes between participant responses. Throughout the review, I developed a codebook to categorize the data into sections, based on the structure of the interview questions. The codebook served as a qualitative research tool used to organize key themes and/or patterns within collected data. Once this was complete, I analyzed the coded data to draw conclusions about the relationships and connections within the data. The codebook was a primary source for confirming the reliability of the data collected. The third step was to identify and clarify the meaning of all themes and patterns within the data, as it relates to the premise of the study. This step involved reviewing the interview questions, to draw conclusions about the meaning of the data. The final step was to review and interpret the findings and prepare a report on the data. This step consisted of discussing the results of the study, as well as the true meaning of the data, and presented a final review of the research and any impact it made.

## **Issues of Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility**

For this study, credibility was achieved using the process of triangulation, an analysis technique that incorporates multiple reviewers of data presented from a study, to assess various viewpoints and ensure soundness of the data (Patton, 1999). Triangulation in this case involved me, as the researcher, chair committee member, and second committee member. Once I completed any step of the study, I sent the data to the chair member for initial review and from there to the second member, to further eliminate any chance for potential bias and/or error. Once reviewed, any updates needed were sent to me for completion. Credibility was guided using a script, to ensure there are no biases or manipulation of the data on my part. Member checking was achieved by allowing participants to review their transcripts following their interview, to further diminish any potential for researcher bias (Patton, 1999).

### **Dependability**

The dependability of a study represents its ability to replicate the study's findings if repeated. Selecting the most appropriate participants was vital to replicating the findings of a qualitative study (Fossey et al, 2002). Criterion sampling defines the specific participants targeted to provide accurate, dependable descriptions of their experiences during the transition to online learning, due to the pandemic.

### **Transferability**

The results presented in this study provided a deeper understanding of the perceived experiences of first-generation college students who navigated the transition

from traditional in person learning, to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Transferability, which refers to research findings being applicable to other contexts and/or situations (Slevins & Sines, 1999), is often challenging with small qualitative studies. However, the elements of this study have been carefully described to facilitate replication of the study increasing the potential for transferability.

### **Confirmability**

According to Connelly (2016), confirmability refers to the extent at which research findings are consistent and able to be repeated. As it relates to the personal experience of the student while in an online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, confirmability protected against any personal bias on part of the researcher. For this study, confirmability was achieved through the creation of a codebook, which was designed to check and confirm the accuracy of all data collected, as well as to identify key patterns and/or themes in the data. The data are based on self-reported information expressed by the participants from the interviews. Once I reviewed the data, they were transferred appropriately into the codebook. Following the completion of the codebook, I sent it to the chair committee member for review.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Flyers posted on the campus of the University of South Florida was the recruitment resource used to recruit students interested in participating in the study. Those who were recruited were contacted via email by me and provided more information about the study and an informed consent statement, to sign and email back to

me. Once consent was confirmed, I set a time with the participant, to conduct the interview.

All participants contacted for an interview were treated with respect and dignity, and all interactions with them regarding their participation in the study were facilitated positively. All participants had the option to independently consent to participating in this research and had the right to withdraw at any time. The data of all participants who chose to withdraw, was not used in the analysis process of this study. Each participant's consent for study participation was both documented and recorded and confirmed with the participant for assurance.

### **Informed Consent and Confidentiality**

After the Walden University Institutional Review Board reviewed and granted permission to proceed with data collection, each participant was provided a copy of the informed consent statement that included the IRB confirmation number. This statement also included an explanation of their rights as an active participant in the research, and specific details regarding their involvement. During this process, I encouraged each participant to ask questions to ensure their understanding of the study, and their involvement as a participant. I also reviewed the purpose, significance, and future implications of the study, with each participant. All participant data are protected and secure.

### **Summary**

This chapter addressed the research method, design, role of the researcher, data collection and analysis, and issues of trustworthiness related to exploring the experiences

of first-generation college students who transitioned from a traditional in person learning format, to an online learning format, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research design included a generic qualitative inquiry, using TA, to explore the experiences of first-generation college students during this transition into online learning. The role of the researcher for this study was to conduct virtual interviews with eligible and willing participants, about their overall learning experience during the peak COVID years, as all academic procedures transitioned from in-person to online. I conducted semi structured interviews to collect responses from participants to answer research questions related to the experiences of first-generation students in online learning during the pandemic. TA consists of six steps that detail each action taken to determine the value and meaning of the data. This analysis is used to code and organize responses based on each research question. Issues of trustworthiness in qualitative research concern the accuracy, generalizability, consistency, and objectivity of collected data and findings. These issues were addressed in this study using use-of-self and appropriate saturation. Chapter 4 will include the setting of the interviews, participant demographics, data collection procedures, and identified themes from responses.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of an unanticipated learning transition among first-generation college students pursuing higher education at a 4-year school, during a global pandemic. The research questions were based on the problem of the unprecedented situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how it influenced the social and administrative infrastructures that have traditionally defined higher education. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1-Qualitative: How do first-generation college students describe the experiences of an unanticipated learning transition, amid the COVID pandemic?

RQ2-Qualitative: What are the socio-emotional experiences of first-generation college students during a global pandemic, with online learning being the full or primary format?

This chapter contains an outline of the setting, data collection, data analysis, results, and evidence of trustworthiness. Each element will be explained so that the reader can understand the process of data collection and analysis for this study.

### **Setting**

Eight students from the University of South Florida were chosen to participate in this study. Students enrolled at a traditional 4-year university were ideal candidates for this study because their experiences would provide a deeper more lucid idea of how impactful the COVID-19 pandemic was on traditional academic systems. The students had diverse backgrounds, and represented various class levels as undergraduates, during

the peak years of the pandemic. Student majors ranged primarily within the behavioral sciences, such as psychology, social work, human services, and pre-med. No known personal or organizational conditions existed that would have influenced the participants' responses in this study, and there were no significant changes to the procedures for recruitment, data collection, and analysis.

### **Demographics**

Information about participants, their individual identifier and their student classification, can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participant Information*

Identifier	Classification
Participant 1	Junior
Participant 2	Senior
Participant 3	Senior
Participant 4	Junior
Participant 5	Freshman
Participant 6	Junior
Participant 7	Sophomore
Participant 8	Junior

### **Data Collection**

*Number of Participants*

As noted, eight students were interviewed for this study, and they represented diverse backgrounds and classifications. Eight participants were sufficient for this study because the sample size was small enough to be manageable, and large enough to collect accurate experiences from the peak COVID years for analysis. Each student was enrolled

at the University of South Florida during that time. The participants' identifiers and majors can be seen in Table 1.

### ***Location, Frequency, and Duration of the Interviews***

Following the confirmation of approval from the IRB, flyers detailing information about the study were posted throughout the campus of the University of South Florida. There was no contact regarding interest in participating in the study, until the third week following the posting of the flyers. There was an approximate span of 3 months, where a total of eight interviews were conducted with randomly selected first-generation students. The interviews were completed using Microsoft Teams, and the Microsoft Teams automated transcription feature was used to transcribe the interviews.

The interview questions were asked in a conversational way to ensure a comfortable and consistent flow throughout the discussion. A carefully constructed set of interview questions (Appendix A) were used to facilitate each interview and accurately assess each participant's unique experience. Some questions were slightly modified to allow participants to provide additional details regarding a particular account. Participants were encouraged to provide as much detail as they could accurately account, to ensure that each element of their experience was captured. An advantage of creating an informal conversational atmosphere, is that it generates trust for the participants, as they share details of their experience.

Microsoft Teams was used to complete each interview, and before each interview commenced, the participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of the study, and their consent was reconfirmed. Each participant was initially instructed to confirm

consent through email. The audio recording for each interview was established through Microsoft Teams and used to generate and analyze each transcript. Each audio recording was also used to appropriately edit any grammatical errors in each transcript. The interview protocol was followed as approved by the IRB, and interviews ranged between 20 to 45 minutes. See Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Interview Duration and Transcript Length*

Participants	Interview duration (minutes)	Transcript length (pages)
Participant 1	39	36
Participant 2	28	29
Participant 3	20	21
Participant 4	38	17
Participant 5	28	21
Participant 6	22	13
Participant 7	21	15
Participant 8	33	20

*Variations in Data Collection Process*

There were no irregular circumstances that significantly impacted the data collection process. In one of the interviews, the participant experienced some technical difficulties when logging onto Microsoft Teams but was able to troubleshoot the issue relatively quickly. A few other interviewees logged onto the Teams call a few minutes late. One participant simply forgot about the scheduled interview, but I sent an email reminder to ensure the interview still worked for her, and she confirmed and logged on. No participants experienced any major internet and/or Wi-Fi issues, and no scheduled interviews had to be rescheduled.

Prior to the start of the data collection process, the interview question list was reviewed a final time to confirm that each question was properly constructed to capture an accurate account of each participant's experience. Eight students were interviewed for this study, because it was determined at that point that data saturation had occurred. Participants were not sent a copy of the transcript and was not contacted regarding any matter following the conclusion of the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was used to determine themes within the data and answer the research questions. A protocol that includes data familiarization, and two steps of coding, was used to mine the data from the interviews and develop themes.

#### ***Phase 1: Data Familiarization***

The interview transcripts were cleaned up to edit significant grammatical and sentence structure errors in transcription. During this process, I listened to the recordings as I read the transcripts. This was key in the familiarization process because there were frequent pauses and rewinding, which repeatedly exposed the details of all data collected, increasing my overall understanding of the value and meaning of the data.

#### ***Phase 2: Initial Codes***

For this study, inductive coding was used to abstract the key themes of each interview. Instead of operating from premade codes and categorizing the data according to that structure, it was determined to be most effective for the data presented from each interview to form its own codes. The transcripts from each interview were used to note key words and phrases, which highlighted essential information related to a research

question. Once a set of both initial and secondary codes were established, themes and patterns within the data began to appear.

I read and reviewed each of the transcripts and identified all key words and phrases that convey key information related to each research question. I used the data produced from each interview as a guide to develop the primary set of codes. From there, over 100 codes were produced to capture all data provided. As data were reviewed and codes were generated, I then started to collapse some secondary codes that represented similar value in information or essentially meant the same thing but expressed slightly differently. For example, secondary codes such as *dealt with depression and anxiety*, *social anxiety*, and *returning home triggered seasonal depression*, were consolidated under the primary code of *mental health*, in accordance with the related research question.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In this basic qualitative investigation of first-generation students' online learning experiences during a pandemic, I employed use of self, TA, criterion sampling, and saturation to increase the trustworthiness of the study. The four areas of trustworthiness relevant to qualitative research are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

#### **Credibility**

Establishing credibility requires illustrating that the findings accurately reflect reality as seen by the participants. Qualitative research reflects the perception and experience of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and findings are my interpretation

based on my analysis of the data. The methods I used to confirm credibility are prolonged familiarization and use of self. Through past experiences working with college students, I built an understanding for how higher education dynamics influence student motivation and self-efficacies. I understood how students engaged with the learning material, and how it influenced their perspectives towards academia. Prior to starting with my interview questions, I spent a few minutes establishing rapport with the students. This helped build their trust to encourage genuine responses to the interview questions.

Applying use-of-self promoted mindfulness, which helped to maintain the integrity of participant responses as their own and not a reflection of mine. The raw data from the interviews and transcripts that were used for data analysis, was saved in secure files.

### **Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability**

Transferability ensures the conditions of the study are replicable. Participants in the current study were recruited using flyers that advertised the study around the campus of the University of South Florida. The flyer included the purpose and goal of the research, as well as eligibility criteria for any students who were interested in participating. Interested students then confirmed their interest with me via email, and I then sent them the Walden University approved informed consent form. Eligible students acknowledged the form and then confirmed a day and time for the interview. I recorded and transcribed the interviews using Microsoft Teams and listened to and reviewed the transcripts to cross reference notes taken during each interview. An accurate explanation of participant selection ensured transferability and dependability. The participant

selection criteria included first-generation college students who were enrolled full time at the University of South Florida, during the peak pandemic years.

The notes taken during each interview included raw data and personal notes used to reflect on thoughts I had throughout each interview. The reflective notes described key statements made by participants that provoked a thought, as well as both positive and negative aspects of each interview. These notes served to ensure dependability and confirmability, which was important for authenticating findings and interpretations.

## **Results**

In this section, key connections between participant responses and identified themes will be described in detail. Statements from participants will be quoted to represent its connection to a theme. This section will help in understanding how each theme was confirmed within the data, and how it connects to each research question.

### **Research Question 1 and Themes**

*Table 3 - Research Question 1 and Themes*

RQ1	Themes
How do first-generation college students describe the experiences of an unanticipated learning transition, amid the COVID pandemic?	Online transition Motivation University support

### **Theme 1: Online Transition**

The impact of the transition from traditional in-person learning to online learning varied between the participants, but they all expressed that it had a significance influence on their academic pursuit at the time. The transition was very abrupt and described as chaotic and confusing for some of the participants, as much was not known about the

COVID-19 pandemic at the time. Majority of the participants expressed having a difficult time during the transition and were faced with many personal struggles as related to their academic performance.

Participant 2 stated that she experienced high anxiety when the transition initially commenced. “I was worried because I knew that I wasn’t a very good online learner,” she stated that she personally thrived within the university campus atmosphere, specifically because it is designed to allow students to establish an academic “routine,” where there are designated places for studying, seeking social support, and professional development. She continued to state that an academic environment made her feel confident about her ability to do well in her courses and achieve her academic goals:

As soon as I found out we were going to do online, I was worried because I knew that I wasn’t a great online learner and I thrived more when I had access to the professor in person and I just thrived more in a classroom setting with my peers and being in an academic formal setting.

This statement suggests the value of the traditional in-person learning experience, and its impact on how some students perform academically and perceive their ability to perform.

Participant 3 expressed similar thoughts on the transition being difficult and particularly isolating. She stated, “It was very isolating, having to go from being around students and then having to go home; and I felt like my instructors honestly didn’t know how to transition their course from in person to online.” This statement provided insight on how social connection in educational environment can influence student academic performance. She felt that going back home had a negative effect on her academic

routine, and that the routine was disrupted due to this transition. This also introduces the idea of courses being transferable to an online or virtual format. She felt that her instructors were not completely successful in ensuring the course still resonated with students and allowed an opportunity to thoroughly explore course materials and connect with classmates in sharing ideas and perspectives.

Participant 7 expressed similar views but focused her emphasis more on the social component of her learning experience. She stated,

Not being able to communicate with my peers and my professors, if I did have any questions for them, was hard. I had to schedule appointments with them, and it was difficult to talk to them because everyone was online, so they had multiple people that they had to talk to.

She emphasized that this was particularly difficult for her because it directly affected her ability to learn and understand her coursework. She later stated,

There were some professors that still had actual classes like how we're doing now, like Zoom or Teams, but there were other professors that were just like here's the material. Here it is like just look at it on the canvas and then just learn it on your own. Here are all the exams you have to take it when you're ready, and so that felt off because I like to have someone teaching me the material.

### **Theme 3: Motivation**

During this time, students expressed how stressful and anxiety provoking this transition had been, which in turn had a significant impact on their overall academic motivation. The consensus of the overall impact on motivation for students represented

both positive and negative experiences. Some students expressed feeling “lazier” and significantly less motivated to focus and exert full attention on their coursework, while others expressed feeling more motivated towards their coursework, for various reasons. This spectrum of experiences by students appears to be determined primarily by the student, and their individual tenacity to endure unprecedented situations.

While discussing the matter, Participant 8 expressed that she was not looking forward to having most of her classes transferred to an online format for several reasons.

I did not like it... I don't consider myself to be a successful online learner. I'm not very good at like prioritizing and managing my time in that way...and I also don't do well with like not having the human interaction of being in person and being able to like, ask questions in real time as they come up as I'm learning. And also like I think a big struggle for me was the type of classes that I was taking and like I didn't think they were pretty like conducive to online learning. And then like a lot of I was in the sciences.

This statement sheds light on how the factors that define both traditional in-person learning, and those that define online learning, influences students' self-efficacies towards academic performance in different ways. Her level of self-awareness was also highlighted, and that understanding the process of the transition, allowed her to reflect on how she views her academic abilities in online environments. This element was recognized within several different students. She also alluded to the social component of the learning experience, which becomes absent within most online learning environments. She stated,

Pretty much most of my classes had a lab and I don't think that's really something that you can like realistically and effectively do online. And then I think moving for me back home was one of, like, the hardest adjustments that I had.

Participant 8 also expressed that she struggled with maintaining motivation towards her coursework, due to the lack of structure and transferability of her classes during the transition. While most students stated they were experiencing a lapse in motivation for at least one class, Participant 8 stated that she struggled in all her classes, regardless of their general difficulty. She stated, "I would say that my motivation dropped for most of my classes. It was especially the case in the harder science classes that I had been taking.... and like anything with a lab." As she began to discuss the factors that influenced, it was noted that she felt that not only was the technology to adequately transfer her classes online was not the most efficient, her instructors were not any more knowledgeable of the online structure than she was:

I did end up switching.... I used to be a bio major and I did end up switching like a post COVID. So like I do think like this whole situation played a role on my decision to switch my major later on when I went back to school.

The experience endured by Participant 8 suggests how valuable the role of motivation is in a student's choice to pursue higher education. A few other students expressed how the transition impacted their motivation in different ways. Participant 6 discussed how he no longer felt that his coursework and academic efforts were meaningful anymore. He stated,

In that regard, my motivation was like, okay, just do the stupid assignment...but that doesn't really reflect anything that I felt... I mean for what I pay for like was it meaningful enough? I was just like, why would I want to continue doing this? You know, post this degree...what was the point?

From a similar perspective, Participant 7 expressed feeling less motivated primarily due to the lack of traditional academic structure. She stated,

I've always liked school, but after COVID I feel like I became more lazy because everything was online... I never had a due date. Everything was pretty open and so having to transition back to that, it had a pretty big impact on me because a lot of times I would just forget I got back to school, and would forget like, oh my God, I have an assignment due literally in a couple minutes!

### **Theme 5: University Support**

During this time, universities were presented with several challenges related to student support, as programs transitioned whole courses and learning resources into an online learning format. Considering the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and its impact on the structures of higher education, many university officials were faced with several challenges and barriers as they navigated the ramifications of the pandemic. Students expressed varying perspectives on how well supported they felt by the university, as courses transitioned into online learning.

In terms of university support, Participant 6 expressed feeling significantly disconnected from the university during the transitional process. He stated,

They were awful ... like specifically, the university was. I get that it's a hard situation ... I was empathetic but ... I needed a place to work ... I couldn't use the library in my computer...breaks the week of finals. I can't use the library, I have to shell out as I mean as a college student, you know over a grand to take a final because it's proctored online. I also have accommodations for my learning disability ... I was a caregiver, so I needed facilities to stay at because driving 400 miles will drive you crazy when you have to do it four times a week.

Participant 6 expressed having additional life circumstances that really made the transition difficult, and that the overall experience was overwhelming.

From a similar perspective, Participant 8 expressed receiving little to no support from university officials, despite having the appropriate documents for academic accommodations. She stated,

I don't really feel like there was any support. I mean, they basically sent us home and like left it up to each professor to kind of figure out and determine like what they were gonna do to, like, move the class to be online... the expectations I feel like remained the same for us to do just as well as people who did it in person and there wasn't really any communication about like if we were struggling. I do think there might have been like an announcement or like e-mail to be like hey, we offer counseling as a reminder, if anyone's like struggling with like just like mental like basic counseling...not really like any like tools for online learning, there was no like...really reaching out in terms of like providing support or like

recommendations to help us adjust to online learning...or to like how to learn on our own...

## Research Question 2 and Themes

*Table 4 - Research Question 2 and Themes*

RQ 2	Themes
What are the socio-emotional experiences of first-generation college students during a global pandemic, with online learning being the full or primary format?	Mental health Self-directed learning Perceived value of academic experience Motivation

### Theme 2: Mental Health

As students prepared for the transition to online learning, while navigating the growing concerns of the COVID-19 pandemic, various barriers presented themselves in ways that made it challenging for students. A prominent one being mental health, in that students had to be vigilant of their own safety and health, while simultaneously progressing through their academic journeys. Several students expressed ways in which the transition impacted their mental health, in both positive and negative ways.

For Participant 6, the transition prompted by the pandemic could not have happened at a worse time. He stated,

So the transition to online learning impacted me a lot because...umm I had some hybrid classes ironically, yet I wasn't allowed to stay in the dorms and I was a caregiver, so I had to travel 200 miles four times a week. Sometimes it was exhausting. I didn't feel like I had academic support or an advisor...I would study when I eventually got a dorm to stay in. I felt so alone because there was nobody staying in the dorm...

He discussed how the pressure of adjusting to multiple classes being online, added a significant amount of stress and anxiety that he had not experienced before the pandemic started. As he previously mentioned, additional personal life factors such as being a caretaker for loved ones, already presented a level of stress, which made it even more challenging to understand and apply the necessary elements to be successful in the new online environment.

Similarly, Participant 2 expressed having experienced a level of anxiety that significantly impacted her self-efficacy, and perceived ability to progress within her degree program. She stated,

I was very anxious because I was finishing up my degree, so I had my thesis paper due and there were databases that I had access to at home, but I worked at the library, so it didn't feel the same as having a supervisor or any person who specialized in database collection there with me if I had any questions... so I was very anxious about completing my work and being able to focus in an environment that I was not at, at all prior to COVID-19.

#### **Theme 4: Self-Directed Learning**

The transition from traditional in-person learning to online learning impacted many elements of the learning experience, as described so far by participant responses. One key factor that was emphasized during this transition, was the concept of self-directed learning. This represents a learning style where the student has a much larger stake in their overall learning process, allowing them more control and autonomy for the

pace and structure of their learning. This concept can be challenging for students whose learning process has been primarily conditioned by traditional in-person learning.

Participant 3 expressed experiencing some challenges adjusting to the nature of self-directed learning, when most of her courses transitioned into an online format. She stated, “Definitely felt like I was teaching myself and it was like we would meet on Zoom, but it would be like, well, the assignments I felt like I was having to teach myself honestly everything and, you know...” This statement provided insight into how the virtual class time experience was impacted by the transition. She continued, “It’s hard to stay focused during a long lecture on oom... you know, there’s no discussions... it’s just easier in person to see, you know. I felt like I was teaching myself the material majority of the time.”

Similarly, Participant 2 expressed experiencing challenges with the online layout of class discussion, specifically instructor and peer interaction. She stated, “I would say it’s more challenging because if a question arose, you could ask for it in a chat, but it wasn’t the same as I’m like a verbal or a visual learner and auditory learner.” She continued to state how this transition changed how she managed her learning process. She stated, “I think uh the self-pace is difficult for people who like, I’m a perfectionist, so things would take me longer to learn sometimes because I needed to make sure that I thoroughly knew it...”

### **Theme 6: Perceived Value of Academic Experience**

One of the most prominent factors of this study is to further understand how the unprecedented transition from traditional in-person learning to online learning, influenced

students' perception of the value of their overall academic experience. The transition prompted several changes to the traditional social structure of university campuses, which impacted several components of the "college experience" that helped shape this perception for students. This influenced several students' learning experience, in terms of how they managed their course expectations, completed assignments, and connected with instructors, peers, and course materials.

Participant 2 expressed how the transition impacted her academic efforts as she navigated key courses of her degree program. She stated,

It did feel like it devalued my education... I think that if I hadn't had the work ethic that I had, it would have been a lot more challenging, but I still value my education because I know that I work still very hard to get to where I was, but it did devalue a little bit. When you're just reading modules and answering questions, and there's not a lot of that, what I really enjoyed about school was class participation...

She continued to explain how the lack of social elements influenced her learning experience. She stated,

I felt like college was all about not just like how you think as an individual, but how your opinions can change when you are exposed to different backgrounds... And then COVID hit and then you're really only talking to a certain group of people, whoever you've already kind of known already. So it did kind of reduce the pool that you could talk to and the diversity of the learning.

From a similar perspective, Participant 3 expressed how the transition influenced her perception of her learning experience, and the social components attached to that experience. She stated,

It felt like I was missing out on a lot of that college experience, you know, because it was like there was no campus activities, there was no that social interaction it aspect. I was really looking forward to having those in person classes... and then when we got back to in person learning, it was like we had to have the face masks.

She provided insight into how the social implications of the pandemic, influenced her in-class experience and her ability to feel comfortable while learning.

Considering the significant impact of the pandemic on higher education, some students had a strong enough connection to their programs and course work to withstand the challenges of the lack of key social elements. Participant 4 expressed how meaningful the process of learning was to her, so despite the pressure of the pandemic, her drive to learn remained strong. She stated,

I'm not really sure if it impacted the value. I feel like growing up, my parents always put an emphasis on education...so for me, learning is always something that's valuable and something that students should take a lot of like rich, meaningful experience from. But I think maybe it changed by get open the perspective to exactly what kinds of forms learning can take.

As Participant 4 continued, she discussed how the transition to online learning offered some benefit to the framework of learning, through evolving professor/student connections and learning materials. She stated,

I think because of the transition to online learning and the way it forced students and teachers to kind of reevaluate how learning can be done, it really pointed out the flaws in some sorts of like, organization when it comes to teaching and highlighted what kinds of strategies really lead to like this meaningful, engaging work...and I feel like with the transition to online learning, it helped raise a lot of questions like is learning something you do by yourself or is it something that happens with others and questions like how important are peers when it comes to learning?

For the topic of motivation throughout each interview, several participants shared experiences of how their lowered motivation during this time, influenced their perception towards their courses and course work. Participant 4 expressed feeling less motivated in her synchronous classes, due to the social and academic disconnect between her professor and the students in the course. She stated,

The synchronous online classes really lowered my motivation to pay attention during those classes just because it felt like we were listening to the professors lecture and they weren't really paying attention to us either....like they would stop for questions once in a while and then people would raise their hands and chat and ask a question.

I think something that made it hard was the professors that allowed students to just interrupt them and ask a question...most of the time, I feel like they're trying to be open, but when they did that, they also didn't let students have the opportunity to really think about what they had to ask and ask them, especially in like a more designated time or people who like to drop questions in the chat that got missed. So I feel like that sort of aspect kind of made me less motivated to try and engage with the classroom.

### **Theme 3: Motivation**

It was noted that the transition not only impacted the perceived value of the overall learning experience, but also the motivation to perform at the best academic potential during that time. Participant 7 expressed how the transition and social isolation had a negative influence on her motivation towards her coursework. She stated,

I just felt like my professors were very absent during that time...I felt like I didn't have any help...that's why it also made me not feel like doing anything because it just felt like I'm just by myself. There was no one to guide me...no one there to at least you know...help me out if I did have any questions, I just felt just alone.

### **Summary**

The responses to the first and third interview questions revealed that during the initial phase of the transition, several students experienced anxiety while adjusting to the dynamics of online learning. This also prompted a decrease in motivation towards completing assigned tasks and participating in class, due to the implications of social isolation. The first question addressed participants' feelings toward the transition to

online learning, and the third question addressed any changes to their motivation during the transition. The second question addressed participants' mental health and provided insight into how the transition influenced students' mental health during that time. Some students stated that it significantly impacted their mental health due to the lack of preparation for the social changes, as well as differences in the form of social support, following the transition.

Question 4 addressed the participants' perspectives towards self-directed learning and revealed that navigating your learning experience as the primary facilitator was very challenging for several students. Students expressed various difficulties with self-directed learning, ranging from a lack of understanding for online tech-based learning tools, to issues focusing during synchronous class sessions due to the absence of key social elements. Question 5 addressed perceived support from university leadership and revealed that there was no sense of valuable or consistent support for students from academic officials during the transition. Question 6 addressed perceived value of overall academic experience, and it was determined based on several responses that the transition influenced students' perceived value of their academic experience in some way. The students expressed both frustrations and revelations regarding themselves and their academic pursuit, from enduring this transitional experience.

Chapter 5 includes an interpretation of my findings, as well as a comparison to literature discussed within the review in chapter 2. The findings are also discussed and reviewed to determine connections to the theoretical framework used for this study.

Chapter 5 will also include a review of the limitations of the study, as well as the implications for social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of an unanticipated learning transition among first-generation college students pursuing higher education at a 4-year school, during a global pandemic. Semi structured interviews of eight former students from the University of South Florida were conducted to answer the research questions. Previous literature focused on how students learned through virtual educational formats and adjusted to the structural design of online learning programs. Little research was found on how student learning experiences are influenced by the implications of a global pandemic, when learning must take place virtually.

Exploring the experiences of first-generation college students during an unplanned learning transition during a global pandemic, provides insights into student perspectives towards higher education, instructional design, and campus preparedness, as those were key elements that contributed to the impact of each student's learning experience. Sharing the results with instructors and department chairs may provide context into what students find most meaningful in their learning experience, and the best ways to support students during unprecedented transitions of academic material. Allocating the results with university administrators and leadership officials may aid in their ability to construct efficient procedures for instructors and students for unprecedented challenges that encourage major transitions in the facilitation of learning.

A key finding from the study was that some students found alternative ways to make their course material meaningful to them, to help with their motivation to continue completing their degree programs.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The key themes uncovered by the interview questions included (a) motivation towards education during transition, (b) mental health during transition, and (c) perceived value of academic experience. Participant 1's statement that "Overall, I maintained my motivation ... because I've always felt like I had most of the control of my learning," and Participant 8's statement expressing, "I struggled with my motivation when everything transitioned," suggests that maintaining motivation to do well in your courses amid an unanticipated learning transition is more dependent on the perceived value of the experience by the student, than the abrupt implications of the transition to online learning itself. For this section, I compare the results of the study to previous literature and the theoretical framework that informed the research questions. The first three research questions addressed the participants' feelings, motivation, and mental health during the transition. The next two questions focus on the influence of university officials and the impact of any support provided to students for the transition. The final question addressed participants perceived value of their learning experience following the transition.

Engaging in an online learning environment, especially as a first-generation student, requires a clear understanding of media-based learning resources and online platform dynamics (Gardner & Leary, 2023). In addition to this understanding, students are also expected to maintain consistent levels of discipline and accountability

(DiGiacomo et al., 2023), as the foundation for virtual learning traditionally encourages more autonomy and self-directed learning. Over the past few decades, online learning has evolved in how educational material is delivered and managed (Joosten & Cusatis, 2020), as well as how students and educators interact with each other (Maré & Mutezo, 2025). Many innovations in educational technology have allowed the process of learning to take place in diverse ways (Abusalem et al., 2024). Advancements in telecommunication now allow instructors to engage with students in real time, with interactive videos and assignments, encouraging students to have more autonomy in their learning experience (Gimby et al., 2024).

Tinto's (2010) "Model of Institutional Departure" states that students are more likely to progress through college and graduate if they academically and socially integrate into the university. The premise of this postulation is that when students feel a sense of connection and commitment within their university, they are more likely to have a positive academic experience. Factors that contribute to this social integration are the student-instructor relationship, consistent support from university administration, and opportunities for both social and professional development (Akram & Li, 2024). First-generation students are more likely to experience challenges adjusting to the dynamics of the collegiate environment (Ricks & Warren, 2021). To obtain a positive learning experience, this population of students should pursue opportunities to connect with peers and instructors for both academic and social support (Bloomberg, 2024). This integration process is most effective within the traditional university environment (Salusky et al., 2024).

The current study found that the transition into online learning during a global pandemic, significantly influenced the academic motivation of first-generation college students. The participants expressed varying perspectives towards the structure of the online learning platform. Each participant expressed having changes in their motivation towards doing well in their courses during the pandemic. Some participants expressed that the lack of social exposure within the virtual classroom environment significantly impacted their learning experience.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of first-generation college students that transitioned into online learning, due to a global pandemic. Limitations are an inevitable factor that can be detrimental to the soundness of the research (Burkholder et al., 2019). The first limitation was the sample size, which was small and limited to one particular region and university. The study focused on undergraduate students at the University of South Florida. There were many other universities that endured a similar experience of transitioning learning formats into a virtual space (Shahrill et al., 2024). The sample population for this study consisted of first-generation students that represented each of the four academic classifications.

Another limitation related to the small sample size was the exact number of participants. Only 8 student experiences were explored for this study. The study was marketed during a summer semester, which had fewer students on campus that would see the flyer used for advertising. A related limitation to fewer students on campus was that of those who were interested in reflecting and sharing their experience during the peak

pandemic years. Despite this, broadening the eligibility criteria for saturation was not needed. The responses throughout each interview focused on similar themes.

### **Recommendations**

This study provided insights into the learning experiences of college students during a transition into virtual learning, prompted by a global pandemic. The specific gap that my research fills is understanding how first-generation student experiences in online learning are influenced by an unanticipated transition from traditional in person learning, which was forced by the COVID pandemic. Further research may include a quantitative survey of university enrollment rates following the peak pandemic years to determine how motivated students were to continue their academic pursuit when most of their learning experience transitioned into a virtual format. University leadership and administrative personnel could be interviewed to further understand their perspective on navigating major changes in learning structures, as well as how they perceive the procedural process for supporting students.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have the potential to influence positive social change amongst academic communities. First-generation students can struggle with adjusting to the rigors of higher education, at higher rates than non-first-generation students (Michikyan et al., 2025). The traditional learning experience provides students with the opportunity to connect with their peers, the instructor, and the academic material in a multifaceted and social way (Owusu-Agyeman & Moroeroe, 2023). This experience has defined the traditional path of higher education learning for decades. Online learning

provides students with interactive ways to engage with learning materials and connect with their instructors and peers (Gonzales-Morales et al., 2025). When students transition between traditional and nontraditional learning structures, it can influence their motivation towards academic goals, anxiety in terms of mental health, and viewpoint of academic value (Kulal & Dinesh, 2025).

The current study may also provide insights to university leadership officials who hire faculty and define the academic standards for the institution. The impact the COVID pandemic had on higher education revealed areas in which training and awareness must be made for faculty (Nguyen et al., 2025). This includes educational technology, mental health services, and reflective communication. In the past few years, higher education has shifted to a more corporate-based operations model, emphasizing grant funded research over student learning experiences (Folabit & Jita, 2024). If student experiences become the primary priority, learning transitions during emergency situations could have less detrimental factors.

Participant responses indicated that university support, intrinsic motivation, and mental health were key social elements impacted during their transition experience. To be better equipped to support students, particularly first-generation students, university leadership officials could redefine the principles, aims, and goals that ground the fabric of the institution, to hire the most qualified instructors, and attract motivated students. If the focus shifts to prioritizing rigorous learning and professional development for students, there could be more resources and better transitional plans in place that can reassure students of their academic efforts. This reassurance can ease the impact made on social

factors like mental health, motivation, and value perception in their overall learning experience.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of an unanticipated learning transition among first-generation college students pursuing higher education at a 4-year school, during a global pandemic. The study addressed how social aspects of first-generation college students' learning experiences, were impacted by the ramifications of an unplanned learning transition. Students choose how they pursue their academic journey based on the experience they feel is best for themselves (Phan & Le, 2025). When emergency situations influence the control of that pursuit, it can impact students in several ways. Eight former students from the University of South Florida provided responses to interview questions about their experience during the transition from traditional in person learning to online learning, during the pandemic. The data analysis resulted in an identified theme associated with each research question, with three key themes represented across each interview. Those three themes were motivation, mental health, and the students' perceived value of academic experience.

The findings indicated that the students' motivation within online learning was negatively impacted due to the lack of social connection. Several students also expressed experiencing increased levels of anxiety and stress that influenced their participation in online courses. Responses also indicated that the unanticipated transition to online learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic, influenced how students valued their overall learning experience. Some students' motivation decreased to an extent that discouraged

their drive to complete their academic goals. Other students found innovative ways to stay engaged with their coursework, instructors, and peers, within the online environment. A conclusion drawn from these data is that ultimately, the outcome of a student's overall learning experience to some extent depends upon how the student internalizes the pressures brought forth by unexpected emergencies in learning systems. The way a student manages social factors like motivation and anxiety, can impact how they understand and resonate with academic material, and connect with instructors and peers.

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## Appendix: Interview Guide

1. How did you feel about the transition to predominantly online learning during the COVID 19 pandemic?
2. Can you describe the effect, if any, the transition had on your mental health during that time?
3. Can you describe any changes to your motivation during the transition from traditional in person learning to online learning?
4. What were your thoughts about the online learning environment and the emphasis on self-directed learning? Did you find this style of learning to be easier or more challenging, and why?
5. During the transition, how and in what ways did your university's administrative officials provide support? Did your instructors provide any additional support during the transition?
  - a. Is that true for each of the classes you can remember being enrolled in?
6. Did the transition to online learning have any effect, on how you perceived the value of your academic experience, compared to in person learning?