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A Descriptive Quantitative Exploration of College Students of Promise During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The term Students of Promise is used for students considered to have a heightened risk status, which not only has a negative effect on students but also on the higher education institutions they attend. This quantitative study explored how the COVID-19 virus has impacted student populations at various US higher education institutions and to uncover what specific issues (financial, emotional, social) impacted students during this unprecedented time in light of student categories and student demographics. This study found statistical significance in Students of Promise characteristics and presents data on the behaviors, activities, and tools necessary for success, concerns surrounding COVID-19, and opinions on higher education factors. Implications are also discussed to include a deeper understanding of Students of Promise needs, social mobility, and advising. This study shows that Students of Promise continue to need academic resources but also ways to lower stress levels and to afford college.

Keywords: COVID-19, higher education crises, students of promise

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted traditional ways of campus learning and instructional delivery. This global event disrupted the student learning model which was rooted in the historical *Oxbridge* model which relies on an

in-person or on-grounds experience. Within this model, residential undergraduate students experience rites of passage through intentional university engagement programs (Sasso & Devitis, 2015). These programs facilitate increased levels of student involvement by connecting students to their campus and with their peers to develop increased forms of social and cultural capital which promotes individual student persistence (Pulliam & Sasso, 2016). These peer connections are especially salient for many students who are characterized by stigma such as low academic performance, lower social or navigational capital, or who lack critical literacy (Blasi, 2002; Sosa et al., 2018).

Students are often academically filtered and positioned into three groups: (a) students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, (b) students who are of minority race, and (c) first-generation students (Tucker & McKnight, 2019). They are often assigned the term *at-risk* which is deficit framing noted by Harper (2010). The at-risk term can be stigmatizing and influence assumptions by peers and higher education professionals that these students are not academically ready for college. However, we center asset-based language to humanize the experiences of these undergraduates thus we use the term Students of Promise instead of at-risk in congruence with previous research (Blasi, 2002).

Extant research about Students of Promise indicates they are academic outsiders who must interface with several barriers and oppressive academic systems to persist to graduation (Price-Williams & Sasso, 2021; Pulliam & Sasso, 2016; Sasso & Phelps, 2021). Additional disruptions such as with COVID 19 and shifts to remote learning may negatively impact their persistence to graduation and place additional barriers which may lead to stop-outs (Sasso & Phelps, 2021). The disruptive effects of the COVID-19 are latent and still being examined by researchers (Wolniak & Burman, 2022).

In this study, we examined Students of Promise who were enrolled during the COVID-19 disruption to determine the pandemic's impact on their learning across the domains of behaviors or activities necessary for learning, concerns about COVID-19, and perceptions of learning formats and student supports through use of the COVID Impact on Current and Future College Students survey (CICFCS) by Fishman and Hiler (2020). The purpose of this study was to contribute to the understanding of factors associated with Students of Promise coupled with additional barriers due to a crisis like COVID-19. Our aim was to identify these salient factors to conceptualize potential solutions to mediate the effect of the COVID-19 disruption for Students of Promise.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students of Promise

The transition from high school to a university is historically challenging for Students of Promise in which academic rigor is required to become successful and becomes connected to their emotional growth (Blasi, 2002; Thomas et al., 2020). Students of Promise also tend to be considered first-generation students who are often defined as students in which neither parent has a four-year degree (Phillips et al., 2020; Pulliam & Sasso, 2016). This lack of social and cultural capital often referred to as *college knowledge* transmitted from family systems inhibits social mobility and the capacity of Students of Promise to move from a lower-class status to a higher-class status (Philips et al., 2020; Pulliam & Sasso, 2016). The unfortunate inability for some Students of Promise to merge comfortably between class systems may increase their inability to have a sense of fit with continuing-generation students (CGS). CGSs are defined as students with "one or more parents having a four-year degree" (Philips et al., 2020, p. 2). If first-generation students feel a lower sense of fit, their academic performance can also be negatively impacted (Shnabel et al., 2013).

Students of Promise also experience challenges related to academic success and endure increased academic-related stress which may perpetuate self-fulfilling prophecies drawn from and rooted in stigmatization (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Scribner et al., 2020; Tibbetts et al., 2016). Stress has been identified as a barrier to student success and Frazier et al. (2019) found a positive linear relationship to stress and poor academic performance.

Students of Promise as first-generation students associate with the negative aspect of their lower-class status and begin doubting their ability to become successful (Croizet & Claire, 1998). Additionally, Students of Promise are typically viewed from a deficit lens; meaning they fit within such "at-risk categories" and may be seen as expected to struggle because of their background instead of believing that they are capable of achieving at higher levels (Brown, 2016). These factors may contribute to first-generation students' ability to persist to graduate and have the potential to earn a higher income, access better health care, and better well-being overall (Reardon, 2011).

Student Success Barriers

College access, the ability to attend and afford college, can vary greatly by student demographic, social, and structural factors (Mwangi, 2015). Underrepresented minority groups and those lower socioeconomic

groups have historically struggled to access college (Comeaux et al., 2020; Hurtado et al., 1997; Perna et al., 2005). Students typically are more like to encounter barriers to persistence if they: (a) have made poor choices or decisions that negatively impacted their academics, (b) are adult students who return to higher education after an extended absence, or (c) students with academic or physical limitations not identified before enrolling in higher education (Horton, 2015; Pulliam & Sasso, 2016). These students are typically low-income, first-generation, and minority students and often the coupling of these social identities can exacerbate student success (Bullington et al., 2022; Tucker & McKnight, 2019).

Students of Promise may experience other system barriers which can be analyzed through interrogating power structures, oppression, and privilege lenses (Brunn-Bevel et al., 2019). These systems facilitate marginality and perpetuate inequalities for many minoritized racial and ethnic populations and are due to their and/or parents' economic status. Students from low-income families are less prepared for college than students of higher income families and are less likely to succeed in college (Roska & Kinsley, 2019).

Students of Promise often attend colleges that are underfunded and have lower graduation rates and come from similar K-12 systems with lower graduation rates (Blom & Manarrez, 2020; Ormrod, 2012; Roderick et al., 2008). Students of Promise, especially Students of Color, are more likely to have higher debt responsibilities, and lower median annual earnings compared to their White peers (Espinosa et al., 2019; Taylor & Turk, 2019). Some minority women have struggled to keep pace with White women in college completion (Guerra, 2013).

Stress, due to discrimination, also negatively impacts student success (Stevens et al., 2018). Students who feel the most discriminated are from Asian and Latinx backgrounds, however Black and Multiracial students also reported high levels (Stevens et al., 2018). LGBTQ+ students also do not academically perform well when they do not feel safe on campuses (Coulter & Rankin, 2020; Coulter et al, 2017; Hoffman et al., 2019).

COVID-19

College and university campuses were closed in 185 countries as the initial disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic (Marinoni et al., 2020). Whichever level of risk institutions of higher education deemed appropriate for their population, universities had to seek and deliver training associated with risk-reduction programs to encourage awareness and ultimately

decrease the student mortality rate (Dehdashti, 2020). Globally, institutions moved to online learning in March 2020 (Crawford et al., 2020), but by Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, institutions offered more hybrid and in-person models (Rixon et al., 2021).

Faculty members and administrators had to find ways to move traditional face-to-face classes to online environments and students had to quickly move back home and take classes online (Johnson et al., 2020; Patricia, 2020). Many issues impact student learning like the rapid transition to online/home environments, unstable internet connections, access to support (Lederer et al., 2021), professors who were not used to teaching online, loss of jobs/income (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Smalley, 2020; Son et al., 2020). Many institutions also suffered severe enrollment declines which had effects on higher education operating budgets (Wolniak & Burman, 2022).

COVID-19 also led to even further disruption for underrepresented student populations. Students of Color reported concerns on delayed time-to-graduation and were more likely to change majors than their White peers due to COVID-19 (Aucejo et al., 2020). Students of Color also reported that they did not know if they would return to their campuses (Simpson Scarborough, 2020). Black and Hispanic students were also almost six times more likely to take leaves of absence for Spring 2020 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020) over Asian and White students. Moreover, minorities, especially Blacks and Hispanics, were more likely to contract COVID-19 (Oppel et al., 2020).

COVID-19, like other pandemics, can have detrimental effects on minority populations and increase the stress put on students such as having to move back home can affect academic success or work a frontline, part-time job (Selden & Berdahl, 2020).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between perceptions of behaviors or activities necessary for learning, concerns about COVID-19, and perceptions of learning formats and student support among Students of Promise. This study used a quasi-experimental descriptive quantitative within-groups survey design to examine the subscales on the CICFCS (Fishman & Hiler, 2020).

The independent variables were (1) perceptions of learning activities or formats and (2) COVID-19 concerns. The dependent variable was

Students of Promise which was defined by Blasi (2002). This study was guided by the following research questions:

What are the perceptions of behaviors or activities necessary for learning, concerns about COVID-19, and perceptions of learning formats and student support among Students of Promise?

What is the relationship between demographic factors and behaviors or activities necessary for learning, concerns about COVID-19, and perceptions of learning formats and student support among Students of Promise?

Sample

The target population of study was full-time undergraduate Students of Promise in the United States who identified within the inclusion criteria of this study. The inclusion criteria was: (1) over 18; (2) undergraduate student status or had plans to enroll in an undergraduate-level degree program; and (3) identify with first-generation status. A random nonprobability sampling procedure was used because the sample size could not be determined because participants reserved the right to participate (Vehovar et al., 2016).

The sample (n = 181) reflected broad undergraduate demographics (see General Trends section) and national trends in higher education institutions as aforementioned within the literature review and introduction sections of this paper. Thus, the results of this study have high external validity as applied to four-year higher education institutions.

Instrumentation

This study used the COVID Impact on Current and Future College Students survey (CICFCS) by Fishman and Hiler (2020). The survey has a credibility interval of +/- 3.1% (Fishman & Hiler, 2020). The CICFCS is organized into three sections using different Likert-type scales (1-5). The first measures behaviors or activities necessary for learning. The second asks about concerns about COVID-19 including its influence on COVID conditions on their enrollment status. The third prompts participants about their perceptions of learning formats and student supports such as student loans or grants.

We also used a demographic questionnaire asking participants to self-report gender identities, age, sexual identities, geographic identity or location, education status, ethnicity, race, marital status, family size, socioeconomic and first-generation status. Each of these instruments consisted of forced-choice surveys with close-ended questions that are

limited to self-reporting. The survey was anonymous and did not collect any identifying information.

Procedure

This study was conducted during a four-month period of the COVID-19 disruption in which many campuses had limited accessibility and presented constraints in accessing the target population of the study. Therefore, for the purposes of study, survey research was used as a "means for gathering information about the characteristics, actions, or opinions of a large group of people" and an online survey was used to reach the broadest cross-sectional population (Pinsonneault & Kraemer, 1993, p. 2).

This survey was cross-sectional because it was only limited to inclusion criteria and it was shared with via social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. It was also shared with higher education administration professional groups, like Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), College Student Educators International (ACPA), and the Southern Association for College Student Affairs (SACSA). The survey was presented in Qualtrics and distributed electronically containing a link for potential participants in which they completed a standardized recruitment statement, informed consent, as well as the demographic survey and CICFCS instruments.

Data Analysis

Survey data were exported from the online survey platform into SPSS and analyzed using descriptive statistics by research question. In order to measure the difference between Students of Promise across factors of academic success, a Pearson chi-square analysis was used to analyze if there were any statistically significant differences between group means. CICFCS scores were computed using standardized scoring as outlined by Fishman and Hiler (2020).

RESULTS

General Trends Among Students of Promise

Participant demographics are reported in Table 1 and are broken down by gender, age, ethnicity, and race. Across gender identities, students self-identified as female (65%), male (22.3%), or gender non-conforming (4%). Students of Promise were mostly of non-traditional age between 20-30 (53.3%) or over 30 (20.7%). Only selected students were within the traditional undergraduate age range (14.7%). Across race and ethnicity, a small proportion identified as Hispanic (13.2%), but the majority were

diverse including other Students of Color such as Black (36.0%), Asian (4.5%), or Multiracial (8.1%).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Category	Response	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	44	22.3%
	Female	129	65.5%
	Gender Non-Conforming	8	4%
Age	Under 20	29	14.7%
	21-30	105	53.3%
	31-40	24	12.2%
	41-50	16	8.1%
	51+	4	4.4%
	Missing	15	7.6%
Ethnicity	Hispanic	26	13.2%
	Non-Hispanic	146	74.1%
	Missing	15	12.7%
Race	American Indian/Alaska Native	2	1%
	Asian	9	4.5%
	Black or African American	71	36.0%
	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2	1.0%
	White	67	34.0%
	Two or More Races	16	8.1%
	Other	4	2.0%
	Missing	26	13.1%

Participants self-reported other demographic information including geographic identity, degree status, marital status, and family size as seen in Table 2. Most were from a suburban area (56.9%), but also from urban (20.3%), and rural (14.2%). Most respondents had completed some coursework but did not have a degree (59.9%) and some completed an associate degree (22.3%). Most respondents were single (68.0%) and a small percentage were married (13.2%) or divorced (5.1%). Family size varied with 5 or more (34.9%) individuals, 3 individuals (19.3%) 4 individuals (17.8%), 2 individuals (13.2%), or a single person household (10.6%). Finally, most participants reported their income status as middle (63.5%) or low (24.9%), but a small percentage reported high (4.1%).

Table 2

Participant Socioeconomic Status

Category	Response	Frequency	Percent
Residential Area	Rural	28	14.2%
	Suburban	112	56.9%
	Urban	40	20.3%
	Missing	17	8.6%
Completed Education	Some college, but no degree	119	59.9%
	Associate degree	44	22.3%
	Bachelor's degree	14	7.1%
	Missing	15	7.6%
First-Generation Student	Yes	81	41.1%
	No	62	31.5%
	Missing	15	7.6%
Marital Status	Single	134	68.0%
	Married	26	13.2%
	Divorced	10	5.1%
	Widowed	3	1.5%
	Domestic Partnership	9	4.6%
	Missing	15	7.6%
Family Size	1	12	10.6%
	2	26	13.2%
	3	38	19.3%
	4	35	17.8%
	Between 5-10	60	34.9%
	Over 10	2	1%
Income Status	High	8	4.1%
	Middle	125	63.5%
	Low	49	24.9%
	Missing	15	7.6%

Research Question 1

Participants were asked about what was important to them to be successful in college. Overwhelmingly, students listed all categories as being extremely important, followed by highly important, as shown in Table 3. Getting proper instruction from instructors or professors was highly rated (94.77%), staying motivated to learn (95.88% extremely important or very important), having enough resources to pay for school (94.77% extremely important or very important), being able to easily ask questions and interact with instructors/professors (84.89% extremely important or very important), having a quiet place to focus (74.27% extremely important or very important), access to a stable, high-speed internet connection (96.52% extremely important or very important), access to student support services

(71.01% extremely important or very important), high quality learning materials (72,78% extremely important or very important), and being able to take care of children while pursuing education (79.27% extremely important or very important).

Table 3

Behaviors, Activities, and Tools Necessary for Success

Category	Extremely Important		Very Important		Moderately Important		Slightly Important		Not at All Important		Total
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
Getting proper instruction from instructors or professors	128	74.42%	35	20.35%	5	2.91%	2	1.16%	2	1.16%	172
Staying motivated to learn	125	73.53%	38	22.35%	5	2.94%	2	1.18%	2	0.00%	170
Having enough resources to pay for school	143	83.14%	20	11.63%	6	3.49%	3	1.74%	3	0.00%	172
Being able to easily ask questions and interact with your instructor or professor	104	60.47%	42	24.42%	23	13.37%	3	1.74%	3	0.00%	172
Having a quiet place to focus	85	49.71%	42	24.56%	31	18.13%	7	4.09%	7	3.51%	171
Having access to a stable, high-speed internet connection	140	81.40%	26	15.12%	5	2.91%	1	0.58%	1	0.00%	172
Having access to student support services	79	46.75%	41	24.26%	30	17.75%	16	9.47%	16	1.78%	169
Having access to high-quality learning materials	84	49.70%	39	23.08%	33	19.53%	9	5.33%	9	2.37%	169
Taking care of children while pursuing your education	56	68.29%	9	10.98%	4	4.88%	6	7.32%	6	8.54%	82

We also examined stressors that could affect student success (Table 4). Again, every category was ranked extremely important or very important by most respondents. The categories were: mental health (82.56%), friends and family catching COVID-19 (67.64%), keeping their current job (65.11%), helping their children navigate distance learning while working or going to school themselves (65.75%), getting a job after graduation (80.73%), catching COVID and spreading it to others (69.59%), being able

to purchase necessities to survive (66.87%), being able to pay tuition (71.43%), and being able to pay for non-education related bills in the next year (77.16%).

Finally, we examined participants' opinions on factors that surrounded higher education (Table 5). Again, most respondents rated the factors very favorably or favorably. The categories were higher education institution, college and university faculty, college and university staff and administrators, in-class learning, online learning, hybrid learning, their institution's response to the pandemic, student grants, and student loans.

Table 4

Concerns Surrounding the COVID-19 Virus

Category	Extremely Important		Very Important		Moderately Important		Slightly Important		Not at All Important		Total
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
My mental health	105	61.05 %	37	21.51 %	24	13.95%	4	2.33 %	2	1.16 %	172
My friends and family catching COVID	95	55.88 %	20	11.76 %	34	20.00%	14	8.24 %	7	4.12 %	170
Keeping my current job	64	49.61 %	20	15.50 %	13	10.08%	13	10.08 %	19	14.73%	129
Having to help with distance learning for my children while I work or go to school	40	54.79 %	8	10.96 %	12	16.44%	5	6.85 %	8	10.96%	73
Getting any type of job once I graduate	110	66.27 %	24	14.46 %	21	12.65%	7	4.22 %	4	2.41 %	166
Catching COVID and spreading it to others	105	61.40 %	14	8.19%	29	16.96%	14	8.19 %	9	5.26 %	171
Being able to purchase necessities like food and housing in the next few weeks to a month	86	52.76 %	23	14.11 %	22	13.50%	11	6.75 %	21	12.88%	163
Being able to pay my upcoming tuition bill	91	56.52 %	24	14.91 %	20	12.42%	12	7.45 %	14	8.70 %	161
Being able to pay my non-education related bills in the next year	102	62.96 %	23	14.20 %	26	16.05%	5	3.09 %	6	3.70 %	162

Research Question Two

A Pearson chi-square analysis was conducted for each of the factors in Tables 3-5 to explore potential significant differences in relation to data from the demographic questionnaire. Statistical significance was found for the following variables in the following demographics of gender identities, age, sexual identities, geographic identity or location, education status, ethnicity, race, marital status, family size, socioeconomic status, and first-generation status.

Table 5

Opinions on Higher Education Factors

	Very Favorably		Favorably		Unfavorably		Very Unfavorably		Total
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	
Your higher education institution	59	36.20%	89	54.60%	13	7.98%	2	1.23%	163
College and university faculty	56	34.36%	89	54.60%	16	9.82%	2	1.23%	163
College and university staff and administrators	50	31.25%	90	56.25%	18	11.25%	2	1.25%	160
In-class learning	57	42.22%	40	29.63%	21	15.56%	17	12.59%	135
Online learning	60	35.93%	58	34.73%					
Hybrid learning	37	25.00%	71	47.97%	24	16.22%	16	10.81%	148
Your higher education institution's response to COVID	49	31.01%	78	49.37%	22	13.92%	9	5.70%	158
Student grants	83	61.03%	35	25.74%	10	7.35%	8	5.88%	158
Student loans	46	32.39%	42	29.58%	26	18.31%	28	19.72%	152

For gender, the relationship was found to be statistically significant for getting proper instruction from instructors or professors, x^2 (15, N = 172) = 36.685, p = 0.01; being able to easily ask questions and interact with their instructor or professor, x^2 (20, N = 104) = 31.893, p = 0.44; staying motivated to learn, x^2 (15, N = 125) = 35.685, p = 0.001; having a quiet place to focus, x^2 (20, N = 85) = 31.893, p = 0.044; having access to high-quality learning materials, x^2 (20, N = 84) = 32.276, p = 0.003); their friends and family catching COVID-19, x^2 (16, N = 95) = 59.697, p = 0.000; catching COVID-19 and spreading it to others, x^2 (16, N = 105) = 56.396, p = 0.000; and being able to pay for non-education related expenses in the next year, x^2 (15, N = 102) = 27.279, p = 0.050.

For age, the relationship was found to be statistically significant for having access to student support services, x^2 (16, N = 143) = 27.461, p = 0.037; mental health, x^2 (16, N = 105) = 26.764, p = 0.044; catching COVID-19 and spreading it to others, x^2 (16, N = 105) = 27.764, p = 0.015; and getting any type of job once the student graduates, x^2 (16, N = 110) = 27.057, p = 0.041.

For sexual identity, the relationship was found to be statistically significant for having access to high-quality learning materials, x^2 (20, N = 84) = 32.276, p = 0.030; friends and family catching COVID-19, x^2 (16, N = 95) = 59.697, p = 0.000; catching COVID-19 and spreading it to others, x^2 (16, N = 105) = 53.396, p = 0.000; being able to purchase necessities like

food and housing in the next few weeks to a month, x^2 (4, N = 86) = 12.325, p = 0.015; and being able to pay for non-education related bills in the next year, x^2 (16, N = 91) = 26.279, p = 0.050.

For geographic identity, the only relationship found to be statistically significant was getting proper instruction from instructors or professors, x^2 (8, N = 128) = 16.363, p = 0.037. For education level, the relationship was found to be statistically significant for staying motivated to learn, x_2 (12, N = 125) = 23.984, p = 0.020; having access to a stable, high-speed internet connection, x^2 (12, N = 140) = 29.671, p = 0.003; taking care of children while pursuing their education, x^2 (16, N = 56) = 52.176, p = 0.000; likelihood to re-enroll in current school for upcoming academic year, x^2 (16, N = 172) = 38.864, p = 0.001; and needing more time to complete their college education than originally anticipated due to COVID-19, x^2 (16, N = 168) = 28, 075, p = 0.031.

For race, the relationship was found to be statistically significant for staying motivated to learn, x^2 (21 N = 125) = 55.192, p = 0.000; having access to a stable, high-speed internet connection, x^2 (21, N = 140) = 44.453, p = 0.002; taking care of children while pursuing their education, x^2 (28, N = 56) = 45.993, p = 0.017; mental health, x^2 (28, N = 105) = 43.124, p = 0.034; COVID-19's effect on the desire to enroll in college, x^2 (28, N = 168) = 51,153 p = 0.005; and needing more time to complete their college education than originally anticipated due to COVID-19, x^2 (28, N = 168) = 48.866, p = 0.009. For ethnicity, the relationship was found to be statistically significant for having access to a stable, high-speed internet connection, x^2 (6, N = 140) = 12.812, p = 0.046; being able to purchase necessities like food and housing in the next few weeks to a month, x^2 (8, N = 86) = 19.732, p = 0.011; the likelihood to re-enroll in current school for upcoming academic year, x^2 (27, N = 172) = 39.721, p = 0.042; and viewing student loans as favorable or unfavorable, x^2 (6, N = 142) = 13.193, p = 0.040.

For first-generation students, the relationship was found to be statistically significant for being able to pay upcoming tuition bills, x^2 (12, N = 91) = 28.906, p = 0.004; the extent to which COVID-19 plays a role in their decision to go back to college, x^2 (9, N = 168) = 17.782, p = 0.038; viewing their higher education institution's response to COVID-19 favorably or unfavorably, x^2 (9, N = 163) = 16.989, p = 0.049; viewing their college and university faculty favorably or unfavorably, x^2 (9 N = 163) = 17.490, p = 0.042.

For family size, the relationship was found to be statistically significant for being able to easily ask questions and interact with instructors

or professors, x^2 (45, N = 104) = 61.627, p = 0.050; having access to high-quality learning materials, x^2 (60, N = 84) = 79.569, p = 0.046; their friends and family catching COVID-19, x^2 (60, N = 95) = 86.240, p = 0.015; catching COVID-19 and spreading it to others, x^2 (60, N = 105) = 90.977, p = 0.006; getting any type of job once they graduate, x^2 (60, N = 110) = 95.198, p = 0.003; their likelihood of re-enrolling in their current school for the upcoming academic year, x^2 (60, N = 172) = 89.647, p = 0.008.

For socioeconomic status, the relationship was found to be statistically significant for having enough resources to pay for school, x^2 (6, N = 143) = 16.051, p = 0.013; having a quiet place to focus, x^2 (8, N = 85) = 16.695, p = 0.033; keeping their current job, x^2 (8, N = 64) = 15.720, p = 0.047; getting any type of job once they graduate, x^2 (8, N = 110) = 16.148, p = 0.040; being able to pay non-education related bills in the next year, x^2 (8, N = 102) = 17.729, p = 0.023; being able to pay their upcoming tuition bill, x^2 (8, N = 91) = 18.916, p = 0.015; being able to purchase necessities like food and housing in the next few weeks to a month, x^2 (8, N = 86) = 20.617, p = 0.008; the extent to which COVID-19 is playing a role in their decision to go back to college, x^2 (8, N = 168) = 20.617, p = 0.008; their likelihood to want to enroll in college because of COVID-19, x^2 (8, N = 172) = 19.368, p = 0.013; needing more time to complete their college education than originally anticipated due to COVID-19, x^2 (8, N = 168) = 23.130, p = 0.003; viewing their higher education institution's response to COVID-19 favorably or unfavorably, x^2 (6, N = 163) = 12.950, p = 0.044; viewing student grants favorably or unfavorably, x^2 (8, N = 136) = 32.255, p = 0.000.

For marital status, the relationship was found to be statistically significant for catching COVID-19 and spreading it to others, x^2 (16, N = 105) = 31.311, p = 0.012; to the extent COVID-19 is playing a role in their decision to go back to college, x^2 (12, N = 172) = 28.684, p = 0.004; their likelihood of re-enrolling in their current school for the upcoming academic year, x^2 (16, N = 172) = 27.926, p = 0.032; viewing their college and university faculty favorably or unfavorably, x^2 (12, N = 163) = 22.981, p = 0.028; their opinion that their institution is delivering an online experience that sets them up for success, x^2 (8, N = 163) = 18.069, p = 0.021.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

The findings from this study suggest Students of Promise encounter significant academic stress. Stress levels can be attributed to finding ways to pay for college, the COVID-19 pandemic, and academic issues. These findings are also in line with research about Students of Promise. We found

statistical significance for at-risk student characteristics for gender (Guerra, 2013); sexual identity (Coulter & Rankin, 2020; Coulter et al., 2017); first generation status (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Croizet & Claire, 1998; Shnabel et al., 2013; Tibbetts et al., 2016), socioeconomic status (Philips et al., 2010; Roska & Kinsley, 2019; Taylor & Turk, 2019), and racial and minority status (Blom & Manarrez, 2020; Espinosa et al., 2019; Stevens et al., 2018; Taylor & Turk, 2019).

There are several implications for practice that can be gleaned from the findings of this study. Practitioners, policymakers, and researchers need to be aware of the needs of Students of Promise to encourage and support their persistence towards graduation during extended learning disruptions such as during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. This study highlights the importance of understanding Students of Promise, particularly during a crisis like COVID-19.

It is vital for higher education institutions to understand the needs of their students, particularly for students at risk of not graduating (Reardon, 2011). Their concerns about the COVID-19 disruption and perceptions of learning are highlighted in this study. Thus, practitioners should be aware of the barriers and stressors identified in this study in order to provide support that will help students overcome some of these barriers.

Finding ways to increase social mobility of students, programs focused on financial literacy and academic success skills should center Students of Promise to address the success gaps elucidated from this study (Pulliam & Sasso, 2016). However, practitioners must understand the needs of students on their campuses by surveying them and assessing their differential needs (Wolniak & Burman, 2022). Adding professional development for faculty, administrators, and staff on how to provide solutions to barriers could help institutions develop increased capacity to support students (Pulliam & Sasso, 2016). Additional approaches should also integrate technology to engage with Students of Promise.

Generation-Z, Millennials, as well as post-traditional Students of Promise felt disconnected during the COVID-19 pandemic and institutions struggled to respond. Practices such as proactive advising should be used with Students of Promise (Dobrinich Johns et al., 2017). Due to aspects of interpersonal communication and relationship development, academic advising has traditionally been provided in person; however, in recent years, it has become more prevalent in the online learning environment and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bouchey et al., 2021; Habley et al. 2012; Steele, 2016). Advisors can discover new ways to meet students' communication requirements and expectations as online learning has

developed and entered new areas (Pasquini & Steele, 2016). This can allow higher education and academic advisors to investigate both synchronous and asynchronous routes of delivery because of the development and integration of technology (Sasso & Phelps, 2021). Applying various technical tools has increased the prospects for asynchronous or *cloud advising* to become more efficacious (Leonard, 2008).

For example, individualized asynchronous advising through recorded video is not intended to replace conventional face-to-face advising sessions; rather, the asynchronous technique, or *cloud advising,* has the ability to suit the advising requirements of various student groups (Phelps, 2019; Sasso & Phelps, 2021). Simply, practitioners and professionals in higher education must promote effective practices and strategies for communicating with Students of Promise (Price-Williams & Sasso, 2021). Approaches to universal design in academic advising and higher education pedagogy promote inclusive settings and personalized learning methodologies such as cloud advising (Phelps, 2019).

Limitations

There are limitations of both the internal and external validity of this study. Self-report instruments were used in this study, and we only examined undergraduate students who intended to pursue undergraduate studies which were important due to the timing of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was only open for four months and we used random sampling to find participants through social media advertising and through higher education professional groups which may have led to sampling bias. There was no differentiation between learning formats, including distance learners, transfer, and *on-grounds* students or between residential and commuter students.

The generalizability of this study might be limited, given the sample size. The findings of this study are not causal and are only exploratory and correlational using primarily descriptive data. This study is not predictive, and its findings cannot claim which perceptual factors influence student persistence during the COVID-19 disruption. Future research should explore the differential impact of this pandemic disruption across the most invisible student communities within existing marginalized economic or social systems.

Future Studies

Researchers need to continue to explore barriers experienced by Students of Promise and disseminate findings through applied research and

evaluation. Additionally, qualitative research on the effects of COVID-19 on student populations is also warranted as we lack nuanced understandings about the differential impact across marginalized identities and Students of Promise. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected how students learn and the rapid move to online-only instruction has highlighted increased educational and learning disparities that have a latent effect on incoming and current students. More research across identities and classifications could also help develop targeted support initiatives for Students of Promise to engage them during another disruption like COVID-19.

CONCLUSION

Students of Promise continue to be a population that needs extra attention in postsecondary education. Often viewed from a deficit lens, these students face increased barriers and may be at heightened risk for academic success and graduation. However, continuing to address and research the needs of Students of Promise can help remove some of the obstacles that they encounter in college and university.

This study centered on Students of Promise enrolled during the COVID-19 pandemic and examined their needs based on learning, student support, and concern on the effects of COVID-19. Students of Promise were faced with additional barriers because of COVID-19 thus it is important to understand how additional obstacles may have affected their academic progress. The research questions focused on the behaviors, activities, and tools needed for success, as well as concerns surrounding COVID-19, and the importance of higher education factors such as learning media and paying for college. The findings are in line with other studies on Students of Promise, particularly with regard to gender, sexual identity, as well as first generation, socioeconomic, and racial and minority status. Finding more ways to connect with and engage Students of Promise to help remove potential academic and personal barriers to education is important and we hope this study advances understanding of this important population in higher education.

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