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Keywords

first-generation students, generation-blindness, COVID-19, highly selective universities, generational identity, college websites

Disciplines

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Abstract

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Introduction

Universities typically leverage their websites to promote distinct institutional and student population characteristics in an effort to remain competitive among prospective students (Ihme & Stumer, 2017; Meyers & Jones, 2011; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014). The use of U.S. higher education websites as public messaging platforms to *current* students has scarcely been explored in the literature. Further, the use of university websites as communication outlets to students during a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is an under-researched yet potentially illuminating practice. Such analysis can provide a window into how universities address the issues that their students face during periods of flux and uncertainty. This is particularly important when considering students who are underrepresented and on the margins at these institutions, such as first-generation students. As institutions strive to demonstrate that they are champions of social inclusion, it is appropriate to hold them accountable for how they use public messaging to address the unique challenges first-generation students face in times of crisis (Brint, 2019).

The institutional use of dedicated websites to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic provides a case study in how universities communicate to first-generation students and address the issues most salient to these students in periods of uncertainty. An analysis of these websites is particularly useful for exploring how *highly selective* universities regard first-generation students and the challenges these students face, related to the pandemic. It has been well-documented that first-generation students often struggle to feel like they belong at universities that are highly selective, whether these institutions are labeled as "elite," or "predominantly white institutions" (Aries, 2008; Jack, 2019; Landers, 2019; Lee, 2016; Mullen, 2012). First-generation students often feel a significant divide from their continuing-generation peers at these institutions, most of whom are White and come from families in the top 20% of U.S. income (Chetty, 2017; The New York Times, 2017). Additionally, the campus experience at highly selective universities can be dehumanizing for first-generation students, partly due to the need to obtain hidden knowledge to efficiently navigate these institutions; academic and social differences between first-generation and continuing generation students; and phenomena that negatively affect the psyche of first-generation students such as microaggressions and stereotype threat (Jack, 2019; Landers, 2019). As such, highly selective universities must intentionally take steps to create an environment where first-generation students feel welcome and fully human – especially in the midst of uncertain circumstances such as the transition to remote learning at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Highly selective universities had an opportunity to use their dedicated COVID-19 websites to affirm the first-generation student identity, while demonstrating their awareness of the challenges that the pandemic caused these students. Blankstein, Frederick, and Wolff-Eisenberg (2020) found that institutional webpages devoted to providing COVID-19-related information were effective forms of communication to keep students informed on policy updates. However, for these pages to be helpful for first-generation students in particular, it is likely that any messaging directed to these students would need to be clearly distinguishable from the rest of the information on each page. For example, Hodge, Wilkerson and Stanislaus (2020) found that while metropolitan higher education institutions provide ample information for first-generation students on their websites, this information was often challenging for these students to locate. Bearing this in mind, highly selective universities could anticipate that first-generation students may visit the COVID-19 websites for information relevant to their circumstances, and in turn these websites needed to be prominent fixtures for first-generation students to successfully obtain that information.

The imperative for highly selective universities to use their COVID-19 websites to address first-generation student issues was exacerbated by the actual impact of the pandemic, which had a disproportionate effect on the health, mortality, finances, and job security of people of color and low-income families (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; COVID Track Project, 2020; Karpman, Gonzalez, & Kenney, 2020; Saenz & Sparks, 2020). A higher percentage of first-generation students come from these backgrounds than continuing-generation students, thus institutional regard for first-generation students during the transition to remote learning took on a compounded meaning (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2020; Redford and Hoyer, 2017). While analyzing the COVID-19 websites of highly selective institutions does not give us a full picture of how these institutions supported first-generation students at the onset of the pandemic, it does provide a window into how much generational identity and the compounding issues that faced these students was covered in the language on these pivotal webpages.

This study analyzes the COVID-19 websites of 24 highly selective institutions for inclusion of the first-generation identity and coverage of issues that these students faced at the onset of the pandemic. Inversely, this study measures whether highly selective universities took a *generation-blind* approach – that is, one that does not consider the first-generation or continuing-generation status of students – to communicate through these websites. The findings have implications for practice and policy at highly selective universities. Regarding practice, the study provides an expanded understanding of how highly selective universities use their websites to address currently enrolled first-

generation students and the issues they face – particularly during a time of crisis and disruption. Such findings may reveal whether the rhetoric used on these websites is inclusive of first-generation students or if it is generation-blind, which would necessitate that these institutions reflect on their communication strategies to ensure greater inclusion of these students. Regarding policy, the findings may reveal discrepancies between the challenges first-generation students actually faced at the onset of the pandemic and the challenges that highly selective universities *felt compelled to address* on these COVID-19 websites. The existence of discrepancies between the information provided on COVID-19 websites and the challenges experienced by first-generation students would not necessarily imply that institutions fell short in supporting first-generation students. However, such discrepancies may reveal areas of policy that institutions should reexamine to ensure that first-generation students feel fully supported.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of generation-blindness is imperative to emphasize how highly selective universities systemically overlook concerns pertinent to the historically marginalized first-generation student population. As there is not an established literature on generation-blindness, I rely on two related concepts to build its meaning: color-blindness as racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2012) and marginality & mattering (Schlossberg, 1989).

Color-Blindness as Racism

Color blindness pertains to the choice of individuals to not consider race in their perspectives of another person's circumstances, and the belief that "race-based differences should not be taken into account when decisions are made, impressions are formed, and behaviors are enacted" (Apfelbaum et al., 2012, p. 206). Bonilla-Silva (2012) contends that this is inherently racist and perpetuates systemic racism by not acknowledging the inequalities and inequities that people of color consistently face – noting that this stems from a "new racism" that "tends to be slippery, institutional, and apparently nonracial" and explains racial disparities by blaming "market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and cultural deficiencies" (p. 134). Color blindness propagates the erasure of race in the absence of truly overt racism, yet is an ideology that ends up stripping away the impact that the construct of race has had on a person's livelihood (Bonilla-Silva, 2012).

Relatedly, a generation-blind approach undervalues the impact that generational identity has on the livelihood of first-generation students. If highly selective universities used a generation-blind

approach on their COVID-19 websites to communicate to students and families, they used language to mobilize their students with the conviction that generational identity should not be at the forefront of that mobilization. In idealistically grouping first-generation students with continuing-generation students, universities would propagate the erasure of generational-identity and in turn the complexities that directly impact these students' ability to respond to the pandemic.

Marginality and Mattering

Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering entails that "people who are in transition often feel marginal and that they do not matter" (p. 6). Schlossberg (1989) notes that people in these transitions repeatedly ask themselves, "do I belong in this place?" (p. 7). The COVID-19 pandemic caused students to undergo a rapid transition from the typical routine of college life to the practice of consistent social distancing and remote learning. According to Schlossberg's (1989) theory, that initial transition period was a necessary time for higher education institutions to reaffirm to all students that they matter and still belong to the institution. Considering that first-generation students face challenges in feeling like they belong at highly selective universities, these institutions had the opportunity and perhaps imperative to counter this sentiment by using their COVID-19 websites to reaffirm the first-generation identity and acknowledge the distinct issues affecting these students.

Schlossberg (1989) argued that there are four factors that influence whether someone feels like they matter: 1) *attention* (the feeling of being noticed by others); 2) *importance* (the feeling that others care about that person); 3) *ego-extension* (the feeling that other people will be happy for that person's successes, and saddened if that person fails); and 4) *dependence* (the feeling that others rely on that person). Universities could have affirmed first-generation students under these four factors by using their COVID-19 websites to address these students and the issues they faced at the onset of the pandemic. First, it would communicate that the university is paying attention to first generation students (*attention*); second, it would demonstrate that the university recognizes the importance of the first-generation student identity and the unique challenges this student population faces (*importance*); third, it would show that the university is invested in the success of first-generation students in spite of the pandemic (*ego-extension*); and finally it would show that the success of first-generation students is integral to the university successfully addressing the pandemic (*dependence*). Website language that does not acknowledge generational identity or the issues first-generation students face does not give institutions the opportunity to affirm their first-generation students within these four factors (Schlossberg, 1989).

Generation-Blindness as a Concept

Related to the complexities of color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2012) and marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989), the concept of generation-blindness raises awareness of potentially detrimental systemic omission of the historically marginalized first-generation student population. A generation-blind approach ignores (either purposefully or unintentionally) generational identity in lieu of an implicit generational norm; one that tilts in favor of the dominant populations in universities who typically categorize the continuing-generation student population. Such a devaluation of the first-generation identity does not align with the increased attention and support highly selective universities have given to first-generation students in recent years. Rather, it aligns more – even if covertly – with the exclusion first-generation students have historically faced from these institutions (Baum et al., 2017; Stevens, 2007). Considering that first-generation students may already feel that they do not belong at these institutions, a disregard for their generational identity may add to – or concretize – those sentiments (Aries, 2008; Jack, 2019; Landers, 2019; Lee, 2016; Mullen, 2012).

Bearing this in mind, it is critical to analyze the COVID-19 websites as a case of how highly selective universities acknowledge first-generation students and address the issues these students face in times of uncertainty. I will now relay my research questions and the study partaken to explore this case.

Research Questions

This study looks at two specific pages, when available, on the COVID-19 websites of 24 highly selective universities: the landing page (the "home page" of the COVID-19 website) and the first page listed under "Undergraduate Students" (or an equivalent label) that can be accessed from the landing page. While there is insight that can be gained from analyzing every page within these COVID-19 websites, it is likely that an undergraduate student – if they were to visit these websites – would have at least looked at either the landing page or undergraduate student page for public messages relevant to their circumstances at the onset of the pandemic.

The questions for this study are as follows:

Q1. Did highly selective universities directly communicate to first-generation students on their COVID-19 website landing and primary "undergraduate students" pages?

Q2. Did highly selective universities address the issues that first-generation students faced at the onset of the pandemic on their COVID-19 website landing and primary "undergraduate students" pages?

Analytic Sample

For the analytic sample of COVID-19 websites, I include U.S. four-year universities with acceptance rates of <20% in the 2017/18 academic year (n=24).[1] The final list of universities can be found in **Table 1**. The study operationalizes these institutions as *highly selective*, since they are among the most selective four-year universities in the U.S. It is important to note that a lower acceptance rate, or more exclusivity, does not mean that an institution is better for first-generation students (or any student) than universities with higher acceptance rates (or less exclusivity).

Methods

Qualitative Content Analysis of Student Newspaper Articles

A crucial dataset needed for this analysis includes concerns expressed and challenges faced by first-generation students during the onset of the pandemic and transition to remote learning. While qualitative interviews can provide indispensable voice in this regard, there is a timely value in analyzing this topic through first-generation student accounts and testimony in the student newspapers of the highly selective universities. Student newspapers provide a forum for students to quickly voice their misgivings with an institution in a public and sometimes anonymous manner (American Association of University Professors, 2016). Thus, I conducted keyword searches on the websites of these student newspapers for COVID-19-related articles (not including opinion articles) that contained the keywords "first-generation" or "first-generation students" within the date range of March 16-April 30, 2020. All 24 of the institutions had a student newspaper; 13 of the newspapers produced results that included the keywords within that date range, resulting in a total of 26 articles for the analysis.

Through qualitative content analysis via Atlas.ti Cloud software, I determined themes (which I label as *concerns*) in these articles that referred to COVID-19-related challenges detailed by first-generation students or others explicitly on their behalf (such as a peer or the writer of the article). White and Marsh (2006) describe content analysis as a "flexible research method" that can be qualitative, quantitative and mixed (pp. 22-23). Qualitative content analysis allows researchers to examine articles like interview transcripts; using "careful, iterative reading" to identify themes, patterns and concepts (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 33). A qualitative content analysis involves an inductive

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[1] This is based on 2017-18 admissions rates for each institution as publicized via Google search as of May 2020. Utilizing the rates that are on a global search engine reflects the rates that individuals may see when they start an initial search on a university. Google has since updated search results to the 2019 admissions rates, which would add 5 more institutions to the list. However, the list of highly selective universities remains relatively stable over time; thus, I chose to keep the original analysis of the 24 institutions, as they represent 83% of the institutions that would have been included if I went by the 2019 admissions rates.

process that is influenced by a humanistic (or subjective-leaning) perspective as opposed to a positivist (or absolute) perspective (White & Marsh, 2006). Thus, this method seemed most appropriate for examining text to develop the list of first-generation student concerns. There may be other issues that first-generation students faced at the onset of the pandemic that were *not* reported to student newspapers, and thus would not have been included in this study.

The final list in **Table 2** includes 23 first-generation student concerns amidst the onset of the pandemic and transition to remote learning**.** It is important to note that after the first round of coding, I disregarded a *Personal Health - Physical* code. This concern was mentioned once in the student news articles, but exceedingly overrepresented on the COVID-19 websites (see "Eliminating the Personal Health - Physical Code" section).

Quantitative Content Analysis of COVID-19 Landing and Undergraduate Student pages

While the qualitative content analysis for this study developed themes for the list of first-generation student concerns, I used quantitative content analysis to examine the frequency that these concerns were alluded to on the COVID-19 websites of highly selective universities. A quantitative content analysis differs from a qualitative content analysis in that it is positivist, deductive, and used to test hypotheses (White & Marsh, 2006). Accordingly, this method produces statistics that can give further insight into an analytic sample (in this case, the highly selective universities). As quantitative content analysis is primarily descriptive and most useful for understanding a snapshot of phenomena, this was an appropriate method for determining how language was used on the COVID-19 websites to address the concerns of first-generation students.

To gather a set of web pages for the quantitative content analysis, I saved the landing page of the COVID-19 websites of each of the 24 highly selective institutions dating May 7 or May 8, 2020. I also saved the primary undergraduate student page of these COVID-19 websites, if they could be accessed through a clearly descriptive hyperlink on the landing page. There were 17 primary undergraduate student pages, which combined with the 24 landing pages provided a total of 41 webpages for the quantitative content analysis.

I decided to collect these pages dating a week past the timeframe of the student news articles (March 16-April 30) to theoretically allow time for the institutions to respond to concerns that were publicly expressed in the articles. I found it important to capture the COVID-19 pages *before* institutions developed their reopening plans for the Fall 2020 semester, to maximize the level of uncertainty that could be analyzed (under the argument that as universities gained more experience

with the pandemic and received more informed public health guidance, the uncertainty incrementally decreased – although it did not go away entirely). Relating back to Schlossberg (1989), I argue that these periods of uncertainty are when first-generation students are the most vulnerable, and highly selective universities should attempt to be most aware of these vulnerabilities.

If a concern was addressed in some way on the 41 webpages of the COVID-19 websites, I counted it as a *mention*. I considered language on these sites as a mention if a) the concern was literally mentioned; b) a subject closely related to the concern was addressed; or c) a hyperlink related to the concern was included on the page or on a menu that only appeared on the COVID-19 webpages (not on the larger university web template, which typically housed the COVID-19 webpages).

It is important to bear in mind that universities may have used other web platforms to address the concerns of first-generation students (such as a website solely dedicated to first-generation students) or that they may have supported students in ways deemed too sensitive to put on a public website. Also, since the COVID-19 websites were updated by the institutions frequently at the onset of the pandemic, it is possible that these institutions addressed the concerns of first-generation students shortly after the dates that I collected webpages for the analysis. Yet, capturing a snapshot of how highly selective universities constructed their COVID-19 websites contributes to a much-needed understanding of the regard these institutions gave to the first-generation student identity during a highly uncertain period of flux.

Eliminating a "Personal Health - Physical" Code

Personal Health - Physical was one of the concerns found in the first round of the qualitative content analysis, but it only emerged one time. This does not mean that physical health was not a concern for first-generation students in general; rather, it exhibited that the student articles did not focus on this particular concern. Also, it may indicate that highly selective universities did a thorough job communicating about this topic to their students, consequently mitigating the need for first-generation students to express the concern in the student newspapers. This seems plausible; the first round of the quantitative content analysis revealed that *Personal Health - Physical* was addressed on the COVID-19 webpages 182 times. The plurality of how personal physical health was addressed on the COVID-19 websites was to be expected, since these websites were designed to relay information related to a public health crisis. The 182 times that this concern emerged in the initial analysis was more than three times any other concern. Given these factors, it was determined that inclusion of this concern would heavily skew any statistical analysis and weaken the usefulness of the findings. Thus,

this code was disregarded in the subsequent rounds of analysis (two more for the qualitative content analysis and one more for the quantitative content analysis). **Table 3** gives a final breakdown of the qualitative and quantitative content analyses, given the elimination of the *Personal Health - Physical* code.

Results

Mentions of "First-Generation Students" (Research Question 1)

The term "first-generation students" or anything related was only mentioned once across the 41 webpages: a link to information about the First-Generation/Low-Income Office on Stanford University's undergraduate student COVID-19 webpage. This means that 23 of the 24 institutions did not directly mention first-generation students on their COVID-19 landing page or undergraduate student page. This suggests that highly selective universities approached the construction of these webpages to some degree in a generation-blind manner. This also means that even if the institutions actually addressed the 23 concerns of first-generation students covered in the student newspaper articles, there is no telling if these concerns were mentioned in support of first-generation students in particular. A motivation for this study is that these COVID-19 webpages were established as major public-facing communication mechanisms for universities during the pandemic, and highly selective universities had the opportunity to use these websites to affirm the first-generation student identity. However, nearly all of the highly selective universities in this study chose to do otherwise.

Comparison of First-Generation Student Concerns vs. COVID-19 Website Mentions (Research Question 2)

Although first-generation students were almost never directly addressed, it is still necessary to see if the highly selective universities addressed the 23 concerns expressed in the student news articles. If the concerns were addressed by the universities, then at least the potential exists for first-generation students to get information and messaging regarding their particular areas of need. **Figure 1** details the concerns and the number of times they appeared in the student newspapers. Instances where students expressed a financially-related personal concern (*Finance-Related)* were the most frequent, followed by concerns about balancing the complexities of the first-generation identity in the new "normal" of social distancing and remote learning (*Navigating Identity),* being left behind or forgotten by the university (*Inclusion)*, and the problems their families were going through due to the pandemic (*Family Struggles)*.

Figure 2 details how often these concerns were mentioned on the COVID-19 website landing and undergraduate pages. *University Messaging and Outreach* was covered extensively by the universities

(110 times total), with *Sense of Community* and *Finance-Related* mentions coming in second and third. Conversely, *Navigating Identity* and *Students Supporting Family* were mentioned the least.

The relative ranking of first-generation student concerns expressed and the COVID-19 website mentions of those concerns (**Table 4**) divides the concerns into three categories based on their frequency. Since there are 23 concerns, the split is defined as follows: top 8 = HIGHEST; middle 7 = MID; bottom 8 = LOWEST. Doing this allows for a comparison of how universities prioritized addressing the concerns to how much those concerns were mentioned in the student news articles (**Table 5**). While the institutions prioritized six of the concerns at a level comparable to how much these concerns were expressed in the student news articles, they underprioritized three concerns (*Inclusion, Student Job Loss and Professional Uncertainty,* and *Who Helps? Who Volunteers?*) and severely underprioritized four concerns, all of which are ranked at the "Highest" concern level (*Family Struggles, Home as Learning Environment, Navigating Identity* and *Student Supporting Family*). The institutions overprioritized eight concerns and highly overprioritized two concerns. It is less clear if this is problematic; it may indicate that first-generation students did not need to express these concerns because the institutions were already overly addressing them.

Discussion

Highly selective universities almost never directly addressed first-generation students on the landing page and undergraduate student pages of their COVID-19 websites. Only one institution, Stanford University, used language that referred to first-generation students. These institutions also underprioritized addressing nearly a third of the concerns that first-generation students had, severely underprioritizing four of the most salient concerns of these students: navigating their identity under the new circumstances, the struggles their families faced due to the pandemic, the impetus and responsibility they felt to support their family, and the difficulty in leveraging their homes as learning environments. Thus, although these institutions addressed six of the concerns at a comparable rate, and overprioritized to some degree 10 other concerns, their decisions not to acknowledge generation-identity and their limited coverage of the issues that most concerned first-generation students produced products (the COVID-19 websites) characterized by generation-blindness.

Conclusion

One response of highly selective universities to the COVID-19 pandemic was to publish websites that addressed community concerns directly related to the public health crisis. The content of these websites provide insight into what the universities thought were a priority to address on these pages. Since these are highly visible public-facing artifacts, and the onset of the pandemic forced universities to rely on online mechanisms to communicate with their students, these websites served as major points of reference for the students of these institutions regarding the institutions' responses to the pandemic (Blankstein & Frederick, 2020).

Highly selective universities had an opportunity to affirm the first-generation identity and address the issues facing these students on their COVID-19 websites. Considering, amongst other factors, the uncertainty involved with the transition to remote learning; the compounding effects of the pandemic on populations most likely to be first-generation students; the pre-existing feelings of non-belonging that first-generation students face at highly selective universities; the danger of undervaluing the impact that generational identity has on first-generation students; and how students on the margins of institutions are vulnerable to feeling like they do not matter, affirming the first-generation identity may have been a useful counter to the dynamics that lead to these students feeling like they do not belong at highly selective universities (Schlossberg, 1989).

This study found that highly selective universities, except for one, did not directly address first-generation students on their COVID-19 websites, and underprioritized addressing seven key concerns that these students faced at the onset of the pandemic and transition to remote learning. A critical finding of this study is that four of these concerns were *severely* underprioritized, ranking among the most frequently expressed concerns in the student news articles; however, these student concerns were the least addressed on the COVID-19 websites. These findings indicate a level of generation-blindness that permeated the construction of these websites.

The findings also demonstrate that even as highly selective universities make progress in admitting and supporting first-generation students, they must continuously a) evaluate whether they are acknowledging the first-generation identity; and b) reflect on their understanding of the complex lives of students from these backgrounds. Such introspection is especially necessary during times of crisis and disruption, where first-generation students need to be reaffirmed that they matter to the institutions (Schlossberg, 1989). The fact that first-generation students were rarely addressed on the COVID-19 websites, and that their concerns related to home, family, and identity were severely underprioritized, suggests a disconnect between highly selective institutions and important personal

aspects of first-generation students. While higher education has been marketed and packaged as a time for students to experience a new chapter in their lives away from home to develop into young adults, institutions must re-evaluate whether such an approach works for all of their students, or whether it perpetuates the well-documented environment where first-generation students feel like they don't belong.

Implications for Practice

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed many social imbalances in our society, and may have exposed ways that highly selective universities fall short in championing the first-generation identity. Highly selective universities must evaluate whether their website rhetoric promotes a generationally homogenous student body, and if it has caught up to their increased desire to enroll and accept first-generation students. In doing so, however, they must be in tune with the ever-present challenges these students face – not just the ones that have been extensively covered by academic literature so far. Future discussions in highly selective university communications must evaluate whether their language, rhetoric and web content is actually inclusive of first-generation students. This may require institutions to connect with their first-generation students and alumni and learn more about how university websites and communication can be most useful to them.

Policy discussions in highly selective universities must consider the impact that generation-blind approaches to decision-making may have on their first-generation student population. The level of generation-blindness on the COVID-19 websites could be considered detrimental towards supporting the specific needs of first-generation students, given that several of their highest concerns were underprioritized on these websites. It is possible that generation-blindness radiates beyond these websites and throughout campus messaging, discussion, and policy. As we see in this study, a generation-blind approach increases the risk that universities will miss the mark in supporting the same first-generation students for whom they have increased access to their institutions.

Finally, highly selective universities must evaluate the relationship between themselves and key personal aspects of these students lives – their home and family. It is evident that the institutions in the study did not prioritize mentioning home and family issues on these COVID-19 websites. While it does not mean that the universities did not address these issues through other online or offline mechanisms, it remains clear that they did not address them on their major public-facing artifact for pandemic-related communication. Highly selective universities should evaluate why these personal issues were not a priority to address on these websites, determine whether this is a replication of a

larger dynamic (or problem) at the institution, and swiftly take action to ensure that such issues are sufficiently prioritized in the future.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: U.S. four-year institutions with <20% acceptance rate, 2017-18

Institution	Acceptance Rate, 2017-18
Stanford	4.7%
Harvard	5.2%
Princeton	6.4%
Columbia	6.6%
Yale	6.9%
MIT	7.2%
Cal Tech	7.7%
Brown	8.5%
University of Chicago	8.7%
Northwestern	9.2%
Penn	9.3%
Duke	9.9%
Dartmouth	10.4%
Vanderbilt	10.9%
Johns Hopkins	12.5%
Cornell	12.7%
Tufts	14.9%
Georgetown	15.7%
Rice	15.9%
Washington University in St. Louis	16%
USC	16%
UCLA	16.1%
UC Berkeley	17.1%
Notre Dame	18.9%

Table 2. First Generation Student Concerns Mentioned in Student News Articles of Selective Institutions

Concern/Issue	Related to:
Academic Ability / Accommodations	the students' concern about their ability to perform well academically despite the circumstances, and whether the institutions would make appropriate academic accommodations to support them
Access to Resources	access to campus resources physically or through virtual means
Commencement	the cancellation of senior commencement ceremonies
Family Struggles	challenges that families of the first-generation students faced due to the pandemic, such as job loss or health issues
Finance-Related	the students' ability to afford their daily means, along with expenses related to their college education
Food Security	issues of students having access to food
Grades/GPA	academic grades and GPA issues, such as pass/fail policies
Home as Learning Environment	challenges students faced in utilizing their homes as learning environments for their remote courses
Housing	concerns regarding on-campus or off-campus housing, including uncertain housing circumstances caused by the pandemic
Inclusion	feeling left behind or forgotten by the institution as a group
Internet Access	challenges students faced in having stable internet access for their remote courses
Long-term Effects	the impact the pandemic would have on students beyond graduation
Navigating Identity	concerns of how to navigate the complexities of being a first-generation student under the circumstances brought on by the pandemic
Personal Health - Mental	maintaining personal mental health amidst the pandemic
Possessions	whether students would have access to their physical possessions
Quality of Instruction	the quality of the courses in a virtual environment, especially in comparison to the perceived quality of those courses in a face-to-face environment
Sense of Community	whether students felt like they belonged to the greater university
Student Job Loss and Professional Uncertainty	first-generation students losing work or internship opportunities due to the pandemic
Student Supporting Family	students needing to support their family members, such as through earning income, filling out forms, or taking care of younger family members
Transportation Home	costs associated with the logistics of traveling back home
University Messaging and Outreach	how the university reached out with messages (and the language used in those messages) regarding the institution's pandemic-related responses
Unsafe Home Environment	concerns of violence or abuse of some sort at home
Who Helps? Who Volunteers?	the ambiguity of who should help first-generation students navigate the disruption caused by the pandemic

Table 3: Final statistics of the analyzed data

Student News Articles (Qualitative Content Analysis)	COVID-19 Landing and Student Pages (Quantitative Content Analysis)
26 Articles 13 of the 24 institutions represented 23 concerns 196 total instances of the 23 concerns within the 26 articles	41 webpages (24 landing and 17 undergraduate student-focused) - All 24 institutions represented at least once 763 mentions of the 23 concerns within the 41 webpages

Figure 1: First-generation student COVID-19 concerns expressed in student news articles, May 16-April 30, 2020

First generation student COVID-19 concerns
expressed in the student news articles
of highly selective universities,
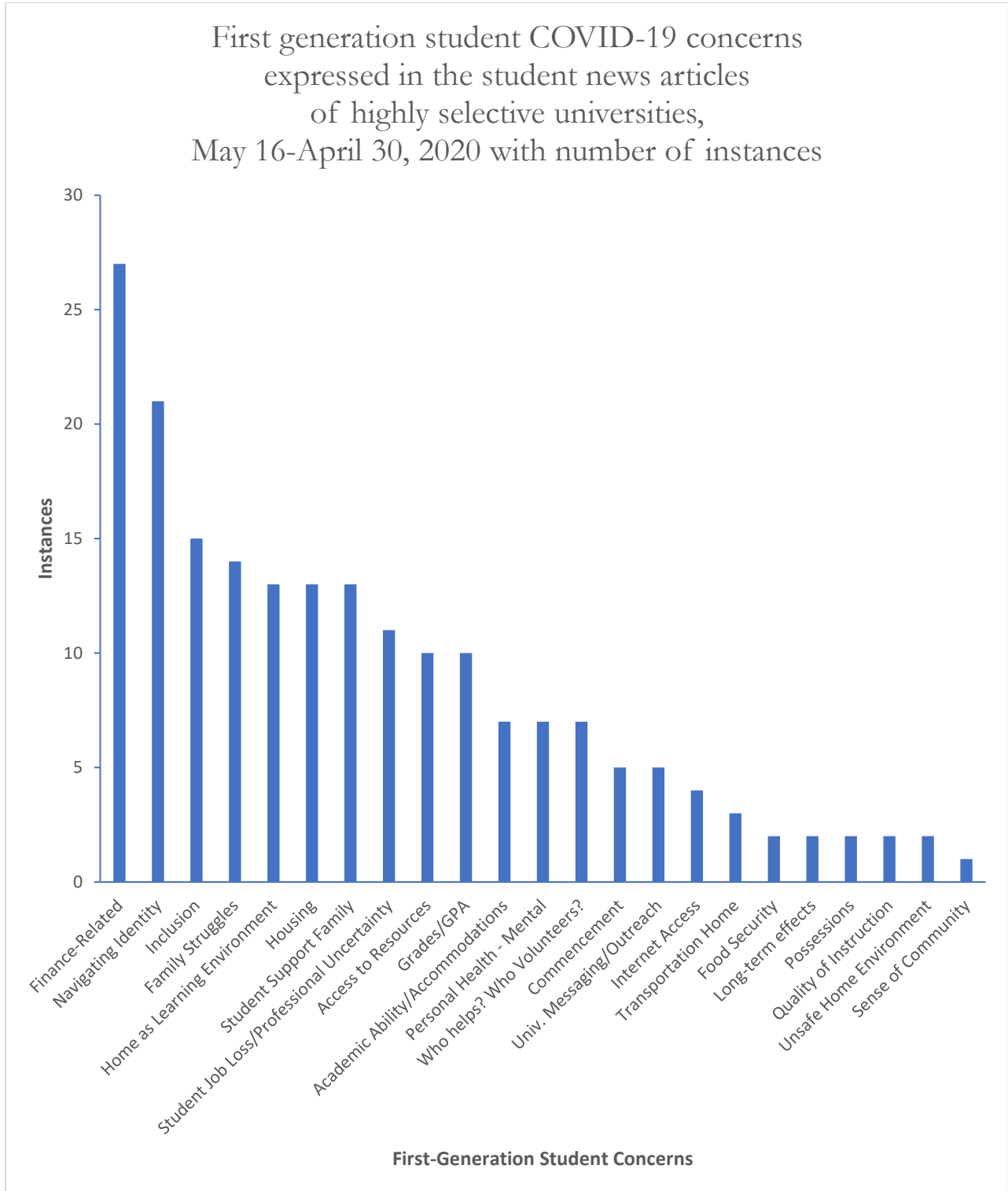May 16-April 30, 2020 with number of instances

First-Generation Student Concerns

Figure 2: Frequency that first-generation student COVID-19 concerns were mentioned on COVID-19 websites of highly selective universities

Number of times first-generation student COVID-19 concerns mentioned on the COVID-19 websites (landing page and undergraduate student page) of highly selective universities
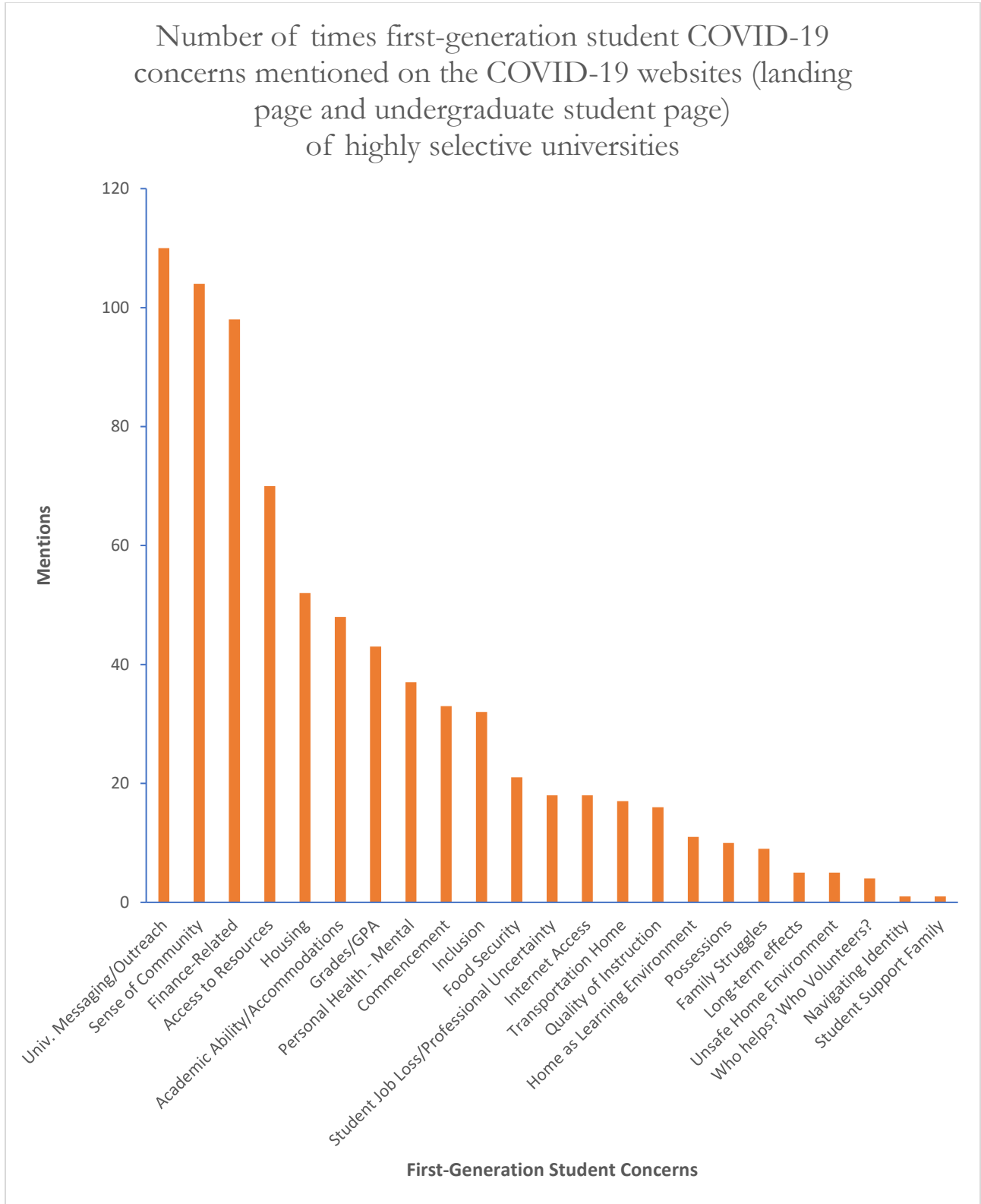
Table 4: Relative ranking of the instances of first-generation student concerns and the mentions of those concerns on highly selective university COVID-19 websites[2]

Number of times concerns expressed by or on behalf of first-generation students			Number of times concerns mentioned on COVID-19 Landing and Undergraduate Student Pages		
Concern	**# of times**	**Relative Rank**	**Concern**	**# of mentions**	**Relative Rank**
Finance-Related	27	Highest	Univ. Messaging/Outreach	110	Highest
Navigating Identity	21	Highest	Sense of Community	104	Highest
Inclusion	15	Highest	Finance-Related	98	Highest
Family Struggles	14	Highest	Access to Resources	70	Highest
Home as Learning Environment	13	Highest	Housing	52	Highest
Housing	13	Highest	Academic Ability/Accommodations	48	Highest
Student Supporting Family	13	Highest	Grades/GPA	43	Highest
Student Job Loss/Professional Uncertainty	11	Highest	Personal Health - Mental	37	Highest
Access to Resources	10	Mid	Commencement	33	Mid
Grades/GPA	10	Mid	Inclusion	32	Mid
Academic Ability/Accommodations	7	Mid	Food Security	21	Mid
Personal Health – Mental	7	Mid	Student Job Loss/Professional Uncertainty	18	Mid
Who helps? Who Volunteers?	7	Mid	Internet Access	18	Mid
Commencement	5	Mid	Transportation Home	17	Mid
Univ. Messaging/Outreach	5	Mid	Quality of Instruction	16	Mid
Internet Access	4	Lowest	Home as Learning Environment	11	Lowest
Transportation Home	3	Lowest	Possessions	10	Lowest
Food Security	2	Lowest	Family Struggles	9	Lowest
Long-term Effects	2	Lowest	Long-term Effects	5	Lowest
Possessions	2	Lowest	Unsafe Home Environment	5	Lowest
Quality of Instruction	2	Lowest	Who helps? Who Volunteers?	4	Lowest
Unsafe Home Environment	2	Lowest	Navigating Identity	1	Lowest
Sense of Community	1	Lowest	Student Supporting Family	1	Lowest

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[2] Rank split for each: Top 8 = Highest; Middle 7 = Mid; Bottom 8 = Lowest

Table 5: Priority coverage level of first-generation students concerns on highly selective institutions' COVID-19 websites[3]

University mention level compared to student concern level	Concern	Students concern level	University mention level
Severely underprioritized	Family Struggles	Highest	Lowest
Severely underprioritized	Home as Learning Environment	Highest	Lowest
Severely underprioritized	Navigating Identity	Highest	Lowest
Severely underprioritized	Student Supporting Family	Highest	Lowest
Underprioritized	Inclusion	Highest	Mid
Underprioritized	Student Job Loss and Professional Uncertainty	Highest	Mid
Underprioritized	Who helps? Who Volunteers?	Mid	Lowest
Match	Commencement	Mid	Mid
Match	Finance-Related	Highest	Highest
Match	Housing	Highest	Highest
Match	Long-term Effects	Lowest	Lowest
Match	Possessions	Lowest	Lowest
Match	Unsafe Home Environment	Lowest	Lowest
Overprioritized	Academic Ability/Accommodations	Mid	Highest
Overprioritized	Access to Resources	Mid	Highest
Overprioritized	Food Security	Lowest	Mid
Overprioritized	Grades/GPA	Mid	Highest
Overprioritized	Internet Access	Lowest	Mid
Overprioritized	Personal Health - Mental	Mid	Highest
Overprioritized	Quality of Instruction	Lowest	Mid
Overprioritized	Transportation Home	Lowest	Mid
Highly overprioritized	Sense of Community	Lowest	Highest
Highly overprioritized	University Messaging and Outreach	Mid	Highest

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[3] Key: If concern level and mention level are the same (i.e. Mid-Mid) then labeled as "Match." If mention level is one rank higher than concern level (i.e. Mid-Highest) then "Overprioritized." If mention level is two ranks higher than concern level (i.e. Low-Highest) then "Highly Overprioritized." If mention level is one rank lower than concern level (i.e. Mid-Low) then "Underprioritized." If mention level is two ranks lower than concern level (i.e. High-Low) then "Severely Underprioritized."