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Exploring Student Decisions at Various Stages of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Exploring Student Decisions at Various Stages of the Covid-19 Pandemic

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how students who began college in the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 explain and reflect on their decisions about college. These decisions included students' choice of school, living situations, courses, co-curricular involvement, and working part- or full-time during college. Exploring students' decisions about college before and during different phases of the Covid-19 pandemic deepens higher education professionals' understanding of how students make decisions during this important time of transition. This deeper understanding allows college administrators, faculty, and staff to better understand if and how the pandemic impacted students' decisions about college. Many individuals in education assume that it did, but it is important to do research to determine if the data validates the assumptions. The results of this study provide new information that can benefit college administrators, faculty, and staff in determining the choices they offer to college students and developing in- and out-of-classroom experiences for future students.

Dedication

To my parents, who have sacrificed much and worked diligently to give me the opportunities that led me to this moment. Not a fraction of this degree would be possible without them.

Acknowledgements

My pursuit and achievement of this degree would not be possible without the unwavering support, patience, and love of my husband. Thank you for keeping me well-fed and well-loved before, throughout, and beyond this degree.

To the family I have been blessed with and the family I have chosen for myself. I love you all dearly.

To my supportive colleagues and supervisors. The kind of encouragement I received in the pursuit of this degree is not normal for student affairs professionals who earn doctorates while working full-time, but it should be. Thank you for being an example for the profession. Finally, and most importantly, a deeply special acknowledgement to my dear, sweet, kind, and incredibly smart mother. Your encouragement and unwavering faith in me, more than anything else, has gotten me to this moment.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Table   Page

Chapter 1: Introduction

The aim of this study was to understand how students who began college in the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 explained and reflected on their decisions about college. This study was conducted at a four-year regional public comprehensive university in the Upper Midwest. The literature review addresses the first-year experience of college students, the unique complexities and nuances of the adolescent brain, important decisions that students make about college, and emerging research related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the Covid-19 pandemic was relatively recent at the time of this study, there was minimal research about students' decision-making before, during, and after the pandemic. This institutional-level study focused on students who began college in the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 to explore how students explained and reflected on decisions about college before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of this study, students who started college in the fall of 2018 were seniors, those who started in the fall of 2019 were juniors, those who started college in the fall of 2020 were sophomores, and those who started in the fall of 2021 were first-year students. While this study paid particular attention to decisions made related to starting college, it was important to also consider decisions made related to staying in college. The results are of interest to college administrators, faculty, and staff as they determine the choices they offer to college students and develop in- and out-of-classroom experiences for future students.

Background of the Study

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic spread throughout the world and people's lives. The world will see the lasting effects of the pandemic for many years to come (Deloitte Development LLC, 2020). Zdziarski II et al. (2007) defined a crisis as "an event, which is often sudden or unexpected, that disrupts the normal operations of the institution or its educational mission and

threatens the well-being of personnel, property, financial resources and/or reputation of the institution" (p. 27-28). Based on this definition, one can certainly make the argument that Covid-19 was a crisis. In this type of situation, people may have struggled in new ways and with different questions. Priorities and perspectives had the potential to shift as elements of the Covid-19 pandemic impacted different aspects of people's lives. This research project sought to explore if and how these shifts manifested themselves in students' decisions about college.

Focusing on students' decisions about college was important for this study because starting college is a time of substantial transition for students. In that way, transitioning into college during the Covid-19 pandemic had the potential to be a powerful and impactful turning point in their lives, with decisions having both short- and long-term effects. During times of transition, people often need support from other individuals. Azmitia et al. (2013) suggested that support from family and friends is impactful when a young adult is establishing their identity during this extremely important transition period. It can be challenging for a young person to move away from home and take care of themselves in a different way. This is not a time when young people should feel isolated or alone. However, most college students feel lonely, depressed, isolated, or a combination of all three at times during their first year of college (Wei et al., 2005). Conley et al.'s (2014) longitudinal study examined students' psychosocial adjustment during their first year of college and found that "the immediate transition is characterized by steep declines in psychological well-being, cognitive-affective strengths, and social well-being as well as increases in psychological distress and cognitive-affective vulnerabilities" that may not resolve themselves by the year's end (p. 195). A student's mental health, physical health, friend group, and academic ability can be dramatically affected by their

transition into college. Research found that college students need to be supported and encouraged in a variety of ways throughout this time of transition (Arnett & Fowler, 2000; Cambridge-Williams et al., 2013; Conley et al., 2014; Green et al., 2019) For some students, this support may come from back home. Indeed, parents play a key role in the level at which a student can handle this transition, and the decisions that come with it, on their own (Greene et al., 2019). For others, it may be a living-learning community or a course focused on transition, both of which have been proven to retain and graduate students (Cambridge-Williams et al., 2013). However the support develops, it is essential and positively impactful during the college transition period.

Times of transition are particularly challenging for any individual, and people make numerous decisions when they are experiencing a substantial life transition. Multiple researchers have conducted studies and developed theories related to the college student transition (Arnett & Fowler, 2000; Cambridge-Williams et al., 2013; Conley et al., 2014; Erikson, 1980; Green et al., 2019; Schlossberg, 2008) and identity development (Chickering, 1969; Erikson, 1980; Kohlberg, 1981; Phinney, 1990; Cross, 1991; Fassinger, 1998; Bilodeau, 2005; Torres et al., 2009; Kim, 2012). This time is characterized by some form of upheaval that may include moving away from home, leaving a lot of friends, deciding an academic major, and living with a relative stranger, just to name a few (Conley et al., 2014). At the same time, pressure may come from outside sources, such as parents or friends, or from oneself. This might include pressure to pursue a certain career, to achieve a certain GPA, to be well-liked among one's floormates, or even just to enjoy the college experience. Students might make decisions about numerous aspects of their lives, such as creating or embracing their unique identity/identities, joining clubs, engaging in rigorous coursework, and making new friends. Experiencing a time of transition within the

context of a global pandemic provided the opportunity for more decisions, complex decisions, and potentially an entirely different college experience. However, there was also the possibility that students were making decisions about college in very similar ways that they did prior to the pandemic.

I analyzed the results of this study using Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice and Tierney & Venegas' (2009) cultural-ecological model. While Perna's (2006) model provided a valuable framework, Tierney & Venegas' (2009) challenge of contexts that drive students' access to financial aid provided an important perspective. Given the increased conversations around college affordability in recent decades, I thought it was important to include a conceptual framework that emphasized finances as they relate to higher education access. Furthermore, it was important to include a framework related to finances as I explored if and how finances impacted participants' decisions in light of the pandemic.

Problem Statement

The World Health Organization defines an adolescent as anyone between the ages of 12 and 19 (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). This age range is often when individuals transition into some type of postsecondary education. They need to make decisions at a point in their life at which the pre-frontal cortex, the section of the brain where logical decision-making, rational thinking, and self-awareness occurs, is not fully developed (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Domenech & Koechlin, 2015). Complete development of the pre-frontal cortex occurs around age 25 (Fetterman et al., 2020). When students transition into college, they make a lot of decisions (Conley et al., 2014). Some of those decisions involve risk assessment (Paternoster & Pogarsky, 2009). There is a substantial amount of research related to adolescent decision-making and criminal behavior, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 2 (Reyna & Farley, 2006; Timmer et al.,

2020; Paternoster & Pogarsky, 2009). The ways in which the fields of criminal justice and sociology have studied adolescent decision-making and used their findings to make more informed decisions of how to serve and work with delinquent youth are helpful when applied to a higher education context.

The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated a different kind of risk that was unlike anything early adults have experienced since perhaps WWII and the Vietnam War (Thelin, 2019). It is important for higher education faculty, staff, and administration to know more about if and how the pandemic disrupted students' transition into college and impacted decision-making. Although there may never be another global pandemic during my lifetime, students experience crises in numerous ways, ranging from family issues to personal struggles to medical diagnoses. I intended for this study to provide valuable information for people who work in higher education to better serve students during collective and individual times of crisis.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how students who began college in the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 explain and reflect on their decisions about college. These decisions included students' choice of school, living situations, courses, co-curricular involvement, and working part- or full-time during college. By studying students who began college in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021, I sought to explore the experiences of students who began college with no impact of the pandemic (2018-2019), some impact of the pandemic (2019-2020), complete impact of the pandemic (2020-2021), and continued impact of the pandemic (2021-2022). By engaging these four groups of students, I hoped to explore whether and how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted students' decisions about college.

Significance of the Study

Exploring students' decisions about college before and during different phases of the Covid-19 pandemic deepens higher education professionals' understanding how students make decisions during this important time of transition. This deeper understanding allows college administrators, faculty, and staff to better understand if and how the pandemic impacted students' decisions about college. Many individuals in education assume that it did, but it is important to do research to determine if the data validates the assumptions. The results of this study provide new information that can benefit college administrators, faculty, and staff in determining the choices they offer to college students and developing in- and out-of-classroom experiences for future students.

Overview of Methodology

I used narrative inquiry methodology for this project. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) developed narrative inquiry as a model for reflection and experience among teachers. John Dewey's (1938) work provides a foundation for the narrative inquiry methodology, specifically his work on experiential learning and reflection (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin & Connelly (2000) defined narrative inquiry as "a way of understanding experience" (p. 20). Bhattacharya (2017) described narrative inquiry as "a framework that helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the participants' recounting of their experiences" and "the study of these stories, storied lives, and how participants come to understand their own story through retelling and interpreting their experiences" (p. 93). Narrative inquiry methodology aligned with my research question.

I used a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C), which allowed me to ask questions of participants while also leaving room to shift the conversation based on participants'

unique perspectives (Bhattacharya, 2017). The semi-structured format allowed me to ask questions that elicited stories of key experiences from participants and provided me with data necessary to discuss participants' experiences in a more holistic way (Jones et al., 2014). It allowed me to guide participants as necessary while also providing the freedom to let the participants tell their stories as they wished (Jones et al., 2014). The semi-structured interview protocol allowed for participants to reflect on their own experiences and engage in storytelling.

In order to analyze these interviews, I employed in vivo coding, which "uses words or short phrases from the participant's own language in the data record as codes" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 65). In vivo coding helps to preserve and honor the participant's voice, which is important when dealing with the narratives of meaningful life experiences. I also utilized emotion coding, since the experiences described occurred during a highly emotional time for the participants. Emotion coding can also provide insights into "participants' perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 67). Sometimes the participant named the emotion and other times I inferred it based on the language the participant used. After completing both rounds of coding, I identified patterns among the codes. These patterns allowed me to determine categories and themes of the codes (Miles et al., 2020). From these themes, I determined the findings of the study and implications of those findings.

Research Question

The research question for this study was: How do students who started college in the fall of 18, 19, 20, and 21 explain and reflect on their decisions about college?

Objectives and Outcomes

The objective of this study was to understand how students who started college in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 explain and reflect on their decisions about college. An outcome of this

study was more knowledge as to whether the Covid-19 pandemic affected students' decisions about college and if so, how. This knowledge informs higher education administrators, faculty, and staff in determining the choices they offer to college students and developing in- and out-of-classroom experiences for future students.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study related to the participants. There were only eight participants interviewed for this study. I intended to interview students who began college in the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. No one who started college in the fall of 2021 answered my calls for participation. They are a group that is missing from this project and its findings. All the participants who I interviewed were majoring in a prescriptive discipline and/or a pre-professional track. I did not have any participants who were liberal arts students. In terms of demographics, I only had one participant of color and one student who identified as male. Everyone else was a white, female-identifying individual. Finally, all the participants of this study came from the same institution. Due to the demographic characteristics of the participants, caution is warranted in interpreting the results. More research is necessary to expand this research to a more diverse and larger group of participants, ideally at various types of institutions.

Researcher Propositions

Throughout this research, I assumed that participants made intentional decisions about college. I also assumed that recruiting from programs and offices that serve diverse students would yield a diverse group of participants. In general, I assumed that students from historically excluded populations approached decisions about college differently than students from

historically privileged populations. Furthermore, I assumed that participants will be honest and open in their interviews with me.

Key Terms

First-year experience: The collective occurrences during a student's first year of college that make up the transition from high school to college

Transition: A key turning point in a person's life

Pandemic: A disease that spreads across several countries and affects a large number of people

Decision: A conclusion, resolution, or course of action that one determines after consideration

Co-curricular: An activity pursued in addition to the standard course of study

Hybrid: A course offered partially in person and online

Asynchronous course: One where no meetings, assignments, or tests occur at the same time for every student

Synchronous course: One that may be conducted in a hybrid or completely online format but students meet and take tests at the same time

Organization of the Dissertation

In this chapter, I introduced my research project and outlined the background of this study, the statement of the problem, and the purpose and significance of the study. I also provided an overview of the methodology and articulated my research question. Finally, I discussed objectives and outcomes, limitations, delimitations, assumptions, and key terms. In Chapter Two, I provide a detailed literature review and discussion of the theoretical framework.

Chapter Three presents the methodology for this study and includes the research design and

plans for specific data collection and analysis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter begins with the first-year experience of college students, during which section I focus on four key aspects of the first-year experience: the presence of independence/autonomy, sense of belonging, academic preparation & subsequent success, and managing conflict. Next, I address the unique complexities and nuances of the adolescent brain from a biological, psychological, and mental health perspective. Then, I explore decision-making among adolescents by focusing on four important decisions students make about college: the choice of which university to attend, the choice of living situation, the choice of which classes to take, and the choice of which co-curricular activities to attend. Finally, I discuss emerging research related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Lastly, I cover Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice because it is the theoretical framework I use for this study. I also discuss Tierney & Venegas' (2009) cultural-ecological model, which informed my study.

First Year Experience

The first year of college is an extremely important time in every student's life. In addition to the first year of college, students may experience many other "firsts" – their first time living away from home, their first time negotiating a roommate, their first time doing laundry, their first time having to study for a test, their first time meeting with an academic advisor, etc. Students might also experience a lot of feelings for the first time – they may be lonely or unsure of their major; they may struggle to make friends and find co-curricular activities they enjoy; they may have conflicts with their professors and be unsure how to handle them. This short list of "firsts" is only the tip of the iceberg for the types of circumstances students may experience during their first year of college. Because of the importance of this time, there is an extensive amount of

research on the first year of college, covering a wide array of elements and aspects of the student experience.

Higher education researchers are interested in the first-year student experience because we want students to do well in college and, just like anything else in life, we can use the beginning of an experience to consider how the rest of that experience will turn out. When someone runs a marathon, they know whether or not it's going to be a good finish within the first five miles. Pacing, hydration, nutrition, weather, how the body feels, mindset, and more are all factors that play into the overall well-being of the runner and the result of the race. Likewise, higher education researchers try to examine the first-year experience of students in depth to determine things like retention to the second year and beyond, satisfactory academic progress, sense of belonging at the institution, persistence toward a timely graduation, and more. Bowman (2010) examined how students' experiences in the first year affected their psychological well-being (PWB). Experiences such as interacting with diverse populations, participating in co-curricular activities, and being challenged in the classroom resulted in an increase in PWB. On the other hand, experiences such as drinking alcohol or circumstances such as being a first-generation college student resulted in a decrease in PWB. PWB is an important measure because it demonstrates how well a student is adjusting to college on personal, interpersonal, cognitive, emotional, and social levels.

Once we have a sense of how students are adjusting to college, we can determine interventions to ameliorate their pain points and continue to improve what is already going well for them. Krumrei-Mancuso et al. (2013) demonstrated how we can use psychosocial factors in the first year to predict student success, with "success" being defined quantitatively as GPA.

Their study found that academic self-efficacy and organization and attention to study were predictive of first-semester GPA. Psychosocial variables such as stress and time management, involvement with college activity, and emotional satisfaction with academics were predictive of college students' life satisfaction. These variables and their predictive outcomes are important to understand so that we can intervene when and where appropriate in order to help students have a positive overall first-year experience.

The first-year college experience is challenging to study because students come to college with all kinds of different life experiences. In that regard, no two students experience their first year in exactly the same way. Certain populations of students, particularly those who have been historically excluded from higher education, face more of an uphill battle within their first year of college. For example, Bowman (2010) indicated that one of the demographic predictors of PWB was being a first-generation college student. Padgett et al. (2012) showed that first-generation college students are at an academic disadvantage in terms of their attitude toward literacy and a psychosocial disadvantage in terms of estimating diversity and well-being. Padgett et al.'s (2012) study is important because it shows that certain groups of students have unique needs and our interventions for first-year college students cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach.

As demonstrated here, there are numerous elements and aspects of the first-year experience that I could focus on within this literature review. However, for the purposes of this study, I focus on four key elements of the first year experience that are applicable to my research question: the presence of independence/autonomy, sense of belonging, academic preparation & subsequent success, and managing conflict.

Independence & Autonomy

When students begin college, there is a new element of independence and autonomy in their lives. That independence and autonomy may look different for each student. For some, they will have independence in their academics because their overbearing parents will not have access to their grades without their permission. For others, they will have autonomy over their time in a way that they never have because they are no longer responsible for caring for younger siblings. Many students might find this independence and autonomy exciting while others may find it overwhelming and frightening.

On a developmental level, there is much research related to adolescence. We know that students at this stage of development are experiencing a level of identity development vs. role confusion (Erikson, 1980). They are also moving through a development of conventional morality (Kohlberg, 1981). They are having experiences and observing others in experiences to develop their own level of self-efficacy, their belief in their ability to be successful and accomplish goals (Bandura, 1997). More recently, researchers have expanded these theories. Baxter-Magolda's (2008) theory of self-authorship is helpful to understand how the presence of independence/autonomy affects first-year students' experience.

The three elements of self-authorship are trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments. Through interviews with participants Baxter Magolda et al. (2012) demonstrated that the decrease in authority – which could also be termed an increase in independence / autonomy – results in students exhibiting an increase in their internal voice. When students' external influences and internal voices conflict with each other, they have to learn how to cultivate, listen to, and ultimately trust their internal voice (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Students learn this over time, through different academic, social, and emotional

experiences. When students experience "firsts" during their first-year of college, there is a lot of room for growth and development.

While students need to develop and utilize their internal voice related to very complex matters, such as choosing a major and making friends, there are also seemingly simple things that require a level of self-authorship. Through longitudinal interviews with students Ding (2017) demonstrated that students may struggle with having autonomy in taking care of themselves, establishing structure, and setting goals and planning. It is also difficult for some students to have so much time alone, to cope when things become challenging, or to discipline themselves to complete homework. In all of these circumstances, students need to learn how to make decisions about their next steps, large and small, without having to ask anyone else for guidance every single time.

It should be noted, however, that having a strong attachment to one's parents is not always a bad thing. While we can certainly make the argument that having overbearing – commonly termed "helicopter" (Kouros et al., 2016) – parents can be very counterproductive for students, we must also acknowledge that research demonstrates that having a positive relationship with authority figures such as one's parents enables students to feel more comfortable asking for help. Holt (2014) showed that higher levels of parent attachment predicted more favorable attitudes about academic help-seeking. When students are struggling in their courses, a positive view of authority – such as a professor – helps students feel less shame or embarrassment at asking for assistance or guidance. In turn, this leads to a greater level of academic adjustment, including level of participation, motivation, and effectiveness in coursework.

Sense of Belonging

Another element of the first-year experience that can strongly impact a student's adjustment to college is the concept of sense of belonging. Sense of belonging is the psychological feeling of belonging or connectedness to a social, spatial, cultural, professional, or other type of group or a community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Researchers have demonstrated that having a sense of belonging within and outside of the classroom can impact a student's degree of academic achievement and whether or not they remain in college (Strayhorn, 2012). On some level, it makes sense that the more people feel like they belong, the more successful they will be in that particular environment. Not only does it make sense, but it is also proven in the literature. Friedlander et al.'s (2007) study demonstrated that increased social support from friends predicted improved adjustment from fall semester to spring semester. Furthermore, increased global, academic, and social self-esteem predicted decreased depression and increased academic and social adjustment. When students feel like they belong on campus, they will do better academically and overall in college.

While a sense of belonging is important for all students, it is especially important for students from historically excluded populations. For example, Museus & Chang's (2021) study demonstrated that for first-generation students, "greater common ground, relevant learning opportunities, and collectivist orientations in the campus environment are linked indirectly to increased sense of belonging through their increases in students' sense of validation" (p. 371). Circumstances and experiences that increase students' sense of validation and, by association, belonging occur both within and outside of the classroom. This is important for higher education faculty and staff to consider when creating experiences that can help students make the college transition more effectively.

One type of learning experience that can aid in the college transition and help students establish a sense of belonging on campus is high-impact practices (HIPs). HIPs include experiences such as learning communities, first-year seminars, undergraduate research, internships, and e-portfolios (Kuh, 2008). They may happen within or outside of the classroom. Regardless of the form they take, they all have certain key characteristics: high levels of performance expectations, student investment of time and effort over an extended period of time, interactions with faculty and peers, experiences with diversity, frequent and constructive feedback, periodic and structured opportunities for reflection, real-world application of learning, and public demonstration of competence (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). Based on these characteristics, involvement in HIPs would very likely lead to increased social support, common ground, relevant learning opportunities, and a collectivist mindset, which in turn result in a stronger sense of belonging and greater adjustment to college (Friedlander, 2007; Museus & Chang, 2021).

Research specifically focused on high impact practices proves this to be a valid and reliable connection. In Ribera et al.'s (2017) study, participating in service-learning, belonging to a learning community, or serving as a leader in a campus organization – all of which are HIPs – resulted in a greater sense of peer belonging. Although Kuh (2008) mentioned the importance of HIPs for students from historically excluded populations, not until recently have critical frameworks been applied to research on HIPs. Results from Ribera et al.'s (2017) study demonstrated that "historically underrepresented populations – first-generation students and students of color – had a less positive perception of peer belonging than did their socially advantaged counterparts, even after controlling for other student demographics, a host of social

and academic college experiences, and institutional context" (p. 555). Although HIPs help historically excluded populations develop a sense of belonging, as evidenced by Friedlander (2007) and Museus & Chang (2021), these students still face more obstacles than their more privileged counterparts when it comes to establishing a sense of belonging on campus.

As student populations have become more diverse, there has been more research on the college transition experience of students from historically excluded populations, even beyond the context of HIPs. O'Shea (2015) argued for the importance of approaching this conversation from a strengths perspective rather than deficit-based language. Her research focuses on first-in-family women who persisted through feelings of exclusion during fall semester and ultimately arrived at feelings of inclusion by end of their first academic year (O'Shea, 2015). However, it is important to acknowledge that the onus for inclusion must not be placed solely – or perhaps even primarily – on the student. Means & Pyne (2017) explored the ways that low-income, first-generation, first-year college students perceive institutional support in helping them "find their way." Structures that positively contributed to students' sense of belonging included scholarship programs, identity-based student organizations, residence hall community-building activities, supportive faculty, academic support services, and HIPs; however, some opportunities also brought to light assumptions and expectations about who may or may not be successful in higher education. In some ways, institutional support was not powerful enough to dispel narratives that students had internalized prior to coming to college (Means & Pyne, 2017).

While gender and socioeconomic status are important factors to consider, race and ethnicity are also key when examining the unique transition experiences of historically excluded populations. Johnson et al.'s (2007) study showed that in particular, social identity-based student

organizations and campus centers as well as faculty and staff who were willing to help and institutional need-based scholarship programs helped students feel like they mattered on campus, in turn contributing to an increased sense of belonging. This study explicitly demonstrated that a student's identity cannot be separated from their sense of belonging; in fact, students from historically excluded populations benefit much more when the institutional support structures take into account that specific identity.

Academic Success

The third element of the first-year experience that can strongly impact a student's adjustment to college is the level of academic success a student experiences during this time. Numerous factors contribute to a student's academic success during their first semester or first year of college, and the ones I have chosen to highlight here certainly do not make for an exhaustive list. As discussed earlier, when students feel supported and a sense of belonging, they are more likely to perform better academically. Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger's (2010) study showed that students in a collaborative living-learning community perceived their environment to be more enriching and educational and had greater academic interactions with peers than did students in other types of living-learning communities.

One avenue of research related to academic success focuses on students' motivation and certain traits that may incline them more toward success. Duckworth (2016) termed the concept of "grit" as a combination of certain traits that enabled students to overcome and persist through adversity. Although Duckworth's (2016) concept of grit has been deemed problematic by researchers such as Golden (2017), the idea that students come to college with certain traits, needs, and levels of preparation is still valid. Melzer & Grant's (2016) study showed that underprepared students – defined as performing below college standards in math, reading, and/or

writing – were less likely to think that seeking out academic tutoring or finding an internship related to their future careers was necessary. It is important for faculty and staff in higher education to understand students' perceptions about academic success in their first year so that we can implement support strategies accordingly. For underprepared students, Melzer & Grant's (2016) results suggested the following may be helpful: guidance regarding fulfilling responsibilities, acting conscientiously when faced with challenging situations, and refocusing on the personal nature of career goals and aspirations. Students who are more academically prepared for college may have different needs and therefore require different support structures.

As discussed earlier, psychological well-being is an important component of the first-year experience. A separate conversation related to mental health and academic achievement is warranted, given the substantial amount of literature on the topic. Boyraz et al. (2017) determined that depressive symptoms negatively affect students' ability to control their effort and attention in challenging or uninteresting academic tasks, which in turn lead to a lower GPA reported at the end of their first year. Cole & Korkmaz's (2013) study demonstrated that if a student does not have a high psychological well-being, the environment can help to assuage that circumstance. If students have a positive perception of the classroom and the institutional environment, their academic performance may not be as affected by a lower psychological well-being.

As with previous aspects of the first-year experience, student demographics are a key component. Historically excluded populations face different struggles in the classroom, just as they do outside of the classroom. Whereas we might assume that being academically motivated always results in a positive outcome, Roksa & Whitley (2017) discovered that African American

students benefit less than their white peers from being academically motivated, particularly when the students perceive faculty as being less invested in their success. This study is important because it demonstrates the pervasive nature of institutional systems and structures that, regardless of the level of motivation, students from historically excluded populations may not be able to overcome on their own. It proves the needs for policies and procedures that take these systems and structures into account and act accordingly.

Managing Conflict

Throughout the first year of college, students negotiate and manage all kinds of conflict, both internally and externally. Clark's (2005) study addressed the importance of developing strategies when faced with obstacles, whether the obstacles are interpersonal, academic, or internal. Students from privileged backgrounds likely have more resources at their disposal to help them learn how to devise these strategies, so institutions need to offer support structures to help those students who do not come to college with that type of capital.

Pizzolato's (2004) research provided more detail as to how to help students gain abilities that allow them to adapt to challenging situations and conflict in college. Her study specifically focused on high-risk students who entered college with an established level of self-authorship and then regressed due to marginalizing experiences. Students who used self-regulated and supported coping strategies were able to regain their level of self-authorship, demonstrating the need to help students develop these types of strategies.

Exploring the ways that college students manage conflict was of particular interest to this project because it tied in closely with the unique functions of the adolescent brain. In the next section of the literature review, I will explain how and why certain characteristics of the

adolescent brain are important to consider when studying decision-making among traditionally-aged college students.

The Adolescent Brain

  The World Health organization defines an adolescent as anyone between the ages of 12 and 19 (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). In this study, I focused on students who are in the last year or two of their adolescence, depending on when they begin college. Due to the complex and intricate nature of the brain, I focused on a few key components of the brain as they relate to older adolescents. In this section, I will explore biological nature, psychological well-being, and mental health as they apply to the brain of older adolescents.

Biological Nature

  Most students experience a transition to the university environment at age 18, long before the part of the brain that controls rational and logical thinking is fully developed. Throughout adolescence, there is an increase in white matter and a decrease in gray matter in the brain, which reflects development in different regions of the brain (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). During this evolution, executive brain functions – the capacity that allows humans to control and coordinate their thoughts and behavior – may increase steadily, and the ability to multitask may increase (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). The rational part of humans' brains, specifically the pre-frontal cortex, does not fully develop until age 25 (Fetterman et al., 2020). The pre-frontal cortex enables humans to be more self-aware and to understand things from another person's point of view (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). It is also the place where rational decision-making occurs (Domenech & Koechlin, 2015).

Psychological Well-Being

I briefly mentioned psychological well-being (PWB) in the previous section on first-year experience, but the concept is worthy of a more thorough exploration as it relates to the adolescent brain. At its core, PWB is a measure of how well an individual is moving through life and whether they are generally happy or whether negative emotions interfere with their ability to function in their everyday life (Huppert, 2009). As evidenced by research, positive emotions and cognition can have a symbiotic relationship with each other; in other words, certain cognitive or behavioral processes can cause positive emotions and positive emotions can result in certain cognitive or behavioral processes, such as focused attention, idea generation, and a greater level of creativity (Huppert, 2009). Research also demonstrated that having a positive mental state leads to better physical health and long-term survival (Huppert, 2009). Because of this relationship, there is a natural desire to improve one's PWB. Researchers have conducted numerous studies related to various factors of PWB, including some that individuals can control – such as the amount that one volunteers – and others that individuals cannot control – such as demographics and upbringing. As research on PWB became more advanced in the early 2000s, research focused specifically on adolescents' PWB, which is where I focused for the purposes of this study.

Viejo et al. (2018) developed an instrument for measuring adolescents' PWB that includes multiple dimensions of four factors: self-acceptance, positive interpersonal relationships, autonomy, and life development. Their research demonstrated the importance of considering the multidimensional nature of PWB. Notably, older adolescents obtained the lowest scores on satisfaction with health and satisfaction with groups of belonging in subjective well-being and self-acceptance and autonomy in psychological well-being (Viejo et al., 2018). These

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low scores relate back to the importance of independence and autonomy (Ding, 2017; Holt, 2014; Kouros et al., 2016) as well as sense of belonging (Friedlander et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Chang, 2021; Strayhorn, 2012) for the older adolescent age group, as it affects their PWB.

While it is certainly helpful to determine factors and trends related to adolescents' PWB, we ultimately want to be able to make predictions based on those factors and trends. In doing so, we can be proactive in our systems and support structures rather than reactive only when adolescents have issues or problems. Balluerka et al.'s (2016) quantitative study demonstrated that there is an overall decrease in PWB as adolescents grow older and an increase linked to higher peer attachment. Of particular interest from Balluerka et al.'s (2016) research is the link between class emotional intelligence (EI) and PWB. They defined class EI as social and emotional interactions in the classroom between and among students and teachers (Balluerka et al., 2016). Classroom circumstances and experiences can impact students' PWB.

Mental Health

A key component of PWB is mental health. Studying mental health in college students is exceptionally important because college poses a unique level and type of stress. Some sources of stress, such as academics, are almost universal among all college students. Other sources of stress might be particular to certain demographics or populations of students. Karyotaki et al.'s (2020) analysis of the World Health Organization's World Mental Health International College Student Initiative provided some guidance and direction. 93.7% of over 20,000 students surveyed reported at least some stress in at least one of the following areas: financial situation, health, love life, relationships with family, relationships at work/school, and problems experienced by loved ones (Karyotaki et al., 2020). Researchers' analysis demonstrated a

significant relationship between the level of stress the student experienced and their likelihood to develop at least one of the following six disorders: major depressive, bipolar, generalized anxiety, panic, alcohol use, and drug use. For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that Karyotaki et al.'s (2020) analysis did not have the opportunity to take into account the Covid-19 pandemic, which I will discuss in greater detail later in this literature review.

Karyotaki et al.'s (2020) research demonstrated that we should be concerned about college students' mental health and its potential effects on their future mental health diagnoses. Other researchers indicated its potential effects on students' current PWB while in college. Antaramian (2015) used a dual-factor mental health model to examine PWB and traditional indicators of psychopathology to determine mental health status. She found that students with high subjective well-being were more engaged in college and that students with high PWB and low symptoms had the highest GPAs. Antaramian's (2015) study indicated the more immediate effects of college students' mental health, primarily as it relates to engagement and academic achievement.

The adolescent brain is complex and multi-faceted. While it would be impossible to cover the nuances of it entirely, I have attempted to demonstrate aspects of its unique nature that are key components of this research study. Its intricacies complicate the decision-making process for first-year college students, which we will explore in detail next.

Decision-Making

Students make a lot of decisions about college, both in terms of larger, one-time decisions that have lasting impacts and smaller, daily decisions that only generate short-term effects. An example of the former might be whether to live in a campus residence hall, whereas an example of the latter would be whether to attend class the morning after a late-night study session. The

central focus of this project's research question was how students explain and reflect on the decisions they made regarding their first year of college. To explore this question, I had to consider some essential decisions that all students make about college. For the purposes of this literature review, I focused this section on decision-making into four big decisions: the choice of which university to attend, the choice of living situation, the choice of which classes to take, and the choice of which co-curricular activities to attend.

University to Attend

The first major decision that students need to make about college is where to attend. For some students, this decision-making process can begin as early as their sophomore year of high school. There is a lot of research on this decision. Long (2004) examined how individuals from 1972, 1982, and 1992 chose whether and where to attend college based on cost and quality. Using a conditional logistic choice model, Long (2004) determined that price did not determine enrollment as much for students in 1992 as it did in 1972; however, it was an important factor for location, especially for low-income students. The importance of quality did increase over time, becoming a more important factor for students in 1992 than it was in 1972 (Long, 2004). This study demonstrated that the idea of getting a quality education for an affordable price has been circulating for quite some time.

Many states responded to this call for a quality education at an affordable price by instituting tuition assistance grant programs. These programs encourage students to attend in-state public universities for a reduced cost. One example of these programs is Florida's Bright Futures Scholarship Program. Modeled after Georgia's HOPE Scholarship program, Bright Futures awards financial assistance at state public institutions to students who meet certain academic criteria and submit a scholarship application. It is a tiered program, in that the higher

your GPA and ACT score, the greater the percentage of your tuition that is covered. Zhang et al. (2013) determined that this program greatly and positively impacted full- and part-time enrollment at Florida's two- and four-year public institutions. Furthermore, after a period of time, the program increased the number of degrees produced (Zhang et al., 2013). Although this might be true in Florida, Sjoquist & Winters (2015) found that exposure to state merit aid programs have no meaningfully positive effect on college completion when examined country wide. Although the programs may be controversial, their very existence demonstrates the importance of finances as an aspect of the college decision-making process.

Tuition assistance grant programs tackle the problem by providing students with money. Paterson (2018) conjectured that it might be more about providing students with information than the money itself. The difference between cost of attendance and the final expense for students can be one of many sources of confusion (Paterson, 2018). Another pain point can occur when students do not consider affordability until the end of their college search process. Rather than narrowing down potential institutions based on cost, students can get in a bind if they find universities and programs they enjoy and then apply in the hopes of receiving substantial aid packages (Paterson, 2018). Indeed, the financial aid offer is extremely important. Braunstein et al. (1999) determined that for every $1,000 increase in the amount of aid offered, the probability of enrollment increased between 1.1% and 2.5% for accepted applicants.

Regardless of the timing, the state, or the situation in which it occurs, researchers demonstrated that most students choose their institution – at least in part – based on a cost-benefit analysis of their tuition bill and the quality of education they believe they'll receive.

Living Situation

The second big decision students make regarding college, once they've determined where they will attend, is where they will live. One aspect of this decision is whether to live on campus in a residence hall or off campus in an apartment or at home, depending on the relative location of the university to the student's house. Institutions often attempt to draw students' attention to the benefits of living in residence halls, one being a heightened sense of community and a positive correlation of that sense of community to persistence (Erb et al., 2015). While some research demonstrated this claim to be true, other research indicated that students may be able to – and in some cases, prefer to – find this sense of community elsewhere, particularly with the increased usage of social media (Bronkema & Bowman, 2017). Like the choice of where to attend school, students may determine that the cost of living on campus is not worth the level of convenience or the sense of community that could be found elsewhere, particularly if students can live at home and save money.

Classes to Take

A third decision that students need to make about their first year of college is which classes to take. There is substantial research as to the effects of parents on students' choices in this area. Workman's (2015) study focused specifically on exploratory students' experiences with a first year academic advising model and living learning community that was intended to help them make decisions about their major and career path. Results of Workman's (2015) study demonstrated that parents were a substantial and mostly positive influence for participants. Experiences can also have a significant impact. Schroeder et al. (2016) discovered that early academic experiences, specifically summer programs at universities, can influence future academic goals in general as well as the choice of a particular major. When students are in

college, living-learning communities can have both short- and long-term academic impacts. Indeed, the entire purpose of a living-learning community is as an integrated living and curricular experience (Dunn & Dean, 2017). In the short term, they can determine which courses students take in a particular semester or year. In the long-term, they may either affirm a student's decision about a particular major or help the student discover that their initial decision is not the best one for them.

Co-Curricular Involvement

The fourth decision to consider is the co-curricular involvement in which students may or may not choose to participate. In recent years, there has been an increased understanding, as well as various potential models, of the ties between learning from co-curricular activities and student success (Dean, 2015). Moreover, research demonstrated that students view co-curricular learning experiences as highly important and meaningful (Kwon et al., 2020). As mentioned previously, co-curricular experiences such as high impact practices can be particularly powerful in engaging students early on and throughout their entire college experience (Kuh, 2008; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013; Ribera et al., 2017).

A long-time criticism of co-curricular involvement is that it is often not available to students who must work while in school. However, there is research to support the argument that a job – when framed and reflected upon strategically – can be a co-curricular engagement activity in and of itself. The tipping point in relationship to academic achievement seems not to be whether a student works but rather how much a student works. Pike et al.'s (2008) study demonstrated that working more than 20 hours per week had a negative impact on grades, whereas working less than 20 hours per week had a positive impact on grades and student engagement. Furthermore, if students are provided with an intentional framework through their

employment and they learn skills that might benefit them in future employment, on-campus

employment has the potential to be extremely impactful in areas outside of academic

achievement (Denda & Hunter, 2016). In many ways, on-campus employment has the potential

to be a high-impact practice.

Considerations of Race/Ethnicity & Socioeconomic Status

There is always the potential to engage students from historically excluded populations in

campus activities that have historically engaged privileged populations. However, research

indicated that students from historically excluded populations have different needs and desires

related to their engagement activities. Clark & Brooms' (2018) research demonstrated that Black

men's engagement in a Black Male Scholars program helped move them from feelings of

isolation to a greater sense of self-awareness and self-authorship. Through their engagement in a

program that was designed specifically for Black men, they found a greater sense of belonging

on campus (Johnson et al., 2007).

In addition to race, students' socioeconomic status can also contribute to their level of co-

curricular engagement. Millunchick et al. (2021) showed that a student's knowledge about the

college environment can impact their participation in cocurricular activities. While first-

generation college students do not have familial resources to help them gain knowledge about

college, Millunchick et al.'s (2021) study supported the argument that if this knowledge could be

provided elsewhere, first-generation students could overcome that deficit. In contrast with

research related to student engagement experiences based on race and ethnicity, Markle &

Stelzriede (2020) found that first-generation students who participated in a learning community

did not demonstrate a significant difference in persistence as compared to those who did not

participate in a learning community. The principles related to sense of belonging and co-

curricular engagement may not apply seamlessly across students from different historically underserved populations.

In this section of the literature review, I attempted to discuss decision-making among college students in the context of four main decisions: which university to attend, where to live, which classes to take, and ways to be involved. Certainly, there are more decisions that students make about their first year of college. For the purposes of this study, though, these four decisions demonstrate the multifaceted and complex nature of decision-making among college students. Next, we will consider the Covid-19 pandemic to further explore whether and how the pandemic affected college students' decisions.

Covid-19 Pandemic

Covid-19 became an issue on college campuses in the spring of 2020, prompting many universities, as well as K-12 schools, to shift to remote instruction for the remainder of the academic year. Among college students, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a shift to online learning for most of their courses (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020). In many cases, that remote instruction continued into the fall of 2020. Some institutions returned to partial or complete in-person instruction in the spring of 2021, whereas others chose to stay remote. Throughout the 2021-2022 academic year, students continued to experience a variety of instructional methods. Throughout the pandemic, some students were forced to experience a certain method of instruction (e.g. requiring a student who tested positive for Covid-19 to attend school virtually) and other students chose to experience a certain method of instruction (e.g. choosing to continue with remote instruction because the student prefers it or performs better in that environment).

As students made choices about instruction, the Covid-19 pandemic forced educators to ask new questions about instructional methods and delivery. As people began to determine what

a post-Covid world would look like, or if a post-Covid world would even exist, it seemed as though students would have even more choices related to their college experience than they did prior to Covid-19. At the time of this study, researchers were only beginning to uncover and understand the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Mucci-Ferris et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study and determined that students need and desire creative and accessible online instruction and remote engagement experiences. They also had a desire for more technological skill development and reflection on their own shifts in perspective (Mucci-Ferris et al., 2021). In addition to considering more general causes and effects because of Covid-19, questions related to mental health during the pandemic were beginning to emerge in the literature.

Mental Health

Much of the first wave of literature surrounding Covid-19 involved mental health, specifically anxiety, depression, and loneliness among students. Outside of the classroom, students became increasingly lonely as the pandemic continued throughout the 2020-2021 academic year (Labrague et al., 2021). Kecojevic et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study and identified numerous difficulties with daily tasks and mental health trends. Difficulty focusing on academic work and loss of employment led to depression, and the search for information on Covid-19 led to anxiety (Kecojevic et al., 2020). Son et al. (2020) confirmed these quantitative findings with a qualitative study. Fear and worry about the health of themselves and loved ones, difficulty concentrating, sleep disruptions, decreased social interaction, and increased concern related to academic performance all contributed to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive thoughts among students (Son et al., 2020). Results from studies conducted during the pandemic demonstrated that mental health is a legitimate concern.

Soria & Horgos (2021) built upon the research of Kecojevic et al. (2020) and Son et al. (2020) to consider different variables associated with students' mental health, specifically symptoms of Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) during the Covid-19 pandemic. Soria & Horgos (2021) considered the effects of individual characteristics, interpersonal factors, institutional factors, health and safety factors, and other stressors on the manifestation of MDD and GAD. Results of their study demonstrated that cisgender men, upper-class students, straight students, international students, and non-transfer students had reduced odds of MDD and GAD; on the other hand, LGBTQ+ students, students who cared for adults, neurodiverse students, Asian students, and students with disabilities had greater odds of MDD and GAD (Soria & Horgos, 2021). Additionally, students who had a greater sense of belonging on campus or a safer living environment had reduced odds of MDD and GAD and vice versa (Soria & Horgos, 2021). While the results of this research study were not necessarily surprising, given literature previously discussed, it was beneficial for suspicions to be borne out in the data when considering further research questions.

Online Learning

Another theme in the emerging literature on the Covid-19 pandemic was online – and in some cases, hybrid – course delivery, specifically student satisfaction, student achievement, and whether online courses can achieve the same learning objectives as in-person courses. Kapil et al. (2021) measured and analyzed student learning in a hybrid biochemistry course during summer 2020, where half of the students were in person and half were virtual. They found that online students had the knowledge and skills necessary to perform techniques, but they were not confident or able to perform them when placed in a laboratory setting (Kapil et al., 2021). This finding indicated obvious problems with online learning in hands-on disciplines. However, Rossi

et al. (2021) demonstrated a potential solution. Within the same field of biochemistry, they incorporated various active-learning strategies into an online course. Results of their study indicated that these methods of teaching and learning can improve performance in both hard and soft skills, benefiting students from both a hands-on and critical thinking perspective (Rossi et al., 2021). For instructors who may not have the pedagogical knowledge or resources to help them incorporate these strategies, Gerhart et al. (2021) indicated how established, publicly available, online participatory platforms – specifically within the discipline of ecology – can be utilized to engage students in rigorous activities within an online course. As emerging research demonstrated, learning in an online environment was possible; however, there was a strong learning curve in some cases and innovation was key.

At the time of this study, there was a lot left to explore in the realm of higher education and Covid-19. This study added to this body of literature by taking into account the first-year experience of college students, the multifaceted nature of the adolescent brain, and decision-making among college students and asking whether and how the pandemic may have affected students' decisions about college. Higher education administration, faculty, and staff should use data to drive decisions about the choices they offer to students because of Covid-19. This study sought to provide that data to inform those choices.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

I used Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice to frame this study. According to Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice, there are four contextual layers to an individual's college decision: (1) the individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context. Perna

(2006) developed this model as a combination economic and sociological aspects of the decision-making process. The first layer of the model, the individual's habitus, focuses on values and beliefs that shape an individual's decision and are reflected in the individual's demographic characteristics (i.e. gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) as well as cultural and social capital. The second layer, school and community context, considers ways in which social structures and resources available to an individual affect college choice. The third layer, higher education context, recognizes the ways that higher education institutions shape student college choice. This may happen directly through communications or more passively through location. The fourth layer, the broader social, economic, and policy context, examines how larger forces, conditions, and policies influence individuals' decisions about college either directly or indirectly. Although I primarily utilized Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice for this study, Tierney & Venegas' (2009) cultural framework for financial aid decision-making also informed my study.

Tierney & Venegas (2009) added complexity to the layers Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice that involve context, particularly those surrounding access to financial aid. Tierney & Venegas (2009) attested that student decision-making patterns are not linear, which aligns with theories and models in criminal justice literature related to adolescent decision-making (Paternoster & Pogarsky, 2009; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992; Timmer et al., 2020). In place of a linear model, Tierney & Venegas (2009) "posit a cultural ecological framework for examining how students think about going to and paying for college…suggest[ing] that information and preparation for college and financial aid are multifaceted and longitudinal and have the potential to play critical roles in increasing access to

postsecondary education" (p. 365). Just as Perna (2006) articulated that context impacts a student's decision about college choice, Tierney & Venegas (2009) contended that context also drives a student's access to financial aid, and a cultural-ecological model can uncover and analyze that particular context. Tierney & Venegas (2009) included a familial aspect to college going in their cultural-ecological model, which is inclusive of more collectivist cultures rather than simply a traditional individualistic model of decision-making. In addition to familial environments, Tierney & Venegas (2009) included out of class environments, educational environments, and community environments as those that impact students' decisions about attending and funding college. In their cultural framework for financial aid decision-making, Tierney & Venegas (2009) perceived decision-making as a group effort, particularly as it related to financial aid and the social contexts and histories of funding postsecondary education.

Conclusion and Transition to Chapter 3

In this chapter, I explored various elements that can impact how students make decisions about college. First, I discussed the nature of the adolescent brain and how the lack of a fully developed pre-frontal cortex impacts an individual's ability to make decisions and assess risk. For this section, I considered literature from the fields of biology, education, and criminal justice. Next, I explored decision-making and college choice. I divided this section into sub-sections based on Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice and the four layers within the model. By analyzing the literature in this way, I drew explicit connections between elements of Perna's (2006) model and existing literature. In the first sub-section, I focused on habitus, specifically demographic characteristics as well as social and cultural capital. In the second sub-section, I focused on various contexts that impact a student's decisions about college. These contexts included school and community context, the higher education context, and the broader

social, economic, and policy context. I closed this section by discussing the unique context of the

Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, I covered Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice

because it was the theoretical framework I use for this study. I also discussed Tierney &

Venegas' (2009) cultural-ecological model, which informed my study. The next chapter outlines

the methodology for this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The aim of this study was to understand how students who began college in the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 explain and reflect on their decisions about college. Knowing more about how students explain and reflect on their decisions about college before and during the Covid-19 pandemic will allow university administrators, faculty, and staff to be intentional as they determine the choices they offer to college students and develop in- and out-of-classroom experiences for future students. In this chapter, I outline the methodology, research questions, data collection and analyses, and my researcher positionality for this study.

Research Design

Qualitative research helps researchers "understand the meaning people have constructed" and consists of four primary characteristics: a focus on meaning and understanding; the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; an inductive process; and a richly descriptive product (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). In exploring participants' construction of meaning and understanding, I needed to be flexible and adaptable as a researcher (Bhattacharya, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The inductive process of qualitative research meant that I gathered data to build concepts or identify trends (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My goal was to gather rich and vivid descriptions and convey them through my analysis, maintaining the voice of participants as much as possible (Bhattacharya, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because my research questions focused on understanding participants' decisions, qualitative research was the best methodology for this project.

I employed narrative inquiry in this research study. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) developed narrative inquiry as a model for reflection and experience among teachers. John Dewey's (1938) work provided a foundation for the narrative inquiry methodology, specifically his work on

experiential learning and reflection (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin & Connelly (2000) defined narrative inquiry as

> a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. (p. 20)

Clandinin & Connelly (2000) developed a "metaphorical three dimensional space" with the three dimensions being temporality, personal and social, and place (p. 50). They also focused on four directions in inquiry: inward, such as toward the internal conditions such as feelings or moral dispositions, outward, such as toward the environment, and backward and forward, such as the past, present, and future of temporality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In narrative inquiry, researchers ask questions that examine an experience from all of these dimensions and directions in order to more fully understand the experience and its impact.

Through asking questions, researchers can take the participants' living and telling of an experience and retell the stories, a process by which researchers may relive their own stories (Clandinin, 2013). Bhattacharya (2017) described narrative inquiry as "a framework that helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the participants' recounting of their experiences" and "the study of these stories, storied lives, and how participants come to understand their own story through retelling and interpreting their experiences" (p. 93). My methodology of narrative inquiry and my method of semi-structured

interview questions allowed me to ask questions of participants and left me room to shift the conversation based on participants' unique perspectives (Bhattacharya, 2017).

For this study, I conducted formal semi-structured interviews. I had a series of questions and possible probes prepared in advance that I used consistently across all interviews; however, the semi-structured format gave the participant and I the freedom to take the interview in unexpected directions based on their answers and relevance to the study (Bhattacharya, 2017). The semi-structured format allowed me to ask questions that elicited stories of key experiences from participants and provided me with data necessary to discuss participants' experiences in a more holistic way (Jones et al., 2014). In many ways, students' decision-making during the Covid-19 pandemic may have been vastly different from students' decision-making in other years; however, in many other ways, students' decision-making may have been extremely similar to each other. I chose semi-structured interviews for my data collection method because it allowed me to work within and between both of those spaces. It allowed me to guide participants as necessary while also providing the freedom to let the participants tell their stories as they wish (Jones et al., 2014). The semi-structured interview protocol allowed for participants to reflect on their own experiences and engage in storytelling.

Research Question

The research question for this study was: How do students who started college in the fall of 18, 19, 20, and 21 explain and reflect on their decisions about college?

Subjects, Participants, Population and Sample

I recruited participants via email and flyers from students who were enrolled in a learning community, who lived in a residence hall, and/or who were involved in the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office during the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, and 2020. I recruited from these

three offices because they all had significant outreach to students in the form of courses, programming, and experiential learning opportunities. These three offices also reached a diverse group of students in terms of ethnicity/race, academic performance, and socioeconomic status. I worked with individuals who worked in these three offices to email recruitment letters to students and hang up flyers in the physical office space and include a digital version of the flyer in their newsletters to students throughout the spring semester of 2022 (see Appendix A). Table 1 contains information about participants and descriptors that are germane to the study.

Table 1

Participants in the Study

Participant	First semester of college	Race/Ethnicity	Sex	First-generation	Pell eligible	Free and reduced lunch in K-12	International student
Becky	Fall 2018	Caucasian	Female	No	No	No	No
Melanie	Fall 2018	Caucasian	Female	No	Unsure	No	No
Sarah [a]	Fall 2018						
Patches	Fall 2019	White	Male	No	No	No	No
Megan	Fall 2019	White	Female	No	No	No	No
Grace	Fall 2019	Asian/Chinese	Female	No	No	No	No
Blair	Fall 2020	White	Female	No	No	No	No
Mac	Fall 2020	White	Female	No	No	Yes	No

Data Collection Procedures

I interviewed participants in the spring of 2022. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately one hour. I tried to interview students who began college in the fall of 2018 first, since I knew they may have been preparing to graduate. Then I interviewed students who began college in the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2020. I was finished interviewing by May of 2022, when the spring semester ended at the university.

Data Analysis

I transcribed the interviews by using the dictation feature in Microsoft Word. I played the recorded interview on one computer and enabled the dictation feature on another computer. Once the dictation feature finished transcribing the interviews, I listened to the interview again while reading through the transcript, correcting any mistakes from the dictation feature. Listening to the interviews again helped me with the retelling aspect of narrative inquiry and enabled me to be accurate in my coding.

To analyze these interviews, I employed in vivo coding, which "uses words or short phrases from the participant's own language in the data record as codes" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 65). In vivo coding helps to preserve and honor the participant's voice, which is important when dealing with the narratives of meaningful life experiences. I also utilized emotion coding, since the experiences described occurred during a highly emotional time for the participants. Emotion coding can also provide insights into "participants' perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 67). Sometimes the participant named the emotion and other times I inferred it based on the language the participant used. After completing both rounds of

coding, I identified patterns among the codes. These patterns allowed me to determine categories and themes of the codes (Miles et al., 2020). From these themes, I determined the findings of the study and implications of those findings.

Setting and Environment

This study took place at Minnesota State University, Mankato, a regional, comprehensive, mid-size four-year public university in the Upper Midwest region of the United States. The mission of this institution is to "promote learning through effective undergraduate and graduate teaching, scholarship, and research in service to the state, the region and the global community," and the institution's website declares the following values: integrity, diversity, access, responsibility, and excellence (Minnesota State University, Mankato, 2020). Minnesota State Mankato has a student population of "more than 14,000 including more than 1,170 international students from 89 countries" and a faculty and staff population of "nearly 1,600...including more than 700 teaching faculty" and "12.4 percent faculty of color" (Minnesota State University, Mankato, 2021).

According to IPEDS, 77.2% of first-time full-time students pursuing bachelor's degrees who began their studies in Fall 2018 returned in Fall 2019 and 79% of first-time full-time students pursuing bachelor's degrees who began their studies in Fall 2019 returned in Fall 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). It is noteworthy that the retention rate after Spring 2020 – the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic – was higher than the retention rate after Spring 2019, which was a "normal" semester.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined the methodology, research questions, data collection and analyses, and my own positionality for this study.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how students who began college in the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, and 2020 explain and reflect on their decisions about college. These decisions include students' choice of school, living situations, and class delivery modes as well as decisions related to students' academic, social, and emotional experiences of college. By studying students who began college in 2018, 2019, and 2020, I explored the experiences of students who began college with no impact of the pandemic (2018-2019), some impact of the pandemic (2019-2020), and complete impact of the pandemic (2020-2021). By engaging these three groups of students, I sought to learn more about whether and how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted students' decisions about college.

The research question for this study was: How do students who started college in the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, and 2020 explain and reflect on their decisions about college? Within each section of this chapter, I present and explain relevant data for each decision and conclusions I drew from participants' answers based on thematic coding. The last section of findings focuses on emotions of participants, based on emotion coding.

Methodology Summary

I used narrative inquiry methodology for this project. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) developed narrative inquiry as a model for reflection and experience among teachers. John Dewey's (1938) work provides a foundation for the narrative inquiry methodology, specifically his work on experiential learning and reflection (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin & Connelly (2000) defined narrative inquiry as "a way of understanding experience" (p. 20). Bhattacharya (2017) described narrative inquiry as "a framework that helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the participants' recounting of their

experiences" and "the study of these stories, storied lives, and how participants come to understand their own story through retelling and interpreting their experiences" (p. 93). Narrative inquiry methodology aligned with my research question.

I used a semi-structured interview protocol, which allowed me to ask questions of participants while also leaving room to shift the conversation based on participants' unique perspectives (Bhattacharya, 2017). The semi-structured format allowed me to ask questions that elicited stories of key experiences from participants and provided me with data necessary to discuss participants' experiences in a more holistic way (Jones et al., 2014). It allowed me to guide participants as necessary while also providing the freedom to let the participants tell their stories as they wished (Jones et al., 2014). The semi-structured interview protocol allowed for participants to reflect on their own experiences and engage in storytelling.

In order to analyze these interviews, I employed in vivo coding, which "uses words or short phrases from the participant's own language in the data record as codes" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 65). In vivo coding helps to preserve and honor the participant's voice, which is important when dealing with the narratives of meaningful life experiences. I also utilized emotion coding, since the experiences described occurred during a highly emotional time for the participants. Emotion coding can also provide insights into "participants' perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 67). Sometimes the participant named the emotion and other times I inferred it based on the language the participant used. After completing both rounds of coding, I identified patterns among the codes. These patterns allowed me to determine categories and themes of the codes (Miles et al., 2020). From these themes, I determined the findings of the study and implications of those findings.

Participants

The participants in this study included individuals who started college in the fall

semesters of 2018, 2019, and 2020. I intended to also interview participants who began college

in the fall semester of 2021, but no one who entered college during that semester answered my

calls for participation. I recruited participants via email and social media from three groups on

campus: students who were enrolled in a learning community, students who lived in a residence

hall, and students who were involved in the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office during these

four years. I recruited from these groups because they all had significant outreach to students in

the form of courses, programming, and experiential learning opportunities. These groups also

reached a diverse group of students in terms of ethnicity/race, academic performance, and

socioeconomic status. For this research project, I interviewed eight participants.

Decision Categories

The interview protocol included questions about five decisions: institution, living

situation, courses, co-curricular activities, and working during college. In line with this interview

protocol, I organized my findings by decision: decision of institution, decision of living situation,

decision of courses, decision of co-curricular activities, and decision of working during college.

Decision of Institution

When asked to explain and reflect on their decision of institution, participants

overwhelmingly mentioned two factors that impacted their decision: cost of attendance and

location, specifically the institution's proximity to home. There were other factors in some

participants' decision to attend this particular institution. Two participants mentioned that they

enjoyed their campus tour and the physical aspects of the campus were appealing to them. Two

participants were drawn to the institution because of particular co-curricular offerings. Three

participants mentioned that they knew the institution had a good program for the major(s) they were interested in pursuing. Because seven out of the eight participants mentioned price and five out of the eight participants mentioned location, I discuss this finding with those two subheadings.

Cost of Attendance. Melanie, Blair, and Mac pay for a significant portion of their college themselves. Grace, Sarah, and Megan lived in neighboring states and could take advantage of reciprocity for in-state tuition. Patches has tuition waived because of parents working within the same university system. None of the participants mentioned that price was more of an issue due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was more related to debt and wanting to be financially conscious.

"I wanted to come out with as little debt as I could," said Patches.

"Very low tuition rates here was a big plus," said Melanie.

"I'm coming out of school with no debt which is really nice, and part of that reason is because I chose like a relatively cheaper school," said Blair.

Location (Proximity to Home). Five out of the eight participants mentioned location as being a large factor in their choice to attend this particular institution. None of them made the decision to live at home during college; however, this institution was the right amount of distance away from home. Overall, underlying reasons were convenience and independence, not the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I could still be close enough to come home when I wanted but I didn't have to stay at home," said Sarah.

"I really like being able to like just pop back home and hang with the family or you know go visit my friends in my hometown," said Blair.

"It gives me that independence so that was a big big deal," said Mac.

The year in which the participants entered college didn't make a difference in relationship to students' decision about which institution to attend. None of the participants mentioned the pandemic when talking about this decision. None of them chose to spend less money or stay closer to home because of the pandemic. Regardless of the pandemic, students wanted to attend an affordable institution that was relatively close to home.

Decision of Living Situation

A common thread among all participants is that the pandemic did not impact their decision about where to live; however, it did impact their experience of those living situations. All eight of the participants interviewed chose to live in a residence hall during their first year of college. Becky, Sarah, and Melanie started college in the fall of 2018. Becky and Melanie lived in a learning community, and Sarah lived on a standard floor. Becky "met a lot of great people." Halfway through the year, Sarah decided to move to an off-campus apartment, but it wasn't a reflection of her residence hall experience. "When I first came I wanted to live in the dorm kind of just have the experience…I did enjoy my experience in the dorms and then when I moved to the apartment that was more just like I wanted my own space and the cost…there was only like maybe like a $200 difference. I was like you know I might as well just go there for a semester and then I could stay…I wanted to stay over the summer," said Sarah.

Grace, Megan, and Patches started college in the fall of 2019. Grace and Megan lived in a learning community, and Patches lived on a standard floor. Grace said, "I didn't really feel like just go through college without at least having one year of dorm experience, and I also figured

it's a quick and easy way to meet people." Megan said, "I was in the learning community my freshman year and so that was pre-pandemic when I like started college and so we all were required to live on the same floor so that's how I like met my like closest friends now." These first-year students had a unique experience in that Covid-19 arrived a couple of months before the end of their first year on campus. Patches talked about this the most: "Spring 2020 semester got cut short…it feels silly to pay extra to be in a dorm to still just do your classes on Zoom. I did still want to be [here] though…our internet is really bad at home…I have friends that I knew I wanted to live with here" so he ended up going off campus to live with friends instead of going home. The Covid-19 pandemic especially affected Grace's decision about living arrangements the following year. "We originally had signed to live a second year in the dorms…but when all the restrictions were coming out with like the kitchens and the lounge areas and dining centers and whatever else for Covid purposes, which makes sense, we just didn't want to deal with all that so we changed our mind," and she and a friend ended up moving to an apartment off campus.

Blair and Mac started college in the fall of 2020, and their living decision was most impacted by Covid-19 at the beginning of their first year. Although they both chose to live in the residence halls, they had very different experiences. Mac lived in a learning community but "I did not have a roommate at all…she dropped out of college because of the pandemic before we started. I got assigned with another one, but she dropped out two weeks in because it was they were so empty and no one was coming in…I chose to live in the dorm because I wanted the dorm experience. I don't think I got that though at all," she said. Mac did meet people who lived

in her residence hall, though. Blair, on the other hand, chose to live in the suite style dorms and had a better experience. She said:

I started off at the dorms because I'm just a super super social person…a lot of people chose to like go back home and I did have that option and I thought about it but I just didn't want to. I wanted to be on campus. I wanted to be like around people, around my roommates, around my suite mates, so that's kind of why I chose to live on campus.

Blair and Mac both moved off campus after their first year of college.

Participants' rationale for living on campus was because they wanted to meet people and they wanted to have the first-year dorm experience. This didn't change during the pandemic. Even the students who started college in the fall of 2020 wanted to meet people and have that quintessential first-year college dorm experience, even though they were coming off of a senior year that was extremely disrupted by Covid.

Decision of Courses

When considering decision-making and choice during a time of crisis, there is an inherent assumption that choices exist. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many institutions – including the one that participants of this study attended – began offering hybrid courses where students could choose to attend in person or via Zoom. The idea behind this course offering was to give students choice in terms of course format. Participants' perspectives, though, demonstrate that this theory didn't come to fruition in practice.

Becky and Melanie, who both started in the fall of 2018, didn't have much choice related to their courses for a variety of reasons. Becky was a student-athlete in a credit-heavy major and had to schedule course around practice. Melanie was in a learning community in a credit-heavy major, and her learning community determined most of her course schedule. Sarah, however,

who also started in the fall of 2018, had quite a bit of choice. She said, "My first year I was doing a lot of my general classes and then when I switched [majors]…I just went through and tried to do like one from each of my minors my major and then tried to get one goal area done." Like Becky and Melanie, Megan was in a learning community in a credit-heavy major, and her learning community determined the majority of her course schedule.

Grace, Patches, and Megan started in the fall of 2019. Grace spoke about her first-year choices from a pre- and post-Covid lens:

When I was choosing courses pre-covid, it was kind of just what's required first of all obviously and then it was pretty much what sounded interesting so I don't know there wasn't really a lot of decision-making that went into those two years I guess…the summer between my freshman and sophomore year I took like 12 credits…because I was like I'm home and I don't have a job…now I would never do that.

The summer Grace refers to is the summer of 2020. Patches spoke about how required advising during his first year impacted his choices:

At first you would have to get a code from your advisor…during the pandemic that requirement went away, so I think that's part of where I got into trouble with taking double gen eds and stuff because I wasn't required to have the courses I was taking looked over anymore. I could just register for whatever I wanted to.

The required guidance from his advisor during his first year helped him choose courses, but he made mistakes in subsequent years when that required advising went away.

Mac and Blair started college in the fall of 2020, during the most COVID-restrictive times. They had the benefit of being able to learn from their online learning experience at the end of high school. Mac said:

> What the end of my senior year taught me…I can't pay attention when I'm over Zoom, not as well as in person…I tried to get as many in person as I could…I ended up with maybe like two hybrids and then half the time there would be no one in there so I wouldn't go to those either I would just do online.

Mac wanted in person classes, but they weren't available. She said, "I can't pay attention when I'm over Zoom…so I tried to get as many in person as I could but that wasn't a really super available option." Blair did not have any hybrid courses during her first year. She said:

> My freshman year all of my classes except one were online and we didn't even get a choice for that…it wasn't like my choice necessarily it was the school's…I didn't know like college in person class versus a college non in person class…if I would have been able to choose 100% I would have chose on campus just cause I can meet people and I feel like I learn better that way too.

As it turned out, participants did not have as much choice in terms of course format. All of the participants were in prescriptive majors, so they needed particular courses at certain times, regardless of the pandemic. They had to take those courses in whatever format they were offered, be it in person, hybrid, or online. A majority of participants preferred in person courses, but they did not have the opportunity to choose a course in that format because it wasn't offered.

Decision of Co-curricular Activities

Regardless of the year that participants began college, a common thread is that those who identified a co-curricular involvement experience early on tended to stick with that experience

throughout their time in college. Becky, Sarah, and Melanie started college in the fall of 2018.

Becky was a student-athlete all four years, and Melanie enjoyed her first-year experience in the

learning communities so much that she continued to be involved with the program in all

subsequent years of college. Sarah, however, didn't get that involved on campus during her first

year and then she said, "once COVID kind of started to come in like I didn't really do any of the

campus activities."

Patches, Grace, and Megan started college in the fall of 2019. They were also able to get

involved on campus during their first year enough so that those activities continued in

subsequent years. Like Melanie, Megan was heavily involved in learning communities as well as

a lot of clubs on campus. Megan noted the impact of Covid-19 on activities: "Most of the

meetings were all online which then just affected like participation…some of them like I gained

more out if from being online and some like I just felt like I wasn't engaged." Grace was heavily

involved in band during her time in college. The decreased engagement that Megan noted

actually impacted Grace in that it gave her the opportunity to have a leadership role in a service

organization. She acknowledged, "I got elected president because there were three of us that

were available." Patches' most frequently discussed co-curricular activity was his involvement in

an on-campus supplemental instruction program as a tutor and eventually a mentor. He said, "It

takes a lot of my time…it's a pretty demanding job…but it's a very rewarding experience."

Mac and Blair started college in the fall of 2020, when activities were the most restricted.

When I interviewed them in the spring of 2022, neither stated that they had ever been very

involved on campus. Mac said, "I worked full time my freshman year…I don't really have a lot

of time to do on campus things…not as involved with the campus community as I think I could

be but I want to be." Blair was involved in a couple of clubs that were tied to her major but as soon as she met people and made friends, she stopped going. She said, "I basically use it as something on my resume to act like I'm involved." Mac's and Blair's experiences stand out as different here. One could argue that they chose not to be involved. On the other hand, one could also argue that the typical ways that students get involved on campus in their first year were unavailable to them, so they didn't have the opportunity to be involved. Either way, a finding of this study is that because they did not get involved early on in their college experience, that is fall 2020, they are not involved during the time of this interview, that is spring 2022.

Decision of Working during College

Because the financial aspect of college influenced the majority of participants' decisions about the institution they attended, it is perhaps not surprising that the majority of participants also chose to work during their time in college. In some instances, participants' co-curricular involvement became their jobs. Melanie and Megan enjoyed their involvement as a learning community member so much during their respective first years in college that they became learning community coordinators in subsequent years. "I enjoy being a learning community coordinator," said Melanie. They both choose to have other off-campus jobs, but it's not necessarily because they need them. "I've always enjoyed working…I've always been someone who likes to stay really busy," said Megan.

The choice of working for reasons unrelated to tuition was a theme among participants. Grace works quite a few hours at her on-campus job and was even promoted to a supervisor position. "Realistically I don't think I could consider necessity…I don't like using money…I don't like spending money…I just get bored to be honest…I just have a lot of time that I need to fill," she said. Patches's work situation is similar to Megan and Melanie's in that his on-campus

involvement turned into a job. He became involved as a tutor in the supplemental instruction program during his first year of college and has remained involved in that program ever since. Patches's work choices are also similar to Grace's in that he does not need it for school. "I'm saving a lot," he said. He is considering graduate school and his parents' experience is a factor in his decision to work. "My parents were in school forever…they're mid-50's now still paying off that tuition…if I can get away with as little debt as possible that's really the way to go."

Some participants did work out of necessity. Sarah works 30 hours a week to pay for "school, bills, health insurance, car insurance, stuff like that." Mac is paying all of her expenses, including tuition, by herself, and she does not qualify for any financial aid. It affects other parts of her college experience:

> You gotta work to live and some people…end up struggling because you're working 50 hours a week on top of full-time school and you're trying to understand why you don't have a social life and you're feeling lonely and guilty because you don't have a social life and it's because you have to work to live…you can't attend those small random events that are being held.

Blair had to pay for a portion of her school. She works multiple jobs and is proud that she will come out of college with no debt. Similar to Patches, Blair was influenced by family members: "My aunts and uncles and you know parents' friends are like, 'Oh yeah, don't have too much debt like you know you have to pay it off and it will take you so long.'" Mac's and Blair's choices around work are particularly interesting to me. They had to work to pay for all or some of their tuition and living expenses, yet they still chose to live on campus when they started college in fall of 2020.

Like the decision to attend a particular institution or choose to live in a particular place their first year of college, participants' decisions about working during college were not impacted by the pandemic. Students who had to work to pay for school would have had to work to pay for school, regardless of the pandemic.

Unfulfilled Expectations

When I examined the results of my coding analysis holistically and considered overarching connections or themes across these five different decisions, one thing stood out to me. Irrespective of when they started college, regardless of the timing of the pandemic amidst their college experience, unrelated to the decisions they made or the choices available to them, every participant had an unfulfilled expectation about college. Emotion coding also elicited these unfulfilled expectations because when participants talk about them, it is through the lens of feeling. The final question of my interview protocol is an open-ended question about how the pandemic has impacted your college experience. Participants expressed anger, frustration, disappointment, and uncertainty about the future.

Anger

Blair said, "I just really feel like I did not make as many friends as I could have…it makes me so mad because I think my college experience would have been so different." Mac says, "I think I would have a lot more friends…I would have had such a larger support system here in [this town] if there was not a pandemic." Mac told a particularly moving story about how she and her roommates were in a car accident. "We were all okay but our car was totaled and like we needed to call somebody but it was all four of our roommates. It's like who do we call? Like we are the only people we know." Participants have very small circles of friends, which is not

innately a bad thing. However, it elicits anger when participants wanted something very different out of their college experience.

Patches is angry that he missed out on key experiences that would help him get a job. In his field of study,

> if you want to get a job…you have to have a portfolio you have to have things that you have actually done saying, you know I took this class isn't enough. You have to prove that you can do those things…all that stuff was cancelled…I definitely plan on doing some next year but you know it's kind of like we're getting down to the wire…it really is time limited…it's really unfortunate like a large chunk of all my schooling was disrupted in those sophomore and junior years when you want to get a lot of these experiences that I really just didn't have the opportunity to.

Frustration

An overarching feeling of frustration came out when students talked about the unfulfilled expectations of their courses. Becky said "education became a joke when it was online. It was so much easier." Becky returned to mostly in-person classes during her junior year and missed out on learning skills during those "easier" sophomore classes that made her junior year very challenging. She said, "Education was tough my junior year…it just I think really made me lose confidence in my abilities." Sarah said:

> I don't think my grades have been impacted academically, but I think I've learned less than I would have if I was in person…a lot of my classes didn't even have zoom meetings. They were async like work at your own pace and so I would just kind of work through to get them done rather than like work through to learn the material so I think that Covid kind of took that piece away from me.

Patches had a different experience. "Classes because they are online became a lot harder…required more time…the courseload was just way more than it should have been." Despite the courseload being greater, Patches felt like he didn't learn as much online:

Online classes just aren't as good as in person…when I took [a key course] the way it was taught, there was not even zoom lectures…[the professor] just wrote notes on a sheet of paper and posted those pictures of notes…and you just kind of had to read them and learn [the subject] that way. It was terrible. I don't know anything about [the subject] you know everything was self-taught and I just had to get through the exams…I'm lacking some of those skills because of when I had to take that class.

Patches blatantly admits that he didn't learn key skills in essential courses in his major, and he worries about how that will affect his job prospects in the future.

Disappointment

Becky's junior and senior years were impacted the most by COVID. While Becky appreciated that the pandemic "allowed me to go home and be with my family," she realizes how that impacted her in retrospect. She said, "Looking back on the pandemic, I think it took so much away…there's so many people that I've met this last semester…I would have been able to enjoy them more and those people's wisdom and their personalities if last year wasn't a wash…I just feel like I wasn't able to make memories…it just doesn't feel like I'm graduating." Sarah had a similar perspective: "Even though my ends and my beginnings are free, it's like that whole middle section I just feel like I missed out on quite a bit of activities like going to the games." Grace described the pandemic similarly. She said, "When like all you see is your coworkers and your roommate it gets to be a drag…you can't really meet people."

Uncertainty

Melanie said that returning to campus during the 21-22 academic year "increased my anxiety a little bit…it was more just like the amount of people…I don't wanna get it or if I have a close call where somebody that I was around exposed me to covid." She was also nervous about how getting Covid would impact her academic progress: "I still wear a mask just because I cannot get sick just because I could not miss [required school] because if I do that sets me back so far so I guess I've had quite a bit of anxiety surrounding Covid…how it would impact school." Similar to Melanie, Blair said the pandemic "made me more anxious" and "definitely made me more introverted and made me more of a homebody." She still struggles with screen time: "the amount that I was on my phone and still am it is so bad." Mac said the risk of transmitting Covid kept her from going home. "I rarely went home and I rarely saw my family, so that was really hard especially because I'm all alone here…and I feel like I don't want to [go home] because I'm worried about spreading whatever."

Patches talked a lot about his mental health and friendships. He said "in freshman year of college and through high school I was a very sociable person" and now "I have friends through school, through my courses…but I feel like I missed out on a lot of other friendships." He talked about how he still feels "this kind of like lingering almost like fear around other people" because during the pandemic, "people turn[ed] into sources of things that could seriously mess up your life." He admitted that "at least for me I feel like it has a bigger kind of mental health toll than you might think or that a lot of people really talk about." He describes the pandemic this way: "Your whole life is okay, I have to stay in this room in my apartment right and it's like okay, time to hop on zoom for two hours…your entire life is you know you get on your zoom call and then you work on homework and then you get on your next zoom call and then you work on

homework and I don't know. There's a lot of days in there where everything was just grim because you wake up and you do school until you go to bed and you wake up the next day I just feel like I don't know maybe not everyone had this experience."

The findings from this project demonstrate that not everyone had that experience because not everyone experienced the pandemic in the same way. However, all participants had some kind of unfulfilled expectation related to college. Some did not get the dorm experience they wanted, despite hoping they would. Others did not make as many friends as they wanted, despite trying to do so. Some missed key co-curricular experiences and essential academic learning that they believe and fear might affect them for quite some time. Participants felt very strongly about their pandemic experience, whatever it consists of, and they did not hesitate to express their emotions as part of their interview.

Summary of Findings

The Covid-19 pandemic did not impact major decisions that students made about college, specifically the institution they chose to attend and the decision they made about where to live. It did, however, impact the choices they were provided with, specifically their options for courses and formats of those courses as well as the co-curricular opportunities with which they were able to engage. The findings of this study demonstrate that the most overwhelming impact of Covid-19 on the participants' experience of college was how they felt about their experience. The pandemic resulted in unfulfilled expectations in different forms, and participants had strong feelings about those unfulfilled expectations. I will explore this more in Chapter Five.

Conclusion

Within each section of this chapter, I presented and explained relevant data for each decision and conclusions I drew from participants' answers based on thematic coding. The last

section of findings focused on emotions of participants, based on emotion coding. In Chapter 5, I will interpret and explain connections among my findings in greater detail and discuss implications of these findings for theory and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusion

This chapter highlights the major findings from this study of college students' decisions at various stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. This chapter will also address theoretical and practical implications as well as limitations of this study. This chapter concludes with recommendations for future research on college student decision-making.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how students who began college in the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, and 2020 explain and reflect on their decisions about college. In order to do this, I recruited participants who began college in each of those four fall semesters and engaged them in semi-structured interviews. I analyzed these interviews with thematic coding and emotion coding. That analysis resulted in the findings discussed in chapter four. In chapter five, I will interpret and explain connections among my findings in greater detail, discuss limitations of my study, and discuss implications of these findings for theory, practice, and further research.

Problem Statement

The World Health Organization defines an adolescent as anyone between the ages of 12 and 19 (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). This age range is often when individuals transition into some type of postsecondary education. They need to make decisions at a point in their life at which the pre-frontal cortex, the section of the brain where logical decision-making, rational thinking, and self-awareness occurs, is not fully developed (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Domenech & Koechlin, 2015). Complete development of the pre-frontal cortex occurs around age 25 (Fetterman et al., 2020). When students transition into college, they make a lot of decisions (Conley et al., 2014). Some of those decisions involve risk assessment (Paternoster & Pogarsky,

2009). There is a substantial amount of research related to adolescent decision-making and criminal behavior, which I discussed in detail in Chapter 2 (Reyna & Farley, 2006; Timmer et al., 2020; Paternoster & Pogarsky, 2009). The ways in which the fields of criminal justice and sociology have studied adolescent decision-making and used their findings to make more informed decisions of how to serve and work with delinquent youth are helpful when applied to a higher education context.

The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated a different kind of risk that was unlike anything early adults have experienced since perhaps WWII and the Vietnam War (Thelin, 2019). It is important for higher education faculty, staff, and administration to know more about if and how the pandemic disrupted students' transition into college and impacted decision-making. Although there may never be another global pandemic during my lifetime, students experience crises in numerous ways, ranging from family issues to personal struggles to medical diagnoses. I intended for this study to provide valuable information for people who work in higher education to better serve students during collective and individual times of crisis.

Research Question

The research question for this study was: How do students who started college in the fall of 18, 19, 20, and 21 explain and reflect on their decisions about college?

Theoretical Perspective

I used two conceptual frameworks for this study. The first was Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice to frame this study. According to Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice, there are four contextual layers to an individual's college decision: (1) the individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4)

the broader social, economic, and policy context. Perna (2006) developed this model as a combination economic and sociological aspects of the decision-making process.

The second was Tierney & Venegas' (2009) cultural ecological framework. Just as Perna (2006) articulated that context impacts a student's decision about college choice, Tierney & Venegas (2009) contended that context also drives a student's access to financial aid, and a cultural-ecological model can uncover and analyze that particular context. Tierney & Venegas (2009) included a familial aspect to college going in their cultural-ecological model, which is inclusive of more collectivist cultures rather than simply a traditional individualistic model of decision-making. In addition to familial environments, Tierney & Venegas (2009) included out of class environments, educational environments, and community environments as those that impact students' decisions about attending and funding college. In their cultural framework for financial aid decision-making, Tierney & Venegas (2009) perceived decision-making as a group effort, particularly as it relates to financial aid and the social contexts and histories of funding postsecondary education.

Methodology

I used narrative inquiry methodology for this project. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) developed narrative inquiry as a model for reflection and experience among teachers. Dewey's (1938) work provides a foundation for the narrative inquiry methodology, specifically his work on experiential learning and reflection (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin & Connelly (2000) defined narrative inquiry as "a way of understanding experience" (p. 20). Bhattacharya (2017) described narrative inquiry as "a framework that helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the participants' recounting of their experiences" and "the study of these stories, storied lives, and how participants come to understand their own story

through retelling and interpreting their experiences" (p. 93). Narrative inquiry methodology aligned with my research question.

I used a semi-structured interview protocol, which allowed me to ask questions of participants while also leaving room to shift the conversation based on participants' unique perspectives (Bhattacharya, 2017). The semi-structured format allowed me to ask questions that elicited stories of key experiences from participants and provided me with data necessary to discuss participants' experiences in a more holistic way (Jones et al., 2014). It allowed me to guide participants as necessary while also providing the freedom to let the participants tell their stories as they wished (Jones et al., 2014). The semi-structured interview protocol allowed for participants to reflect on their own experiences and engage in storytelling.

In order to analyze these interviews, I employed in vivo coding, which "uses words or short phrases from the participant's own language in the data record as codes" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 65). In vivo coding helps to preserve and honor the participant's voice, which is important when dealing with the narratives of meaningful life experiences. I also utilized emotion coding, since the experiences described occurred during a highly emotional time for the participants. Emotion coding can also provide insights into "participants' perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 67). Sometimes the participant named the emotion and other times I inferred it based on the language the participant used. After completing both rounds of coding, I identified patterns among the codes. These patterns allowed me to determine categories and themes of the codes (Miles et al., 2020). From these themes, I determined the findings of the study and implications of those findings.

Overall Statement of Findings

The Covid-19 pandemic did not impact major decisions that students made about college, specifically the institution they chose to attend and the decision they made about where to live. It did, however, impact the choices they were provided with, specifically their options for courses and formats of those courses as well as the co-curricular opportunities with which they were able to engage. The findings of this study demonstrate that the most overwhelming impact of Covid-19 on the participants' experience of college was how they felt about their experience. The pandemic resulted in unfulfilled expectations in different forms, and participants had strong feelings about those unfulfilled expectations.

Discussion of Findings

It is important for college administrators, faculty, and staff to understand how college students make decisions because they are the ones with the power to provide college students with various choices. This study is unique because it examined college students' decisions during a time of transition from high school to college, which also occurred during a global pandemic. Much time, energy, and resources are spent on college campuses each year trying to decide what to offer to students in terms of the institution, living situations, courses, co-curricular activities, and work opportunities. This discussion section is divided into themes that were present in participants' answers about all these decisions.

Participants did not have choices of course format during the pandemic

During the pandemic, institutions offered hybrid or flex-sync courses and framed it as providing students with choices about their class format. Findings from this study demonstrate that departments or individual instructors made decisions such that students didn't have a choice of format. This idea did not come to fruition in the sense of students choosing between a hybrid

or online version of the same course. Although multiple course formats were offered at the institution overall, those offerings did not trickle down to impact individual students' choices or their overall college learning experience.

A question that arises from this finding is the potential impact of not offering college students the choices that they expect. Bowman (2010) examined how students' experiences in the first year affected their psychological well-being (PWB). PWB is an important measure because it demonstrates how well a student is adjusting to college on personal, interpersonal, cognitive, emotional, and social levels. It may be impactful to understand how disappointment in choices provided to college students during the pandemic impacted their PWB and thereby impacted their student success overall (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013).

Furthermore, in a world where people are learning to live with the presence of Covid-19, there may be conversations among faculty, staff, and administrators about how to continue to leverage and offer different formats of course delivery. Should institutional decision-makers choose to offer hybrid and online courses to students, the findings of this study demonstrate the importance of being clear to students about what choices will be available to them. Emotion coding analysis proved that students felt strongly and negatively about not receiving the choices they expected as it related to course format.

Today's college students are extremely money conscious, regardless of the pandemic.

When I started this project and began to consider the potential impact of the pandemic on college students' choices, I thought there would be a correlation between when the fall in which students started college and decisions that they made, particularly those with a financial impact. I thought students would choose a closer or less expensive institution due to the unknowns of the

pandemic. I thought students would choose to live at home and begin college completely online to save money because of the unknowns of the pandemic.

The findings of this study demonstrate that I was wrong. The students who chose this institution based on cost and location would have done that regardless of the pandemic. It was a decision borne from money-consciousness in general rather than due to the pandemic. This generation of college students is extremely aware of their finances, and they fear coming out of college with significant, if any, debt and having to spend years to pay it back. These feelings are strongly influenced by family members.

Despite their money conscious behavior, students are willing to pay for what they want. In this study, that bore out in terms of all participants choosing to live on campus during their first year of college rather than live at home. Even if it meant they had to work an additional job or more hours, it was important enough to them to make that sacrifice in order to have that experience. For students for whom their dorm living experience was dramatically impacted by covid, they felt strongly that they didn't have the kind of experience they deserved and, truthfully, that they paid for.

As a millennial, I wonder if this generation of college students is also influenced by their following of mine – one that is frequently cited in the media as less able to purchase a home or having fewer or no children due to college debt. The way that participants talked about money and finances in general was particularly fascinating to me. Further research related to current college students' attitudes and perspectives about finances could impact what higher education administrators, faculty, and staff offer to students in future generations.

Participants tried to put themselves in situations where they could meet people during their first year in college.

The choice to live in a residence hall during their first year is just one example of how participants tried to put themselves in situations where they could meet people during their first year of college. Regardless of the pandemic, all of these students entered college with a degree of hope. Even those who entered in the fall semesters of 2020 and 2021 thought they would be able to carve out a somewhat normal college experience by living on campus, by attending events, by taking courses in person, by making friends.

On some level, perhaps with the retrospective vision that comes with writing this in the spring of 2023, this hope seems irrational. During a global pandemic, it is illogical that a person would think they might have a college experience that is similar to that of pre-pandemic fall semesters. On the other hand, it is understandable that 18-year-olds thought this. As I discussed in the literature review (Domenech & Koechlin, 2015; Fetterman et al., 2020), the pre-frontal cortex of their brains, the part where logical reasoning and thinking occurs, is not fully developed yet. Combine that lack of development with a decision that must be made based on risk, and it is completely understandable why an 18-year-old would have attempted to live in the dorm to meet people, despite restrictions that would prevent them from doing just that.

The participants who were able to meet people were those who had the opportunity to participate in a high-impact practices (HIPs), particularly the learning communities and the supplemental-instruction program (Kuh, 2008). HIPs are characterized by high levels of performance expectations, student investment of time and effort over an extended period of time, interactions with faculty and peers, experiences with diversity, frequent and constructive

feedback, periodic and structured opportunities for reflection, real-world application of learning, and public demonstration of competence (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). Students who had the opportunity to engage in HIPs – that is, students who began college in the falls of 2018 and 2019, prior to the pandemic – demonstrated a stronger adjustment to college and a greater sense of belonging, which is in line with the literature presented in Chapter 2 (Friedlander, 2007; Museus & Chang, 2021). Students know that these types of experiences are impactful, whether they realize it or not, and participants in this research project tried to put themselves in situations where they would develop these types of meaningful relationships with other students. This was true even for participants who began college in the fall of 2020, when pandemic-related restrictions were at their highest.

Relationships that people develop in college are incredibly important academically and socially. Many of them can result in lifelong friendships and even marriages. Further research to explore the impact of this missed opportunity among a group of college students to develop these relationships may provide data that further supports the importance of offering students these choices and supporting their decisions to be involved in activities that foster those relationships.

Participants perceive the impact of Covid-19 on their college experiences as multi-faceted and long-lasting.

Participants expressed that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted their college experience in two primary ways: academically and mentally. I was surprised by the level at which students articulated the potential long-lasting implications of the pandemic. Their comments demonstrated a high level of reflective thinking. Furthermore, this is where students expressed the most emotion, as discussed in detail in Chapter Four. Overwhelmingly, the emotions were

negative. Only one participant felt like it might have helped with time management and resilience. Everyone else felt like the impact would be negative over time, particularly as it related to academic learning and preparation for employment.

Much of the negative impact of academic learning related back to the fact that students didn't have a choice. They knew that they learned better in person, but in person courses in challenging subjects were not available to them. They needed the courses at that particular time to stay on track to graduate, so they had to essentially manage with whatever they ended up being offered. Participants found this frustrating, and it made them angry.

Participants had mixed responses about online courses. Some participants didn't learn as much in online courses. Others felt like online courses were too challenging at a time when they were already stressed and uncertain about things due to the pandemic. Related to employment opportunities, some participants felt like they missed out on networking for internships or key experiences that would allow them to build portfolios or demonstrate skills that would set them up well for jobs later.

Participants who were in college during the pandemic, regardless of when it occurred during their college careers, may need different support structures than previous students who had a more "normal" college experience. Melzer & Grant's (2016) study showed that underprepared students – defined as performing below college standards in math, reading, and/or writing – were less likely to think that seeking out academic tutoring or finding an internship related to their future careers was necessary. One can surmise that this will become even more true with students who experienced college during the pandemic. In that sense, further research is

necessary to determine whether and how the pandemic widened the opportunity gap and what additional and/or different resources are necessary for students.

The mental health impacts have the potential to be long lasting as well. Participants talked about feeling isolated at a time when research proves that connection and community is important (Azmitia et al., 2013; Wei et al., 2005). Although that finding was not very surprising to me, I was surprised by participants' descriptions of themselves as mad about not making friends or frustrated by the lack of instructors' ability to teach online. All these feelings together result in an anxiety that has lasted beyond the immediate days and months of the pandemic, and participants see it showing up in their increased tendency to stay at home rather than socialize, their increase in social media and phone usage, and their lack of trust in other people.

Research demonstrates that mental health impacts psychological well-being (PWB), which in turn impacts academic achievement. In that sense, we cannot discuss academic learning and mental health as two separate entities, because they greatly impact each other. Boyraz et al. (2017) determined that depressive symptoms negatively affect students' ability to control their effort and attention in challenging or uninteresting academic tasks, which in turn lead to a lower GPA reported at the end of their first year. Cole & Korkmaz's (2013) study demonstrates that if a student does not have a high psychological well-being, the environment can help to assuage that circumstance. If students have a positive perception of the classroom and the institutional environment, their academic performance may not be as affected by a lower psychological well-being. Mental health impacts academic achievement, and high academic achievement can assuage mental health concerns. This research is borne out in findings from this study, specifically related to high-impact practices (HIPs). The participants who had the opportunity to

engage in HIPs prior to the pandemic had a stronger on-campus support system during and beyond the pandemic than those who did not have the opportunity to make those connections on campus prior to the pandemic. A further research question based on this finding might be long-term academic success and mental health impacts of involvement in HIPs as it relates to the timing of the pandemic.

Summary Statement

Exploring students' decisions about college before and during different phases of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a deeper understanding among higher education administrators, faculty, and staff of how students made decisions during this important time of transition. This deeper understanding allows college administrators, faculty, and staff to better understand if and how the pandemic impacted students' decisions about college. The results of this study provide new information that can benefit college administrators, faculty, and staff particularly those who work in the areas of admissions, orientation, first-year experience, transition programming, retention, and persistence.

Implications for Further Research

This research project generated numerous new questions for future research. It may be beneficial to explore the potential impact of not offering college students the choices that they expect. The impact may be substantial when considering the presence of neoliberal thought in higher education, which is the idea that higher education is a financial investment for students and therefore carries a particular level of customer satisfaction and competition. Further research related to current college students' attitudes and perspectives about finances could impact what higher education administrators, faculty, and staff offer to students in future generations. Future

research could also include a study on the effect of meaningful relationships on the college student experience overall and students' transition into later adulthood after college. Further research to explore the impact of this missed opportunity among a group of college students to develop these relationships may provide data that further supports the importance of offering students these choices and supporting their decisions to be involved in activities that foster those relationships. Likewise, further research related to long-term academic success and mental health impacts of involvement in HIPs as it relates to the timing of the pandemic may provide data the supports the offering of HIPs, particularly among first-year students during times of uncertainty.

It may be beneficial to conduct longitudinal studies of students from this group related to employment opportunities, pursuit of professional or graduate degrees, and mental health impact. Additionally, a longitudinal study on giving may provide implications for advancement professionals to consider. We know that people financially support institutions and programs that they feel strongly about or identify with. A research study exploring whether this group of college students' feelings about missed experiences or lack of opportunities provided to them during this time in college, combined with this generation's views of finances and money in general, will impact their giving later during adulthood could be beneficial in a variety of ways. Higher education administrators, faculty, and staff may gain information that would help them decide which programs and activities to offer to students. Advancement professionals and other individuals involved in university funding campaigns may gain valuable information that would guide marketing or outreach initiatives to more recent alumni.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings from this research project, my implications for practice are for higher education administrators, faculty, and staff at all levels of the institution to partner to create out-of-classroom opportunities for students, embrace just-in-time education, utilize educational technology in the classroom, and provide opportunities for emotional intelligence & awareness.

Embrace Just-In-Time Education

One finding from this research project is that today's college students are enormously impacted by an extremely attuned level of financial awareness. Many higher education institutions suffered financial losses during the pandemic that may have exacerbated a downward trend in enrollment and revenue that was occurring before the pandemic. As institutions attempt to operate beyond the pandemic in a world where it looks like Covid-19 will always exist, leaders have to become creative in creating a futuristic college experience rather than attempting to return to pre-pandemic functions, practices, and operations.

College and university leaders need to embrace the concept of just-in-time education and the idea that people need consistent ways to upskill and reskill themselves for jobs, which is not the education that college has historically provided (Levine & Van Pelt, 2021). We have seen this need with the rise of LinkedIn Learning and Google Certificate programs. Institutions of higher education need to offer programs that teach individuals skills they need in a relatively quick, self-paced, asynchronous way that can be accessed by professionals beyond the brick and mortar of a campus. Google has provided higher education a great model from which to work from, and companies sponsor employees to complete their certificate programs in project

management, data analysis, and more. Colleges and universities need to offer the same thing and engage private businesses in collaborative efforts to get these programs out to employees. This kind of initiative provides a new source of funding for colleges and universities. It also allows students like Patches, who feels he missed opportunities to develop skills in college, the ability to upskill on the job.

Adding additional revenue streams such as skill-based certificate programs enable higher education leaders to make the traditional college experience more affordable for students who choose to have it. Findings from this project demonstrates that the traditional college experience is still important. For example, students choose to live in the dorms not because it has a correlation to a higher GPA – although we know that to be true – but because they want to make friends. If we get to a point where people who want to have that experience can't afford it, then higher education no longer becomes a public good, as it was intended to be. It becomes something that only the most privileged among us can afford. Certainly, arguments could be made that we have already reached that point. However, by embracing and adapting to change rather than trying to go back to a pre-pandemic world, college administrators can create new streams of revenue that stymie the widening of the opportunity gap.

Partner to Create Out-of-Classroom Opportunities for Students

Findings from this research project demonstrate how important out of classroom experiences are to college students. Higher education professionals with a student affairs background and/or an understanding of college student development theory already knew this; however, this project's findings demonstrated how much more important these types of experiences can be for students during times of uncertainty and crisis, however a student chooses

to define that. When students don't have those experiences early in their college career, then they tend not to get involved at all. They have fewer friends. They don't spend as much time on campus. They don't establish relationships that help them network toward internships or future employment opportunities.

There will always be students who choose not to become involved in co-curricular experiences or other out-of-classroom engagement opportunities. In my experience as a higher education professional, there is a lot of time, energy, and resources devoted to getting more students to attend these experiences. However, when you ask a student why they didn't come to an event, the answer usually is not because they didn't want to. Increasingly, the answer is because they had to work. Instead of focusing only on increasing numbers at co-curricular activities or events, higher education administrators, faculty, and staff need to enable students to be in a position where they don't have to forego co-curricular activities because of work. We need to explore how we can embrace artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) to offer unique co-curricular experiences that can be accessed at different times by different groups of students. We need to figure out how to partner with the private sector to fund more scholarships for students so that they don't have to work as much during the academic year and can engage in more co-curricular activities.

Students don't only work to make money. They also work to gain skills and connections for future jobs and employment opportunities. Higher education needs to partner with the private sector to not only provide scholarships to students, but also these opportunities to gain skills and network in a way that aligns with their future career goals. Instead of working in the summer, students could attend conferences or other professional events that allow them to meet people in

their future fields of work. Students used to be able to do these types of things through summer internships, but many of them have become unpaid. If we can find ways to make that unpaid element no longer such an enormous barrier for students, then we can elevate this concept to a new level.

Historically, providing students with co-curricular activities and other out-of-classroom experiences has been the job of student affairs and providing students with engaging curriculum within the classroom has been the job of academic affairs. If one implication of this research for practice is engagement in creativity and innovation beyond and outside of the institution, it is also necessary to urge creativity and innovation within the institution. Everyone in higher education must commit to the work required to break down the historical silos of academic affairs and student affairs. We can no longer see one as superior to the other. We can no longer say that one is more important or more effective than the other. Findings from this research shows that it is all important to the students, and they have feelings about expectations related to all of it.

Utilize Educational Technology in the Classroom

Just as the findings from this research demonstrate the need to be creative and innovative to develop equitable and affordable co-curricular experiences for students, they also demonstrate the obligation that higher education administrators, faculty, and staff must provide students with a quality education regardless of format.

Alexander (2020) says that online learning has grown steadily since the 1990s. In 2012, higher education tried massive open online courses (MOOCs) which rapidly became a global movement and then fell almost as quickly (Alexander, 2020). In more recent years, the

educational technology (edtech) sector has expanded to include learning management systems (LMSs) and open education resources (OERs) (Alexander, 2020). Teaching pedagogy has evolved to include evidence-based practices for incorporating social media, gaming, and flipped classroom/blended learning practices (Alexander, 2020). In March of 2020, when people had to shift courses online quickly and teach via a LMS and video conferencing system, it should not have been difficult or new to anyone.

It was new to people because higher education has not incorporated technology into the classroom in a way that is equitable and fair to all parties. Alexander (2020) highlights faculty at numerous universities and professional organizations that have opposed technology in the classroom. Faculty's arguments about intellectual property and pedagogical practices and their concerns about funding public education that often underlie their opposition are well founded. We must work together to provide educational technologies that do not instill fear in the unknown. We need to marry new technology with change management practices and security features that protect faculty, staff, and students. It is possible. Levine and Van Pelt (2021) highlight the music, film, and newspaper industries as ones that have successfully adapted to technological changes. All of those institutions operate on a foundation of intellectual property. If the music industry can evolve from Napster to Spotify, for example, higher education can evolve to equitable pedagogical practices that embrace educational technology.

Provide Opportunities for Emotional Intelligence & Awareness

Higher education administrators, faculty, and staff need to spend more time talking to students about how they feel, not just what they do. When I asked participants about the impact of the pandemic on their college experience, some of them told me that was an excellent question

and others said no one had ever asked them that. Participants spent more time answering this question than any other I asked. Findings from this research project show that the mental health and social-emotional impacts of the pandemic will be far reaching and long lasting. Furthermore, students are eager to talk about their experiences and their feelings, and we can learn a lot from them if we ask.

Higher education leadership needs to provide faculty and staff with professional development opportunities focused on building emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). The transactional pieces of advising related to course registration and graduation requirements are only one aspect of the advising practice. Cultivating emotional intelligence and expressing empathy can lead to better relationship development and more effective communication with students while also promoting intellectual and emotional growth in students (Haley, 2016). It is important to acknowledge that learning these skills and integrating them into one's advising practice can be challenging. It can also take time. One session on emotional intelligence is unlikely to yield substantial changes or meaningful results. That is why it is important for higher education leadership to provide consistent and multiple opportunities for everyone on campus who has explicit or inferred advising responsibilities to develop and practice these skills.

Based on the findings from this research project, my implications for practice are for higher education administrators, faculty, and staff at all levels of the institution to partner to create out-of-classroom opportunities for students, embrace just-in-time education, utilize educational technology in the classroom, and provide opportunities for emotional intelligence & awareness.

Relationship of Findings to Theory

The conceptual frameworks for this study were Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice and Tierney & Venegas' (2009) cultural ecological framework. According to Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice, there are four contextual layers to an individual's college decision: (1) the individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context. The findings of this study support Perna's (2006) conceptual model because all four of these layers exhibited themselves in participant's decisions about college. Participants' overwhelming consideration of the cost and location of their institution in their college decision demonstrate how much students consider their own resources, the school's resources, and broader context related to college affordability and student debt. The first layer of Perna's (2006) model, habitus, was also clear in participants' values in and beliefs about certain aspects of college, namely the value of living in a dorm during their first year of college and the belief that it would lead to friendships.

Tierney & Venegas' (2009) cultural ecological framework suggested that decisions about college related to finances are contextual and multifaceted. They posit that financial aid and preparation for college play critical roles in post-secondary education access. This research study's findings bore that to be true, particularly related to institutional choice as primarily based on cost and location. Tierney & Venegas (2009) included out of class environments, educational environments, and community environments as those that impact students' decisions about attending and funding college. Findings of this study demonstrated that as well, particularly related to students' decisions to work and how involved they became on campus. In their cultural

framework for financial aid decision-making, Tierney & Venegas (2009) perceived decision-making as a group effort, particularly as it relates to financial aid and the social contexts and histories of funding postsecondary education. In this research study's findings, participants demonstrated the impact of family and other individuals on their spending as it related to college and their tolerance for student debt.

If I were to do this project again, I would utilize a conceptual framework related to college students' sense of belonging, both in terms of how that sense of belonging develops and how that sense of belonging impacts their overall success and satisfaction with the college experience. Research questions surrounding the effects of development of meaningful relationships and the impact of participation in one or more HIPs could be answered with research conducted through a conceptual framework related to students' sense of belonging. There are also opportunities to employ a sense of belonging framework in studies that focus on a more immediate impact during college as well as longitudinal studies that focus on transitions and experiences in later adulthood.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study related to the participants. There were only eight participants interviewed for this study. I intended to interview students who began college in the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. No one who started college in the fall of 2021 answered my calls for participation. They are a group that is missing from this project and its findings. All the participants who I interviewed were majoring in a prescriptive discipline and/or a pre-professional track. I did not have any participants who were liberal arts students. In terms of demographics, I only had one participant of color and one student who identified as male. Everyone else was a white, female-identifying individual. Finally, all the participants of

this study came from the same institution. Due to the demographic characteristics of the participants, caution is warranted in interpreting the results. More research is necessary to expand this research to a more diverse and larger group of participants, ideally at various types of institutions.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I interpreted and explained connections among my findings in greater detail, discussed limitations of my study, and discussed implications of these findings for theory, practice, and further research.

The key finding of this project is that the Covid-19 pandemic did not impact major decisions that students made about college, specifically the institution they chose to attend and the decision they made about where to live. It did, however, impact the choices they were provided with, specifically their options for courses and formats of those courses as well as the co-curricular opportunities with which they were able to engage. The findings of this study demonstrate that the most overwhelming impact of Covid-19 on the participants' experience of college was how they felt about their experience. The pandemic resulted in unfulfilled expectations in different forms, and participants had strong feelings about those unfulfilled expectations.

As a result of this finding, there are numerous other avenues for further research and implications for practices. Longitudinal studies on students who entered college during this time related to the effects of these unfulfilled expectations have the potential to provide insights related to annual giving trends, future employment opportunities, future pursuit of professional or graduate degrees, and mental health impact. Higher education administrators, faculty, and staff can apply the findings of this research study by embracing the concepts and practice of just-

in-time education, partnering in creative ways to create out-of-classroom opportunities for students, encouraging and providing resources to facilitate the utilization of educational technology in the classroom, and providing opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to cultivate their emotional intelligence and awareness.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

March 21, 2022

To: Giovanna Walters

Email: gewalters@stcloudstate.edu

Project Title: Exploring Student Decisions at Various Stages of the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol to conduct research involving human

subjects. Your project has been: **Approved**

Expiration Date: March 20, 2023
Approval Type: Expedited 1
SCSU IRB#: 36342582

Please read through the following important information concerning IRB projects:

ALL PROJECTS:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any
- adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes,
  significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).
- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process,
  survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time

EXEMPT PROJECTS:

- Exempt review only requires the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.

EXPEDITED AND FULL BOARD REVIEW PROJECTS:

- The principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form
  in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.
- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and
  expiration dates.

If we can be of further assistance, feel free to contact the IRB at 320-308-4932 or email
ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu and please reference the SCSU IRB number when corresponding.

Sincerely,
IRB Chair: **IRB Institutional Official:**
Dr. Mili Mathew   Dr. Claudia Tomany
Chair and Graduate Director
Assistant Professor   Associate Provost for Research
Communication Sciences and Disorders   Dean of Graduate Studies

Appendix B: Recruitment Script

Dear Students,

I am conducting a research project titled "Exploring Student Decisions at Various Stages of the Covid-19 Pandemic." (IRB #36342582). The purpose of this study is to explore how full-time, first-time, traditionally aged students who began college in the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 describe and explain their decisions about institution to attend, living situation, courses, and co-curricular activities. I am seeking students between the ages of 18 and 23 who began college for the first time in one of those fall semesters to be participants in this study.

As a participant in the research study, you will complete a demographic survey and engage in a semi-structure interview with me over Zoom. This interview should last about one hour.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email me

at gewalters@stcloudstate.edu.

Sincerely,

Ginny Walters

Ed.D. Student, Higher Education Administration, St. Cloud State University

Participate in a Research Project

Exploring Student Decisions at Various Stages of the Covid-19 Pandemic
(IRB # 36342582)

The purpose of this study is to explore how full-time, first-time, traditionally aged students who began college in the fall semesters of 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 describe and explain their decisions about institution to attend, living situation, courses, and co-curricular activities. I am seeking students between the ages of 18 and 23 who began college for the first time in one of those fall semesters to be participants in this study.

As a participant in the research study, you will complete a demographic survey and engage in a semi-structure interview with me over Zoom. This interview should last about one hour.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email Ginny Walters, Ed.D. student, at gewalters@stcloudstate.edu.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

<u>Introduction</u>
- Give an overview of project/consent form.
- Introduce myself.
- Allow participant to introduce themselves.
  - Year in school
  - Major

<u>Prompt #1: Decisions about College</u>
- Who or what (people, resources, etc.) helped you make decisions about college?
- Where did you get information about college?
- Describe your thought process in choosing to attend MNSU.
  - Possible probes
    - Tell me about the different things you thought about when choosing MNSU.
    - Describe how your financial situation impacted your choice to attend MNSU.
- Where did you choose to live during college and why?
- Describe your thought process in choosing courses.
  - Possible probes
    - Was time a factor?
    - Did you consider format of the course?
    - Does the instructor make a difference?
    - Do you consider other people (friends, family, etc.)?
- What types of activities have you been involved in on campus and how did you choose them?
- How have you made friends in college?
  - Possible probes
    - In what venues have you made friends (clubs, classes, etc.)?
- Do you work while you are in college?
  - Possible probes:
    - Is it an on- or off-campus job?
    - Do you work out of necessity (to pay tuition) or by choice?

<u>Prompt #2: College Experience</u>
- Describe a time when you were in a difficult situation and how you overcame it.
- Identify challenges that you have had during college.
  - Possible probes:
    - Academic challenges?
    - Social challenges?
    - Emotional challenges?
    - How did you manage or cope with your challenges?
- As you started college, describe some of the feelings you had leading up to the beginning of the school year.
  - Possible probes:

- For example, were you hopeful, cynical, optimistic, pessimistic, excited, nervous, or scared?
- What/who do you think impacted your feelings?
- How did those feelings change throughout your first year of college?
- What is the most enjoyable aspect of college for you?
    - Possible probes
        - Academically
        - Socially
        - Emotionally
- Describe how finances impacted decisions you made throughout college.
    - Possible probes:
        - Working during college
        - Choice of major
        - Choice of how many credits you took
- How do you think the pandemic has impacted your college experience?
- How do you think the pandemic has influenced your future decisions?

Prompt #3: Reflection
- How were your expectations of college met?
- How were your expectations of college not met?
- Tell me about a time when you made a choice during college and things didn't go as planned.
    - Follow ups / possible probes:
        - What did you learn from this experience?
        - How do you think your learning from this experience impacts your future choices?
- What do you wish was different about your college experience?

Conclusion
- Is there anything I should have asked that you'd like me to know?
- Do you have any questions for me?
- Thank the participant for their time.