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How the COVID-19 Pandemic Impacted Low Income Student Enrollment

**Introduction**

In early March 2020, the COVID-19 Pandemic enveloped the United States in a wide-ranging grasp that at the time seemed unlikely to ever cease. The once in a century global health crisis had innumerable impacts on the United States, disrupting life as we know it, and causing widespread economic, political, and societal changes across the country. One particularly impacted sector of American life was higher education, as the vaunted American university system faced the strains of campus closures and declining enrollment. As is true in most global crises, those impacted the greatest were already some of the most vulnerable among us. In the realm of higher education in the United States, this group is found to be low-income students. It is an easy conclusion to draw: If a global health event shuts down the economy, then those struggling to pay for a good or service (education) will face greater disruption to their lives than those comfortably purchasing such services. This paper would be rather short if the question at the outset was focused on the question of “If” the coronavirus pandemic impacted low-income students more than their peers. To ascribe a greater degree of hardship caused by the pandemic to these students is a mere statement of fact. A low-income student is often categorized as a recipient of a federal Pell Grant, though this is not the only way to fit the category. Low-income students may attend two-year community colleges compared to four-year universities, and in some regions of the United States, low-income students and minority students overlap significantly within student populations. Such diversity amongst an at first seemingly uniform group begs the question: How did these aforementioned factors affect the impact low-income students registered from the COVID-19 pandemic? While utilizing previous scholarly research, reputable pandemic era commentary, and an interview with an undergraduate student from Florida State University, this paper concludes that the COVID-19 Pandemic’s impact on low-income student enrollment varied based upon a multitude of factors, including the student’s race, state of residency, and form of higher education.

**Methods**

This Investigative Field Essay sets out to answer the question of how the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted enrollment among low-income college students. It assesses a variety of factors to determine how low-income student’s experiences during the pandemic may vary, and to what degree. Sources used within this paper were gathered through a variety of scholarly databases, including the FSU online library database and the *Google Scholar* online database. In total, four scholarly articles are used, supported by two nonacademic news reports that assess government data, interview experts, and utilize case studies to cover the topic at hand. These details will be examined later, in the “Results” section.

Accompanying these sources is an interview conducted in person with Abigal Rios, a third-year student at Florida State University who serves on the Multicultural Greek Life Council, as an Honors Colloquium Leader, and is studying to become a chemical engineer. As an applicant during the pandemic era, her experience was insightful.

The prior research cited assesses how the COVID-19 Pandemic’s impacts on low-income students varied across the United States, due to a multitude of differing factors. Most sources use state government data on college enrollment and demographic makeup of student populations. Sources assess student populations in diverse, high population states such as Florida, California, Ohio, New York, and Arizona. More specifically, sources focus on either state community college systems, or specific four-year universities, to draw conclusions on the form of higher education’s impact on low-income students across the nation. This subgroup breakdown includes a prevailing trend relating to race, which will be addressed as a factor later in this essay. As mentioned previously, interviews conducted by previous researchers and journalists are included in the sources as well.

**Results**

Assessing any impact of the pandemic on low-income students must begin with identifying their existing enrollment patterns. In four-year universities, such as the University of Florida and Florida State University, low-income students are classified by their status as federal Pell Grant recipients (Echleman). Beyond the four-year university system, millions of low-income students attend two-year community colleges, some with vocational training programs and others with a dual enrollment credit system. In the nation’s most populous state of California, the pandemic’s impact on these community college students was devastatingly high. An analysis of California Community College enrollment data by George Bulman and Robert Fairlie found that “California community colleges lost a total of nearly 300,000, or 17 percent, of students.” This precipitous decline was above the national rate of 10% reduction in two-year university enrollment during the pandemic. (Bulman and Fairlie 2). Across the nation in Ohio, a different reality was unfolding. Utilizing dual enrollment programs, where both college and high school credit is earned by students, headcounts rose by approximately 8,000 students (Ison 4). The greater proportion of low-income students in these two-year university systems demonstrates the real variation in outcomes dependent upon their geographic location. Within what Bulman and Fairlie describe as “the largest higher education system in the country,” low-income students faced worse outcomes than those hundreds of miles away in Ohio’s community college system. The stresses placed on low-income students by novel systems such as remote learning seemed to have been mitigated greater in networks that served less students over a smaller geographic area. This trend is critical when evaluating the precise impact of COVID-19 on these learners.

The division in geographic based results for low-income learners intersects with the division in results for learners based upon their type of university. The financial burdens for those low-income students who attended four-year universities varied greatly from those in the aforementioned two-year systems. Núria Rodríguez-Planas, a researcher at Queens College in Queens, New York, surveyed the student population and discovered an incredibly disproportionate outcome for low-income students. Rodríguez-Planas describes how low-income Pell Grant recipients “…were 20% more likely to lose a job due to the pandemic and 17% more likely to experience earning losses than never Pell recipients.” Students who rely on a combination of financial aid and employment to continue their education were naturally at greater risk of detrimental impact due to economic consequences of the pandemic, especially with harsher pandemic restrictions in the polling population’s borough of Queens. These Pell students faced an additional 65% higher likelihood of facing food and shelter insecurity. (Rodríguez-Planas 1). These realities translated to the incoming class of low-income students during the pandemic era as well. Othniel Rhoden, a potential low-income college applicant described to *TIME* magazine that “Th[e] pandemic has really killed my ambition for school and other stuff I had a passion for.” Nationwide, those low-income students already enrolled or on the way to enrolling in four-year universities suffered different, and typically greater setbacks than those attending two-year institutions. Even with a 36% higher likelihood of federal funding through the CARES Act, low-income students faced these greater financial hardships (Rodríguez-Planas 3). Faced with greater difficulties than their counterparts at two-year institutions, low-income students that were attending, or would have attended four-year academic programs, opted out of attending at greater rates (Velez 1). The nationwide decline at these four-year institutions differed less on a state-by-state basis than the examples contrasting California and Ohio mentioned earlier, with students from Queens to Miami facing similar choices and challenges. Due to this fact, a low-income student attending a four-year university had less of a chance to avoid harsh consequences based on their school’s location than if they attended a community college.

The final variable that was seen across all sources to impact a low-income student’s vulnerability to the pandemic was race. In California, reductions in enrollments were most significant amongst African American and Hispanic students (Bulman and Fairlie 1). In this case, California seems indicative of a nationwide trend. In one survey almost half of all African American and Hispanic students surveyed reported severe financial impacts from the pandemic (Velez 3). These financial strains are an obvious force multiplier on the already tenuous financing low-income students employ to cover the costs of their education. The overwhelming trend is these effects being felt at higher rates, and in larger quantities, by minority students. In Florida, as top universities rose in the domestic rankings, a stratification emerged where low-income minority students made up less and less of incoming classes (Echleman). In a relatively smaller state such as Arizona, data from the majority Hispanic Arizona State University (ASU) tracks similarly to that of Queens College in New York, with low- income minority students being the hurt the most by the pandemic (Rodríguez-Planas 2). The race of any student qualified as low-income was a consistent indicator of how negative experiences with pandemic related disruptions were, correlating so strongly that it outweighs the two other factors referenced earlier. This component provides perhaps the best preview of how to assess the pandemic’s impact on these students, as it lacks the variability of other indicators. As Katie Reilly wrote for *TIME*, enrollment declines “…concentrated among Native American, Black and Hispanic students.”

In her high school in south-central Florida, Abigal Rios saw these trends realized among her peers. Her school was in her word’s “almost all Latin,” and her experience as a Hispanic American college applicant delivers a unique window into the conundrum of why race seems linked so heavily to the pandemics impacts on low-income students. In Rio’s words, “online learning definitely impacted where people would visit and apply to” (Rios, Abigal. Personal interview. 29 September 2023.) Applying during fall 2021, her experience was in what some may consider the waning days of the pandemic. Yet Rios recounted the experience of her older sister who applied in fall 2020, who “couldn’t visit any of the large schools up north,” leading her to attend the University of Florida in Gainesville (Rios, Abigal. Personal interview. 29 September 2023). While Rios described herself and sister as having a middle-class family, she referenced some of her lower income classmates who “would have struggled in normal circumstances” to decide where to attend college and how to pay for it. Rios’ perspective provides a great window into how all three factors discussed intersect in a student’s experience with the pandemic. Her references to her peer’s experience shows how lower income minority students felt more pressure due to university responses to the pandemic. In Rios’ south Florida high school, attending schools in faraway parts of the United States became unrealistic for even middle-class students, much less those of lower economic status. Additionally, Rios mentioned how two-year community colleges “definitely got more interest, at least for one or two semesters” from her classmates (Rios, Abigal. Personal interview. 29 September 2023). Rios describes a population of students that we know now were at higher chance of negative impact due to their Hispanic heritage and were isolated due to their geographic location. Their experiences would vary based upon the type of university they attempted to attend, again showing another variable in assessing the impacts of the pandemic on low-income students.

**Analysis**

After the thorough research detailed above a few realities become starkly apparent. Most significant is that despite the other two variables of location and form of higher education, a student’s race was an overriding indicator nationwide of the degree the pandemic would impact a low-income student. Second is the higher chances of student retention at two-year institutions versus larger and more expensive four-year colleges. These results were true across the nation, however with one notable caveat: In a state like Ohio, low-income students’ chances of being negatively impacted by the pandemic were less at a community college than in a California community college. In this example is the nuanced answer to the question posed at the outset of this paper. It is often dependent on a certain set of variables just how much the pandemic disrupted a low-income student’s life. In California, the high minority student population may explain the worse outcomes for low-income students, even at a two-year college. The data reviewed and experiences discussed previously show there is essentially no one size fits all answer to this paper’s core question.

The strong correlation of race with negative impact on a student can be explained as an expected outcome when the data is reviewed further. In the United States, those of lower socioeconomic status are on average more likely to be a minority group than not. Additionally, younger generations are more demographically diverse, and since college applicants during the pandemic period are overwhelmingly members of Generation Z, there are now more minority applicants in all groups, including low-income students. With the pandemic affecting low-income students more, it is a statistical reality that those who are more often to be low-income and increasingly make up the population being measured, are the most negatively impacted despite other variable factors. As for the other factors, the lower tuition rates and therefore higher accessibility to low-income students may explain their softening of some of the pandemics impacts on their students. Additionally, the two-year window of enrollment may serve as a lessened commitment than their four-year counterparts, encouraging low-income students to maintain enrollment throughout the pandemic. Finally, the location of a university also dictated their response to the pandemic and ensuing policies. Those in states that encouraged in person learning early (Florida, Ohio, Arizona) seem to have had higher retention rates based on the data observed.

**Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly impacted low-income students’ enrollment more than their middle- and upper-class peers. However, just how disruptive and hard hitting these impacts were on them must be evaluated by accounting for a variety of factors. The three most critical to this assessment are the race of the student, the type of university they attended, and where their university was located within the United States. Data collected of nationwide and statewide populations across the nation showcases race as the most prevalent factor, with the latter two factors having varying degrees of impact when interacting with one another. No one answer can totally encapsulate how the pandemic impacted a low-income student’s enrollment, with the true answer being determined by an unfortunate nuance of factors that vary across virtually all populations of low-income students in the nation.

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