

**Communicating with College Students During COVID-19:
College Student Reflections on Communication Preferences and Institutional Best
Practices**

Elizabeth A. Rainey
Loyola University New Orleans

Zachary W. Taylor
University of Southern Mississippi

Abstract

Decades of research suggests that institutional communication can dictate student success, but the COVID-19 pandemic exposed challenges to new demands. Institutions may not have been prepared to adjust communications during the COVID-19 pandemic, and given the ongoing nature of the pandemic, literature has yet to examine how higher education institutions communicated with students during COVID-19. The current study fills this gap by exploring how college students viewed institutional communication from multiple stakeholders, including staff, faculty, and peers, and whether institutional communication supported student persistence. Data suggests a majority of students were critical of institutional communication but rarely engaged with that communication or acted. Moreover, students strongly preferred communication that they perceived to be authentic and personal, while students also felt that high-quality communication from their institution would help them persist and connect with their support networks. We address implications for research, policy, and institutional communication and practice.

Keywords: college students, communication, financial aid, technology, COVID-19

Research has found that institutions of higher education were not prepared for the unexpected nature of the COVID-19 pandemic (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Smalley, 2021). Near the height of the pandemic between March 2020 through December 2020 and early 2021, institutions of higher education pivoted instruction and student support

services online (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Critical during this pivot was campus communication.

Pre-pandemic, much of university communication may have been entirely in-person, including academic and financial aid advising appointments, office hours meetings with faculty members, and on-campus student resource presentations. During the pandemic, institutions needed to facilitate nearly all of these services online, and the challenge arose: How can institutions best communicate support and services with their students in a remote or hybrid environment? And, given that all campus offices needed to communicate virtually with students, how could critical information avoid being lost in countless emails, Zoom meetings, or other forms of digital communication? These questions are relevant to educational settings because we expect to see similar disruptions in the future as a result of natural disasters, weather events, or gun-related violence.

To date, most of the COVID-19 era higher education research has focused on the emergency transition to online learning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021) and how the pandemic impacted the lives of students (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Copeland et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Molock & Parchem, 2021). This study responded to a gap in the literature about institutional communication during the pandemic and how students perceived that communication. This study also focused on how college students prefer their communication, and whether students view institutional communication as a persistence mechanism.

As a result, this study conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews via Zoom with 18 college students during the 2021 spring semester to explore their perceptions of institutional communication, their preferences for institutional communication, and whether students feel institutional communication can increase their success and continued enrollment in college. This study answered the following research questions:

1. How did college students describe institutional communication from staff or faculty while learning online?
2. Do college students have preferences for institutional communication? If so, what are those communication preferences (email, phone, face-to-face, etc.)?
3. How do college students view communication as it encourages student success and persistence?

By answering these questions, higher education practitioners can improve and optimize communication with college students, leading to higher quality communication to increase student success and persistence. We conclude the study by articulating implications for research, policy, and practice, in hopes that the practitioner community can learn from student experiences during COVID-19 and improve communication, thus increasing student success.

Theoretical Framework

We applied two theoretical frameworks to this study. First, Sanford's (1966) theory of *challenge* and *support* frames this study as college students encounter various *challenges* and can receive various forms of *support* on their path to a postsecondary credential. Challenges can include students' interactions with their peers, instructors, or support staff. Challenges also come in response to academic expectations, time management, study strategies, or feeling a sense of belonging, all factors known to affect college student success. Similarly, students can experience support from many of the same sources, including faculty members, support staff, peers, and their families. As students develop more effective study strategies, they become their own form of support through self-efficacy. Related studies have successfully engaged with Sanford's (1966) theory of *challenge* and *support* to articulate how marginalized students reach out for support services to persist toward graduation (Ward et al., 2005) and how Black male college students establish friendships (Strayhorn, 2008), and how students described their experiences with emergency online learning during COVID-19 (Rainey & Taylor, 2022).

We applied Sanford's (1966) theory to understand the challenges and support systems college students may have encountered when engaging with institutional communication during the 2020-2021 academic year, as COVID-19 conditions rendered online learning the primary and safest modality for learning. In particular, we use this theory to understand how they described institutional communication, their preferences for communication, and if communication encouraged student success, knowing most institutional communication is intended to be a form of support. Yet, these students may have encountered other environmental challenges, such as at-home distractions or inequitable access to technology or lacking awareness of the importance of reading emails, which may have presented students with barriers to their success.

In addition, we draw from Coombs' (2007) situational crisis communication theory because the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global crisis that presented reputational threats to higher education. This framework also highlights the role of ethical considerations in

crisis communications, such as the need to focus on physical, psychological, and emotional responses to the crisis. Coupling Sanford's (1966) challenge and support framework with crisis communications theory (Coombs, 2007) allowed us to understand students' descriptions of and preferences for institutional communications in college, and how that communication intersected with student success during a crisis period. Ultimately, we hoped to learn how college students experienced institutional communication while learning online, uncovering their struggles and successes, and articulating how institutions can better support these students through effective communication strategies.

Literature Review

Although this study primarily focuses on how college students view institutional communication, there is limited empirical research regarding institutional communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the pandemic and its effects on institutions of higher education was unprecedented. As a result, this literature review briefly discusses the importance of institutional communication toward increasing student success as well as crisis communications in higher education and the limited literature that has emerged during the COVID-19 era related to how institutions of higher education communicated with college students during the pandemic.

Institutional Communication and Student Success

Educational researchers have found that high-quality institutional communication increases student engagement and success (Kuh et al., 2011; McCroskey et al., 1989; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019; Yook, 2012). As communication systems have advanced over the years, institutions who have embraced 21st century technologies such as the Internet and its related communication channels, including email, text messaging, social media, and video conferencing. In doing so, institutions have successfully engaged with their students, increasing their persistence and retention (Gikas & Grant, 2013; Naismith, 2007). Moreover, research has found that communication must follow a student from the time they are a prospective student up until graduation from a variety of critical stakeholders, including staff, faculty members, and institutional leaders (Kuh et al., 2011; McCroskey et al., 1989; Yook, 2012). Additionally, longitudinal commitments to student communication helped retain students at their institution and has allowed institutions to build relationships with students over time to gain student trust and understanding (Kuh et al., 2011; McCroskey et al., 1989; Yook, 2012). Communication and

support to first generation college students—students whose parents did not attend college—is especially critical because they often navigate college independently (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003) and are unfamiliar with language used to describe critical policies like financial aid (Taylor & Bicak, 2020).

Crisis Communication in Higher Education

Given the importance of communications in higher education—coupled with unplanned events—we examined crisis communication scholarship. Coombs (2007) asserted the needs of stakeholders are a top priority. Once stakeholders are physically and psychologically supported, managers can focus on maintaining the organization’s reputation through media and communications. Coombs’ (2007) work was part of a systematic review of crisis communication literature (Hazaa et al., 2021) in which the authors divided their robust review into eight categories: communications, social media, leadership, knowledge, governance, information technology, strategic planning, and professional entities. These sources highlighted the need to mitigate risks and uncertainty and to enact plans in response to crises.

Specific to higher education, Gigliotti (2021) examined the impact of COVID-19 on academic department chairs and found a dearth of training, particularly in crisis leadership, a key competency in higher education settings. Before the pandemic, crisis communication literature in higher education often focused on racialized events (Cole & Harper, 2017; Lucas et al., 2015; Morton et al., 2020). There are commonalities in these communications studies. There is an urgent need to respond to constituents’ needs, however diverse they are. Crisis communications also should include clear, relevant information during and following a crisis. Following these steps allows crisis managers to protect the organizational reputation.

Institutional Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

At the time of the writing of this study, research was sparse in relation to institutional communication with college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, few studies emerged that addressed how institutions communicated COVID-19 policies and procedures to college students (Mackert et al., 2020; Taylor & Childs, 2021) and their support networks (Jeong et al., 2021; McMillan, 2020). These studies, collectively, found that institutions must communicate frequently and clearly with students and their support networks to allow these stakeholders to gain trust in the institution and remain up-to-date regarding campus closures, public health measures, and other institutional support services related to the pandemic. These

studies also found that students and their support networks value personal, authentic communication that responds to student needs and keeps all stakeholders informed regarding emergency situations and campus safety initiatives (Mackert et al., 2020; McMillan, 2020; Taylor & Childs, 2021).

Other studies emerged that partially addressed communication as it related to how faculty members can promote student success during emergency online learning (Benty et al., 2020; Katz et al., 2021; Sobaih et al., 2020). Katz et al. (2021) surveyed roughly 2,900 college students attending four-year institutions about Internet access and their experiences with online communication with faculty members and found that some college students struggled with access to the Internet, rendering their learning experiences difficult. Many college students did not have adequate Internet access, and even students with adequate Internet access experienced poor communication from faculty members, leading to students feeling confused about their coursework and unclear regarding how to access academic resources in an online setting.

Subsequently, early in the pandemic (mid-2020), Benty et al. (2020) evaluated the role of communication during online learning in Indonesian higher education. The authors found that as faculty members engaged with communication technologies frequently, student success increased, with the authors also asserting that faculty members who were early adopters of online communication were more successful in reaching their students and helping them persist through the challenging early months of the pandemic (March 2020 through June 2020). Similarly, Sobaih et al. (2020) evaluated how college students used social media during the pandemic to engage in their coursework and how faculty members used social media to facilitate online learning environments. The researchers found that college students were much more likely to use social media to communicate with peers to form learning communities, whereas faculty members used social media to communicate objectives and curricular materials. This contrast led to some negative student learning outcomes, as many students reported that they felt social media could be used in the learning process, yet students felt that faculty members were inexperienced with social media and did not leverage the technology in ways that engaged students.

Finally, Calonge et al. (2021) reflected on the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that institutions of higher education did not have the communication structures in place to keep students engaged in their coursework and keep them apprised of COVID-19 related developments and campus services. The authors reviewed crisis communication and emergency

communication literature in higher education and juxtaposed their findings with current practices (as of the 2019-2020 academic year) to argue that many institutions have crisis communication plans in place but were not ready for a global catastrophe on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors suggested that institutions ought to learn from the pandemic and develop early alert systems and better methods of evaluating communication—not just student enrollment numbers or learning outcomes—as communication is critical for institutions to operate and for students to remain safe and learn.

However, these studies leave a considerable gap in the literature related to college students' perceptions of and preferences for institutional communication, especially from stakeholders other than faculty members within the contexts of teaching and learning. Additionally, no studies have engaged with college students to explore students' opinions of communication and whether it helps them persist, especially during crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, this study works to fill the gap in the literature and inform institutions how they can better communicate and support college students.

Methods

We chose a qualitative case study approach to gather a deeper understanding of students' perceptions, opinions, and behaviors (Stake, 1995). We conducted semi-structured interviews to address our research questions. These interviews were part of a larger mixed-methods study of students enrolled in success courses in spring 2021. This study focused on interview data because of the rich findings related to students' preferences for institutional communication and their behaviors. This section describes the site location, recruitment of participants, data collection methods, and approach to data analysis.

Site

The research site was Gulfsouth University, a pseudonym for a private four-year postsecondary institution in the Gulf Coast region of the Southern United States. This location is important to this study because the location experienced several weather-related events in fall 2020, in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic. The institution enrolls about 4,500 students per year, with 3,200 undergraduates and 1,300 graduate students, including 66% women and 34% men, with more than half of all students being Students of Color. Nearly 30% of all undergraduate students at the institution are first in their families to attend college, making this an important study for students who may have varying levels of experiences with higher

education and institutional communication. In this sample, two-thirds of the participants were first in their families to attend college.

Sample

The IRB at GulfSouth University approved this study in December 2019 and an amendment in April 2020 to examine the impact of COVID-19 and adjust protocols to use Zoom for interviews. A second amendment was approved on December 16, 2020 to extend the length of the study until December 20, 2021 given the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of the data under investigation.

Participants were recruited from one of eight sections of one-credit success class offered in spring 2021. Some students were auto-enrolled in the class because of their academic status, while others opted in voluntarily. The majority of the students (14/18) in this sample were on academic probation or financial aid warning; four students were in good academic standing (i.e. cumulative GPA over 2.0). Students learned they could participate in this study through the course syllabus, a module and assignment on Canvas, the course learning management system, and an announcement from the course instructor. Completing the consent form on Qualtrics was a graded assignment in the class, but students' responses were not known to their instructor until after final course grades were submitted. Students who volunteered to be part of the study received emails and text messages to sign up for an hour-long interview on Zoom. Guided by Stake's (1995) approach that interviews are a way to capture "multiple realities" (p. 64), the research team conducted 18 interviews with open-ended questions to get students to describe their experiences, reactions, and ways of accessing information. The research team asked students about university policies like academic probation and financial aid eligibility to assess if students understood their status and how they would locate this information. Some questions asked students to reflect on what they understood in the previous semester compared to the present. We asked students about supports they used, if any, and about their experiences in college during COVID-19. Students who participated in the interviews were given \$20 in Amazon gift cards for their time. See Table 1 for students' demographic information.

Table 1*Descriptive statistics of students participating in this study (n=18)*

Pseudonym	Class year	Gender	Race	First Generation Status	Fall 2020 GPA	Fall 2021 persistence
Angela	First--year	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	First generation	3.4	Retained
Annabelle	First-year	Woman	African American	First generation	2.7	Retained
Charlotte	First-year	Woman	White or Caucasian	First generation	0.0	Not retained
Christina	First-year	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	First generation	3.5	Retained
Denise	First-year	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	First generation	0.0	Retained
Felicia	First--year	Woman	White or Caucasian	Continuing generation	3.1	Retained
Genesis	First-year	Woman	White or Caucasian	First generation	0.0	Not retained
Holly	First-year	Woman	White or Caucasian	First generation	2.4	Not retained
Immanuel	First-year	Man	African American	Continuing generation	2.9	Retained
Julianne	Junior	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	Continuing generation	2.1	Not retained
Katrina	First-year	Woman	White or Caucasian	Continuing generation	0.0	Not retained

Mia	Sophomore	Woman	African American	First generation	2.2	Not retained
Michael	First-year	Man	White or Caucasian	First generation	0.0	Retained
Olivia	First-year	Woman	African American	First generation	0.0	Not retained
Samantha	Junior	Woman	White or Caucasian	Continuing generation	3.2	Retained
Scarlett	First-year	Woman	Hispanic or Latinx	First generation	0.0	Not retained
Vanessa	First-year	Woman	Multi-racial	First generation	3.5	Retained
Vivienne	Sophomore	Woman	African American	First generation	1.8	Retained

We included persistence outcomes based on enrollment data from the institutional research office at GulfSouth University. We coded students as “retained” if they were enrolled in a full-time class schedule (12 or more credit hours) on the last day to add a class in the fall 2021 semester, the next academic year after the data collection. We include this data point to reflect students’ success in college.

Data Collection

Interviews took place via Zoom in April and May 2021 and lasted approximately one hour. They were recorded, auto-transcribed in Zoom, and later cleaned up for accuracy. We tested our interview protocol in a pilot study in spring 2020. The interviewer took reflective memo notes after each interview, noting patterns or inconsistencies, a practice consistent with qualitative methods in case study research (Stake, 1995). The larger data set also included students’ discussion board posts and instructor meetings, which allowed the research team to triangulate findings. Our interview protocol aligned with Saldaña and Omasta’s (2022) recommendations for semi-structured interviews, beginning with broad, rapport-building questions. Students often reflected on the full academic year (2020-2021) in our interviews. The

research team followed the interview protocol in Appendix A. All data were stored in password-protected files and students were assigned pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The first researcher read and coded the transcripts based on our start code list, while the second researcher independently conducted the same analysis. We met weekly to compare results, refine codes, establish reliability. Data analysis consisted of two rounds of coding, informed by Sanford's (1966) theory of *challenge* and *support*, Coombs (2007) work, and Saldaña's (2016) coding process. We approached our data with a list of start codes that evolved through an iterative process of deductive and inductive approaches (Saldaña, 2016). We noted our positionalities throughout the data analysis process.

First Cycle of Coding

Our deductive starting codes came from extant literature about communication and COVID-19, our theoretical frameworks, and our experience with institutional communication in postsecondary education settings. Our code list evolved through inductive coding techniques to capture "emergent, data-driven" codes (Saldaña, 2016, p. 75), such as the way students looped communication information through their family networks to decide if or how to engage with the information.

Second Cycle of Coding

Consistent with Saldaña (2016), we completed a second round of coding to assess the quality of the codes we generated with respect to our research questions, dropping less-used codes. Our codes evolved as this process entailed several iterations of review, reflection, and analysis. From this process, we added sub-themes to our major themes, to organize our robust findings and tease out important nuances, like their conflicting opinions of institutional communication. We used Dedoose, a platform for mixed methods research analysis, to identify themes and track which students were retained or not into the fall 2021 semester. We also used the code co-occurrence chart function in Dedoose to find where our codes were most frequent and where they overlapped (Salmona et al., 2020).

Findings

Major Theme: Students Critical of Communication but Didn't Engage or Act

Students were generally critical of institutional communication because they consistently did not understand or read information being sent to them. In this way, the institution also failed

to engage in accessible, meaningful communication with students about key topics like financial aid. As a result, students were inclined to skim subject lines to decide whether to open an email. However, students' critique of communication was not always warranted because they consistently failed to take action, like replying to an email from a university official, even if they needed clarification. For example, Christina did not know what her financial aid standing was despite reading the emails from financial aid and having access to other support services like advising. Christina said:

I have to see what happens with my classes from this semester and last semester combined. That's one thing I'm a little unsure of. I was going to reach out to financial aid when my finals are over. I'm all over the place with that. I don't know if that notification is gonna still apply my sophomore year.

Students like Christina often overlooked the support they could access in replying to a university email, like a notification from the financial aid office. Scarlett also confirmed that financial aid information was important to her. She knew she needed good grades to keep her financial aid without a clear definition of good grades. When the researcher asked how she would find out more information, she said she would call the financial aid office, something she should have done but did not.

Scarlett also was not sure if she received any other communication from financial aid this year, but then searched her inbox during the interview. Using the search term "financial aid," she found a revised financial aid "thing" sent to her in February (this "thing" was a revised financial aid award notification). She did not remember the contents of the email, but admitted that it had been read. Scarlett's actions, like not remembering an email or reaching out for clarification about requirements, demonstrated how students valued information but struggled to understand how to access it. Scarlett read emails but did not retain the information she read, perhaps because she was inundated with other information or emails were not written in an accessible way. Several other students echoed Christina and Scarlett's sentiment, claiming that they felt confused by institutional communication, but they later admitted that they did not engage with the communication, take action, or ask for help.

Subtheme: Students Relied On Multiple Modes of Communication to Find Information

Students like Christina and Scarlett had access to many modes of communication, like emails, text messages, student information portals, websites, Zoom appointments, and some in-

person opportunities. Yet, the outreach they received from Gulfsouth University also was not consistent; some departments sent only emails while others used text messaging, too. This inconsistency is not ideal from an organizational communications standpoint. The spring 2021 semester had a mix of in-person availability based on the department's COVID-19 plan. Navigating uneven forms of communication must have been confusing for students.

In our interviews, we found students relied on multiple modes and sources of information to understand policies and expectations about financial aid, academic good standing, and COVID-19 related updates. The only consistent form of communication and information that all students accessed was the student portal for their grades, bills, and financial aid information. Scarlett, for example, assumed there were details about her financial aid status somewhere on the student information portal. Beyond the student portal, however, their preferences varied, and included text messages, emails, in-person meetings, phone calls, and checking websites.

Regarding financial aid, students reported using a plethora of resources to find the same information. When asked how to find financial aid information, some students would check the Gulfsouth University website. For students who relied on university websites, they often looked at staff photos for familiar faces. However, others relied on family members for financial aid information. Several students also mentioned the FAFSA website, using Google, and searching their email inbox for notifications from financial aid. Interestingly enough, no students mentioned the school's social media outlets, though they exist, and modern college students participate heavily in social media.

Our interviews then asked where students would turn if they had a pressing question. In those cases, students strongly preferred phone calls. Scarlett liked to talk to people by phone to cut down on feeling confused. Olivia shared a penchant for in-person conversations to address something that was confusing to her. Mia also picked up the phone when financial aid was on the line:

The school sends a lot of emails, so the first month I kept overlooking them. And then I was like, ohhh, I can't have my financial aid next semester or I can't come back. So I'm gonna call [my financial aid counselor] and figure this out.

Similarly, Angela had her financial aid counselor's phone number in her phone as a result of their many conversations around the financial aid verification process the summer before enrolling at Gulfsouth University.

Other students described when they would pivot from relying on email interaction to making a phone call. Holly had a threshold for when a phone call was better. If she had a quick question, like about a form request, she would email. But if it was going to be an “extended two-way conversation, Zoom is much better. If it’s one to three questions, then I just call.” Olivia also preferred talking in person to avoid missing information.

In sum, the students in this study were often critical of the institution’s communications, often lacking important information or not realizing how or when to engage with it. Although students could locate an email from the financial aid office, they also expressed confusion about how to seek more information. In many cases, a reply to that email could have led them to this goal. Students also relied on many forms of communication like the student portal, university websites, or Google searches. Several students had a personal criterion for when a phone call is better than email communication, which dovetails with their preferences, our next major theme.

Major Theme: Students Have Strong Yet Contracting Opinions about Communication

Our data also suggested that students held strong opinions about communication preferences but often contradicted themselves in their responses. They repeatedly complained about the volume of emails they received from the institution but then acknowledged there were limited outlets to convey information. Similarly, they would claim emails were important but then admit they would go days or weeks without checking their university email account. These findings run counter to the literature that should frequent, clear communication with students builds trust (Jeong et al, 2021; McMillan, 2020). Particularly, when asked about communication methods, students often preferred text messages because it eliminated the formality of writing emails and is more visible. Charlotte explained:

I really like texts. If it's in my email, frankly, there's a 50/50 chance I'm going to read it. But, when I get texts, there is a 100% chance I'm going to read it... Getting texts is easier for me to reach back out because I don't have a type a formal email. I can be on the go send the text. Email can be so formal. By texts, I can just be like, “Hey [success instructor], what's up? I need your help.”

This formality of email communication was also the reason why other students, like Charlotte and Katrina, preferred text messages. Katrina acknowledged the power of both a text and email message: “If I get a text, I see it. And if it's referring to an email, I’ll go to my email. That’s usually when I find a whole bunch of stuff I should have been looking out for.” She also

mentioned that she was unlikely to take a call from an unknown number. Here, it seemed as if college students saw the value in email but did not often engage with it, while students also preferred text messages because they could convey similar information and be more readily available on their phones. Ultimately, many students strongly preferred text messaging over email for institutional communication without making many mentions of face-to-face interactions.

Subtheme: Conflicting Opinions of Email as a Form of Communication

Nearly all students mentioned emails in their interviews. They often knew they had critical information in their email inboxes but would not check email regularly. Michael was the only student who expressed fondness for reading and writing emails. He enjoyed the formalities of headers, greetings, and commas. However, when asked about financial aid emails, he did not recall seeing one. He said, “I need to start checking my email more regularly. I could have gotten in and just not seen it. I usually check email every couple of days. But, over the break, I kind of lacked on it a little bit, so I probably just didn’t see it.” Here, even a student who seemingly enjoyed email would not check theirs regularly.

Additionally, many students were overwhelmed by the volume of emails they received from Gulfsouth University, particularly confused by how important academic emails were mixed with ones about non-essential student activities. Students like Angela and Felicia, however, learned about course withdrawal and credit requirements through email interactions. Many students, including Olivia and Samantha, complained they received too many emails about clubs and events, and would subsequently miss important ones. Mia learned to adjust her email checking habits:

My freshman year I really wasn’t looking at my emails and then I realized all the information sent through email, so I check my email every day now. Like my social media apps, they’re the first thing I read when I get up in the morning.

Few of the other students described a process like Mia, who learned to check email daily, which seemed like an effective way to engage with communication. Sadly, although Mia used this helpful routine, she did not return to Gulfsouth the subsequent semester.

Once Annabelle was enrolled in the success class, she emailed her instructor with questions about changing her major and other questions. In the semester prior, she did not know who to ask for help, even though she said she was comfortable emailing her instructors. She did,

however, see emails from offices like financial aid about required documentation. Annabelle said, “I do check my email, so I feel like that is an effective way. I read the headers and then I decide to open it or not, but I feel like email is pretty effective. I don't really know another way of communicating with students.” Angela also noted she would decide whether to open an email based on its subject line or header, a sentiment echoed by several other students.

Despite the volume of email they received, and their selectivity based on subject lines, the majority of the students in this study recalled reading an email about their financial aid status, which prompted them to check their financial aid status. Aside from Denise and Olivia, many students specifically remembered receiving the email notification over the winter break. Students remembered reading this email and having an emotional response, even three to four months later when the interviews took place. Genesis, for example, was home in Boston when she read the email and was upset there was not more of a warning prior to the notification, confused as to who to turn to. Genesis explained:

I got the email and moved on with that information in the back of my head because I didn't really know who to ask. I wasn't really sure... and I never got a warning or an email about it again, so I assumed all was well.

When students missed seeing emails entirely, their academic outcomes suffered. Olivia attended fall 2020 classes online while living at home with several siblings and working at a fast-food restaurant. Olivia did not interact with advisors or other staff at Gulfsouth University until she realized she had failed—and subsequently withdrawn—from all her fall 2020 classes. She admitted to missing emails during the semester because important academic updates were combined with less important ones about activities and events. Olivia only noticed an email about course withdrawals after her grades were posted. Her only interaction with a school official was with her associate dean of her college before the spring 2021 semester, which led her to the success class and a better understanding of the pass/fail policy.

Email communication is so critical that one of the success classes specifically addressed a campus-wide email about the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund II (HEERF II) (Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2021). Reviewing this email was a class activity that involved identifying confusing terms, understanding if or how it applied to them, and what to do next. For example, Gulfsouth automatically awarded Pell Eligible students with additional grant funds, but students outside this FAFSA-related eligibility

criteria could complete an application link in the email text. In our study, none of the students reported having seen the HEERF II email. One of the students, Charlotte, recalled this class meeting, too. She recounted:

One of the things we talked about was how they were giving out money for COVID-19. [The professor] said, “Check your email. Who all has seen it?” None of us raised our hands. So we checked our email. I found it, and it showed I had opened it. Our professor said, “So you opened it, but you didn't actually see what it said.” That taught me to pay a little bit more attention because if I could have qualified, that would have sucked.

There were, however, other students interviewed who saw the HEERF email and referenced it when asked about communication from financial aid. Denise, for example, remembered the HEERF email but did not recall an email notification about her financial aid standing, though one was likely sent to her in January as part of the notification protocol at the university.

Interviewer: The only emails you remember from financial aid were about the refund?

Denise: Yes.

Here, students' confusion demonstrated the potentially problematic nature of institutional email communication. Most of the students in this study recalled the email they received during Winter Break about their financial aid status, which was a successful email message in that it reached the majority of its audience. But there still were students who felt confused and lost by the notification or did not see it at all (like Denise), showing they did not see how to engage with the email for support.

Sub-Theme: Authentic, Personal Communication Matters

Given these interactions with email communication, our findings yielded that authentic, personal touches resonated with students. Above all, students cared that the information felt personal to them as an individual, acknowledging what they cared about and coming from someone who truly knew them as a person. Given the mixed emotions and actions associated with emails, students were more inclined to engage through text message, make selective reading choices based on subject lines (sometimes called “headers”), and sought authentic, personalized outreach. Interestingly, none of these forms of outreach were specific to the financial aid communications, which did occasionally send informative text messages. These references pertained more so to academic advisors, success class instructors, or other faculty members.

Charlotte admitted she was deliberately hiding from her advisor's attempts to communicate with her in the fall semester based on signs of struggle. This advisor was reaching out to her in the fall 2020 semester and later was her success class instructor in spring 2021. Charlotte laughed at a text message her advisor sent to her about early alerts, notices from instructors that she was behind on assignments and attendance. Charlotte confessed to ignoring the outreach because she felt overwhelmed. She remembered a particular text message that called her out, which stated, "I know you are hiding from me! Come see me." Charlotte did finally go see her advisor. From that point on, Charlotte's communication with her advisor felt deeply personal and caring to her. At a different point in the interview, Charlotte stated that her advisor "saved me a couple of times this semester." The advisor's communication style had invited her to accept support, which is consistent with communications research about faculty promoting student success during online emergency learning (Rainey & Taylor, 2022). Despite this connection, however, Charlotte did not return to Gulfsouth.

Genesis, on the other hand, felt the (mostly email) communication from her advisor was "structured" and "professional" because the messaging did not acknowledge her as a unique individual. She felt this way about most of her exchanges with Gulfsouth University—from the president's emails to her interactions with a campus therapist. Genesis described herself as a very "vibe-y" person." She explained this was why "structured emails" did not resonate with her. Genesis said:

I could literally care less to talk to this woman, to talk to this advisor, because I'm like I know it's all for the school, you know what I mean. They are not really like, "This is a student I care about and would like to see what's going on with her."

Genesis described an interaction with her advisor and the financial aid office about a course withdrawal because her grade was low. She emailed her advisor, who replied, "This could affect your financial aid, so call them." She called the financial aid office and set up a meeting with her counselor, but he was only available a day after the withdrawal deadline. Genesis sent another email to her advisor explaining the hold up with the financial aid office, and was then granted an extension. The financial aid counselor missed their planned meeting time, so Genesis drafted another email to her financial aid counselor, apologizing for being an inconvenience. She expressed her frustration with the system:

I feel like a lot of people, especially higher ups, people older than us, kind of look at us like, “Yeah, you are okay, you're an adult now.” And it's like I have no idea what to do! I can't even get myself dressed in the morning. How do you expect me to email 25 people? Genesis’s reference to not being able to dress herself was likely connected to her mental health state; she described herself as depressed and sad. On top of this, she was now asked to search for the right people to email and negotiate deadlines, all the while no one asked Genesis if she was all right or tried to learn more about what was happening in her life throughout these interactions. Genesis wanted to feel like someone cared about her but, instead, she felt bounced around and frustrated. She interpreted the communication from her advisors as only being for the school and its business needs, and not about her as an individual. Genesis was also frustrated because she appreciated the communications she received from the admissions offices as she was making her enrollment decision, which did not equate to the communications once she was an enrolled student.

Students like Charlotte saw individualized communications from their professors as a sign they cared about her. Charlotte said:

It's one thing to get a notification on Canvas but if I get an email I'm going to see it and react to it. Just something like, “Hey are you doing okay?” or “I noticed that you missed this or that and I want to help you[...] Just reaching out and talking to you personally, not just like you're one of the herd has been nice.

Charlotte also believed she could distinguish personalized communication from the greeting line like, “Dear Students” v. “Dear Charlotte,” despite the many platforms that allow for merged fields. Interestingly, the above example references email and Canvas notifications, though Charlotte elsewhere in the interview expressed a preference for text messages.

Despite their mixed emotions about emails, many students saw at least some of the important information Gulfsouth conveyed through this channel. They clearly value messaging that feels authentic and personal to them, providing multiple ways to learn and engage with information and resources.

Major Theme: Communication Improves Persistence and Encourages More Communication

Learning to communicate with professors, either by email or in person, was a critical part of communication leading to successful outcomes. Students noted their improved confidence in

communication, especially email communication, led to better connections with faculty, a key persistence support. For example, Julianne was a junior who moved from in person classes to fully online classes and noted that she was more confident in email communication. She said, “I’m more emboldened to ask questions over email, then I would be having to find them and ask the question. It’s easier for me to communicate and get things done while doing other things, instead of having to stop and go in.” Annabelle also talked about feeling more comfortable emailing instructors in spring 2021 than she was the semester prior, fall 2020. She said, “I’m more prone this semester to advocate for myself or reach out to teachers or whoever. Just build that connection.” Annabelle returned to Gulfsouth the following semester, showing that this improved skill could have led to her persistence. Consistently, students said that email communication allowed them to build connections with their professors, also developing communication skills and self-efficacy along the way.

Subtheme: Students Believe Good Communication Improves Persistence

When asked how the institution could improve communications, Vanessa suggested including more content in first-year courses and in orientation. Students like Julianne and Felicia relied on emailing an instructor before talking to them in person for fear of appearing confrontational. Once students learned how communication with their instructors was helpful and not to be feared, they engaged in a key persistence strategy. Annabelle reflected:

I think that it’s just important that you reach out to people as soon as you start noticing that you should reach out to people—whether it be professors about grades or homework or receiving therapy on campus. You’re not doing yourself any favors by postponing reaching out. And it just becomes a little bit unbearable to reach out after too long of—at least for me personally—after a lengthy period of avoiding it.

For many of the students, learning to communicate with their success class instructor was the gateway to improved communications with all their instructors, often leading to better grades, less stress, and more confidence. It also helped that students like Charlotte knew they could get a quick reply from their success instructor, making them feel less afraid while gaining the information needed.

Subtheme: Good Communication May Catalyze Student-to-Family Outreach

Family relationships were an important part of a student’s academic and personal support system. When asked directly about critical information related to financial aid, bills, or policies,

many students referenced family communication. Some of the students who shared they were first-generation students said they wanted to chart a path for their younger siblings. Other students, however, preferred to navigate college and its policies independently from their families. Above all, however, many students who engaged with institutional communications looped in their family as part of their process of understanding and using information.

Christina first mentioned on campus resources when the interviewer asked about her financial aid standing, noting that she took the initiative to inform her parents of her financial aid standing. At a later point in the interview, however, she talked about a course withdrawal in the semester and that she consulted with her advisor and her mom. After speaking with her mom, she decided to withdraw from the class because she could not catch up to pass it, although earned hours are part of her financial aid eligibility criteria.

Some students were clearer about their parents' communication. Vivienne admitted, "I would be so lost without [my parents]." Vivienne's responses to all questions about her financial aid, bills, or criteria indicated she relied heavily on her parents reading emails, paying bills, and keeping track of policies. Similarly, Scarlett relied on her mom to "keep tabs" on her financial aid communication. Olivia said her mom is her "main parent" when it comes to school. Some students talked about siblings in a parental-like role, relying on them for critical information and advocacy. Felicia referred to her older sister more than ten times in her interview. Felicia explained her sister was someone who was not afraid to find and talk to the person she needs to clarify a question. When pressed, Felicia admitted that was not something she often did for herself. She also consulted with her sister and her mom at the end of the fall semester when deciding about the late course withdrawal policy. Charlotte also connected with the financial aid office only after her mom advised her to call about a loan. Last, Michael relied more on his support network at Gulfsouth University for clarity around financial aid policy, but still leaned on his mom when he was confused about other institutional communication.

Other students like Olivia and Mia seemed determined to prove they could operate without family help, but then noted the ways their families were involved in navigating institutional communication and policy. Olivia preferred to navigate college independently from her family, but her mom became involved when she realized she had not passed any of her fall 2020 classes. When the interviewer asked how that exchange went, she said, "loud and angry."

Together, Olivia and her mom connected with the dean's office for a better understanding of her options and ways to move forward.

Mia called financial aid when she could not figure out a form or how to complete the FAFSA herself. She was determined to prove she did not need to rely on family. She later admitted:

I personally don't like making phone calls. If I can do it myself, I will spend hours trying to figure it out. But I mean it's a big deal to pay for school. So, I had to get that figured out.... I'm the youngest [sibling] so most things have been done for me. So, I have proved to myself that I can get it done without them [siblings] helping out.

Mia also acknowledged, however, that she would not be in college without her older sisters, and always went to them with her questions. She also said she relied on her mom when she was selected for verification, as she first tried to navigate the process herself but had to call her mom for specific tax forms.

Angela also described the complicated experience of financial aid verification. Coming into her first year at Gulfsouth University, Angela was required to track down additional documentation, which was burdensome because she was not in touch with her birth father. Further complicating this was the fact that the local City Hall was not open due to COVID-19, so her mom had to locate custody papers through virtual channels. Further, her mom experienced delays in a letter about her tax filings because the government office was focused on COVID-19-related relief. However, due to the communication she received from Gulfsouth, Angela successfully navigated the verification process after contacting her mother and triangulating the institutional communication with what she knew about verification and her mother's knowledge. Angela returned to Gulfsouth the following semester, perhaps demonstrating the positive effect of an engaged parent during a complicated financial aid process. Like other students, looping in family members was an important way to process and navigate critical university information or requirements.

The nature of institutional communication influenced if or how students connected to support and resources. Genesis felt the communication she received from Gulfsouth was too structured and not personalized to their unique identities, while students like Charlotte had assigned advisors who found ways to reach students and draw them in. Yet, Olivia did not connect with resources until she already failed most of their classes. None of these three students

returned to Gulfsouth, though it was clear from the interviews that Charlotte felt a connection to the institution. Arguably, these students needed interventions sooner, and they needed them personalized, both of which could be rolled into institutional communication policy. While Gulfsouth had resources like academic advisors, tutors, and counselors, students had uneven knowledge of them or experiences with them. Students who were connected to their academic advisors or success class instructors could name campus resources like tutoring, the food pantry, and mental health counseling. But many of them learned of these support structures in the spring semester, only after struggling academically and enrolling in the success class.

Limitations and Delimitations

The research team acknowledged the limitations of this study while setting delimitations to complete the study in a timely manner. This study targeted students enrolled in a success class for students to improve their grades and completed course credits but noted that four of the 18 participants were in good academic standing (GPA > 2.0 on a 4.0 scale and > 67% earned-over-attempted credit hours). The students in this study were not randomized, but their stories add to our understanding of institutional communication. This study was delimited to the 2020-2021 academic year because our interviews took place in spring 2021 and included a reflection on the previous semester and overall experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. We captured students' enrollment in fall 2021 as a proxy for their success but recognize this is part of a broader college journey. This study may be transferable to similar student populations—especially first-generation college students—at times of crisis or disruption. The descriptive nature of our qualitative approach also allows readers, scholars, and practitioners to determine if our findings are applicable in their settings.

Discussion and Implications

Based on our professional work supporting students, including 33 combined years across two authors, and scholarly knowledge, we entered this study knowing students had communication preferences, echoing prior research (Taylor & Serna, 2019, 2020). Our results illuminated the importance of communication, language, and support networks in negotiating challenges throughout the college journey, as prior studies have consistently articulated that clear, timely communication is critical when assisting college students to complete processes, access institutional information, and become self-sufficient communicators (Coombs, 2007; Kuh

et al., 2011; Taylor & Serna, 2019). These findings are also echoed by Taylor and Bicak (2020) in communicating financial aid processes to first-generation college students.

We also found students viewed institutional communication as a *support* but were often *challenged* by that communication in various ways (Sanford, 1966). For instance, participants in this study had strong communication preferences, often wanting it to be personalized and authentic, and institutional communication often did not align with student expectations and was a subsequent *challenge*. The participants in this study did not find Gulfsouth University's institutional communication to be supportive, consistent, or clear. However, participants who learned to engage in communication, including emails, built connections with instructors and were better able to navigate institutional information. They also involved their families as they processed university information, a tenet of crisis communication forwarded by Coombs (2007), as institutional communication ought to be accessible for students and their support networks to triangulate information and increase awareness on campus. This is an important finding given that two-thirds of the parents in this sample did not graduate from college, so educating the entire family on support structures is important to student success. In these ways, this study has many implications for practitioners and future research.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Students make critical decisions about what they read based on very few words, like an email subject line or the “vibe” of a text message campaign. Knowing this, institutions like Gulfsouth should examine their language choices, even testing their messaging with current students before relying on messaging they have used previously. Combining multiple modalities to the common notification email—like a text message or social media campaign, or a parent message—could lead to improved open and reading rates. Moreover, the actual text within the message may be important, as prior research has found that students respond better to text messages including their name and the name of the text message sender (Taylor & Serna, 2019, 2020). It is also important to find out where students go for information and double down on efforts to use that channel, like the student information portal or staff web pages. Coombs (2007) argued that institutions ought to inventory their communication to understand what unit is sending what communication and when, and this study echoes the importance of Coombs' (2007) work and its insistence on streamlined institutional communication.

This study also revealed the importance of consistent messaging from support services to ensure that students have equal opportunities to access resources, hinted at by prior research (Copeland et al., 2021). Again, institutions could consider conducting a communication inventory to ensure messaging is consistent to students and that students are being communicated with a known entity, either a person or unit on campus. Coombs (2007) and Taylor and Serna (2019) offered similar suggestions, highlighting the importance of humanized communication as much as possible, including alerting the student of who is sending the message and attempting to make personal connections with students so that they learn to trust institutional communication.

The reason communication is so critical is because the unknown can be scarier than the known, especially for a student in academic or financial danger of leaving college. In this case, most of the students knew they needed to improve their grades or earned hours, but very few knew by how much or in what ways. They also did not consistently engage with institutional communication from support offices, like financial aid, that would have yielded the answers to critical questions. This looming sense of needing to improve without the precise details can lead students to imagine more difficult or impossible-to-achieve criteria. Left to their creative imagination, students may envision a more difficult road than the one they need to take. Policymakers, for example, could integrate promising practices into the guidelines for maintaining or appealing federal financial aid. Connected to this, students could benefit from strong alignment between key university policies, like financial aid and academic policies. Repetition between academic and financial aid policies could reinforce the criteria and create less confusion for students and staff.

Given these implications, it is important to continue to add to the literature about communication with college students. In the following section, we propose several directions for future research.

Implications for Future Research

This study fills a timely gap in the literature about communication with college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies examined communication about COVID-19 policies (Mackert et al., 2020) and their support networks (Jeong et al., 2021; McMillan, 2020), largely finding the need to be clear with students and to allow community members to trust the institution. Our study confirmed their finding that students and their networks appreciate personalized, authentic communication (Mackert et al., 2020; McMillan, 2020). Other studies

looked at communication between faculty members and students during COVID-19 (Bently et al., 2020), while Sobaih et al. (2020) looked at social media in online learning contexts. Further, Calonge et al. (2021)'s study found that most postsecondary institutions were not well-equipped to communicate during a crisis at the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic. Where our study fits in is that it provides a student-centered view of institutional communications at a heightened time for crisis communication and continuous engagement. Our study illuminated communication challenges that likely pre-dated the pandemic (like students not reading emails) but exacerbated in the context of online learning and support modalities.

We also find our application of Sanford (1966) unique in that institutional communication acted as both a *support* and a *challenge* for college students. It was a challenge when it was ignored, misunderstood, or triggered more stress, though it likely was intended to provide resources, build connections, and maintain a sense of community. The critical nature of university communications and its challenging nuances in meeting different preferences, audiences, and needs makes this an interesting addition to the literature. Further, drawing from Coombs (2007) crisis communication theory, we found GulfSouth University failed to follow a consistent communication approach across individual units, like advising and financial aid offices.

Finally, the field of communications and college students is vast and ever-changing, especially as new modalities for information and engagement appear. That, coupled with changing preferences among college students, makes this study an important contribution to the literature.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we know that communication with college students matters. The urgency of communications was heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic because traditional methods of sharing information were dismantled as nearly all education operations moved online. For this reason, this study examined how college students viewed institutional communication from university leadership staff, faculty, and peers, and whether these students engaged with institutional communication as a persistence mechanism. We found students were critical of institutional communication but also did not engage or act, like replying to an email or remembering a message that was marked "read." Consistent with previous literature, students want communication to feel authentic and personal and, in some cases, students improved their

communication skills, skills that could increase a student's likelihood of being successful in college. Students who receive, understand, and know how to engage with university information are likely to succeed in other parts of college life.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Author Biographies

Dr. Elizabeth A. Rainey is the Assistant Provost for Student Success at Loyola University New Orleans, where she leads the Pan-American Life Student Success Center and university-wide retention strategies. She has worked in higher education for more than 20 years in roles spanning admissions, advising, faculty support, and student success. Her research focuses on students' experiences, retention outcomes, and financial aid policy.

Dr. Z. W. Taylor is an assistant professor at the University of Southern Mississippi. Dr. Taylor has worked in education for 15 years as a pre-college counselor, financial aid consultant, assistant director of admissions, and admissions analyst, specifically aiming to serve low-income students and students of color.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hello! My name is [researcher name]. I am [brief background]. This meeting will be recorded and transcribed. I may reach back out to you with clarifying questions.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the experiences of students on academic probation and financial aid warning. This research project aims to improve the ways we support students at Gulfsouth. As part of the module called, “helping future students” in your success course this spring, you completed a consent form for this project. Gulfsouth’s Institutional Review Board approved this project for study, which means it complies with privacy expectations and support for research. This interview will take approximately 1 hour and you will be sent a \$20 gift card on Amazon by email within one week. Do you have questions?

There are risks and resources associated with this project. Talking about academic struggles may be hard or upsetting. Remember students have access to have access to resources in counseling, student life, and student success services. I can provide more information to you at the end of this conversation. I also acknowledge that this interview may come at a difficult time and that you may share information for which I have resources. Know that I will acknowledge your voice and will offer you resources at the end of the interview if appropriate.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

This interview will contain several open-ended questions and follow up questions. Please feel free to share anything you’d like.

This study is about students during academic probation and financial aid warning. The first set of questions are about academic probation, then about financial aid, and finally about your overall experiences.

Academic probation.

1. Thinking back to the fall [or the semester prior to probation], what did you understand about the policies or expectations of academic probation?
2. Are you on academic probation this semester?
3. How did you know about academic policies?
 - a. How did you find this information?
4. How did you first come to understand you were on academic probation?

- a. What was your reaction?
 - b. Whom, if anyone, did you tell?
5. How would you describe your academic status to a peer or family member?
 6. How did you feel about being on academic probation?

Financial aid.

7. Was financial aid a concern for you while you were on academic probation?
8. Do you know the status of your financial aid? (e.g., warning, probation, eligible, not eligible). What is it?
9. Thinking back to the fall [or the semester prior to probation], what did you understand about the policies or expectations of financial aid?
10. How did you first come to understand your financial aid standing?
 - a. What was your reaction?
 - b. Whom, if anyone, did you tell?
11. How do you know about financial aid policies?
12. How did you find this information?
13. Do you understand what you need to do to keep your scholarship/financial aid?
 - a. How did you know?
14. How do you describe your financial aid status?
15. How would you describe your financial aid status to a peer or family member?
16. How do you feel about being in financial aid warning?

Experiences.

17. Did your academic or financial aid status change your mindset coming into the spring semester?
 - a. In what ways?
18. What support, if any, did you seek at Gulfsouth University to improve your grades?
19. How did you know what support was available to you? Tell me more about your experience this spring...
 - a. Study habits?
 - b. Approach to classes?
 - c. Approach to professors?

- d. Friends?
 - e. Family?
 - f. Work?
 - g. Other commitments?
20. What was your experience in the success class?
21. How did you navigate the transition to online learning during COVID?
- a. Did you face challenges?
 - b. Were there benefits?

Closing

Thank you for spending this time with me to help future students. I really appreciate your willingness to open up to be and to be part of a project to help future students.

Appendix B

Code Book

CODE	Description
Belong	Sense of belonging; feeling part of community; not alone.
Communication	Emails, not reading emails, flyers, talking to professors, friends, family.
COVID-19	Related to pandemic
Criteria	What students understand about financial aid or academic criteria.
Criteria-correct	Accurate description or reference to criteria related to financial aid.
Criteria-semi-correct	
Criteria-unknown	Did not know the criteria to keep financial aid.
Expectations	Expectations student has for themselves; expectations of faculty; expectations of family; perfectionism
Fear	Imposture syndrome; Fear of failure; fear of speaking up; fear of being alone; fear of going home; fear to ask for help; fear of missing out; fear of sounding dumb; fear of being judged; lack of confidence; insecure
Great quote	
Health	Self care, mental health, Mental well-being; access to medication and treatment; anxiety; depression; physical health; stress; exercise; meditation; accessing resources; spirituality; faith; sleep; happiness; music; art; creativity; reflection; diet; food
Motivation	the desire to be in college; the desire to be at the institution; the willingness to do work that is less interesting or seems unimportant

Pay for school	
Policy	What they understand about financial aid or other policies
Policy-correct	Accurate description of policy
Policy-unknown	
Relationships	Family; role of student’s family in their academic and personal journey; death in family; friends; role of student’s friends (or lack thereof) in their academic and personal journey
Relationship-Faculty	
Relationship-Family	
Resource	
Retention	Indication they stopped out or will stop out of college. Or allude to something pertaining to retention
Status	How students described their financial aid status
Status-correct	Student description of their status is correct.
Status-unknown	
Study strategies	Effective strategies and approaches to academic skills, such as writing a research paper, studying for a test, or prioritizing tasks; preparation from high school; organization; paying attention; notetaking
Technology	Role of technology as a necessity in college, learning management system, Blackboard, Canvas, emailing instructors, using Zoom; role of technology as a means to connect with others; role of technology as a distraction; multitasking in technology; online classes; cell phones; text messages; video games
Work	Jobs, employment