The FFWS contracted with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center to conduct a survey of current FFWS recipients to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their academic plans. After spring break, all UW Campuses closed to in-person classes and moved to online education for the rest of the semester. The survey was sent to students on April 30th, with three reminder emails before closing on May 15th.

Once all data were gathered, FFWS Executive Director, Mary Gulbrandsen, contacted the researcher to see if there were commonalities that emerged from the open-ended survey responses.

The researcher then coded and analyzed the qualitative responses from each open-ended question. NVivo 1.0 qualitative data analysis software was used. The researcher examined specific words and sentences, which were thought to be insightful perceptions expressed by the participants regarding their experience with the COVID-19 pandemic. This technique guaranteed that the opinions and perceptions of the participants were observed and categorized consistently. Consequently, grounded thematic patterns (Creswell, 2003) were acknowledged and grouped into parallel key categories.

**Findings**

**Question 12 – What kind of issues did you face in the move to online instruction?** *Other* **responses:**

Analysis of the data revealed five emerging themes: Technological Issues, Learning Style, Miscommunication, Learning Environment, and Motivation. Direct quotes have been presented as indicative of the respondents' views.

**Technological Issues**

A vast majority of the survey participants spoke about their difficulties with accessing and obtaining the proper technology they needed in order to be successful in an online class format. The most prevalent technological shortcomings mentioned were internet connectivity, having to purchase software, having a properly functioning webcam, printing and scanning capabilities, and having a home computer or laptop. For example, one participant spoke about their experience and the adjustments that were made.

> I didn't have a laptop this past year at school, thankfully a family friend lent me a laptop until I was able to get one. Furthermore, my family and I had to pool money in order to buy a new router and modem, for our internet to be consistent. The camera on the laptop I got wasn't working so I had to communicate this with

> all my instructors and find alternative methods to ensure I was following academic honesty procedures. I don't have a printer at my house and some tasks would have been tremendously easier with one.

Another participant expressed their technological troubles with internet connectivity.

> I have faced internet connection issues. Since everything has been moved online, the internet is trying to keep up and I know I am not the only one who has struggles with this. I am close to failing a course because of my internet connection issues. Also, I am taking educational technology that requires Zoom class lectures each week and sometimes I can't connect to it.

Additionally, numerous participants mentioned having to make expensive, unexpected technological purchases. Some of those responses were, "I had to purchase WiFi at my house to do my homework. It also isn't as good as the universities, so homework often takes longer," "I don't have internet at my house, I've had to use a hotspot for my homework. The connection is slow and using a hotspot is expensive," "I had to upgrade my WiFi and get a new laptop to do school sufficiently," "I have already gotten one electricity bill to remind me that I'm constantly on my laptop".

**Learning Style**

Transitioning from mainly in-person classes to completely online has been perceived as one of the biggest obstacles for participants. Many participants selected their more traditional institutions because they were cognizant of their learning style, wanted in-person classes, and valued social interaction. Now, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, being forced to shift to online learning, participants are experiencing austere trepidations. Students who were excelling at in-person classes now feel their academic prowess is in jeopardy because of the unexpected switch to an unfamiliar method of learning. Here are a couple of comments that illustrate this theme.

> Because I am very much an auditory learner, not having any lectures has made it more difficult to retain the information from just reading articles and writing. Because my classes are difficult, a lot of peer-to-peer collaboration is required to break down the homework assignments, lectures, and projects. This has become especially difficult now that none of us see each other anymore.

> I am in my student teaching semester, the transition to online learning has been very difficult as classroom teachers also try to navigate teaching online. There is not a set number of tasks for me. Also, the differences between districts I am teaching in is huge. One district has 100% online participation, the other is not instructing online at all.

> I can't hear or follow the lectures very well, and often, that makes it difficult to do anything in a class that has exclusively video lectures and conferences. Professors simply don't provide transcripts or as in-depth written notes. It was not nearly as much of a problem in-person because I could ask other students for help. Whereas now, that is much more difficult (only showing a slideshow with brief bullet points or only having a very tiny face-cam on-screen).

> I have gone from all passing grades (A's and B's) to failing ½ of my classes because of online classes. I cannot seem to get in contact with my professors with work that I am struggling with.

> I struggle with learning online because I learn the most valuable information from working in the field, discussions with my peers, and face-to-face conversations with my professors.

These are just a few examples of the complications expressed by participants having to switch to online learning. While online learning can be affective and could possibly become the new normal because of COVID-19, based on the responses to this question, it appears that more innovation and differential delivery methods need to be explored to accommodate the various learning styles.

**Miscommunication**

Unexpectedly transitioning to online learning, appeared to impede communication between faculty and students. Many participants noted being "confused" about assignment due dates and when quizzes and exams were. Also, participants expressed their frustrations with longer than normal or non-existent responses to email. The severe health risks associated with COVID-19, coupled with some faculty not being familiar with the online platform, made some students feel there online learning experience was "unorganized" and "poorly communicated".

> A lot of professors were had hard time adjusting same as us but it only made worse by the fact that most of them have had little contact period. Like they contact (email) us once a week or once every two. I have had to drop classes because I felt like it just didn't work online.

> A lot of professors were not clear when quizzes or exams would be posted, so I have missed a few trying to get in the swing of things. Also, some professors stopped teaching, so I only had PowerPoints to reference when learning material.

> Miscommunication regarding what is do when or even what assignments we have and deadline changes without notifying students.

> Assignments were late cause they were not showing up on Canvas or put in the wrong place, also professors are getting used to it as well so it's hard to communicate properly.

> Classes being taught with little to no communication from instructors. There has been a lot of confusion regarding instruction, and classes are far more difficult to navigate. We also resumed classes at the same time we were required to move out of dorms, so it was a hard adjustment to begin with and made more difficult without communication.

**Learning Enviornment**

Having a conducive learning environment is an effective way to manage time and complete required tasks. For many participants, being on-campus, allowed them to choose an environment that provided discipline and structure. However, once COVID-19 hit and students were forced out of their preferred environment and routine, not all home environments were as conducive to aid in their learning.

> As the eldest child, being at home means that I have daily responsibilities that I have to do to help out my family. I don't mind helping my family, but it did take away from focusing on academics.

> Despite having more time and being home at almost all times, it is difficult to find a quiet place in the house to sit and do schoolwork. Both of my parents are essential workers, therefore, they come in and out of the house at different times. My younger sister is also always in the house. I live in a small apartment with all of them. I require space and quiet to focus on my homework and my family members try to give me the space I need but sometimes it isn't enough.

> I have a big family, so I have a problem focusing during the online classes because my siblings are in the background constantly. Before the stay-at-home order, I spent my time completing assignments in the Union or the library.

> I have house chores and responsibilities so when I go home, it is very difficult to manage time for homework and staying on track. My family's stressful situation of bills disturbs me and impact me.

**Motivation**

Many participants mentioned having "no motivation" with online instruction. Not having the accountability of in-person instruction, where many faculty still take attendance, participants felt online instruction provided them with the prospect to "slack off". Here are some examples of responses provided.

It's very difficult to work in my current environment and stay motivated, as I'm sure everybody has noted. These times creates a stressful atmosphere that makes me want to return to normal very soon.

Keeping track of class times and knowing what day it is. I'm also facing some issues with being motivated and staying focused.

Issues with motivation mostly. Going on campus was easy for me and felt productive. Now I don't have that. I am still keeping up, but the lack of structure is incredibly debilitating.

I have found that taking all online classes is very difficult to transition to because I often lost motivation. It was also quite hard to find a routine that worked for me that I could stick to.

**Question 23 – <u>Before</u> COVID-19, did you have any of the following additional plans for Fall 2020?** *Something else* **responses:**

Analysis of the data revealed four emerging themes. Please find the themes listed below. Themes are not listed in any particular order. Other, less frequent responses included: moving, traveling, volunteering, club team participation, and graduation.

- Graduate/Professional School (i.e. medical school, law school, graduate school)

- Field Work/Clinical

- Independent Study/Faculty-Led Research

- Work (on-campus and off-campus)

**Question 24 – <u>Currently,</u> do you have any of the following additional plans for Fall 2020?** *Something else* **responses:**

Similar to the responses in Question 23, analysis of the data revealed four emerging themes. Two remained the same and two new ones were developed. Please find the themes listed below in no particular order. Other, less frequent responses included: fraternity/sorority life, traveling, volunteering, and club team participation.

- Graduate/Professional School (see examples listed in Question 23)

- Field Work/Clinical

- Student Teaching

- Time Off (many participants considered this option if online classes persist and things are not returned to normal)

**Question 33 – From what service or institution have you received financial assistance?**

Analysis of the data revealed three emerging themes. Please find the themes listed below. Themes are not listed in any particular order.

- Emergency Fund Grant—institution specific and funded through Financial Aid Office (labeled differently based on the institution but appears to be the same type of emergency funding provided to students due to COVID-19)

- Government Stimulus Check (exact amount varied)

- Unemployment Benefits

**Question 36 – What concerns you the most regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and your academic plans?**

Analysis of the data revealed three emerging themes: Graduating On-Time, GPA, and Financial Strain. Direct quotes have been presented as indicative of the respondents' views.

**Graduating On-Time**

Numerous participants expressed their unsatisfactory experience with online learning and how that could impact their anticipated graduation date. These sentiments are illustrated by the following comments.

> Because classes are more difficult, I am concerned about passing important classes that I need to graduate and then having to retake classes, therefore being set back on my graduate date.

> Because I don't perform well in online setting, I am seriously considering a semester off until we can return to campus. Doing so however, would derail my graduation plans and future career path.

> Completing course work on time due to no internet in the area that I live it's not provided. Being behind due to this pandemic and not graduating on time.

**GPA**

During the collegiate experience, GPA is vital to remain competitive for scholarship opportunities, grants, internships, research opportunities, graduate and professional school, and other high impact practices. However, participants felt that taking classes online because of COVID-19 has negatively impacted their GPA.

> Currently COVID-19 has affected my schooling greatly. If the pandemic continues, I will try and continue my schoolwork from online, but it has been a lot harder for me.

> Currently, I don't feel as if I am performing to the best of my ability while taking courses in the online format. I am worried now that my grades will suffer having to takes these online classes in order to stay on track for my academic plan and to maintain scholarships.

> Due to the switch to online-instruction delivery and not a lot of in-person interaction, it is hard to stay motivated to perform well academically, which can affect my GPA for graduation.

**Financial Strain**

A substantial number of participants expressed financial hardships due to COVID-19. Here are some examples of their issues.

> Due to COVID-19 pandemic, I lost out on credits which have resulted in me being behind. I plan on transferring schools, so I can be closer to home now that I don't have enough money to support myself if I stayed ay my current campus. My lack of credits could hurt my chances of being able to transfer to said school. Due to this, I hope to take online courses to increase my credits; however, I will have to be working in order to have enough money to pay for the course and still live comfortably and save money for the fall 20202 semester.

> Due to COVID-19 I will most likely have to take out loans. This is because I am still paying for a house off-campus in [institution name removed] but not living there. Since I am living with my family I had to install and pay for Wifi and pay for rent.

> Due to COVID-19, my dad was laid off for the time being which means that I may not be able to take my summer classes because we can't afford them.

> Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to relocate back to my hometown to help out my family. I am contributing financially to the household for utility bills and necessities like food. I am also home schooling my two younger siblings that are still in the K-12 education system. In addition to struggling to balance my academics and trying to help my siblings with their academics, I am also helping

> my father take care of my grandma…We are struggling to get by and trying to budget for summer as well.

**Question 37 – Do you have any suggestions to the FFWS board of directors that could help support you and other FFWS recipients during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Analysis of the data revealed one main theme. Please find the theme listed below. Other, less frequent responses included: more lenient grant requirements (i.e. fewer credits required to receive grant funding), extended eligibility (i.e. students can receive the FFWS grant for more than 10 terms), employment opportunities, and additional resources to assist with stress, anxiety, and time management.

- Additional Financial Assistance—participants mentioned these funds would assist with things such as:
    o Tuition (for summer term and next academic year)
    o Additional equipment/supplies needed due to transitioning to online instruction
    o Rent
    o Groceries
    o Utilities
    o Gas
    o Childcare
    o Assistance for students caring for elderly parents and/or grandparents
    o Bills
    o Income subsidy due to being unemployed as a result of COVID-19

References

Creswell, W. J. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.