

Academic Entitlement in Pre- and Post-Pandemic College Students:

A Cross-Sectional Examination

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Abstract: The COVID-19 outbreak forced college faculty across the globe to move their courses online and relax their policies and expectations for course attendance and assignments. Although these changes were clearly warranted, research has yet to examine the extent to which such pandemic related changes may have affected students' perceptions of and expectations concerning their education. The present exploratory study was designed to examine this question by utilizing archival data that included a cross-section of two college cohorts: one sampled immediately before the pandemic and the other sampled two years later. Mean-level differences were examined in college students' scores on measures of academic satisfaction, academic entitlement, academic locus of control, and growth mindset between those surveyed immediately before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US and those surveyed two years later. Results revealed that while undergraduate students are equally satisfied with the education they received prior to the pandemic compared to those surveyed two years later, undergraduate students sampled after the pandemic appear to have (a) heightened beliefs that they have little autonomy over academic outcomes in their lives and (b) increased expectations that they should succeed academically regardless of their own efforts or performance.

Keywords: college students, academic entitlement, COVID-19

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically disrupted normal practices of higher education systems. Beginning in March of 2020, Universities and colleges across the globe were forced to quickly, in the span of days or weeks, shut down campuses and transition instruction to distance learning methods (Huang et al., 2020; Prokopenko & Berezhna, 2020; Mseleku, 2020; Ratten, 2020). Due to the emerging pandemic, faculty and students worldwide

had to immediately, and without warning, adapt to a new form of teaching and learning. Arguably, both faculty and students had to relax their expectations to adapt to the sudden, disruptive changes that were required to maintain instruction. That is, students could no longer expect to receive the same kind of instruction from or interaction with their instructors, and faculty could no longer expect the same kind of work or performance from their students. In fact, because of the pandemic, faculty across the globe were urged – and sometimes forced as a matter of circumstance – to relax or ignore their previous, pre-pandemic course policies that reinforce “good” student behavior (e.g., policies concerning attendance, participation, and late or missing work). Further, in some ways, faculty were forced to either intentionally or unintentionally inflate students’ grades to accommodate for the circumstances – leading to the greatest spike in grade inflation ever recorded in the published literature (Karadag, 2021).

Although it can be argued that, over the long-term, the pandemic’s emergency protocols forced an overdue critical review of traditional practices and policies within academia, many have wondered how the extreme leniency students were provided during the pandemic may have negatively affected the students. For instance, Meeter and colleagues (2020) questioned whether the relaxation or removal of policies during the pandemic that typically reward good student behavior (e.g., policies concerning grading, attendance, participation, meeting deadlines) may have reduced students’ intrinsic motivations to learn, and unintentionally rewarded more problematic learning behaviors (e.g., skipping class and submitting late work). Unfortunately, emerging research appears to support such fears. For instance, retrospective studies asking college students to reflect on their experiences before, during, and after the pandemic have demonstrated a rather dramatic decline in college students’ self-reported academic motivations and desire to learn (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Meeter et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2021; Velásquez-Rojas et al., 2022). Further, college students have reported – and empirical evidence demonstrates - that students now procrastinate more and put less effort into their coursework (e.g., spend less time studying, attend fewer lectures) than they did before the pandemic (Meeter et al., 2020; Pagoto et al., 2021). It is perhaps unsurprising that emerging research is suggesting

that college students are now, after the pandemic, performing worse in their college classes than they did before the pandemic (Ferrer et al., 2023).

Interestingly, while students admit that, since the pandemic, they are now less motivated and are putting in less effort into their learning and education, they continue to expect to receive good grades (Ferrer et al., 2023). This conflicting pattern of findings, which has been noted in several qualitative studies (e.g., Meeter et al., 2020; Pagoto et al., 2021), suggests that beyond reducing students' motivations and desire to learn, the COVID-19 pandemic may have increased college students' feelings of academic entitlement. Chowning and Campbell (2009) define academic entitlement as "... the tendency to possess an expectation of academic success without taking personal responsibility for achieving that success" (p .982). Consistent with this conceptual definition, research finds that students who score high on measures of academic entitlement do not take personal responsibility for their learning and, instead, believe that their instructors are ultimately responsible for making sure they succeed in their courses and degree programs (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Knepp & Knepp, 2022; Miller, 2013). Unfortunately, students who have a heightened sense of academic entitlement tend to view education from a consumerist perspective, believing that grades and degrees are something they are purchasing through their tuition and course fees rather than something they are earning through their behavior and performance (Schaefer et al., 2013). Instead of taking responsibility for their own behavior, students who score high on measures of academic entitlement tend to attribute responsibility for their academic success to outside sources (Formuth et al., 2019; Ney & Fischweicher, 2021). As such, academically entitled students often demonstrate a clear lack of engagement both in and out of the classroom (Knepp, 2016; Knepp & Knepp, 2022), and are prone to engaging in a wide range of problematic behaviors (e.g., academic dishonesty) inside and outside of the classroom (see Stiles et al., 2018 for review).

Although the extant research has documented, often via retroactive self-reports, that the pandemic negatively affected students' academic motivations while bolstering their expectations for success, no research has empirically examined the extent to which the pandemic may have increased academic entitlement among college students. The present exploratory study was

designed to examine this question by utilizing data, collected at the University of Cincinnati, that included a cross-section of two college cohorts: one sampled immediately before the pandemic and the other sampled two years later.

The Current Study

In the present study, we utilized archival data to examine college students' feelings of academic entitlement immediately before and two years after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. The data, which was collected as part of an existing program evaluation at the institution, included college students' responses to measures of several psychological constructs, including Kopp et al.'s (2011) measure of academic entitlement. Research reveals that higher scores on measures of academic entitlement tend to be associated with a heightened belief that academic outcomes are outside of one's own personal control (i.e., an "external" locus of control; Formuth et al., 2019; Ney & Fischweicher, 2021; Sohr-Preston & Boswell, 2015), and an orientation toward taking a fixed (vs growth) mindset when it comes to the malleability of intelligence (see Gregory et al., 2023). We examined whether there are any mean-level differences in locus of control and growth mindset between the two cohorts. Finally, as an exploratory factor, we examined the extent to which students are satisfied with the education they are receiving at both time points.

In general, we expected the post-pandemic sample of students to score higher on measures of academic entitlement than those sampled immediately before the pandemic. Further, considering research has already documented an increase in students' tendency to adopt an external locus of control during the pandemic (Misamer et al., 2021; Orgilio & Odar Sough, 2022), we predicted that the post-pandemic sample of students would also score higher on the measure of external *academic* locus of control than those sampled before the pandemic. No specific predictions were made concerning growth mindset and academic satisfaction.

Method

Participants

As part of larger program evaluation efforts at the University of Cincinnati, a convenient sample of 279 college students (82% female, 16% male, 1% non-binary) ranging in age from 18 to 53 ($M_{age} = 21.97$, $SD = 5.59$) were recruited to participate in the current study. A total of 155 participants were recruited at the beginning of the 2020 Spring semester, shortly before the pandemic drastically impacted the policies and procedures at the university (i.e., between Jan 22nd and Feb 14th of 2020). The remaining 124 participants were recruited at the beginning of the 2022 Spring semester, approximately two years after the pandemic drastically changed the policies and procedures at the university (i.e., between Jan 19th and Feb 11th of the 2022). A majority of those who agreed to participate self-identified as White/European American, with the remaining 30% identifying as either Black/African American (11%), Asian or Pacific Islander (7%), Hispanic American or Latino/a (4%), or bi- or multiracial (6%). Approximately 62% indicated that they were Junior ($n = 88$) or Senior ($n = 82$) level students with 60 completed credit hours or more.

Materials and Procedures

Students enrolled in 2000- and 3000-level courses in psychology at the University of Cincinnati were provided a link via recruitment information externally directing them to a Qualtrics survey. After providing their consent to participate and basic demographic information, participants were asked to complete a series of individual difference measures, presented in a randomized order. The constructs of interest in the current study included items assessing individual differences in academic entitlement, academic satisfaction, academic locus of control, and growth mindset. Across all measures, participants were asked to respond to individual statements using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*).

Individual differences in academic entitlement, the primary construct of interest in the current study, were assessed using Kopp et al.'s (2011) academic entitlement questionnaire.

Although other measures of academic entitlement exist in the literature (e.g., Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Jackson et al., 2020; Miller, 2013; Wasieleski et al., 2014), the academic entitlement questionnaire was chosen for its brevity and strong evidence of construct validity (see Kopp et al. 2011 for validity evidence). The questionnaire includes 8-items that assess the extent to which students expect to receive positive outcomes (e.g., high grades) in academic settings, regardless of their performance (sample item: *“Because I pay tuition, I deserve passing grades”*). Consistent with prior research (see Kopp et al., 2011), the measure demonstrated an acceptable level of internal consistency ($\alpha = .77$). As such, participants’ responses across the 8-items were averaged, with higher scores reflecting a heightened level of academic entitlement.

In addition to completing the 8-item academic entitlement questionnaire, participants in the current study were asked to respond to 4-items from Schmitt and colleagues’ (2008) measure of academic satisfaction ($\alpha = .82$; sample item: *“I am happy with the amount I learn in my classes”*), and 3-items from Rotter’s (1966) Locus of Control Scale that were selected to assess individual differences in the extent to which they take an *external* locus of control in regard to academic outcomes ($\alpha = .50$; sample item: *“Exam questions often tend to be so unrelated to course work that studying is useless.”*). Finally, among other measures, participants were asked to complete Dweck et al.’s (1995), 3-item measure of growth mindset ($\alpha = .84$; sample item: *I believe that students have a certain amount of intelligence, and they can’t really do much to change it*).

Participants’ responses to each of the individual difference measures were averaged so that higher scores reflected heightened levels of the underlying construct measured. As such, scores on the measure of academic satisfaction were coded such that a higher score reflected a greater degree of academic satisfaction. Averaged scores on the measure of academic locus of control were coded such that a higher score reflects a greater tendency for students to attribute major academic outcomes in their life to *external* forces (i.e., an *external* academic locus of control). Averaged scores on the measure of growth mindset were coded such that higher scores reflect a greater tendency to believe people can get smarter with effort (i.e., reflecting a “growth” mindset). It is important to note that, given the way responses were recorded on this measure, lower scores reflected a greater tendency to take on what Dweck (1999) calls a “fixed” mindset.

Dweck (1999, 2006) suggests that those that take on a fixed (rather than growth) mindset tend to believe that there is very little anybody can do to change their intelligence – because it is something they are born with.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

A preliminary series of exploratory correlations were conducted to examine the extent to which participants' scores on the four measures of interest were intercorrelated. Results revealed that, for both pre- and post-pandemic students, the higher they scored on the measure of academic entitlement, the more they tended to take on (a) an external (as opposed to internal) locus of control regarding academic outcomes and (b) a fixed (as opposed to growth) mindset regarding the malleability of intelligence (see Table 1). Further, as seen in Table 1, participants' scores on the measures of academic entitlement and (external) academic locus of control were associated with decreased levels of academic satisfaction across both cohorts, suggesting that the more academically entitled both pre-and post-pandemic participants were – and the more they tended to attribute their own successes (and failures) in academics to outside forces – the less satisfied they were with the academics of the institution. The only variable consistently associated with increased academic satisfaction across the two cohorts was a growth mindset. The more students took on a “growth” mindset (as opposed to a “fixed” mindset), the more satisfied they were with the education they are receiving at the institution.

Table 1

Correlation between academic entitlement and measures of growth mindset, academic satisfaction, and academic locus of control within the pre-pandemic students (above the diagonal) and post-pandemic students (below the diagonal).

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Academic Entitlement	--	-.39**	-.31**	.26**
2. Growth Mindset	-.46**	--	.22**	-.31**
3. Academic Satisfaction	-.41**	.24**	--	-.36**
4. (External) Academic Locus of Control	.40**	-.25**	-.20*	--

Note. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Major Analyses

A series of independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine the extent to which the two cohorts, reflecting a snapshot of students before and after the pandemic, differed on the four variables of interest. Although our predictions were directional, we specified the tests to be two-tailed to ensure we did not miss an effect that may – for good reason – have existed in the opposite direction (e.g., post-pandemic students score *lower* on the measure of academic entitlement than those sampled before the pandemic). To control for family-wise error (i.e., the tendency for the probability of making a type I error to increase across a series of inferential tests), a Bonferroni corrected alpha level of $p < .0125$ was used to determine statistical significance instead of the standard criterion of $p < .05$. This adjustment ensures that the probability of making a type I error does not exceed 5% across the series of tests.

Results of the series of *t*-tests revealed a significant mean-level increase in two of the four core variables measured in the study ($ps < .01$). As seen in Table 2, students sampled two years after the pandemic had higher mean-level academic entitlement scores than those who were sampled immediately before the pandemic. Further, these post-pandemic students also scored higher, on average, on the measure of external academic locus of control than those in the pre-pandemic cohort. No mean-level differences were detected when comparing the two cohorts' scores on the measures of academic satisfaction or growth mindset.

Table 2

Results of the four independent samples t-tests examining differences between the pre- and post-pandemic cohorts

Variable	<i>Pre-Pandemic</i>		<i>Post-Pandemic</i>		Cohen's d
	<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t(269)</i>	
Academic Entitlement	2.73 (.80)	<	3.00 (.94)	2.64**	.32
Growth Mindset	4.87 (1.32)	=	4.(1.26)	0.35	.04
Academic Satisfaction	5.38 (.90)	=	5.28 (.82)	1.01	.12
Academic Locus of Control	2.81 (.99)	<	3.44 (.99)	5.19***	.64

Note. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Less than signs (<) denote direction of mean difference. Equal signs (=) denotes no mean difference.

Discussion

The present study utilized archival data, collected as part of ongoing program evaluation efforts at the University, to examine how college students' perceptions of and expectations concerning their education may have changed during the pandemic. More specifically, in this study, we examined whether there were any differences in academic entitlement, locus of control beliefs, growth mindset, and academic satisfaction between two cohorts of college students sampled immediately before and two years after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Results yielded several important patterns of findings that meaningfully contribute to the extant knowledge base.

Students' expectations have changed

Overall, results from the present study appear to confirm many educators' and scholars' fears that students' perceptions of and expectations concerning their educational experiences have changed since the pandemic. While students' beliefs concerning the malleability of intelligence did not appear to change, the post-pandemic sample of students were more inclined than their pre-pandemic predecessors to believe that (a) they deserve to succeed academically regardless of their own efforts or performance, and (b) external forces, beyond themselves, were ultimately responsible for ensuring positive academic outcomes in their lives.

The heightened levels of academic entitlement and increased tendency to take on an external locus of control in the post-pandemic sample is concerning. A rich literature base within psychology reveals that individual differences in academic entitlement and locus of control are both linked with a wide range of negative outcomes and behaviors. For instance, a heightened level of academic entitlement is associated with decreases in academic (and intrinsic) motivation (Greenberger et al., 2008), reduced self-efficacy (Fletcher & Haynes, 2020), lower grades (Seipel & Brooks, 2020), more academically dishonest behaviors (Formuth et al., 2019; Sohr-Preseton & Broswell, 2015), and reduced academic satisfaction (Miller, 2013). In a similar manner, an external locus of control in students is associated with reduced academic motivation (Formuth et al., 2019; Greenberger et al., 2008), decreased persistence and resilience (Arsini & Rusmana,

2023; Cappella & Weinstein, 2001), poor academic performance (Gifford et al., 2006; Hasan & Khalid, 2014), and higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Ganjoo et al., 2021; Misamer et al., 2021; Origlio et al., 2022). Taken together, an increase in both constructs within the college student population is concerning, and something faculty, college administration, and even future employers, should be aware of. Neither construct is associated with positive outcomes – in academia or the workforce (see Chowning & Campbell, 2009, and Harvey & Harris, 2010, respectively).

Continued Academic Satisfaction

Results of the present study revealed that although the post-pandemic sample of students scored higher in academic entitlement than their pre-pandemic predecessors, there was no evidence that the post-pandemic cohort was any more (or less) satisfied with the education they were receiving. In fact, an inspection of participants' mean scores on the measure of academic satisfaction suggest that students from both cohorts were generally satisfied with the education they were receiving at the institution. Academic satisfaction scores for both cohorts were well above the midpoint on the scale.

It may be comforting to know that, given the turmoil and changes within higher education during and since the pandemic, post-pandemic students continue to be satisfied with the education they are receiving. That said, the pattern of results concerning academic entitlement and academic satisfaction is perplexing. It has been well established in the literature (see Kinne et al., 2022 for review), and further confirmed within the current study, that heightened levels of academic entitlement are associated with more dissatisfaction among students. Given this information, it is unclear why the rise in academic entitlement between the two cohorts did not correspond with a *decrease* in academic satisfaction. We speculate that perhaps there are other factors that may explain why a mean-level increase in academic entitlement did not correspond with a similar mean-level decrease in academic satisfaction. For instance, research finds that grades (e.g., student GPA) strongly predict academic satisfaction among students (Nauta, 2007). Given research documenting pervasive grade inflation during (and perhaps since) the pandemic

(see Karadag, 2021), it is possible that a cohort of more academically entitled students continued to be satisfied with their education because, regardless of their heightened entitlement, they are continuing to receive high grades. Alternatively, it is possible that faculty's relaxation of course policies during the pandemic – and increased understanding of extenuating circumstances (and mental health) during this time – has led the current cohort of students to feel more supported by their faculty and institution. This alternative explanation could explain the conflicting results. Perhaps faculty's need to be more understanding of students' circumstance (and mental health) during the pandemic produced a marked increase in student satisfaction, thereby mitigating a potential negative effect a mean-level increase in academic entitlement may have produced on student satisfaction. Unfortunately, the results of the current study do not directly address such questions. Future research should more directly explore the extent to which grade inflation, and relaxation of policies that have traditionally been used to reinforce “good” student behavior, may lead to increases in academic entitlement among students while simultaneously maintaining their academic satisfaction.

Limitations and Future Direction

Although results of the present study suggest that the pandemic may have led post-pandemic students to demonstrate more academic entitlement than their pre-pandemic peers, it is important to note that results of the present study are correlational in nature. Given the cross-sectional nature of the current study, and the limited data available in the data sets, it is unclear *why* the post-pandemic students scored higher on measures of academic entitlement and external locus of control than the students from the pre-pandemic sample. Further, given the fact that the data from the current study only reflects a snapshot at two specific time points, it remains unclear whether these changes reflect something unique about the time of the pandemic or simply reflect current trends. For instance, there is mixed evidence in the research literature suggesting that, for various reasons, academic entitlement among college students has been steadily increasing across the last several years (Boswell, 2012; Lemke et al., 2017; Stiles et al., 2018). However, given the historic nature of the pandemic – and the degree to which it affected every aspect of education – it seems reasonable to suggest that the

relaxation of standards within higher education during the pandemic may have inadvertently contributed to students' academic entitlement. More research, however, is clearly needed.

Conclusion and Recommendation for Action

Overall, results of the present study suggest that while undergraduate students are currently just as satisfied with the education they are receiving now as they were prior to the pandemic, undergraduate students now appear to have (a) heightened beliefs that they have little autonomy over academic outcomes in their lives and (b) increased expectations that they should succeed academically regardless of their own efforts or performance. Although it is unclear specifically why external locus of control and academic entitlement have increased among college students during this period, we speculate that pandemic related changes within higher education may have inadvertently fostered these beliefs.

Given the results of the current study, and in the context of the extant literature, if academic entitlement is increasing among college students, perhaps faculty could work to employ evidence-based strategies to mitigate this trend. For instance, Zhu et al. (2019) argue that college students demonstrate less academic entitlement when education is framed as an opportunity for growth (rather than a transactional, consumerist, experience), such that faculty "should consider including statements either in their syllabus or verbally during the first few sessions of the course that explicitly frame the relationship between themselves and their prospective students in ways that allow students to be active and responsible partners in their education" (p. 516). Such research suggests that regardless of faculty's idiosyncratic course policies, they may effectively promote students' ownership in learning (and reduce academic entitlement related beliefs) by encouraging them to embrace the hard work of learning.

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