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# The impact of COVID-19: Graduate students' emotional and psychological experiences

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## ABSTRACT

The global lockdown of higher education institutions due to COVID-19 has led to major modifications in the way education is delivered. While students were enrolled in traditional learning environments before the pandemic, delivery modes changed quickly into online or remote learning environments mid-semester at the onset of the coronavirus. Many students experienced different emotions and challenges in response to the disruption. This study explored those experiences from the graduate students' perspective. Qualitative methods were used to analyze graduate student reflections across the Spring 2020 semester during the COVID-19 pandemic ( $n = 7$ ). The reflection papers captured the students' fears, frustrations, anxieties, and concerns over six weeks. The outcome of the study identified five key themes—accepting virtual learning and teaching; managing disappointment; experiencing loss of power and control; feeling anxious and fearful; and incorporating coping strategies and finding relief. Most study participants expressed concern over the effectiveness of the online learning environment, while others struggled with the possibility of not seeing their colleagues physically in class. There was a general feeling that students did not have control over what they did and the uncertainty over the coronavirus proved difficult to manage. The study participants proposed a few coping strategies, including finding enough space to work and connecting with others for emotional support. This work contributes to the growing body of studies on COVID-19 and its impact on students.

## KEYWORDS

COVID-19; graduate student; perceptions; experiences; virtual learning

## Introduction

The need for higher education leaders, stakeholders, and community partners to prepare for crisis is evident today more than ever. The response to COVID-19 has required often rapid and significant shifts in the way education is delivered—having an impact on students and educators. Research examining the experiences of students during a pandemic is limited, but will likely grow in the coming years informed by our experiences today. When students are enrolled in traditional learning environments and then abruptly thrust into online and/or remote learning environments mid-semester, they may experience a range of emotions and personal challenges in response to this disruption. This article explores those experiences from the students' perspectives. As we prepare for an unknown future, it is imperative that we learn from the past and from our experts on classroom experiences—our students.

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Online/remote learning and the use of learning management systems (LMS), such as Blackboard or Canvas, are resources that help institutions to continue operating and offering courses to avoid cancellation. However, the dilemma surfaces when students and the instructors are not accustomed to virtual online learning. The learning curve can be further exacerbated by increasing stress levels that distract us from focusing and absorbing new knowledge.

Less research has been conducted on the impact of a pandemic on students and virtually none has focused on graduate student perceptions during major crises like the current pandemic. This is a crucial time to contribute to the literature by researching and capturing student experiences and perceptions in the moment. To substantiate this gap, MacNeil and Topping (2007) stated that “Although research in the areas of crisis management is available, most of the research is focused on regular, normal and natural disasters like school shootings, terrorist activities, stabbings, suicide, major fires and road traffic accidents” (p. 1).

### **Course overview and context**

The Governance and Higher Education course is typically taught during the spring semester. Each year, approximately 20 students enroll, with only one faculty member who teaches this course. The majority of students identify as African-American. A combination of masters and doctoral students enroll, as it is a required course for both programs. Due to the size of the class, the group meets in one of the larger classrooms.

Traditionally, the course meets weekly in-person for three hours. During the three-hour period, the instructor employs various pedagogical practices, such as discussing the assigned readings in a large group, reviewing and reacting to in-class materials such as videos or case studies, discussing concepts and sharing critical thoughts with a partner, working in small groups, and presenting final reports. All of these are interactive learning tools intended to engage students, assess learning, and identify opportunities for deeper discussion.

Most students welcomed the interactive structure which created a high energy and robust learning environment. However, due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the university moved all classes to online/remote learning. Therefore, the traditionally in-person learning environment for the Governance and Higher Education course was fully converted to online using the Canvas learning management system.

Considering the impact of COVID-19 on postsecondary education and the nature of the course designed to examine higher education governance practices, students were asked to reflect upon their sudden experiences as online learners throughout the remainder of the semester. The reflection papers were intended to capture students’ concerns, fears, anxieties, and frustrations.

### **Methods**

This studies uses qualitative methods to analyze graduate student reflections throughout the Spring 2020 semester during the COVID-19 pandemic. The students’ reflection papers captured their fears, anxieties, frustrations, and concerns over approximately six weeks. The

approach includes an in-depth analysis of student reflections and addresses the existing gap in the literature.

Seven graduate students (five master's students, two doctoral students; five women and two men) enrolled in a Governance and Leadership in Higher Education course wrote a series of reflective journal entries about their experiences of rapidly pivoting moving to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic which impacted the second half of the 2020 Spring semester. Combined, the students submitted a total of 14 reflection papers sharing both their academic and personal challenges due to COVID-19.

The course instructor provided a series of questions to elicit responses related to students' personal needs, the responses and guidance offered by the institution's leaders, and course-related modifications. Each student was asked to write two reflection papers. Students were encouraged to be as transparent and critical as possible when describing their feelings and experiences. Although the findings provide insight into the perceptions and experiences of these graduate students, the data collected will also inform future teaching pedagogy as well as be useful to institutional leaders' efforts to effectively and thoughtfully support students during crises.

The research methodology was guided by an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The central focus of the study was the individual perceptions and experiences of students as they navigated the spring semester during a global pandemic. This topic lends itself to an IPA which offers a rigorous and explicit process of interpretative activity that seeks to make meaning of experiences (Reid et al., 2005). The perceptions and experiences were captured through 14 student reflection papers. The reflection papers focused on how the pandemic personally impacted students' day-to-day lived experiences. Questions to guide the student reflections included:

- (1) What created the most anxiety, frustrations, and areas of concern?
- (2) How did you cope and navigate the situation?
- (3) What generated the most relief?

Students were encouraged to reference course texts and class discussions in their reflections. Also, students were allowed to expand upon the questions and include additional content that they felt was important to their story as graduate students navigating the pandemic.

The reflection papers averaged three pages in length. Seven students in the class agreed to have their work used for this study resulting in 14 reflection papers included in the analysis. Five categories were identified based on themes that emerged from the reflections. I conducted additional rounds of review and comparison and tested the master list of themes against each transcript. When using IPA there is greater emphasis on the researcher's interpretations of the data.

## Results

The five main themes identified were: 1) Accepting Virtual Learning and Teaching, 2) Managing Disappointment, 3) Experiencing Loss of Power and Control, 4) Managing Feelings of Anxiety and Fear, and 5) Incorporating Coping Strategies and Seeking Relief. Each of the themes is supported by specific quotes from the graduate students who are identified using pseudonyms.

### ***Accepting virtual learning and teaching methods***

Prior to the pandemic, traditional face-to-face class meetings were the primary form of instruction for the university. Many students preferred face-to-face over online instruction and indicated that in-person instruction and learning was most effective and desired. Regularly attending classes helped students interact with peers, organize themselves, and enhance learning through class discussions. Also, in-class learning enabled students to learn from each other, thus helping teachers to understand personalities and identify gaps in learning.

Many of the students expressed concern that the online learning environment was not effective for them. Sonny explained, “I retain information best during face-to-face conversations, and I had worries about not being able to hear the answers to the question’s students were asking since class seemed to be a space for that also.” Sonny added, “... I thrive in a learning environment where I can connect with others face-to-face and complement my preferred learning style of social, visual, oral, and verbal.”

Throughout the reflections, many students emphasized a preference for classroom learning because of the benefits of interacting and connecting with each other in the same space. Students did not feel that the experiences they received in face-to-face classrooms were replicated through their online learning experiences as the institution transitioned to remote learning in the spring of 2020.

### ***Managing disappointment***

As COVID-19 spread and social distancing measures were implemented, students grappled with the notion that they might not see their colleagues again in class, nor be able to participate in graduation ceremonies together. Some students expressed stages of acceptance that included disbelief, anger, frustration, and disappointment.

The two doctoral student respondents also teach undergraduate courses at their respective institutions. They reported that many of their students expressed disappointment about the postponement or cancellation of commencement ceremonies. Pearl observed,

In working with first generation students, my seniors are completely distraught over the cancellation of their graduation. For the first time, their families would be able to see one of their own walk across the stage and that moment has been taken from them.

Sonny shared, “Graduation is a huge accomplishment for my family especially myself because I will be the first in my immediate family to obtain a Master’s degree.” Graduation was not only an important accomplishment for her, but also for her family.

### ***Experiencing loss of power and control***

Traditional classroom learning provided some sense of power over what students and instructors can manage. Students expressed their intentional decision to choose an academic program providing traditional face-to-face instruction. However, with the onset of the pandemic, students reported that they felt they no longer had control over what they did because of stay at home orders enforced by the governor. Tasha stated, “Students, faculty, and administrative staff went about their businesses until the strange pandemic took over

and forced everyone to sit at home.” For some, not being able to interact with instructors in person and access their office spaces has created a sense of loss of control.

The pandemic compelled students to learn how to interact and learn virtually. Tasha reported,

As a graduate student, the era of COVID-19 has taught me to think outside the box. Transitioning into virtual office work, virtual internship, and online classes was something I never planned for. I was used to the traditional learning method of face to face interaction with my professors and colleagues because I thought that was the best way to learn.

Other students added that learning new ways to engage was a challenge. Pearl wrote, “With no thorough preparation or training for students, faculty, and staff, we have all been abruptly thrown into this virtual world with no real concept of what comes next.” Online learning required students to identify optional forms of engagement and interaction with peers, instructors, and complete course assignments. Andrew added,

Being physically present [for class] in discussions was engaging for me because it gave my life a sense of balance. It was a set time that I could put my work aside, enter a space for sharing, and really focus on my learning and my development as a competent student affairs’ professional. But in this new reality, work-life *balance* has become work-life *integration* and it’s definitely harder for me (and I’m sure other students can agree) to compartmentalize work obligations, learning assignments, family responsibilities, and activities that support a personal well-being.

Work-life balance was one of the most daunting challenges as students tried to manage multiple responsibilities. Since many students spent their time at home, adjusting to the challenges, and managing school and professional work in the same space became increasingly difficult. Pearl explained “The greatest challenge I have faced has been trying to separate my academic and work life while operating in the same space with little time spent outside. Teleworking in the same space, on the same computer, and most likely in the same room has blurred all my lines a bit.” Also, the aspect of time made the learning experiences that some of the students had quite difficult. Nola shared “... the small window of time to complete the graduation portfolio caused me to feel hopeless and as if there just wasn’t enough time to display my experience over the past two years.” As such, graduating students found it difficult to have adequate time and space to think and reflect upon their learning experiences throughout the program.

Some out-of-state students found it difficult being alone and away from their families. Sonny expressed, “I am currently working from home and often thinking about packing up my stuff and moving back to [state redacted] to work from there to spend more quality time with my husband, who is also working from home.” Students were learning in a different way, with personal and academic factors that made it difficult for them to adjust to the changes and focus on academic requirements.

Another loss of power and autonomy students highlighted was pressure during the pandemic to remain indoors. Some expressed concern that this shift had infringed on their privacy and ability to work in quiet areas. Pearl wrote,

I also live with [family member] who is teleworking as well so it can be a bit of a challenge finding an isolated area to focus. Typically, when I needed some space, I would be able to go to my office at work or a library to have a quiet place to do my homework.

Nola agreed, writing,

While I could have just made a routine to move to another location in the room other than my house, I still desired to maintain some form of independence that typically my car rides to work would give me. Alone time to just think to yourself is so important to have and other students, as well as myself, often fought feelings of wanting to occupy different spaces that our families didn't have the same access to. For me, that place was my room.

### ***Managing feelings of anxiety and fear***

Students reported that they experienced fear and anxiety. Tasha explained, “the faculties and students were tasked with a quick move to online instruction and learning. This, undoubtedly, was accompanied with anxiety on both sides.” For many students, the uncertainty about the coronavirus is one of the most difficult factors to manage. Students expressed uncertainty about the extent to which their lives would be impacted. Tasha, who happens to be an international graduate student, explained, “For those of us in higher education, no one truly knows what the capacity of their campuses/facilities is going to be like in the next academic year. The thought is scary.” Students suggested that they could not accurately predict the future of their learning and they were anxious regarding the abrupt move to online learning.

Many indicated that not knowing when the pandemic would end and life would return to normal was the source of their fear and anxiety. Andrew stated,

I believe the greatest source of anxiety is the increasing degree of uncertainty surrounding this pandemic. There is an overwhelming concern about how we are going to “get back to normal,” and panic that we may not be able to. For an institution, there is uncertainty surrounding operating budgets, essential functions and personnel, offered services and resources, the role of technology in learning, the effectiveness of remote work/classes, accountability for employees, scheduled campus events, and cocurricular opportunities (thinking of college athletics in particular) that make college a holistic developmental *experience* – not just a transaction.

Students also expressed anxiety related to their social identities. In some cases, individual social identities amplified student fears over their safety. Sonny wrote, “Additionally, we have seen an increase in hate crimes for the Asian American community throughout the nation. This has raised my anxiety and fear when going out to get groceries because my external visible identity can target me.” In addition, international students carried another layer of anxiety about being able to remain in the United States. Tasha expressed strong concern for her personal stability, “I was not sure if the situation would get to a point where I would have to go back to my country.” For international students, the problem presented a major dilemma, since many countries had issued orders for the closure of passenger travels, meaning that students had to remain in their current location without key social support.

Students expressed fear not only for themselves, but for others. These fears cut across a variety of topics from employment to educational access related to issues of equity. Pearl reported, “Students have been asked to evacuate campuses. Many ‘non-essential’ workers are left without employment. Students are struggling to keep up in their courses as they experience challenges finding access to adequate WiFi connection and technology.”

Students shared that the transition to online learning was a greater challenge among low-income families where access to internet services may be an issue.

### ***Anxiety and fears compounded due to personal responsibilities***

Students stated that the health and well-being of their family contributed to their fears and anxiety. Oscar expressed concern about employment status due to the pandemic.

As a professional, I have been in meetings that have spoken about the impact that the virus will have on the budget of 2021 and how the health concern will have a major economic impact on our country, our state, and college. The unknown naturally builds anxiety as I am the sole provider for my family.

In addition to financial stability, students expressed concern for individual health and well-being of family members. Nola explained,

Throughout my experience during the pandemic, the peak time for my anxiety sprung up around the time of my nana recovering from her stroke and the passing of my grandfather shortly after. There were multiple factors I was battling, including the feelings that came with us not being able to have a well-attended funeral for him, which resulted in us choosing to have him cremated.

The uncertainties of the pandemic caused students to experience fear and anxiety about the well-being of their families as well as the inability to provide physical protection, emotional support, and financial stability for their families.

### ***Incorporating coping strategies and seeking relief***

Although the pandemic presents challenges, students also shared coping strategies. Finding adequate space to work and connecting with others for emotional support are strategies students used to deal with stress and anxiety. Being intentional about the use of rooms and assigned space throughout their homes was described as a coping strategy for some of the students. This mainly involved the way the rooms were arranged to facilitate certain activities. According to Pearl, “What has been helpful is to assign different rooms in my apartment to different tasks on a rotation schedule . . . The living room may be my work office for the day and my dining room, my library.”

Structuring time and space to accommodate work and classes was described as a coping strategy. Nola explained,

I also became really intentional about what I wanted to accomplish. I even rearranged my room to give myself a separate workspace and a personal space. Since I couldn’t leave the house to occupy spaces like my work office . . . I knew that I needed to create those spaces in my home.

Communicating through technology was beneficial particularly for some international students. Sonny wrote about the impact of communicating with her peers as a means of coping, “To cope and navigate the situation, I am thankful I have built a community here with my colleagues and have the technology to facetime one another.”

Consistent communication with their students provided relief. Nola shared,

What has generated the most relief for me has been being able to keep consistent communication with my students. Through video conferencing, I am able to check in with them about academic related issues but most importantly their mental health and overall well-being.



Frequently communicating with others could be important for mental health since it ensures that students have a place to share their experiences, problems, and challenges with others. Sharing these experiences creates opportunities to escape and offers a semblance of hope to one another. Nola acknowledged, “I truly love providing service to my students and it brings me joy to be able to still connect with them.”

The certainty associated with completion of program requirements influenced Sonny to share, “... with all this uncertainty and increased anxiety, the certainty of finishing up my master’s degree and graduating generates the most relief because I know there is a definite timeline/ending and something I can control.” Graduation provided Sonny with relief from the stress of the pandemic.

In addition to the strategies outlined above, Tolu summarized her approach writing, “I was able to overcome this anxiety by taking everything one day at a time and hoping for the best the next day.” Oscar wrote about his faith and spirituality as a means of coping, “At this point, I have to turn to my faith, belief, pray, and choose to have a positive attitude daily as I do not know what tomorrow holds, and I am blessed to be alive today.”

Whether a mantra applied across situations or specific approaches for different aspects of the experience, students were able to develop coping strategies as they navigated the spring term during the pandemic.

## Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrust learning, and higher education in particular, into a period of drastic and profound changes. From having to shift from face to face to virtual, and students having to study in isolation, away from their peers, to the changes in teaching and learning approaches, students have had to contend with anxiety and necessary but unavoidable changes. However, despite these changes, students can still access the vast resources provided by online learning platforms, and benefit from the rapid expansion and development of online learning capacity and infrastructure, during and hopefully after the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Implementing new teaching and learning approaches*

While learning was initially halted after the onset of the pandemic, most institutions have resumed, albeit in online and distance settings, in lieu of in-person contact instruction and learning. This development may offer students the much-needed opportunity to continue learning amid the pandemic, but the new settings do not replicate the convenience and effectiveness of face to face interactions with peers and instructors. Of much concern, in this respect, is the loss of the benefits/impact of an in-person learning environment, when replaced with online and remote settings. As Di Pietro et al. (2020) noted, “peer effects are realized in different channels, including peer teaching, peer motivation, competition, and general social influence in subject interest (p. 9).” With the online and distance settings, students are deprived of these benefits and opportunities.

Online classes may have been amplified and necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but not all classes can be conducted online. For example, courses and classes that require laboratories or hands-on learning may not be replicable through online methods.

### ***Navigating feelings of disappointment***

The physical interaction of in-person classroom learning is difficult to replicate with virtual learning. Due to the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, content delivery changed drastically. With non-existent in-person experiences and limited peer interactions, students were left frustrated and disappointed. Online and distance learning modes disrupted students' discussions, group work, and interactive projects (World Bank, 2020). The change from face to face to virtual learning may be disruptive by itself and is further complicated by the withdrawal of the benefits provided by the former. As a result, students struggle to adapt to the new modes, a process better understood in light of the stages of grief.

There are five stages of grief; denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Lim, 2013). Viewed through this lens, the students are primarily in the acceptance stage where they realize that while virtual learning may not be their preferred learning mode, it is probably here for the long term. As a result, they begin realigning their study habits and techniques to adopt online and remote learning, demonstrating that they are moving toward acceptance of this new reality.

The loss of power and control and the changes in educational practices resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, have left students with no choice but to accept the reality and adjust accordingly. The fact that the students elected an in-person academic program suggests they prefer in person learning environments and the associated engagement and interaction. With virtual learning, students have to contend with changes in how and where they learn as well as different teaching and learning methods and approaches. Therefore, students have to contend with changes, not only in how and where they learn, but also in teaching and learning methods and approaches. The student-centered approach is realized through questions, discussions, and on-line platforms among students, which may not have the same impact when engaging in learning activities in-person (Duraku & Hoxa, 2020).

Not only do the students have to deal with changes in classroom dynamics, they may also experience isolation from family and friends due to quarantine and social distancing requirements. Many graduate students are out-of-state and international students who are far from their families and unable to easily access support from them.

After institutions resumed class sessions virtually later in the Spring semester, most students were still isolated from family and unable to connect with peers in person. For this reason, they were left to navigate COVID-19 related challenges on their own with minimal support. As the World Bank (2020) asserted, "long periods of self-isolation can have an adverse impact on the psychological well-being of students and staff, especially for those who live alone, international students, and students/staff who are not in their place of origin" (p. 6). Therefore, students who were already dealing with challenging learning settings experienced additional psychological turmoil, with limited access to family and friends for emotional and psychological support.

### ***Contending with anxiety and fear***

Similar to any other crisis, the coronavirus pandemic has led to various emotional and psychological challenges and responses. Students have experienced periods of social withdrawal, difficulty concentrating, and feelings of anger, helplessness, panic, and worry. The pandemic has led to the closure of cities, states, and entire countries. Stress and fear

attributed to the coronavirus outbreak could be overwhelming for faculty and students. Students proximity to areas with high COVID-19 outbreaks could lead to unanswered questions, anxiety, and fear for their health and well-being. As students monitored announcements and reports of the pandemic's impact, they were left wondering "what next?" As UNESCO (2020) concluded, "this psychological and socio-emotional imbalance will "take its toll" and "leave its mark," especially for students with preexisting conditions" (p. 16).

However, despite the numerous challenges and drawbacks caused by COVID-19 disruptions, some positive factors exist. Virtual learning offers socialization opportunities, and, in some cases can expand the reach of in-person learning. As Di Pietro et al. (2020) acknowledged, online learning platforms do not just incorporate in-person instruction, but also provide for online student organizations, among other extracurricular activities. Students can use these features to socialize and interact, and reach a wider and broader pool of peers than in-person settings and without the usual social barriers.

The onset of the pandemic accelerated the development and implementation of online learning, and the expansion of its supporting infrastructure (Zhu & Liu, 2020). As a result, institutions are better positioned to offer virtual learning in ways that will enhance student learning and produce positive outcomes and students enrolled in online-based classes are more likely to have positive experiences and access enhanced technology.

### ***Implications for postsecondary education faculty and staff***

The goal of this research is to enable postsecondary professionals who are engaged in supporting students and developing policy to gain greater insight into the experiences and perspectives of students during significant social and institutional changes such as those experienced due to COVID-19. The findings of this study offer a unique perspective into the experiences of graduate students at an HBCU. The study findings provide insights into student challenges, fears, anxieties, and coping mechanisms that can inform institutional decision making processes that are equitable and thoughtful and more likely to produce positive outcomes for students. In addition, a brief discussion to provide recommendations and implications for postsecondary education professionals regarding policy changes and practices to include a) remaining technologically current to include professional development for employees, b) providing access to online emotional and psychological support for students, c) incorporating creative ways to provide closure during the time of a social crisis, d) communicating institutional changes regularly and consistently, and e) considering students multi-layered identities. Afterward I will provide suggestions on opportunities for future research on specific and relevant areas to further expand this study.

Remaining technologically current is of significance importance for students, staff, and faculty, and should include professional development for employees. Easy access to technology such as learning management systems for faculty and students can facilitate an easy and seamless transition during an emergency such as COVID-19 when in-person gatherings are restricted. Equally important is for staff and faculty to have access to professional development resources on using the technology in an effective manne.

Providing access to online emotional and psychological support for students is essential. As a result of self-quarantine and social distance requirements, students experienced high

levels of emotional and psychological stress that exacerbated feelings of frustration, anxiety, and depression and led to severe emotional stress for some students.

Due to COVID-19, the university counseling center was not accessible for students. For many students, the university counseling center is their only resource for psychological and emotional support. Postsecondary institutions need to think beyond the traditional in-person one-on-one and group counseling to services that can be accessible online.

Incorporating creative ways to provide a semblance of closure to assist students with emotionally and psychologically moving forward to the next set of program requirements, graduation, and/or entering a career. The students indicated they experience ongoing feelings of disappointment because of the loss of engagement with peers, no longer participating in in-person classes, and the cancelation of graduation ceremonies. To support students, postsecondary professionals can consider identifying strategies for providing closure to support the psychological health of students and their ability to “move on.” Creative ways may include virtual course closings for students and faculty to share reflections; virtual graduation ceremonies for students, families, and friends; and/or delaying opportunities for providing closure until after emergency circumstances are mitigated or resolved.

Communicating institutional changes regularly and consistently to inform students of modifications and updates to manage anxiety and frustration is of great importance. Communicating with students regularly and consistently warrants planning from student affairs and higher education professionals. For example, deciding on the best form of social media to reach students in along with use of institutional e-mails. Equally important, as part of the planning is to develop a team of individuals to include information technology, campus communications, social media staff, faculty, and staff in order to ensure a concerted effort that will disseminate information to the student body in a thoughtful and effective manner.

It is important to thoroughly plan for external communication as well as ways to receive inquiries in a centralized manner. In cases of a pandemic institutions should consider methods to receive information from students to identify a location for students to share concerns, frustrations, and ask questions to be monitored and addressed in a timely manner.

Considering students multi-layered identities is extremely important and should be considered for student affairs and higher education professionals. Based on findings from the study, students revealed their identities and positionality such as full-time employee, graduate assistant, parent, spouse, etc. that must be acknowledged in the time of a pandemic. For postsecondary professionals it is difficult to know every identity that students possess but there is an opportunity and need to acknowledge that students are complex with layered identities. Therefore, postsecondary professionals must allow space to fully humanize students in order to help mitigate the impact and new demands experienced by a pandemic.

### ***Opportunities for future research***

- (1) An examination of the post traumatic stress disorders that students display due to COVID-19.
- (2) A review of the ways in which postsecondary staff and faculty implement technology services for co-curricular student engagement outside of the classroom.

- (3) An investigation of the changes of counseling services in higher education to assist students beyond existing traditional methods.
- (4) Defining the professional development needs of faculty and staff to effectively use learning management systems to support students emotionally and intellectually.
- (5) An investigation of effective coping strategies to uncover strategies used by students to manage and navigate a pandemic while pursuing their educational goals.

## Conclusion

The worldwide closure and transition to virtual class meetings throughout postsecondary education institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic changed the delivery of education to learners. Traditional learning environments were rendered impossible to implement due to health and safety risks in most institutions in an attempt to regulate COVID-19 infections. Because of this, most colleges and universities embraced online and/or remote learning environments, which were not without its challenges.

This study analyzed the remote learning experiences of graduate learners and uncovered key discoveries. The study identified that preparedness has become increasingly important because of the societal and institutional disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is necessary to be proactive in order to experience uninterrupted learning in the face of potential critical scenarios caused by an infectious disease pandemic. Preparedness will ensure learners do not lose out on prerequisite learning times that might interfere with their developmental milestones.

The top priority for stakeholders in the higher education sector must revolve around establishing alternate learning pathways that can guarantee access to continuing education in times of disruption. Moreover, the current study provides space for additional voices to be heard and the information learned to inform equitable and thoughtful decision-making processes. Due to the newness of this pandemic, the experiences of students, staff, and faculty remain scanty, especially because of the social distancing, curfew, lockdowns, and sanitization rules that have been enforced. Therefore, further studies should consider documenting the experiences of student affairs staff and faculty to identify strategies that can enhance student learning during periods of disruption. It is also clear from the study findings that adjusting to the transformation in the traditional practices during the pandemic has been difficult for the students both emotionally and psychologically.

## Declaration of interest statement

Chad Kee declares that he has no conflict of interest.

## Human rights statements and informed consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1964 and its later amendments. Informed consent was obtained from all patients for being included in the study. Animal Rights: This article does not contain any studies with animal subjects performed by the any of the authors.

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