

Graduate Student Well-Being: Learning and Living During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This essay shares experiences related to graduate student well-being in the transition from face-to-face to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and amid global social unrest. The unexpected and rapid changes due to the preventive measures taken created challenges for both educators and students in the middle of the Spring 2020 semester. In navigating these challenges, we sought ways to tend to students' well-being without sacrificing educational quality. The authors discovered students needed a safe space to share their experiences and feelings, which helped them connect with each other at a deeper level and develop a sense of community.

Keywords: COVID-19, higher education, graduate students, pandemic, transition, virtual learning, well-being

The global pandemic created by the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) affected everyone's lives, organizations' operations, and institutions' functionalities significantly all over the world. The COVID-19 pandemic in the United States forced many institutions of higher education to transition from brick and mortar or face-to-face learning to online or virtual meeting platforms within the matter of one to two weeks in the middle of the semester. While online education is common in post-secondary education due to the non-traditional profile of

the majority of students, having to move from one platform to another unexpectedly and rapidly has brought some challenges both for educators and students. Transitions under normal circumstances are unsettling. Nancy Schlossberg's research (1989a, 1989b, & 1995) and creation of the transition theory explains how adults in transition often find themselves confused and benefitting from assistance. This seemingly abrupt transition challenged faculty members and students as the nation sought to minimize the virus' spread and to instead flatten the curve of cases and hospitalizations. In this reflective essay, we describe our experiences in two education courses navigating through the new pandemic adjustments while seeking not to affect the quality of the class by trying to be flexible with student work and making sure they are able to adjust to the new learning platform amid global social unrest after the murder of George Floyd by police and policy attacks for international students.

Many graduate students began working from home and trying to balance children and/or partners who are at home too. Public and private grade school students are studying from home as well, which for younger children particularly requires adult/parental instruction. This means some individuals are working from home, teaching from home, and learning online amid the traditional responsibilities of life. Yet for essential workers, the ability to work from home is non-existent, so there are students who must venture out and position themselves at a higher risk of contracting the virus for the sake of performing their much needed work tasks. With all of this occurring, it is understandable to be concerned for students' transition and well-being. "The time needed to achieve successful integration varies with the person and the transition" (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016, p. 38). These variances challenge educators to create an environment where students' feel welcomed and there is an ethic of care for their overall well-being. One's well-being encompasses more than just feeling well. Well-being is defined by one's experience with health, happiness, and prosperity including "good mental health, high life satisfaction, a sense of meaning or purpose, and ability to manage stress" (Davis, 2019, para 1). During a pandemic, social unrest, and transition in learning platforms, what is students' well-being? This question leads to reflection on class facilitation and ways in which the instructor led the classes through a major and ongoing transitional period.

Reflections on class facilitation

Graduate education comes with its own set of anxieties and academic concerns. For 32 graduate students including 7 international

and 2 Black students studying education at a private institution in the Southwest, the transition from learning face-to-face to learning online was a relatively smooth one in regard to technological access and utilizing previously existing tools such as Zoom, Blackboard, and Kaltura. Yet, e-mails regarding university grade policy changes, along with providing extensions based on a student's individual circumstance and transition, were less easily addressed. The degree to which one's life is altered is the hallmark of a transition. Students' lives were drastically altered numerous ways unforeseeable at the start of the semester. Students shared how 2020 was a year of tragedy and trauma, beginning with the loss of basketball legend Kobe Bryant, followed by the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the increased push for the Black Lives Matter movement, and the attack on international students for simply trying to study abroad during a pandemic. The first six months of the year were filled with life-altering changes that affect well-being. Moreover, "Unfortunately, well-being appears to be in decline, at least in the U.S. And increasing your well-being can be tough without knowing what to do and how to do it" (Davis, 2019, para 2). Being mindful of the student's well-being in the midst of unexpected changes in their learning, we focused on ways to provide a safe space for students to be able to share freely during class meetings online. The authors developed a short survey consisting of open-ended questions designed to gauge how students were doing overall and implemented the online survey twice during the remainder of the semester.

As part of the survey, we asked the graduate students questions in order to better understand how their learning is affected by online instruction. Students reported to faculty in a technology check-in survey as 100% possessing WiFi at their primary residence and only 16% relying on access to a smartphone for the Internet. The availability of technology among graduate students somewhat varies from undergraduate students who are more likely to utilize their smartphone or another type of hand-held device. This is indicative of the nature of graduate study in general as oftentimes courses and related assignments require easy access to scholarly databases and journals. However, while the access to technology may have involved minimal concern, the logistical and emotional effects of the pandemic and social unrest on their educational experience varied greatly.

The survey results showed, in March, more than half of the students (55%) expressed they were stressed, concerned, homesick, and lonely while the rest were feeling positive and grateful. When the survey was distributed again in April, 40% of the students expressed they were

struggling, while the rest were feeling okay or great. International students expressed their concern over the pandemic and the emotional challenges it brought for them: “I am really worried about the situation we are in today (coronavirus) and feel homesick” and “I would feel better getting through this time with my family” are illustrative examples of international students’ responses to how they felt. Being away from home and not being able to go back due to the health risks and flights being cancelled created stress and homesickness for them when combined with the social unrest happening at the same time. The multiple and ongoing protests across the world centering on racial injustice affected students’ moods, priorities, and focus. This was evident in student comments in relation to the class such as, “it’s the only time I get to forget about work and the stress of being stuck at home” or “it helps me feel connected.”

In response to the first survey, one approach utilized in classes was to allocate time in the beginning of each class to ‘check-in.’ Students were free to talk about what they wanted to during these check-ins. Under normal circumstances and in face-to-face environments the need for such sharing space would be less. The need for this open communication was great during this pandemic as we realized sharing with each other helped students to decompress and center themselves. Engaging in conversations with peers helped students to see they were not alone in their struggles due to the pandemic and having a safe space allowed them to feel free to share their experiences. As we noticed the impact of the check-in sessions in the beginning of each class, we did not restrict the sessions to a certain time-limit.

During these sessions, students talked about their emotional challenges. Focusing and trying to keep up were the major challenges that students encountered as they tried to adjust to the situation and finish out the semester. One student shared that “the distractions from this pandemic has made it harder to focus” while another described how their life looked by saying, “Keeping up with everything online now. Work, my daughter’s work, schoolwork.” Considering the survey results and the nature of conversations, we believe that check-in sessions played a role in this decline in the number of students who were struggling. We also noticed the virtual learning platform combined with the nature of the conversations allowed for creating a sense of community quickly in the class.

Conclusion

It is important for educators to understand the challenges students encounter during transitions and particularly during a pandemic

with a “Stay Home, Work Safe” order. Dialogue and conversation--between instructor and student and between students--becomes even more meaningful. Graduate students’ well-being, especially for international students away from home, is critical. Educators who provide an outlet for students to express their concern, confusion, and worry are allowing students to be themselves and to demonstrate their social-emotional and psycho-social sides. There is more to life than academic study, especially when students feel their academic pursuits are being attacked. For international students during this time period, the requirements for face to face learning style and the percentage of allowable online learning posed a threat. Institutions had to consciously and creatively find ways to support international graduate students during the pandemic and not limit their academic access. Other beneficial insight from personal observation is ensuring the syllabi and course outline detail assignment deadlines clearly, checking in with students individually to inquire how they and their families are doing, welcoming the cameo appearances of animals and family members during online class time, and allocating time for the slight delay between speakers all help to create an environment that promotes healthy transition and well-being. The class should be a space where students learn and feel supported always, but it is especially important during a pandemic affecting millions of people globally. We recommend educators and graduate students alike foster learning and living that centers on students’ well-being.

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