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**Exploring Residential Experiences of  
Undergraduate Students During COVID-19  
Pandemic: A Case Study of a Historically  
Black University in the United States**

**Juana Hollingsworth**

**Virginia L. Byrne**

**Krishna Bista**

**Uttam Gaulee**

**Tracy Rone**

**Glenda Prime**

Morgan State University, Maryland, USA

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**ABSTRACT**

*The COVID-19 pandemic caused higher education institutions to pivot to online instruction and forced residential students to vacate on-campus housing. Most students moved in with family or friends, but other students did not have access to safe and supportive housing options. This paper explores the experiences of students who requested to live on-campus because of housing insecurity or the need for independent space. Specifically, this paper reports on the types of support and resources that 20 residential undergraduates at a Historically Black College*

*and University (HBCU) relied on to navigate challenges brought on by the pandemic and to cope with the isolation of living on a nearly empty campus. Resources include faculty relationships, student networks, and campus culture. Implications for higher education practitioners include reexamining students' capital and adopting trauma-informed approaches into reopening plans.*

**Keywords:** College Students, COVID-19 pandemic, Faculty mentorship, Historically Black College and University, sense-of-belonging

## **Introduction**

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, undergraduate students navigated new policies such as remote instruction, social distancing, roommate separation, and independent living (Hodges et al., 2020; Smalley, 2021). As a result, undergraduate students reported suffering from heightened anxiety, stress, loneliness, fear, and isolation (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2021; Lederer et al., 2020). While most college students chose to complete the 2020-2021 school year at their family home or in an off-campus living arrangement, a small population of students requested to live in campus residence halls (e.g., Firozi et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). Reasons for living on-campus during the pandemic include housing and food insecurity, lack of a supportive home environment for learning, lack of Internet access, affiliation with a campus-based program that required residential living such as athletics, or a discipline requiring in-person classes, such as nursing.

Our study explores the experiences of a small group of undergraduate students at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) who chose to live independently in university-managed housing for the Fall 2020 academic

semester and how they navigated the uncertainty and isolation. Using a qualitative approach, we explored the forms of capital students relied on to support their mental and physical safety, academic success, and personal development. In this paper, we answer the question, *What forms of cultural capital helped HBCU residential students cope with the isolation, stress, and uncertainty of the Fall 2020 remote semester?*

### **Literature Review**

The COVID-19 pandemic forced colleges and universities to close campuses and adopt modified academic schedules to protect students, faculty, and staff from contracting the virus. As a result, college students were faced with heightened financial and psychological hardships (Jones et al., 2021; Lederer et al., 2020). Black and African American students experienced disproportionate financial hardship and COVID-19 mortality (Dyer, 2020; Hardy & Logan, 2020; Millett et al., 2020) and struggled with heightened levels of illness, stress, and social setbacks during the pandemic (Fetter & Thompson, 2020). The present research study centers on the voices of Black and African American students who attend one HBCU located in an urban area on the East Coast of the United States. In this section, we review the existing literature on cultural capital, the impact of sense of belonging on college students, the HBCU college experience, and the importance of faculty mentorship on colleg student success.

### **Cultural Capital Framework**

During challenging times such as these, students draw from their existing resources (or capital) for strength and resources such as guidance from parents or mentors, reliable meals and housing, a loving community, and transparent and trustworthy leaders. Our research builds

upon Yosso's (2005) prominent cultural capital framework to explore which types of capital students drew from during the pandemic to cope with uncertainty, stress, and isolation. Cited over 7,500 times in the education literature, Yosso's (2005) framework adopts a critical race theory lens to construct an anti-deficit framing of the cultural and community capital of Students of Color. Cultural capital is a collection of cultural expertise, abilities and talents acquired. More specifically, cultural capital is manifested in six ways: aspirational capital (e.g., students' optimism), linguistic capital (e.g., students' communication skills), familial capital (e.g., students' personal networks), navigational capital (e.g., students' ability to navigate systems), social capital (e.g., students' social networks that aid in navigational capital), and resistant capital (e.g., a foundational legacy of fighting for equity and justice; Yosso, 2005). Ultimately, the capital that students possess impacts how they navigate higher education and life overall.

### **Sense-of-Belonging**

As students navigate the ups and downs of college and life transitions, sense-of-belonging and community affiliation impact students' mental well-being (Hagerty et al., 1992; Maslow, 1954; Spanierman et al., 2013). Students characterize their sense-of-belonging in higher education as a psychological sensation that is validated by feeling like a "valued member of the college community" (Hausmann et al., 2007, p. 804). The impact of sense-of-belonging on college students' emotional well-being is positively associated with increased feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). As students develop a sense-of-belonging at their university, it leads to increased educational achievement, perseverance, confidence, and greater academic performance (Garvey et al., 2020). Establishing and fostering an environment that

leads students to feel a sense-of-belonging is extremely important to the college experience in curricular and co-curricular spaces.

### **The HBCU Student Experience**

The first HBCUs were founded in the 1830s in the United States with the intent to bridge the gap of education and gain upward mobility among Black Americans. The need for creating colleges for and by Black Americans was to counteract the exclusion of Blacks in higher education that widely segregated Black people from white people. These academic and cultural environments were initially reserved for the advancement of Black scholars but have now produced scholars of all racial, social, and economic backgrounds (Allen et al., 2007). Despite HBCUs only constituting three percent of U.S. higher education institutions, they continue to serve as a hub for Black scholarship (Allen et al., 2007) by producing more than a tenth of Black bachelor's degree holders in the Nation (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

As the enrollment of Black students at HBCUs continues to rise in comparison to Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), Black students who attend HBCUs express unique feelings of community and belongingness (Davis, 1991; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; George Mwangi, 2016; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). The existing research suggests that this increased feeling of community is a result of genuine determination to nurture an atmosphere that spotlights, commemorates, and showcases Black accomplishments, tradition, and unity (George Mwangi, 2016). The unique institutional atmosphere that is fostered at HBCUs (e.g., the engagement and education of Black culture and community cohesiveness) has been found to positively influence sense-of-belonging among Black students (Davis, 1991; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; George

Mwangi, 2016). The institutional factors that impact student success and belonging at HBCUs can lead students to gain social capital (Williams, et al., 2019).

Studies have shown that Black students select HBCUs as their college choice because they desire to be surrounded by individuals with shared ethnic backgrounds and to further learn about their ethnic heritage (Awokoya & Mann, 2011). The widely available opportunities for Black HBCU students to build relationships with same-race individuals at an HBCU compared to the limited opportunities at PWIs have led students to feel increased confidence in their identity and ability (George Mwangi, 2016). Additionally, the cultural affinity that is normative and embedded within HBCU communities has led students to feel a heightened sense of ethnic pride and sense-of-belonging (Freeman & Cohen, 2001).

### **Faculty Mentorship**

Research suggests that faculty mentorship among undergraduate students has been associated with increased levels of satisfaction with their college institution and sense-of-belonging (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007; Strayhorn & Saddler, 2009). Noted throughout the literature, mentorship is defined as an official or unofficial agreement between an expert or highly skilled person and a novice or beginner with the purpose of assisting in the advancement of their evolution (Lee 1999; Luna & Cullen 1995; Roberts 2000; Strayhorn & Saddler, 2009). HBCUs have established a reputation for affording the opportunity of lower student-to-faculty ratios that permit students to feel encouraged by faculty during their college career (Awokoya & Mann, 2011). Some HBCUs, however, reportedly suffer from conservative and paternalistic cultures which can result in pervasive heteronormativity and the subordination of students beneath faculty (Harper & Gasman, 2008).

This literature review as gathered to study a specific group of students navigating a crisis: residential HBCU undergraduates who are living along during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study seeks to examine, if students' capital and resources help them cope with crises, and if students' sense of belonging and community affiliation support student perseverance and resilience, then students' access to capital and community may inform their coping strategies and their ability to cope in times of crisis. Therefore, the research question for this study is, *What forms of cultural capital helped HBCU residential students cope with the isolation, stress, and uncertainty of the Fall 2020 remote semester?*

### **Methodology**

A collective case study (Stake, 2010) of 20 HBCU undergraduate residential students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic is presented below. A collective case study methodology enables us to conduct a contextual study of the unique phenomenon of living on an HBCU campus during the isolating and traumatizing pandemic (Mills et al, 2010; Yin, 2003). The data presented was obtained from an IRB-approved study of HBCU undergraduate students' experiences during the pandemic.

### **Data Collection**

In Fall 2020, approximately 350 students moved into university-managed residence halls at a Mid-Atlantic HBCU. These students applied for this opportunity based on their extenuating circumstances such as involvement that required campus residence (e.g., athletes, ROTC, residence advisors, nursing majors) or because of unsafe or distracting living situations at home (e.g., homelessness, overcrowded homes, lack of Internet access).

**Survey.** In October 2020, the research team recruited students who were living on-campus to complete

an online survey. Participants were asked to complete a brief online survey of Likert-scale and open-ended questions about their experiences with residence life, online classes, the campus' pandemic-related safety procedures, and demographic information. Of particular interest to this paper are the nine items regarding students' feelings of anxiety and or fear reported in Table 3. Students were asked to self-report the extent to which they experienced these fears on a scale of 1-4 (common for anxiety instruments; Spitzer et al., 2006) in which 1 represented None or Not at All and 4 represented a Severe feeling. Students were paid \$10 for completing the survey.

**Interview.** Students who fully completed the survey were invited to participate in a one-hour Zoom-based interview with researchers in November 2020. During these semi-structured interviews, students were asked how they felt about the sudden change to remote instruction and how they have been coping with the circumstances. Questions included, *What factors did you take into consideration when making the decision to attend an HBCU? How has the pandemic impacted you socially? How has the pandemic impacted your health (mental, physical)?* Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Students that completed the one-hour Zoom-based interview were paid an additional \$25 for completing the interview.

### **Participants**

We collected 121 survey responses and conducted 21 interviews. In this paper, we present findings from the 20 undergraduates who completed both the survey and an interview. One student was removed from our initial sample who self-identified as a graduate student. As presented in Table 1, the majority of our participants identified as Black or African American and as women. Students represented all four traditional undergraduate



years (5 first-year students, 2 sophomores, 4 juniors, 9 seniors).

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographic Characteristics*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>% Sample</b>
Gender Identity	Man	5	25%
	Non-binary	1	5%
	Woman	14	70%
School Year	First-year/Freshman	5	25%
	Sophomores	2	10%
	Junior	4	20%
	Senior	9	45%
Racial Identity	Black or African American	17	85%
	Multiracial	3	15%

### **Data Analysis**

**Quantitative Data.** We conducted descriptive analyses using SPSS 25 to determine the frequency of students' self-reported anxiety and fears in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. We report the frequency and mean of each.

**Qualitative Data.** Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed through Zoom. The interview transcripts were reviewed and edited for machine-generated errors. The participants' interview transcripts were combined with their survey responses to create 20 distinct cases. We reviewed each students' case and wrote analytic memos to document emergent themes.

An initial codebook was developed to reflect both the challenges students faced during the pandemic and the resources they relied upon to overcome these challenges

including specific people or groups. Then, we independently coded two random transcripts. We discussed our coding, revised each codes' definition, and established interrater reliability. We added a code to explore students' sense-of-belonging on campus. Our final codebook can be found in Table 2. We then double-coded an additional eight random transcripts. We again discussed our coding and rectified any discrepancies. Then one author coded the remaining 10 transcripts using the final codebook.

**Table 2**

*Interview Analysis Codebook*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Challenges During & After Pivot to Remote Instruction	Hindrances related to the pandemic including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sense of isolation</li> <li>● Lack of resources (supportive people, programs, finances, etc.)</li> <li>● Mental health challenges</li> <li>● Social Challenges</li> </ul>
Resources During & After Pivot to Remote Instruction	Supports related to the pandemic including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Campus Programs &amp; Affiliations</li> <li>● Access to knowledge, materials, etc.</li> <li>● Faculty and/or Peer relationships</li> <li>● Family and/or Friends</li> <li>● Work</li> </ul>

Optimism & Belief in Leadership

Demonstrated positive outlook or resilience

- Attempts to positively reframe the situation
- Expressing satisfaction/making do

Sense-of-Belonging

Sense-of-belonging or feeling a community or being at home

- Connection to campus
- Use of “we,” “our,” or “us”
- No longer feeling a sense of isolation

The coded excerpts were reviewed and compared across transcripts to determine themes in how students’ resources and perspectives aided their coping with the pandemic-related trauma. These themes were then discussed, and an additional round of coding was conducted to verify their accuracy. Participant quotes and findings are presented below using pseudonyms.

Recognizing how our paradigms, experiences, and identities inform our interpretation of the participating students’ lived experiences, we acknowledge our position as researchers and practitioners at an HBCU who study trauma responses among college students. Our research team is comprised of faculty and graduate students from an HBCU School of Education.

### **Findings**

The residential HBCU students in the study sample reported feeling severely isolated and shared that their on-campus peer networks, co-curricular affiliations, and faculty mentors supported them in coping with the isolation and stress of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally,

students’ trust in the university’s leaders and their strong sense of community was a source of support that might have alleviated some stress. In this section, we first present the descriptive survey results. Then we present the case study findings in the form of thematic summaries and anonymized participant quotes.

### **Quantitative**

Participants self-reported moderate levels of anxiety as well as feeling bored, isolated, and stuck (Table 3). The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the sampled students to differing degrees: some reporting severe stress, financial issues, and housing and food insecurity, while other students reported having less of a negative experience during the pandemic. These 20 students did not have a universal experience and, likely, had different forms of financial and familial capital from off-campus sources. What they did share, however, was a unique residential living experience at an HBCU that pivoted from face-to-face to fully online instruction and co-curricular activities.

**Table 3**  
*Frequencies and Means of Items Related to Feelings and Fears*

<b>Items</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Mil d</b>	<b>Moder ate</b>	<b>Seve re</b>	<b>Mea n</b>
Nervous or anxious	1	3	10	6	3.05
Lonely	4	4	6	6	2.70
Bored	2	4	5	9	3.05
Happy	0	9	5	5	2.70
Isolated	1	2	8	9	3.25
Stuck	3	2	6	9	3.05
Fear of getting sick	5	8	2	5	2.35
Food insecurity	9	4	4	3	2.05
Housing insecurity	7	1	9	3	2.40

### **Qualitative**

## **On-Campus Networks and Resources**

We found that students directly mentioned campus departments and programs that served as a resource to their success and retention at the university. For example, students mentioned an on-campus center that is designed to increase academic success and retention. During the pandemic, this center leveraged online meetings and group chats to continue its work. Adio stated, “I have a relationship with [the program] because they have always propelled us to go further, and they always pushed us to go harder.” Brianna elaborated, “...they have tutoring that we have to go to.” Not only did the program serve as an academic resource and motivator but it also created opportunities for peer connections. Brianna shared that “In our academy group, we have a lot of the same classes...we have our [students] separate group chats and we have one teacher for everything.” Students shared that participating in this student program afforded them with a community and mentorship that continued throughout the pandemic.

Several students mentioned that having group chats helped them stay connected to their peers in an online environment. Monica stated,

I feel like [online learning] has challenged me to connect with my classmates in a more creative way. I have a thousand GroupMe chats for every class I have...we meet through GoogleMeets to work on stuff and that is a good thing.

Students often took the lead in creating these group chats among their peers not required or monitored by their faculty. “The first class I went to, I said Hey everyone, I am going to make a GroupMe. Can I get everybody's number?... I did not have them [classmates' numbers] before, but I do now,” stated Monica. Elijah also echoed similar sentiments stating,

One of my classmates set up the entire thing. They looked up everybody that was in the class and sent

out...a message that included everybody that was in the class to say, 'I started a group chat. Send me your number and I will add you.'

Elijah also mentioned that the creation of group chats not only helped him stay connected to peers but served as an accountability platform to be successful academically.

Elijah stated,

...If someone misses something, they will ask in the group[chat] and find out. Or one person gets a question answered from the professor and disseminates the answer to the whole class. That has been a major help, not just for me, but for my classmates as well...Everybody is interacting pretty well in there, we joke, we laugh, stuff like that.

As students mentioned their unique ways of connecting to their peers in an online environment, one student mentioned how it was easier to socially connect and develop a relationship with their peers online than it normally would be in an in-person environment. Aaliyah stated,

Online you connect more with your classmates. In that aspect, I like it [online] better. Because I'm kind of a shy person I wouldn't walk up to you [in person] but online in a group chat, if I were to text message my classmates and ask some questions, they would give it to me right away. That's how we make friends.

Academic spaces were not the only space that students were able to develop or maintain peer connections. Several students joined or were already involved in student organizations during the pandemic. Asia stated, "I joined [during the pandemic] the [cultural based] club. They've been doing online events like versus battles...checking up on each other throughout the semester in the group chat that we have." Students also held leadership roles during the pandemic that not only provided them with peer

connections and support but gave them a sense of purpose and access to resources during a difficult time. Myra stated, “I am a RA for freshmen males. I chose to be an RA to make a difference in students' lives.” Elija stated,

Being on the basketball team really played a part in it[being connected to campus and academically accountable]...The athletic department has the athletic student center and the gym and that was a big boost for me in terms of being able to buckle down and make sure all my work is done...Having people like [Associate Director of Athletics] and the other staff was helpful.

Maintaining some sense of normalcy such as retaining employment was important for these students because it helped them cope with the adverse social and financial impacts of the pandemic. Skyler stated,

I work at the bookstore. So, that's been my socializing and my financial security. As frustrating as it is to work and go to school, if I did not have a job, I would have been in a completely different mental state. It would not have been good. I did not have my job over the summer, and it was terrible, I was so sad. Having a job here is a big plus.

A major influence that added to these students' optimism and helped them cope with the effects of the pandemic was having family members such as cousins or siblings and high school friends that attend or attended the university. Adio stated, “My older brother goes to school here with me. I have somebody to talk to and when I need to, go spend time with him.”

### **Faculty Relationships**

Students often noted that they relied upon their existing relationships with faculty members as a source of support during the pandemic. For example, Sabrina shared that “All of our professors know us pretty well and they

want to have that social interaction with us, but the camera and the computer are in the way.” Students noted that they looked to faculty they already knew and purposefully enrolled in their classes perhaps as a way to create community and connection to campus. Elijah said, “Just based off of last school year, the relationships I was able to build with some of my professors were helpful...” Sabrina echoed this sentiment stating,

I have the same professors that I had last year. The same professors in education teach multiple courses. You see them often and they say things like ‘If we were in person, I would be hugging on you guys’.

Students drew upon their existing relationships with faculty and noted it as a source of support not just for learning the course content. Instead, students noted that they sense that these faculty members cared for them and thus their courses were intentionally sought out.

The pandemic was the first time many faculty taught online, and students understood that this would be a difficult adjustment. Several of our interviewees shared that they recognized that faculty were doing the best they could to be supportive of them; “I know the teachers are trying” (Monica). In particular, the students observed that the faculty were being more accommodating and providing more support for learners to work through the material at a slower pace than would be expected before the pandemic. Andrew shared,

...I can't generalize all professors ... my ones with my major are actually trying to really look out for students. Accommodate them in terms of going over material outside of their usual hours ...And really just talking slowly so that we all get it.

Asia echoed, “I liked that some professors were gracious towards students because it's like really a messed-up situation, this whole pandemic.” The undergraduates in our



study talked about their relationships with the faculty and the support they were getting from faculty as sources of support.

### **Trust in University Leadership and Campus Safety**

When the students in our study were asked how they felt about the plan to pivot to remote instruction, several students shared that, while they were disappointed to have to take classes online, they understood the university's rationale for making the decision. When talking about the decision to be fully remote instead of hybrid, Aaliyah shared, "I feel the school is trying its best and everything." Students compared their campuses' low rate of COVID-19 cases as a sign that the university's administration was making the right decisions. Tyler shared, "I understand like circumstantially, it's difficult...even though I think [my college] is still doing pretty well with...negative confirmed cases... compared to a lot of other schools." Students attributed the university's safety protocols to alleviating some of their stress in coping with the pandemic: "I think that definitely helps out -- just to know that I am safe"( Elijah).

Students noted that they agreed with the on-campus safety protocols like masking and COVID-19 testing. Andrew said,

I do feel as if I have an obligation to uphold policies. Just because ... it's just maturity. They're not asking you too much. That's the biggest thing for me. [Our university] isn't asking us to cut off an arm and a leg just to get something done. It's just simple things we need to comply to. So, I would say, in that sense, I do feel like I have an obligation. I am going to adhere to certain ... things like anything in regard to COVID.

They recognized that these safety measures were in place to protect them and that it was their "obligation to uphold

[the] policies” as Andrew said to keep everyone safe. Students also felt like the university had set them up for success by providing them with a fanny pack of branded gear like hand sanitizer and face masks. Talking about this gift, Alexis said,

...I like to wear the masks because it says [our university name] on it so it’s just like ‘OK, I can rep my school...staying safe...’ And it came with some mints because, you know, mask breath is real. So, I feel like that was good. They, [the university president] did that. And then hand sanitizer because you got to stay clean. I just feel like it was like... how, like, workers have, like, their tool belt? I feel like that's what it was. It was like a fanny pack for, like, the little essentials for this pandemic.

Students appreciated the “tool belt” gift because it supported their safety while also allowing them to show their school spirit.

These students were thankful that the university let them stay on campus. Some students found the campus to be a safe place to meet their goals, such as Monica who shared, “I came here so that I could focus and get good grades and I feel like I am doing that despite the challenges.” When sharing her story, Sabrina said,

I think [college president] is trying to do as best as he can. I think that we were fortunate enough to have those students who do come from extreme circumstances, be able to stay here because that speaks volumes. I do not know any HBCU that is doing that. [Other colleges] told everybody come get your stuff and go [home]. [My college] said let us try to make something work. Let us try to do something, for those who cannot or are not able to go home. Everybody does not have good people around them to even push them to even be here. I look at the residents here, they are strong enough to

not have that support system but to still be here. Not every school is cautious about those things and [my college] did that.

Sabrina expressed how she views the actions taken by her college to be above and beyond what other schools are offering and she attributes it to both individuals and an administration who cares more about providing a safety net for students.

### **Sense-of-Belonging and Connection to Culture**

Throughout this study, we found students repeatedly used group-related words (we, our, us) when sharing their feelings about campus. The student participants continued to mention this shared community or unity with their peers based on the premise that they all were affected or going through some sort of struggle whether personally or academically because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Andrew shared,

In regard to our campus and everything that's going on in the world right now, it kind of keeps us engaged as one unit, as students. We no longer look at things [individually] but as one. Like we are all affected and impacted.

Skyler shared similar sentiments of a sense of unity and sympathy among peers.

...a lot of us live apart in different states so everyone is at home grinding trying to figure it out. But even in a group chat, we are all helpless, it does feel better to not be helpless by yourself. None of us know anything!

Asia also stated this collective orientation to coping with the pandemic and feeling that “we are going to get through this together.”

I feel like, if anything, it helped unite the classmates because we're all in the same situation where we can't show up to the class. Oh, we can't do this

assignment. Our Internet went out like we all have some type of situation going on.

Alexus echoed similar sentiments,

I feel like it [relating to classmates in an online environment] hasn't [changed] only because we are all in the same situation. We are all sitting here [saying] yeah, this is a change. So, we're going to have to rise to the occasion. And there's no telling when everything will go back to normal, so for now, you just gotta kind of push through.

The shared sense of community during the crisis expressed among these students seemed to promote a heightened sense of optimism about their future. All the students expressed hopefulness and confidence about the future despite the distressing times. Even further, knowing that health officials have determined that the path to normalcy will be long and hard, these students still displayed a noticeable amount of positivity about their adverse circumstances.

Students also mentioned other sources that led them to feel a sense-of-belonging and community at their college. One source was having a shared cultural connection to the HBCU mission and history. Elijah shared, "It is really the tradition and the culture. I think you have bragging rights going to an HBCU just because of the history behind a lot of these places that a lot of people do not know about." More specifically, students expressed that by attending an HBCU it gave them an opportunity for self-exploration and discovery of diverse cultural experiences. Myra shared "One thing I will say at [my university] is I have learned what it means to be African American here on the campus. When I tell you, I did not know who I was before I came here." Alexis echoed similar sentiments stating, "I definitely wanted to go to an HBCU just because I feel like it's a good cultural experience. And I like that it helps you learn more about yourself."

Students felt that being at an HBCU afforded them a space of community in which they can stand in solidarity and unity with those from shared backgrounds, demographics, and experiences. Janae shared “Really seeing Black people stand together I just felt it was right to be at an HBCU.” Students mentioned that their institution being an HBCU was a big factor in why they decided to attend. Adio shared “I just wanted to be around my people. I wanted to learn more about my history...” Students shared that seeing successful Black scholars in high-achieving roles and certain fields of study was inspiring. Myra shared “I got to be around Black doctors. That was something I never even heard of. I grew up in the inner city, you do not see those role models...It is so important to be at an HBCU.” Andrew shared similar feelings, “Coming to an HBCU and seeing the amount of Black lawyers, Black dentists, and Black business owners was a really big thing for me.”

This feeling of being surrounded by individuals that look like you, share similar values as you, and love and support you like family by being at an HBCU was expressed by students. Myra shared, “But the thing that makes the HBCU experience better is just the environment and stuff; it is the energy that the campus brings. It is just how we support and love each other and stuff like that.”

Additionally, the researchers found that students felt some sort of shield of protection against directly experiencing racialized incidents or coping with racialized incidents that were happening in the broader society by attending an HBCU. For example, many students referenced the unwelcoming environments of PWIs as being environments of racism or exposure to racist experiences. Savannah shared, “One of my friends said it is really hard at a PWI like you think about racism. She has been in countless racial situations. Me making the choice of an HBCU was a great choice.” Another student stated,

I went to a primarily white community college before I got to [my university]. Being at [my university] It just feels like being home. But being at a PWI, I feel like I wouldn't know the people that I know now. I wouldn't have learned so much about myself. My hair wouldn't be natural like it is right now. My experience would have been very different. (Amber)

Lastly, students noted that their decision to attend an HBCU, and particularly this HBCU, was greatly influenced by being socially connected to someone that was attending or had attended the university or another HBCU. This predisposed connection with the university or HBCU culture that students were exposed to before enrolling may have had an impact on their heightened sense of connection and community to their university. For example, Enam stated “My cousin went [here] and graduated. I think he was a major influence in my decision to come to [HBCU].” Another student (Andrew) echoed similar sentiments,

I'm the youngest. My brother and sister both went to HBCUs. They went to [another HBCU]...And there were a lot of motivational things behind me, going to an HBCU, but that was overall it.

In conclusion, the findings from our present study explored the resources that HBCU residential students drew from to cope with the stress, isolation, and challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Presented below are the findings from this study framed around the theoretical framework of cultural capital and its relevance to the field of higher education.

## **Discussion**

To answer our research question, we frame our findings around Yosso's six forms of cultural capital (2005). Specifically, in this section, the findings from this study are outlined drawing parallels between Yosso's forms

of capital (2005) and the experiences of the study participants. As a result of our study, it was found that HBCU residential students coped with the isolation, stress, and uncertainty of the Fall 2020 remote semester by leveraging four forms of capital (Yosso, 2005): aspirational, social, familial, and resistance.

### **Aspirational Capital**

Aspirational capital is the capacity to envision the future (Yosso, 2005). As students navigated continuous alterations to their academic plans and college environment, these students still expressed a glimmer of hope. Their optimism stemmed from their trust in the university and its leaders. Students such as Sabrina expressed faith that the decisions the university made thus far - and would continue to make - would be in their best interest. They often compared their university's decisions and COVID-19 campus protocols to that of other institutions in the geographical area, more specifically the local PWIs. A few students such as Tyler felt surrounding PWIs were being negligent in their response to COVID-19. In contrast, the HBCU students reported that a shared understanding and commitment of faculty, staff, and students to the HBCU mission protected them at their institution, which further increased their assurance in their university. The accommodations of this HBCU during the COVID-19 pandemic reaffirms the HBCU mission of extending opportunities to those who have typically been denied access to resources and support (Allen et al., 2007).

The safeguarded protection that the participants felt that the university provided (e.g., the approval to live in residence halls) further contributed to their optimism. Furthermore, students such as Elijah expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to live on campus and have access to dining halls (i.e., food), twice-weekly free COVID-19 testing, etc. Although students such as Skyler expressed

feeling physically lonely as a result of isolation, they reported a sense-of-belonging and shared struggle with their peers. Students' sense of optimism seemed to be bolstered by the acknowledgment that their struggles were not unique, and that the pandemic was a shared experience with their peers.

### **Resistance Capital**

Resistance capital is the ability to understand and defy discriminatory systems and practices (Yosso, 2005). The students in our sample shared that they noticed and appreciated how they had shared backgrounds, demographic identities, and experiences as their HBCU faculty and peers. Students such as Savannah found the HBCU environment to be empowering as they coped with pandemic-related challenges as well as off-campus racist incidents such as unjust police killings of unarmed Black people. In particular, students highlighted how the HBCU culture fosters a sense of family and collective identity that negated adverse circumstances.

Students recognized that their HBCU environment positively showcased and educated them about Black culture, tradition, and scholarship (George Mwangi, 2016). Students such as Amber attributed this environment to discovering more about their ethnicity and identity than in their previous educational contexts. Students such as Andrew and Janae also acknowledged the mission of the institution being built for and by Black scholars (Allen et al., 2007), further contributed to their sense of confidence and safety with the university's decisions in response to the pandemic to be in their best interest. The findings from this study suggest that the cultural empowerment students felt because of their HBCU enrollment equipped them with intangible tools, skills, and resources to navigate oppressive structures outside of the university and challenges within the university.



### **Social capital**

Social capital is the network of relationships and supports an individual possesses or has access to (Yosso, 2005). Asia, Monica and other students frequently mentioned their reliance on peer support and the use of group messaging apps to help them navigate their socially distanced social lives. Students not only used their peer group messages as means to achieve success in their courses but also as an opportunity to make new friends. Students also leveraged student organizations and their roles as campus leaders to find community - despite organization meetings and events being moved onto video conferencing platforms. Many of the participants were actively involved in campus life and positions that gave them access to other students such as Myra being a residence life paraprofessional (an RA), Skyler being a campus bookstore employee, or Elijah being an athlete. With this access to social connections, despite the pandemic-related restrictions (i.e., social distancing), students still found ways to find social connections to their campus either online or in-person.

### **Familial capital**

Familial capital is defined as the knowledge and resources obtained through kinship connections with kinship encompassing extended family and non-blood relatives (Yosso, 2005). Students in our study repeatedly used terminology that suggested that they felt like a part of a collective group or community such as “us,” “we,” and “our” as they referred to their classmates, faculty, and the broader HBCU campus. Even if they had not met their classmates in person, students still felt a sense of community with their peers, and they appeared to use that as a positive reinforcement to persevere through the pandemic. Reports of perceptions of collective group unity

were highest among students whose presence on campus was also associated with a pre-existing community such as an athletic team, nursing students, or ROTC students.

Academically, students such as Sabrina and Elijah leveraged their pre-existing connections with faculty that they knew before remote learning began to cope with the academic effects of the pandemic. Some students specifically mentioned intentionally enrolling in classes with faculty they previously knew to maintain a sense of normalcy and receive compassion-based teaching. More specifically, a few students in this study mentioned the “loving” atmosphere [Sabrina] fostered by faculty such as receiving hugs from their professor if they were in person as an expression of the care-taking environment and role that is often unique yet normal at HBCUs.

Lastly, students in our study expressed the importance of attending an HBCU and, for some, continuing the legacy in their family lineage to attend an HBCU. Adio and other students mentioned having siblings, parents, or close friends that attended HBCUs who informally exposed them to the HBCU atmosphere. We believe that this HBCU-related kinship was a source of strength and hope as students navigated the pandemic.

### **Limitations**

This study sought to document the experiences of HBCU students living in residential housing during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, how HBCU students living in isolated housing coped with the stress, isolation, and challenges of the pandemic. As with all research, this study is not without limitations. First, we realize that our analysis of the experiences of HBCU students is not generalizable to all HBCU students. Students at this university were influenced by institutional factors (e.g., campus culture, resources, location). Our analysis did not account for students’ gender or sexual

orientation identities which may have limited our understanding of the potential impact of heterosexism and cisnormativity that has been found to be prevalent on HBCUs campuses (Harper & Gasman, 2008). We also recognize that our limited sample size and investigation of exclusively residential students restrict our study findings to apply to non-residential HBCU students who also navigated the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, although our study was conducted with a student-facilitator to alleviate power dynamics, participants may have overemphasized or performed their optimism for this study to potentially express a more socially desirable response. Third, we did not complete any follow-up data collection or further explore any of the themes discussed throughout this paper with student participants.

Additionally, we did not specifically inquire how their experiences relate to the six types of capital used as a framework for this study (Yosso, 2005). Lastly, we did not collect any financial data to explore how socioeconomic status, access to economic resources, or financial aid impacted their experiences.

Considering the limitations of our study, future research examining the pandemic's impact on college students attending minority-serving institutions, such as HBCUs that primarily enroll Black students could strengthen the literature (Kimbrough, 2020). Additionally, future studies could examine the relevance of trauma on college students during the COVID-19 pandemic and incorporating trauma-informed practices into higher education re-opening strategies (Davidson, 2017). Particularly, our findings and implications point towards the adoption of trauma-informed practices on college campuses particularly in times of crises (Davidson, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014). Students in our study were seeking safe environments (online and in-person), transparent university leadership, peer networks, familiar trusting relationships

with faculty and staff, and the chance to keep their community safe by adopting the pandemic-related safety protocols (i.e., masking, testing, distancing). Therefore, examining formal adopting of trauma informed practices on college campuses during times of crisis could inform future emergency responses.

### **Conclusion**

The present study aimed to investigate the types of capital HBCU residential undergraduates relied upon to cope with the stress and isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic in Fall 2020. Our qualitative findings demonstrate that students relied on their peer networks, existing relationships with faculty and staff, campus-based positions and activities, and their sense-of-belonging with the campus community. Framing this work in Yosso's (2005) cultural capital theory, we found that students particularly drew upon four forms of capital (Yosso, 2005): aspirational, social, familial, and resistance.

Of importance to higher education professionals, is to understand how critical the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is and was on students' academic performance, social integration, and overall persistence. For example, faculty, staff, and researchers in higher education should understand how the pandemic has exacerbated short- and long-term inequities that exist among minoritized student communities. Our findings suggest that students' sense of community, collective identity, and cultural bond with their HBCU campus contributed to their adherence to pandemic-related protocols. While we cannot make causal claims, there is reason to believe that students in our sample were more likely than students at a PWI to adhere to pandemic-related protocols because the safety concerns were bigger than just school rules - it was tied to protecting the Black community. Journalistic work has documented such claims

(Valbrun, 2020) but more rigorous research is needed to better explore this connection.

Furthermore, in times of crisis, instead of creating new programs and resources, higher education professionals should consider investing more energy into longstanding and familiar programs. Our findings suggest that students relied on existing campus connections with programs, organizations, peers, and faculty for support. Potentially, through unfamiliar times, students wanted to feel a sense of normalcy, so they turned to spaces, relationships, or programs in which they already felt safe. Building off this finding, we recommend that, instead of creating new programs to support students in crises, campus resources should be intensified and channeled through existing trust structures.

The findings from this study shed light on the value of HBCU culture and climate as well as building multi-semester faculty-student relationships. This study draws attention to the potential differences between HBCU and PWI students in coping with the stress of the pandemic and adhering to pandemic-related safety protocols. Further work is needed to understand the impact of the pandemic on students at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) and institutions with special missions.

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### **Authors Bios**

**Juana Hollingsworth**, Ph.D. student studying Higher Education Administration at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. Her research interests include exploring the experiences of marginalized populations at historically and predominately white institutions. She also investigates the prevalence of cyberbullying on college campuses. Juana earned her bachelor's and master's degree in Social Work with an emphasis in trauma-informed care from the University of Northern Iowa.  
Corresponding Author Email: [juhol110@morgan.edu](mailto:juhol110@morgan.edu)

**Dr. Virginia Byrne**, Assistant Professor of Higher Education & Student Affairs at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. Her work investigates how social media and instructional technology are changing how we teach, learn, and connect in higher education. Virginia earned her Ph.D. from the University of Maryland, College Park, and her Master's degree from Florida State University.

**Dr. Krishna Bista**, Professor in the Department of Advanced Studies, Leadership and Policy at Morgan State University. His research focuses on college student experiences related to classroom participation, perceptions of academic integrity, faculty-student relationships, the role

of advisors, and cross-cultural teaching and learning strategies in higher education.

**Dr. Uttam Gaulee**, Professor in the Department of Advanced Studies, Leadership and Policy at Morgan State University. His research interests include the community college, diaspora studies, interdisciplinary perspectives on education policy, global citizenship, and cross-cultural issues in international development and geopolitics. A professor in the Community College Leadership Doctoral Program at Morgan State University, Dr. Gaulee is an advocate of community college as a vehicle for social progress and economic development in and beyond the U.S. He recently edited a volume on Global Adaptations of Community College Infrastructure.

**Dr. Tracy Rone**, Interim Director of Innovation and Community Partnerships, and Associate Professor in the Department of Advanced Studies, Leadership, and Policy in the School of Education and Urban Studies at Morgan State University. Her research aims to illuminate urban education issues in high-poverty, resource-challenged contexts through an anthropological lens. She is especially interested in how identity informs academic performance, the intersection of health and educational disparities, and how narrative can be used to illuminate lived experiences in urban communities.

**Dr. Glenda Prime**, Dean for the School of Education and Urban Studies at Morgan State University. Dr. Prime earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry, biology, and statistics, a master's degree, and a Ph.D. all from the University of the West Indies in St. Augustine, Trinidad. Her research and publication in science education and technology education have received international recognition leading to numerous invited presentations and

keynote addresses at scholarly venues in the UK and several other European countries.

**\*Corresponding author:** Juana Hollingsworth,  
juhol10@morgan.edu

**ORCID:** Juana Hollingsworth: 0000-0003-3586-0871;  
Virginia L. Byrne: 0000-0003-2080-6522; Krishna Bista:  
0000-0002-7841-9069; Uttam Gaulee: 0000-0001-7728-  
6834; Tracy Rone: 0000-0001-7901-4090; Glenda Prime:  
0000-0002-1873-1536