

## **Looking Backward, Looking Forward: Institutional Responses and Instructional Changes to Address COVID-19 Among A Rural Midwestern University<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In response to COVID-19, post-secondary institutions went through a widespread transition to online and remote learning to address the immediate effects of disruption in the teaching and learning environment. This study aims to map the changes and challenges in the areas of responses to students' psychological needs, responses to students' academic needs, and responses to minoritized students' needs from institutional leaders', teaching faculties', and teaching assistants' perspectives via a qualitative approach. The results suggest that institutional leaders and instructors perceived a decrease in academic motivation and increase in social isolation among students during COVID-19 especially from minoritized backgrounds. Implications and guidance on future university policies and programs to help preserve educational quality of instruction and mitigate educational inequities are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Higher education, qualitative research methods, COVID-19, institutional responses, faculty responses

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Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher educational institutions experienced a sudden transition to new ways of teaching and learning in March 2020. During

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the pandemic, higher education was criticized for not preparing enough to handle online teaching and assessment, with many faculty members doubting the efficacy of the tools (Illanes et al., 2020). Significant confusion surrounding the essential and nonessential employee designation also highlights communication challenges in COVID-19.

Although understanding institutional leader and faculty responses to the emergent transition and needed resources is important, there is limited research on capturing the institutional responses to the pandemic. The current study is part of a larger mixed-method study investigating the association between instructional changes and students' sociocultural factors at a large Midwestern university. The purpose of this paper is to map the changes and challenges in the areas of responses to students' psychological needs, responses to students' academic needs, and responses to minoritized students' needs from institutional leaders', teaching faculties', and teaching assistants' perspectives using a qualitative approach based on interviews and analyzed thematically. This study is one of a few that has attempted to document institutional and academic/learning responses at the advent of the pandemic in March 2020 to illustrate the role of higher education institutions and faculty in creating a supportive and inclusive environment for students, especially historically marginalized student populations (e.g., ethnic minority students, low-income college students, international students).

Our research objectives and methods were informed by a literature review focusing on university responses and faculty (including teaching assistants [TAs]) responses to the rapid institutional transition during the pandemic. The databases employed for the literature search were EBSCO and ERIC and only peer-reviewed journal articles are included in the final literature review.

The research team specifically included articles focused on understanding how the higher institutions and university professors responded to the rapid shifts in teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and whether these responses helped create a supportive environment for students. We believe that previous literature on crisis responses in higher education can help us better understand the steps and strategies taken by universities and faculty during COVID-19 and comprehend the effectiveness of those actions.

### **COVID-19 Impact on Students**

When the pandemic exploded, the U.S. government implemented social distancing orders and lockdown policies to prevent the spread of the virus. Universities nationwide went through a rapid shift to online teaching and learning, forcing faculty and students to quickly transition from in-person instruction to remote teaching (Hodges & Fowler, 2020). Hodges and Fowler (2020) termed this transition "emergent remote teaching" (ERT), which is described as a sudden but temporary shift of instruction to new ways of teaching and involves fully remote education under crises.

Existing literature, though developing, has begun to unpack the full extent of the impact of COVID-19 on college-going students. Many students lacked access to the internet and quiet places to study, and students, especially from rural backgrounds and low-income households, had difficulty accessing online materials (Neuwirth et al., 2020). Studies have also found that because of social distancing and closing of physical, institutional spaces, essential human needs like social cohesion, mutual solidarity, and a sense of collective efficacy were threatened throughout the crisis (Kay et al., 2020; van Ameijde et al., 2009). This also influenced related psychosocial aspects of students' well-being, like sense of belonging. Evidence shows that community dimensions like sense of belonging are associated with higher student self-efficacy and lower academic stress during COVID-19 in college students (Procentese et al., 2020).

### **Institutional-Level Challenges and Responses During COVID-19**

Although ERT is adopted only during crises and tends not to continue once the crisis subsides, it still provides meaningful information and prepares leadership and faculty in higher education for other emerging situations by challenging them to reflect on what worked and how to better meet students' needs based on the past experiences (Hodges & Fowler, 2020). To mitigate the unforeseen challenges brought by the pandemic, clearly defined goals and responsibilities, internal support for the university team, and adaptive behaviors that involved team members changing their approach in case of altered requirements were essential in contributing to effective leadership during a crisis (Spendlove, 2007; van Ameijde et al., 2009). Studies also draw attention to the ability of many individuals at the university to maintain an optimistic outlook through an emergency and come together to discover ways to cope positively (Fillmore et al., 2011). Institutions were seen centering their responses around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (Renn, 2020), requiring universities to rely on well-integrated interdepartmental teams and processes.

Compared to the evidence about COVID-19's impact on college students, less literature is available on understanding institutional-level challenges and response mechanisms. Of what is available, despite developing response systems rapidly and radically, institutions faced enormous challenges in coping with COVID-19. There was significant confusion surrounding essential and nonessential employee designations and crisis communications in the past, which has translated into communication challenges. Such situations often require more resource allocation and training initiatives for administrators, faculty, and staff in emergency mitigation, response, and recovery (Hodges & Fowler, 2020). Additionally, a study reported that higher education was not prepared to handle online teaching, specifically online assessments, with many faculty members not convinced regarding the efficacy of the tools (Sharadgah & Sa'di, 2020).

### **Faculty-Level Challenges and Responses During COVID-19**

Emerging literature on faculty perceptions and responses during the COVID-19 pandemic points towards the understanding that despite compromised teacher-student interactions in remote settings, the expectations of students for courses do not change much. In addition, faculty appreciate the flexibility of classes in online learning (Burnett et al., 2020; Perets et al., 2020). As a response, most faculty-level changes include converting the grading system to pass/fail to ease the academic burden on students in response to the transition, eliminating unnecessary assignments and quizzes to decrease students' work volume (Johnson et al., 2020), and postponing the due dates of assignments and extending exam time to ensure students have enough time to finish their work.

Faculty felt the need to maintain a connection with students when virtual interactions replaced in-person teaching and decreased student motivation because of limited social interactions and increased distraction in the online learning environment (Burnett et al., 2020; Sharaievska et al., 2022). This resulted in more electronic communication through emails and other online platforms such as Canvas to offer support (Perets et al., 2020).

The compromised teacher-student interactions raised concerns among faculty about completely identifying students' needs and providing academic and psychological support (Burnett et al., 2020; Rupnow et al., 2020). On the other hand, leniency of assessment led to additional problems. Burnett et al. (2020) mentioned that cheating was detected in online chemistry exams, and the average grade of exams was much higher than in in-person sessions. Another study at Yale University in spring 2020 suggests that changing the grading system to pass/no pass after the emergent remote instruction led to a significant drop in students' attendance in synchronized Zoom lectures and TA sections (Perets et al., 2020).

Moreover, for a long period, instructors struggled to understand what they were supposed to fulfill in online teaching. Faculty inexperienced in online teaching viewed this emergent transition more negatively on many fronts, like the online teaching environment, class content, technology use, and students' engagement (Gyampoh et al., 2020; Jung et al., 2020). Even though universities organized training sessions, most did not address the psychological needs of faculty, making them feel disconnected and alienated in the online education settings (Perrotta & Bohan, 2020). Many faculty members in the United States reported anxiety and stress in response to this transition but were simultaneously trying to comfort their students from stress and anxiety (Johnson et al., 2020). In many ways, the sudden teaching and learning transition posed a heavy psychological burden on instructors, especially at the beginning of this rapid shift.

## **Research Questions**

Literature on COVID-19 is nascent, and there is a prominent gap in capturing institutional responses to the pandemic. Of the studies reported, there is a clear recognition and need for more in-depth qualitative studies to shed light on

the nuances of experiences that administrators, faculty, and TAs navigated through the early and continuing stages of the pandemic. The current study takes a qualitative approach in mapping the changes and challenges at the administrative and leadership level (i.e., university responses) and the course level (i.e., faculty and TA responses) to gain a holistic view of the instructional changes during the COVID-19 pandemic at a Midwestern university in the United States. We focus on two main research questions:

1. How did the institutional leadership respond to providing continuity of education in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What approaches did the faculty and teaching assistants (TAs) use to respond to providing instruction in the early stages of the pandemic?
  - What were the faculty and TAs' perceptions of student academic and psychosocial needs?

## **Method**

This qualitative study is part of a larger mixed methods study that seeks to investigate the in-person to online instruction change and its association with student sociocultural factors during the spring 2020 academic semester at a public Midwestern university in the United States. The quantitative portion method study included randomly selected courses across seven colleges of the university by surveying 600 students. The qualitative portion involved interviewing faculty and their TAs from the same colleges/schools about the institutional mechanisms that arose from the COVID-19 shelter-in-place order that began in March 2020 and was extended to institutional leadership like deans and provosts and other administrative personnel.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with institutional leaders ( $N = 4$ ) representing points of contact from offices of provost and deans representing one of the colleges, and the university counseling office, and faculty members ( $N = 6$ ) and TAs ( $N = 5$ ) representing a diverse set of colleges/universities (see Table 1). The interviews aimed at understanding how the university leadership and faculty perceived and responded to COVID-19-related challenges and their learnings from the experience. Some sample interview questions include: “How do you think university responses during COVID-19 impacted students’ resilience, well-being, and coping mechanisms?” and “How do you think students were supported during the pandemic?”

**Table 1**

*Demographic Affiliation of Study Participants by Self-Report*

	Affiliation	Race/Ethnicity	Gender
Administrator 1	College of Fine & Applied Arts	White American	Male
Administrator 2	Counseling Center	White American	Female
Administrator 3	College of Engineering	Greek	Male
Administrator 4	College of Education	African American	Male
Faculty 1	School of Music	Greek	Male
Faculty 2	College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences	White American	Male
Faculty 3	College of Liberal Arts & Sciences	South Asian	Male
Faculty 4	College of Engineering	White American	Male
Faculty 5	College of Liberal Arts & Sciences	Swedish-Mexican American	Male
Faculty 6	School of Information Sciences	White American	Male
TA 1	School of Music	White American	Male
TA 2	College of Liberal Arts & Sciences	White American	Female
TA 3	College of Engineering	Asian American	Female
TA 4	School of Information Sciences	Asian American	Female
TA 5	College of Education	African American	Female

Following the transcription of the interviews, two researchers independently coded them to guarantee interrater reliability, using a parent coding scheme based on the interview prompts (see Appendix). When disagreements about codes occurred, the research team further discussed the meaning of codes and recoded the transcripts if needed. Constant comparison was used throughout the coding process to generate larger categories and themes and to identify connections among interviews (Maxwell, 2012).

### **Deductive and Inductive Processes of Coding**

This process consisted of development of the coding scheme, including producing emergent codes through constant comparison method of analysis. The team employed initial deductive processes to facilitate multiple readings of transcripts. We applied multiple open-coding processes in Microsoft Word, NVivo, and Taguette, all designed to facilitate coding, recoding, and determining interrater coding and discussions among team members. We briefly describe how the open-coding processes were applied:

- Team members read MS Word transcripts and applied processes of interrater coding by coding segments of documents and comparing coded

phrases during iterations of coding and in weekly team meetings. Secondary coders assisted primary coders during this open coding process while conferring with team members to ensure similarity of coding and meaning throughout the initial coding process.

- NVivo served as a project management system for all cleaned and second-coded transcripts during the MS Word open-coding process. Coding transcripts in NVivo allowed for developing code frequencies and occurrences to determine frequently occurring codes, by which the team constructed themes across research questions.
- Taguette provided an opportunity to display and highlight themes vertically and horizontally by faculty and TAs and across core passages reflected in thematic groupings of codes, respectively. Taguette transcripts allowed an even richer cross-comparison of themes across faculty and TAs to enrich the presentation of results below.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis involved developing strategies for structuring, linking, retrieving, writing, and quantifying aspects of the qualitative data informed by the study research questions. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) informed the use and reporting related to meaning-making and findings from the study respondents. CAQDAS was used to explore best practices in handling data and discover themes from the study. For instance, Paulus et al. (2017) undertook how researchers who highlight implications report their use of ATLAS.ti or NVivo “to test empirical support for suggestions in the methodological literature that QDAS can help researchers make their research processes more transparent.”

**Table 2**

*Emergent Themes and Codes Frequency*

Categories	Codes	Frequency (% of all code fragments)
Responses to changes in students’ psychological needs	Belonging	12 coded fragments (10%)
	Coping	18 coded fragments (14.5%)
	Resilience	5 coded fragments (4%)
	Well-being	21 coded fragments (17%)
Responses to changes in students’ academic needs	Accommodation	19 coded fragments (15%)
	Assessment	19 coded fragments (15%)
	Motivation	8 coded fragments (6.5%)
Responses to changes in minoritized students’ needs	Underserved	16 coded fragments (13%)
	International	6 coded fragments (5%)

## **Results**

The coding process resulted in series of findings categorized into three types of needs: responses to changes in students' psychological needs, students' academic needs, and minoritized students' needs (see Table 2). Findings are organized by themes related to factors associated with students' psychological and academic needs during the pandemic. We use the themes above to reveal a set of institutional and instructional responses and changes addressed at Midwestern University and suggest ways institutions of higher education continue to operate in the post-COVID era.

### **Responses to Changes in Students' Psychological Needs**

#### *Belonging*

Belonging as a code was defined as an institutional response by faculty/TAs and institutional leaders about "matters relating to belonging to the university," especially considering ways in which the university or teaching faculty promoted mechanisms to facilitate more attachment and engagement with the institution or in the coursework.

Institutional leaders identified several aspects of belonging as a response to providing continuity during the early stages of the COVID-19 academic. The following responses, which speak to the larger issue of reimagining the university community, focus on (a) emphasizing the role of residential campus learning, (b) developing online learning platforms, and (c) highlighting the importance of non-traditional learning. For example, the response from Administrator 3 highlights the role of the residential campus:

A residential campus provides for those students to find themselves connected with peers, people who have similar experiences while, at the same time, liberated if you are from those responsibilities that go along with being in the environment where they have additional family-related things to worry about.

Teaching faculty and assistants recognized that the transition to classes online manifested losing access to immediate social support during face-to-face learning. For example, TA 5 stated, "I think that sense of belonging suffered because before you might have joined organizations, have friend groups, study groups, and now you don't have access to that kind of support." However, the teaching faculty and TAs realized the online transition provided opportunities for themselves and the students to find new ways to work and connect through virtual platforms. As TA 4 stated, "We definitely became closer throughout the semester, especially when everything transitioned online. Because we all were struggling, and we had to work together as a team." Responses from TA 2 also suggested how additional platforms (like Zoom) were used to facilitate a sense of belonging:



After the online change, some people started creating Zoom sessions that were silent study sessions. They get on Zoom to study together, but not talk. I guess they want to replace that sense of connection by doing something together, so you can study and stay compatible in silence at least you're doing it together. You don't feel so alone.

The impact of COVID as shown above illustrates the necessity of focusing on and increasing college students' engagement as an important characteristic of belonging that focus on unique student experiences that facilitate traditional, online, and hybrid learning possibilities.

### *Coping*

Coping as a code was defined as an institutional response by faculty and institutional leaders in which they managed or dealt with the rapidly changing situations, including academic, social, and environmental demands, at the beginning of COVID-19.

Institutional leaders identified coping as a response to supporting students and faculty during COVID-19. They emphasized the resources offered and actions taken by the university to help students and faculty cope with stress related to the rapid transition, as Administrator 2 stated:

The students are talking about the pandemic and the feelings of loneliness and disconnection. ... We don't need faculty members to be a counselor, but just a willingness to reach in and ask students, "Hey, I noticed that you're struggling, it must be difficult." We want to get our faculty and staff to be part of the campus safety net.

The institutional leaders also highlighted students' strong coping ability, with their mindset transitioning quickly. Administrator 2 reveals an aspect of immediate coping:

The students were like, "Oh my goodness, there's this pandemic, how do I readjust? I have to go home, but I don't have adequate technology for this. How do I make this happen so quickly?" Sooner the students were focused on "how do I make this work? What do I need to do?"

Teaching faculty also provided resources and support at the classroom level to help students cope with the rapidly changing situations, including helping students adapt to online learning and giving flexibility in work/research/coursework. The excerpt below suggested efforts made by TA 5 to provide support:

We were in a pandemic, and if somebody needed an extension, we gave it to them. We didn't advertise it. But we tried to be very flexible with them, as flexible as our lives dealing with the pandemic was allowed, and I let them talk about how they felt, and a lot of them were very stressed out.

Not only were students struggling, but faculty also struggled and self-accused when they could not provide sufficient/timely support to help students cope. As Faculty 1 stated:

We had extra challenges with two students. They had taken incomplete grades, and they had other issues. One of them had psychological mental issues. If we could have a face-to-face communication, I would have helped them enormously. In those two cases, electronic creation, virtual mediation had a negative effect.

At the advent of COVID-19, Midwestern University institutional and instructional leaders recognized the priority of coping amidst the pandemic while prioritizing most basic needs and serving as safety nets for students in crisis. Opportunities for developing resources for faculty and students to cope in times of crisis were noted and continue to be necessary as institutions address ways to help students adapt to realities of the health related trauma they were facing on all university campuses in US and worldwide.

### *Resilience*

Resilience as a code was defined as institutional leader and faculty responses and actions to help students recover mentally and emotionally from the challenging COVID-19 situations.

The faculty and institutional leaders identified “intentional learning and development of skills” as an approach to developing resilience. Administrator 3 acknowledged that the university faculty and leaders should prepare students to be resilient:

We have students with us on campus to provide them with the opportunity to develop resilience and discipline they need in order to be able to learn online throughout their lifespan. ... And that is closely related to the point I made that is for us to be able to develop resiliency and discipline learning online for our students.

Moreover, Administrator 1 addressed the importance of resilience at a personal and department level, referring to one of his unit’s departments as a “department as resilience”, which typified the particular manner that the unit was adapting to the challenge of COVID-19 by offering zoom offerings before any other units in the College.

Also noted above by Midwestern University respondents, there are opportunities for realizing ways to increase resilient skills for faculty, administrators, and staff in ways that help in recovery and healing processes. The role of departments, beyond the usual health clinics, serve as important catalysts and refuge for students.

### *Well-Being*

Well-being as a code was defined as institutional leader and faculty responses related to psychological and physical well-being of students. The institutional leaders acknowledged that the university served as a safe ground for minoritized students during COVID. However, at the same time, they also found it hard to create a safe place if other faculty were neglecting students’ needs. Administrator 2 stated that students initially felt professors really weren’t

considerate of the unique challenges that each student would face, for example, everyone's situation is different, but some professors were completely acting like there is no change.

Although students complained about faculty being insensitive to their needs, they responded that others put in great effort and took several actions to support students' well-being. The teaching faculty in our interviews identified two aspects: flexibility is appreciated and trust in students to relieve students' mental stress during COVID-19. The faculty members were aware of students' situations and generously offered flexibility to allow students to invest more mental energy into other life aspects. TA 1 also mentioned trust was critical in supporting students' well-being:

If we ever had a student who had an extenuating circumstance, whether it was an illness or an issue with their personal life or something that happened within their family, whatever it might be, we would not question it, we would give every student the benefit with no doubt, we would work with them ... the last thing you need to do is question something from a student.

In addition, the interviews captured observations from faculty and institutional leaders about students' psychological and physical burdens because of COVID-19. As Faculty 5 stated:

There was a student who lives with his parents, his sister, and a grandmother. His sister became ill. She tested negative, but there was a concern for a couple of weeks that she was positive, and she could have possibly infected his grandmother who was 80. ... Everybody was kind of just feeling a little bit in shock and a little displaced.

The interviews also captured the burden faced by teaching faculty, illustrating that not only were students impacted by COVID, but the faculty and TAs also faced great challenges. TA 1 described the mental exhaustion experienced:

Sitting in a chair for five hours is more tiring and in a very odd way, especially mentally. So, by the time that I get to the fourth class, I'm way more tired than when I'm in person walking around. Because I'm managing so many different screens ... it was a mental exhaustion. By the end of the day, by the time I was done, I was ready to go to sleep at like 6 p.m. on a Friday.

In summary, narratives that reinforce well-being were common among Midwestern University institutional and instructional leader respondents. As reflected in the quotes above, priority of well-being included recognizing the need for flexibility, understanding and trust due to the unique psychological, family, and societal issues faced during the pandemic.

## **Responses to Changes in Students' Academic Needs**

### *Motivation*

Motivation as a code referred to institutional leader and faculty perceptions of students' academic engagement at the beginning of the COVID-19

pandemic. They also talked about ways to facilitate students' motivation in academic involvement.

The institutional leaders identified that the students' motivation plummeted in the first few months of COVID-19. For example, as Administrator 2 illustrated, "Lack of motivation is something that we saw really spike especially during the early months. I have a session with students, and they'd be in bed, or they wouldn't have done any work." Moreover, the TAs also saw decreased assignment quality because of decreased academic motivation. As TA 5 stated, "In terms of academic motivation, I would say that the quality and organization of their writing diminished. After everything went online, it didn't seem like they put the same amount of care into their work as before."

However, not all students experienced a drop in motivation. Some students were the same or even more academically motivated. Faculty 3 explained that students who were interested in learning stayed interested after transitioning to online mode, whereas students who were not academically motivated stayed not motivated:

Some people crave to come to the lab and do what we call explosive reactions and observe the terrific color changes and learn from it ... but there's always a certain amount of students who want to do the bare minimum to get credit. ... The first pool of students are motivated and are taking chemistry because they like chemistry. ... The other pool of students are taking it as a blessing in disguise.

The teaching faculty and TA also identified that the pass/no pass policy during the pandemic may demotivate students, as TA 3 noted:

I think it was very dependent on which courses they decided to do pass/no pass and which courses they decided to stay in the letter grade system. Those were always the incentives, and those are the only things students seemed to care about. When that incentive was removed, they just left, they gave up.

Instructional leaders and administrators noted varied notions of motivation among students. On one hand, the impact of COVID created obstacles for students to stay motivated and the quality of academic work decreased and led to minimal effort. Other responses reveal online innovations increased levels of motivation innovation and engaged learning.

### *Accommodation*

Accommodation is referred to as issues related to class, college, and institutional adjustments made to the teaching and learning process during the advent of COVID. The idea of accommodation to respondents was to serve all students during the pandemic, as noted in Administrator 2's response, "So, we figured out pretty quickly, 'how can we serve all students?' The most important way that we serve all students was really pivoting our outreach and prevention efforts."

The same spirit of accommodating all was echoed by faculty/TAs who recognized how the university's efforts to apply multiple modes and efforts to reach students in ways to be as equitable as possible. For instance, both institutional leaders and faculty/TAs highlight the critical need to develop and use virtual platforms and learning materials at the advent of COVID-19. As Faculty 6 noted:

What I did was, from the outset of the course, I tried to move everything to a web-based equivalent software. So, if it involved learning Python, I didn't have them download Anaconda or Spider. I had them go to the Replika, which actually is a new website one of my teachers knew about, that provides a programming development environment right there online, and you could create assignments if you wanted to use.

Teaching faculty and assistants identified additional factors that were relevant in their teaching and learning responses during COVID, including increased email check-ins, more accommodated class activities, and more leniency with grading and timelines. For instance, TA 4 noted her increased engagement and activity during the advent of COVID:

I emailed my students a lot, like twice a week just giving them updates like, "hey, your lab report is due," and I felt they responded to emails really well. I'd get a lot of responses, and I kept emailing certain students back and forth and never had questions about the lab reports.

Faculty/TAs especially engaged in accommodating class activities and materials for students. In many situations, faculty/TAs made extra efforts to rewrite labs, syllabi, and assessments to fit the advent of COVID in ways most reflective of the challenging teaching and learning moment. As Faculty 5 noted:

I dumped the exams, which are generally a big source of stress for the undergrads, and I went with weekly quizzes instead. I maintained assignments that they had, written assignments, that they have to do individually ... and the other big change was that I was no longer lecturing live. I was using pre-recorded lectures that I had from three years ago.

As noted above, an equally important aspect of accommodation related to leniency regarding grading, whether through timelines or classroom and course assessments.

The concept of accommodation was an important response among institutional and academic leaders at Midwestern University. Faculty and TAs report using multiple online instructional modes and platforms, increased communication with students, and providing flexibility related to grading and assignment timelines. For details related to assessment are included in the next thematic section.

### *Assessment*

The assessment code, related to course grading and assessment issues, specifically from the perspectives of faculty and TAs. As a major

accommodation and response to COVID, assessment themes related to the following practices were made: (a) modified grading structures and adjusted or eliminated assignments, (b) creation of new learning resources, and (c) more communication regarding flexibility and adaptability.

Considerable attention was paid to matters of assessment at the advent of COVID. Faculty and TAs eliminated and modified assignments as noted in the accommodations theme finding above. The detail of the modifications was quite extensive, as Faculty 1 noted, when a final assignment was adjusted to increase accessibility and course options and provide an assignment relevant to the COVID pandemic:

We gave them a final assignment that was a reflection on what they learned in a class in conjunction with what they were seeing in terms of how the United States responded to the COVID pandemic. Also, for the final assignment, they had choices for how they submitted it. They could write a paper, they could record a short video. ... I think leaving those options available makes the class generally an accessible class.

Teaching faculty and TAs also noted the need to communicate more about assessments. For example, Faculty 6 described the immediacy of rethinking the midterm exam at the advent of COVID made for more opportunities to think about the modifying grading structures and standards for the rest of the semester:

When COVID hit, we hadn't issued a midterm, so it gave me a chance to work with TAs, to remind them of that and basically say, we need to have a lot of adaptability and flexibility as we're thinking about this.

The need to create learning resources was a strategy faculty and TAs used to ease the stress of assessments. From the use of online and virtual platforms to the leniency noted in the accommodation thematic finding section, faculty and TAs provided innovation in the way of teaching. TA 4 created study guides to assist students with the final examination and then went a step further by completing the study guide responses for them:

I made like a giant study guide for the final for all of my students, and it was 163 pages, it's quite long, but it went over basically the whole book and all the important aspects ... when I filled it out, I realized it took me like six hours to do it, and I thought that was way too much for an undergrad, so I just filled it out for my students, and I think they really appreciated it.

Accommodations related to (classroom) assessments were most frequently noted as reflected in previous thematic responses. Faculty and TAs at Midwestern University describe ways they rethought assignments, often in situ, to ease stress on students and to increase course options and accessibility.

## **Responses to Changes in Minoritized Students' Needs**

### *Underserved*

The underserved code related to issues affecting underserved groups in courses and at the university. This code focused on the realities faced by

primarily domestic or U.S.-based underserved students at the advent of the COVID pandemic.

Administrator 4 noted the unique situations faced by people of color in the United States amid social and racial unrest during the COVID pandemic. He identified with the notion of multiple pandemics faced by certain underserved groups in the United States and higher education:

Most of us here, we say multiple pandemics. ... Yes, the students are existing in multiple pandemics and that professors are just sometimes acting as if that's not a reality or that the reality is the same for everyone.

He continued to discuss how higher education served as a refuge and safe ground for some students:

I wonder higher education as a refuge for people ... especially LGBTQ dimensions, in their hometowns, they were embattled and fearful for their safety, and when you're the "only one" in some little rural location, you went here (i.e., the university) to find some of your people and to be accepted and seen, and then you go back these places where you were trying not to be seen, as being seen came with threats.

Importantly and fortunately, actions had been taken to leverage student narratives about their minority or ethnic status as a resource for support. Administrator 4 highlighted the unique ways that minoritized students were supported during the challenging moments of the pandemic:

There were students from underrepresented backgrounds that truly wanted to be heard. They recognized that our campus made a decision that was adversely impacting them. There was a resolution going on campus at the time to shut the campus down. It was led by a Latina on our campus who gave not just an empowered written resolution but an empowered and passionate speech to the Senate and executive committee that I sit on and other faculty senate.

Teaching faculty and assistants also identified unique challenges and opportunities related to the minoritized students. TA 5 noted the environmental concerns that students of color faced: "The students were feeling very conflicted and concerned about their surrounding community, definitely that some of my students are Black, some of them are Latino, and they definitely felt the weight of the pandemic." Faculty 3 also echoed the concerns that the pandemic posed heavy weights on students, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds:

Certain students have access to the bare minimum required technology. ... We had a student who did not have access to a computer, we reached out to the student, and he was in a state that his whole family had access to only one computer.

Midwestern University instructional respondents report the acute situation faced by Black, Indigenous, and other persons of color (BIPOC) students on their

campus. In particular, and as reported earlier in thematic analysis, the residential campus served as a buffer from challenges they faced in their hometowns.

### *International*

The international code referred to issues affecting international students at the university. This specific code focused on the realities faced by international students at the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The realities for international students were apparent beyond the university as the issues of the pandemic were felt widely, as noted by Administrator 4: “In terms of us being able to rise to, think about the international students that impacted and the students outside of the state of Illinois, that’s something we grapple with.”

Teaching faculty and assistants also faced issues more relevant to class and course materials, though the opportunity to create virtual opportunities allowed opportunities for students who were abroad, as noted by TA 4:

Since I had students in Asia, the time just wouldn’t work out. I made different YouTube tutorials, where I’d post online for them to see. I also posted it on Moodle for the whole class, and I ended up having students who weren’t in my section watch the videos.

The teaching faculty and assistants put extra effort to guarantee all students, especially students in China, where YouTube is banned, have access to online learning materials and catch up with class, as Faculty 1 stated:

Students that were overseas, that they go back to China ... they had limited access to the internet, I could not share the links of YouTube, so I download the YouTube pieces and upload them to Compass, because I don’t know what kind of YouTube videos are accessible.

At Midwestern University, administrative and instructional leaders report how the international students' realities were especially unique considering those who were based out of the U.S. Despite the attention to classroom accommodations with online instruction, respondents suggested challenges that international students faced challenges that extended beyond the classroom and were unique compared to domestic minoritized students.

### **Discussion**

This study draws on literature and methods to focus on university and faculty (including TAs) responses to the rapid institutional transformations and transitions during (and following) the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the study highlighted the increasing impacts of COVID-19 on students, the institutional-level responses and challenges faced in the pandemic, and faculty perceptions and responses, including challenges faced during the pandemic. While the COVID-19 literature is still emerging, key gaps were identified related to institutional responses to the pandemic and more in-depth qualitative studies on the topic focused on faculty and institutional responses, all of which became driving characteristics of this study.



Through an interactive qualitative design aligned to the two research questions of the study (Maxwell, 2013), methods were employed to gather deeper understandings of responses to the COVID pandemic aimed at a cross-section of administrative leaders, faculty, and TAs from multiple schools of the university. By using multiple processes of coding and meaning making of transcripts of interviews, the study team identified three categories of responses: (a) responses to changes in students' psychological needs, (b) responses to students' academic needs, and (c) responses to changes specific to minoritized students' needs.

It has been well documented that the pandemic's results profoundly affected student academic needs through changes in technology use, opportunities, resources, and everyday campus life (Sharaievskia et al., 2022). Sharaievskia et al. (2022, p. 6) identified six categories that describe "students' beliefs on how the COVID-19 pandemic changed their educational experiences ... [and] how students reacted to these changes" positively and negatively. Similarly, in this study, we identified three important aspects related to academic needs, some of which align with the Sharaievskia et al. study. They include matters related to students' academic motivation and engagement, such as decreased assignment quality and the need to adjust academic policies to attend to the urgency of the pandemic. In addition, institutional leaders and faculty/TAs report the need for accommodations such as virtual platforms and multiple modes to facilitate their learning, including changing grading, timelines, and other class materials.

The psychological needs of students at higher education institutions remain an issue that teeters on crisis because of the pandemic (Woolston, 2020). Continued reports at campuses across the United States, for instance, highlight the need for more mental health services for students, especially in this lingering post-pandemic period (Soria et al., 2020). This study shows in the context of one university how the issues of belongingness, coping, resilience, and well-being are priorities for administrative leaders, faculty, and TAs. The findings suggest that rethinking the role of residential campuses, attending to non-traditional learnings, and developing online platforms are ways to build community and access to social and academic support. More than ever, resources, trainings, and the values of adaptability and flexibility are reported by study participants in learning to respond to the pandemic, thinking about planning, and looking forward to changes in ways of reimagining higher education post-2020. As these study participants highlight the need to plan for student and institutional resilience amidst burdens that extend outside of universities, the need to focus on student well-being takes priority by creating safe and trusting learning and teaching spaces.

While this study touches on differential needs of multiple minoritized populations during the pandemic, it does not delve deeper into the institutional responses that catered specifically to LGBTQ or international students' experiences. While important distinctions should be made in the domestic/international student experiences, particular international experiences

varied so that students from China had different experiences than those from India, Chile, or Kenya. Additionally, the nature of LGBTQ and sexual diversity student learners is worthy of another study and missing from the current literature that focuses on student experiences but without intersectional, sociodemographic variables and uniquenesses (Mucci-Ferris et al., 2021; Sharaiveska et al., 2022). Like the Koo et al. (2021) study, which focused specifically on international students' experiences, challenges, and perceptions of racism and racial discrimination during the pandemic, the findings we report regarding minoritized and international students are worthy of more attention due to the continued reports about the disproportionate impact of COVID on populations of color, even at universities (Soria et al., 2020).

Moreover, as we transition into a post COVID-19 era, it is imperative to recognize that while the focus of current study centered on the immediate responses and adaptations during the pandemic, its findings still hold significant implications for the evolving challenges that higher education institutions continue to face. The results from this study offer a critical lens through which we can understand and address the enduring impact of COVID-19 on the academic and psychological perspectives of students and institutions, including the shifts in pedagogical approaches, the increased awareness of student mental health needs, and the reassessment of institutional policies and support systems. The study's exploration of different responses to diverse student populations during the pandemic also provide a foundation for more nuanced and targeted strategies to support minority students' academic and psychological well-being. The results highlighted the importance of flexible, inclusive and context sensitive approaches in response to crisis, which are still key principles as institutions strive to foster resilience and growth in a post-pandemic era.

## **Limitations**

Although this study takes a more nuanced approach to investigating the effect of COVID-19 on institutional leadership and faculty-level responses, it is not without its limitations. Even though this study occurred during the pandemic, there was still a gap of two months before the first interview was conducted. This delay was inevitable given the timelines of the study design to be finalized, IRB permissions to be obtained, and consent from departments and courses; nevertheless, it contributed to some delay in capturing responses to the pandemic at its early stages. When the actual study took place, the Midwest university had already begun classes, and we were able to incorporate some of the immediate experiences of the pandemic into reflections and slight adjustments made in the fall 2020 semester by way of policies and new ways of approaching teaching.

## **Future Directions**

When colleges and universities are still searching for answers to deal with college academic and social life on campuses in the United States, our study sheds light on future directions, researchers, and scholars interested in the longer-

term implications and possibilities. Longer-term studies across global nation-states are needed to shed light on the similarity of experiences that affect students from the recent pandemic. This study scopes out the institutional-level responses in the United States, consistent with other recent literature in diverse post-secondary contexts (Sparkman-Key et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2022). The authors realize that this may not be a picture across the globe, where many countries faced severe challenges to provide a smooth transition to online education. The implications on well-being, motivation, and academics would only be more severe in these situations.

University responses are based on these three categories and recommended to be differential based on the social identities of the groups it is catering to; homogenous responses may not work, and more detail may be needed for different groups of university faculty, staff, and students. For instance, while this study focuses on institutional/administrative and faculty responses in service to students at a Midwest university, sufficient studies since the pandemic also focus on faculty experiences and responses for their own well-being at higher education institutions that lend nicely to a more holistic representation of how the pandemic has affected and will affect higher education in the future (Hodges & Fowler, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Moralista & Oducado, 2020; Neuwirth et al., 2020; Perrotta & Bohan, 2020)

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## Appendix

### Interview Coding Scheme

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CODE(S)	Coding Description
GENDER	Gender
RACETHNIC	Race/ethnicity
RESILIENCE	Matters pertaining to resilience
WELLBEING	Matters pertaining to well-being
COPE	Matters pertaining to coping with academic, social demands
MOTIVATION	Matters pertaining to motivation
BELONG	Matters pertaining to belongingness to class, university
UNDERSERVED	Matters pertaining to underserved groups in class, university
INTERNATIONAL	Matters pertaining to international students in class, university
ACCOMMODATION	Matters pertaining to accommodation (pivots related to COVID)

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