

An Intricate Balance: The Challenge of Caring During COVID-19 While Maintaining High Student Expectations

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the challenges faced by graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic is difficult for professors aiming to maintain high expectations of students. This essay explores the balance between caring for and challenging students in the face of their needs and limitations during social distancing.

Keywords: Caring, COVID-19, Expectations, Flexibility, Graduate Students, Student Needs, Understanding

Many challenges stem from the movement to online instruction in the age of social distancing due to COVID-19, but one where professors of advanced students seem to struggle lies in maintaining high student expectations in a time of extreme flexibility and understanding. Teachers of students at the masters and doctoral levels must hold high standards to meet the magnitude of expectations their students face upon graduation; however, many of these are based on work quality, timeliness, and professionalism. Each of these domains of student excellence are prolifically impacted by the COVID-19 virus and social isolation that comes with responsible living in this time.

Work quality requires focus and access to resources—both of which are a luxury of another time. Students, especially those now caring for home-

bound children and elderly family's members—cannot devote time in the ways done previously and are learning how to focus amidst excessive distractions while continuing their educations without pause. These same students had access to a plethora of university-based resources from technology to face-to-face meetings to university services—all of which are no longer readily accessible. Especially of concern are students who utilized mental health and disability services, which often require a face-to-face modality for high-level effectiveness. Together these adjustments can decrease the quality of student work despite best efforts to continue advancement that reflects each graduate student's potential and passion for education.

Timeliness reflects privilege rather than devotion when excessive needs pull at students who might struggle to maintain their own basic living standards. Graduate students commonly live paycheck to paycheck working from stipends, low-paying jobs, or on savings. Some graduate students are fortunate enough to have full-time or well-paying jobs; however, these students experience additional concerns such as potentially hazardous working conditions, transitions to online or home-based work, and even furloughs and job losses. With these concerns, professors cannot expect students to prioritize schoolwork as physiological needs might be going unmet. Even those privileged enough to supersede such concerns experience issues with safety needs, another foundation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), relating to job security, health, and even access to resources such as toilet paper and disinfectant. Punctuality reflects privilege in these situations because only those with basic needs met can rise to meeting psychological needs—inherently unmet with social isolation—and approach self-actualization. These same concerns drive issues relating to student professionalism.

Students who would typically demonstrate a professional and academically focused demeanor need not only dwell on basic needs, but deal with substantially changed home environments as well. Many no longer have reliable access to laundry facilities with the closing of laundromats, to a quiet workspace with the cancellation of school and daycare, or even to reliable internet access or computers. Students must access courses in suboptimal conditions, sometimes using nothing more than a mobile device to connect to online learning. While most have computer access and internet access in some way, several students use older computers and low-speed internet at home due to typical access to better computing and technological resources on campus. As such, the professionalism students displayed in the past becomes greatly hindered.

With these concerns, it is difficult to both understand students and continue to challenge them in the face of COVID-19. Professors must consider student needs and limitations but still offer them the challenges that

will help them to grow and develop academically. Professors must be creative—even though we struggle with many of the same issues our students face. We must make time for students and for ourselves while understanding that we all need distractions and escape from the outside world right now. Our students are relying on us for a high-quality education despite and in the face of COVID-19. We must expect our students to accept challenges and learn while understanding how manifestations of learning are changing. Keep challenging your students but listen and understand.

REFERENCE

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