The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Related Stressors on Graduate and Undergraduate Students at a Majority-Minority University in New York State

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Following the onset of COVID-19 (March 10, 2020; World Health Organization 2020), United States public health statistics on mental health have shown an increase in depression and anxiety in young adults (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021; Keyserlingk et al. 2021). As universities implement emergency safety measures (e.g., closing campuses, enforcing social distancing policies, switching to remote learning), college students have been vulnerable to experiences of stress from substantial life changes. In recent longitudinal research, college students have been found to experience an overall decrease in well-being and an increase in externalizing behavioral problems over time (Copeland et al. 2021).

Perhaps one of the most notable impacts of COVID-19 on college students is the impairment of academic functioning. As students expeditiously shifted to the remote learning format, they encountered issues and barriers such as navigating through the online learning platform, difficulty understanding the subject timeline and assessment deadlines, and difficulty staying engaged with online materials (Kyne and Thompson 2020). There were also additional barriers associated with disruptions at home during remote learning, such as poor internet connection, inability to access synchronous sessions, and technical problems (Kyne and Thompson 2020). Such barriers might be attributable to college students experiencing increased stress specifically related to homework, procrastination, and study/life balance (Keyserlingk et al. 2021), increased attention problems (Copeland et al. 2021), and decreased confidence in successfully completing learning tasks (Prokes and Housei 2021).

However, academic functioning is but one aspect of COVID-19 related challenges for college students. Prior to the pandemic, undergraduate students with minoritized identities (i.e., ethnicity and race, sexual orientation, gender) were found to have lower levels of well-being as compared to peers with non-minoritized identities (Brocato et al. 2021). For students with historically minoritized identities, COVID-19 has been a “double pandemic” due to its disproportionate impact on both physical and mental wellness. Research on national data of nonmetropolitan counties revealed that the average daily increase in the COVID-19 mortality rate has been 70% higher in rural counties with the highest percentage of Black residents, and 50% higher in those with the highest percentage of Hispanic residents (Cheng et al. 2020). Such disparities experienced by individuals from racial and ethnic minorities can stem from multiple sources, including difficulties finding affordable and quality housing, lack of access to quality health care, increased exposure to COVID-19 in essential work settings, lower-income status, and limited access to high-quality education (CDC 2020). In addition to racial disparity, individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ and are HIV positive reported additional barriers of accessing healthcare during COVID-19, as a result of both fear of dying from the virus due to immunodeficiency and stress related to stigmatization due to greater visibility of their sexual orientation (Pereira et al. 2021). For undocumented students, qualitative and quantitative data from more than one thousand participants showed that their immigration statuses exacerbated the negative economic effect of COVID, leading to financial strains that further exerts cascading
negative effects for students’ academic performance and health (Enriquez et al. 2021). Last but not least, for some international students, witnessing how the country responded to the series of societal upheavals, anecdotal reports have shown that the pandemic has damaged the appeal of studying in the United States (Berger 2020).

In addition, heightened political tension and racial unrest co-occurred with COVID-19. In the past year, intensified divisiveness has been a key feature of the political climate of the US, especially following significant social events such as the 2020 presidential election, the murder of African American citizens (e.g., George Floyd and Breonna Taylor) by police, the expansion of and spotlight on Black Lives Matters protests, the US Capitol insurrection, as well as the recent rise of COVID-related anti-Asian hate crimes. Scholars have commented that under the context of COVID which has triggered unprecedented levels of anxiety, the killings of unarmed Black individuals have become “the flashpoint for justifiable anger and civil unrest not seen since 1968” (p. 228), representing the public’s deep discontent with inequality that has plagued the country for decades (Galea and Abdalla 2020). Further, recent survey data has shown that more than 30% of respondents have witnessed someone blaming Asians for the coronavirus pandemic, and more than two thousand instances of anti-Asian harassment have been documented between mid-March and June 2020 (Borja et al. 2020; Ellerbeck 2020; Li and Nicholson 2021). These experiences have led to some scholars describing racism and COVID-19 in African Americans as “a pandemic on a pandemic,” (Laurencin and Walker 2020) and some highlighting the transition of Asian Americans from being regarded as “model minorities” to the “yellow peril” (Li and Nicholson 2021). Perhaps, it is not hard to imagine that societal upheavals that are specifically related to minoritized populations in the US will have a long-lasting effect on college students’ understanding about the US political environment as well as the justice system. The amalgamation of unique societal stressors might serve as reminders of systemic oppression and racial trauma, not only leaving emotional wounds of sadness, anger, and frustration for college students with minoritized backgrounds, but also fermenting guilt and shame in college students with privileged identities.

While current literature has produced several quantitative inquiries into the impact of COVID-19 on college students’ experiences, limited qualitative research on this topic has been conducted to date. For example, some qualitative researchers have commented that the focus of the research on the transition to online learning has been on faculty/college staff (Bal et al. 2020) and that the perceptions of students are absent (Prokes and Housei 2021). To the authors’ knowledge, less than a handful of qualitative inquiries (Bal et al. 2020; Jackson et al. 2021; Kyne and Thompson 2020; Prokes and Housei, 2021) shed light on the impact of COVID-related stress on college students regarding issues such as remote learning, political climate, and racial unrest. Even less is known about the experiences of graduate students. Qualitative research methods, different from quantitative analyses, are particularly useful in addressing societal injustices, illuminating social discursive practices, and giving a voice to historically disenfranchised populations with under-represented experiences in the research literature (Levitt et al. 2018). Drawing on the strengths of qualitative research, the current study explored student experiences and related stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic including remote learning, the political climate, and racial unrest.
Method

Participants. Participants include 30 students enrolled at a diverse, public university in New York State. Demographic data will be presented in aggregate to protect the anonymity of participants. As participants had the option to choose not to share their identifying information, we have incomplete demographic data for 6 participants. Sixty-seven percent (n=20) of the participants were graduate students, while the remaining 30% (n=10) were undergraduates (4 Seniors, 3 First years, 2 Juniors, 1 Sophomore). Two participants identified as Latinx, 3 as Biracial/Multiracial, 4 participants as Asian or Asian American, 17 as White (56.7%), and 4 chose not to respond. The mean age for the sample was 28.08 (median=24.5; sd=9.59). Participants were majority cisgender women (70%; n=21), while 20% were cisgender men, and 10% were transgender or nonbinary (TNB). Approximately 53.3% (n=16) identified their sexual orientation as heterosexual or straight, while 26.7% (n=8) identified as either lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or asexual, and six chose not to respond.

Procedures. Qualitative data were collected through seven focus groups which took place in mid-December (December 9-18th, 2020) at the end of the Fall 2020 semester. All participants who completed a survey focused on student experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic and related stressors were invited to participate in a focus group. The focus group questions and protocol were developed by research team members on a collaborative team comprised of professional staff (psychology, public health, institutional research), faculty, and graduate students. All interviewers received training in qualitative interviewing from the first author, who has expertise in this area. Focus groups were transcribed using automated software (Zoom transcript, Otter.ti) and checked for accuracy. Data were coded by three members of the interviewing team with expertise in qualitative methods (authors one, three, and four). We utilized thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 86-93) to generate themes across the data. Throughout the coding process, all coders met to review discrepancies and reach agreement on all themes and subthemes.

Results

Theme 1: “Having the Fear of Coronavirus in the Background”: Worries Related to Health

Worry related to contracting or spreading COVID-19 and the university’s role in enforcement was observed across five focus groups. Participants reflected on worries related to their own health and safety, the health of others, and a general feeling that it was important to continue to follow recommended hygiene and social distancing practices. Within this major theme, there were three subthemes: 1) Concern about Family Members, 2) More Clarity and Enforcement of Public Health Guidelines, 3) Balancing Isolation with Ethical Obligations.

Subtheme 1: Concern about Family Members. Many participants reported high anxiety and worry about their family members contracting COVID-19 as a result of their high-risk status,
age, or occupation. “You worry about your loved ones...like my dad went to the grocery store and like one of the cashiers tested positive like everyone is like, just more on edge about that kind of thing in general.” This worry was described as being on students’ minds at all times, yet becoming more intense at some points in the semester, such as towards the end of the semester or following a potential exposure.

“But I remember a couple of days where I was just like, really extra stressed about her because she had all the symptoms. She wasn't having a good time. And that sort of impaired my ability to participate in class.”

Subtheme 2: More Clarity and Enforcement of Public Health Guidelines. Participants reported frustration with witnessing their peers not following public health safety guidelines and campus expectations. A number of participants who were living on campus or taking some classes in-person called for harsher penalties, stating they had observed peers receive only a “slap on the wrist,” which was frustrating to them: “There’s absolutely no excuse for that. There’s absolutely no excuse for me hearing classmates saying, oh you can’t expect students not to go to Halloween parties. Yeah, yeah I can, I can definitely expect you not to go to Halloween parties I can expect you to not go drinking every weekend. Where are the penalties? Where are the actions that are actually going to keep people safe?” Participants also highlighted the importance of consistent enforcement of policies, refusing to serve those who are not wearing a mask, and giving Resident Assistants (RAs) more power to better enforce violations. Participants who were exposed to COVID-19 reported that greater clarity regarding procedures related to quarantine or isolation would have made the process less stressful.

Other students opted for remote learning and living off-campus or with family due to worry about the behavior of other students on campus:

“I think [being on campus] would have just caused me such severe anxiety to be in classrooms and like looking around to people, not knowing where they were this past weekend...That already makes me nervous like seeing friends, you know, do things when I talked to them like texting them and I’m not even seeing them. And so I think that it just would have been really bad for me to be on campus.”

Subtheme 3: Balancing Isolation with Ethical Obligations. Participants reflected on the tension between their desire to connect with others and their desire to follow public health safety guidelines and to ensure others’ well-being.

For some, this included a reflection that it may take a while to feel comfortable being around people in ways we used to socialize without a second thought: “I’m not comfortable being in a room with people, no matter how many people are there. It’s going to take me a long time to get back to little stages and my big thing is like bringing COVID at home to the people I love and so I just couldn’t do it.” Others grappled with the uncertainty and worry that came up even when following recommended safety precautions for gathering with friends and family:
“I got tested before I went to visit them, but even though I got tested. I was still super nervous that something was going to happen. That was uncomfortable and even now I’m nervous to even go visit them socially distant. I don't want something to happen.”

There was an evident sense of loss concerning the fewer visits that were possible with family throughout the semester, and the missed opportunities to connect with peers in-person. Participants wrestled with more existentially oriented questions about their place in the society such as,

“It's not okay [to visit family for the holidays], do I need to quarantine? If I do choose to go, am I being a bad member of society? After a really challenging year you're going to want to be with people. And at the end of the semester you're excited to be done and to see people and we can't even do that which is kind of hard.”

Finally, participants reflected on challenges that emerged when roommates failed to have clear and direct conversations about COVID safety, particularly when health behaviors differed. This led to more instability for one participant’s friend such as, “sleeping on a friend's couch for like the whole semester because she just could not feel comfortable with her roommates and their decisions.” Students noted the importance of including conversations about COVID safety as part of roommate contracts and RA training.

**Theme 2: “This Was Not a Normal Election”: Sociopolitical Anxiety**

A major theme that emerged across all seven focus groups was the ongoing difficulty associated with balancing academic responsibilities while dealing with ongoing anxiety and stress related to the sociopolitical climate. Many participants spoke about the way that the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated political anxiety, and highlighted challenges associated with how this topic was brought into the classroom or avoided or ignored, leading to increased feelings of isolation. Three subthemes emerged: 1) It felt so inescapable, 2) It’s a literal matter of survival for some 3) Academic/theoretical Discourse: Dancing around the issues and impact.

**Subtheme 1: “It Felt so Inescapable.”** Participants reflected on the all-consuming nature of the political climate and presidential election as a result of constant exposure on social media, television, and daily conversations with friends and family members: “It's like, there's no escape from it anymore. It's like you just want to shut it out from the world. It's just like, Oh, you know what, I don't want to do politics today. I want to just sit here, and you know, escape, but there is no escape because it's everywhere.” The constant exposure was described as generally stressful and distracting by participants, although reactions varied in severity for folks with more privileged versus minoritized identities. For instance, “there is no telling where the country would be in the next four years, just because of this result of the election. So it was really nerve racking for me for a long time. But on the other hand, it provided me a lot of entertainment during the pandemic, which helps me a little bit.”
As the election “dragged” on students found it challenging to continue to hand in assignments and attend classes, while others noted feeling frustrated that they were forced to take on additional responsibilities with group projects, as their peers were not able to accomplish assigned tasks:

“I had a lot of trouble sleeping during election week which obviously contributed to sort of poor engagement and focus in my online classes. I feel like it was just sort of the stress of the election exacerbated by covid and vice versa. There's a lot going on.”

Subtheme 2: “It’s a literal matter of survival” for some. A number of our participants reflected on the differential impact of the election on their mental health and well-being as a result of their historically minoritized identities. International students reflected on the major impact the outcome of the election could have on their future career goals and plans. “Also, it was a bit terrifying because the next president would eventually decide if I would get a job here or not. I mean, he is the one who would be deciding how stuff would go for international students like me.”

Participants with minoritized identities reflected on how draining it was to see political signs that made them fear for their safety while walking down the street. For transgender and nonbinary participants, the impact of the current administration was also more than theoretical, it was about survival:

“It’s the largest number of trans people murdered, not just in the US, but in the world. And at the same time instead of passing protections, our current administration is passing more restrictions and targeting and just awful things that are happening... There's a level of privilege that people have when politics are not about their very survival...”

Some participants with minoritized identities reflected on how draining it was to see political signs that made them fear for their safety while walking down the street, or how challenging it was to see professors ignoring the impact on students with minoritized identities. “So I was like having to bring up all of these racial justice things in class, which unfortunately my professors were not very good at holding space for [it]. And getting like that was hard, like really frustrating to have to deal with in class and then outside of class.” Finally, several participants who were White cisgender women reported feeling unsure what to say to friends or their students who were more negatively impacted as a result of their identities.

Subtheme 3: Academic/Theoretical Discourse: Dancing Around the Issues and Impact. Participants were in agreement that the nature of the 2020 Presidential election made classes challenging for a variety of reasons. Participants had mixed experiences with how they felt professors addressed (or failed to address) the potential impact on students and differed in whether or not they preferred to use dedicated time in class to talk about issues related to the election.
Some participants felt frustrated and alone when professors failed to acknowledge what was going on, and felt a responsibility to initiate conversations in class. “If at all, I feel like it was really tough, like with everything going on, and then having professors that didn’t really address what was going on, I think was like really infuriating and frustrating.” More passive professors were perceived as out-of-touch or uncaring if they continued on as if it was a typical day and week:

“But it’s really tough to see when it feels like your professors don’t care, and they’re sending you feedback on the days of the election. And during that time, and they’re sending you work, like the workload didn’t reduce. And I think like out of every election that I can remember, this is probably like the most stressful one. And so, it wasn’t a normal election year. And I feel like professors should have known that it wasn’t a normal election year.”

Others commented that there was too much discussion in the classroom about the issues, with little attempt to support students in what they might need to get through a challenging week, such as understanding or flexibility on assignments or class attendance. “It was actually talked about a lot. And it was addressed in a lot of our classes, from what I know, a lot of the conversations I had, but I feel like it was really hard to focus during that time.” Finally, some participants noted that it was uncomfortable to have these conversations in a classroom setting as some professors or fellow classmates were open with their views, which led to conflict or awkwardness at times. As noted by one participant “engaging in [political engagement and importance of the election] in the academic setting, it bothered me.”

Professors who created space to acknowledge the potentially difficult week, while managing conversations that were “less contentious,” or managing students that intentionally disrupted classrooms, were identified as helpful supports. “I had one professor not talk openly about their political views, but about the potential stress. The election was having on us and was very understanding of people if they couldn’t attend as a result of just sort of this ongoing stress.”

**Theme 3: Everything Blurring Together: More than an Adjustment to Remote Learning**

Participants reflected on the challenges associated with learning from home, which included logistical and technological stressors (not covered in this paper) as well the difficulty balancing coursework while living through a global pandemic with new and changing responsibilities. Subthemes included: 1) Being Pulled in 30 Directions, 2) All of the Work with None of the Fun, 3) All Zoomed Out.

**Subtheme 1: “Being Pulled in 30 Directions.”** Participants reported difficulty meeting the demands of their multiple roles and competing responsibilities such as taking care of their parents or children, balancing employment with academic demands, and often supporting students they were teaching or advising. They reflected on the difficulty meeting the demands
of these multiple rules, while they were sharing space with family members, or were perceived by others as being more available.

“Now that everything is home, and I have another job on the side of school, it's really hard to separate out, for me at least and everyone's different, I guess. But for me separating out work from like, actual self-care and like, taking time off. And I don't know, just like spending time with my family and spending time with my dogs and all that it's been really hard because everything is virtual, and I'm always home.”

Subtheme 2: All of the Work with None of the Fun. As a result of safety precautions and changing modes of instruction, most students were learning from their bedrooms or homes, which was a vast change from the typical higher education experience. Students reflected on the loss of what could have been in terms of forming social connections with peers and professors as well as informal conversations while walking in between classes. Without the built-in excitement of on campus events, organizations, meeting peers in person, going to parties, support for completing their dissertations, college and graduate school became all about the work.

“There's no sense of just popping in and saying, Hey, how are you, and that's something I realized was like. So, such a big part of my college experience was like. Popping by a friend's room to say, hey, and like all the sudden opening up to each other about stuff. We didn't know what was going on, like just that really organic time.”

Subtheme 3: All Zoomed Out. Participants reflected on stressors related to Zoom fatigue and burnout with online learning. As stated by one participant, “I don't like [online learning]. It doesn't work for me. It's so much more draining.” At this point in the pandemic, the novelty of online learning and the flexibility it can facilitate had worn off for most participants. Students reflected on challenges related to learning from home such as less accountability to pay attention, decreased motivation to turn on their cameras and engage with others, and greater distractions at home.

“I have a really hard time focusing because no one has their cameras on. So why am I going to turn my camera on, and then I'm just distracted by my phone or anything that's around me because I'm not being watched. And I can just do whatever I want. Even though I know that I should be focusing, I just can't.”

In addition, it was challenging to build in breaks in between meetings and classes. Participants reflected that everything “blurred together” and it was hard to differentiate between their responsibilities in their classes, their familial and social roles, and their home lives. Participants remarked that the loss of the physical movement between classes made it hard to find time for breaks or to step away from the screen and that the loss of travel to and from school made it difficult to delineate their work lives from their personal lives. Participants also commented on missing social interactions in the classroom, as well as before and after classes. They noted that
the opportunity to connect informally was not there anymore, and that things felt overly formal or inauthentic with remote learning:

“You know, they say that on the zoom everything feels too formal and just too rehearsed. And just too artificial. It's just not the same as walking up to your friend and giving them a high five, hugging them, doing whatever just shooting the breeze and it's just really hard to replicate that while also staying safe for COVID.”

Finally, participants expressed frustration with Zoom as the primary way of engaging with professors, advisors, student clubs, and peers at the university. Despite feeling isolated and seeking increased connection, participants noted it was hard to find the motivation to log on to yet another meeting. As one participant explained, “We all have zoom fatigue.”

Discussion

The university campus has long been described as a microcosm of issues in society (Jones 1990; Sweet 2001, 19-38), and the past year was no exception. The current sociopolitical context exacerbated ongoing stressors for both undergraduate and graduate students, particularly BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and international students, many of whom were experiencing a “double pandemic.” According to research in recent years, college students have been found to experience an overall decrease in well-being, and an overall increase in the externalization of behavioral problems (Copeland et al. 2021, 136-139), with lowest levels of well-being among students with minoritized identities (Brocato et al. 2021). Superimposed on these challenges are stressors associated with a sudden shift to remote learning and completing college or graduate school in a global pandemic.

The present study has shed light on a number of academic, familial, and sociocultural challenges faced by undergraduate and graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic, but perhaps even more important are the potential implications that the data have for college and university administrators, faculty and staff members, and mental health practitioners. More specifically, administrators within institutions of higher education may benefit from enacting and supporting flexible academic policies such as classroom accommodations and the inclusion of designated “mental health days” during which academic classes would be suspended or permitting excused mental health days, which students have called for in recent years (Gewertz 2021). Although not explored in this study, alternative grading practices have been increasingly discussed in recent years, and may be worth critically examining as a way to promote equity and reduce barriers (Streifer and Palmer 2020). Additionally, it appears that students understand that the pandemic has been a stressful experience for their faculty and staff members and that they would appreciate faculty and staff sharing their pandemic-related challenges and struggles and how they have addressed them.
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Study findings also suggest that, for mental health professionals working with college students, both undergraduate and graduate students are welcoming of new and innovative methods of delivering mental health services, such as through telemental health as well as the utilization of social media and other online methods to offer vital information regarding self-care and coping. Across all mental health interventions for students during the pandemic and beyond, it is critical to implement a comprehensive, public health-informed approach which addresses the entire student population to support health, provide early intervention for students at risk, and intervene in a timely and responsive manner with treatment and referral with students who are experiencing mental health-related problems (Cramer et al. 2020; Wotring and Hutchins 2021). It is critical that all interventions in university settings are developed through an intersectional framework (Crenshaw 1989), taking into account varying levels of privilege and oppression among students both within the higher education system and in external systems (Brocato et al. 2020).

There were several limitations to the present study. As this study explored the experiences of graduate students and undergraduate students in combined focus groups, we are not able to make interpretations regarding differences across groups. Given that our sample was largely made up by graduate students (67% of the total sample), the mean age of our students was 28 years old. As such, these data may not reflect the concerns and experiences of traditionally aged undergraduate students. Future researchers may wish to structure separate focus groups for undergraduate and graduate students to better examine differences across these developmental periods, related challenges, and supports. This sample was racially diverse and took place at a majority-minority university in New York State, which is important to consider in the interpretation of these findings and recommendations. As university campus demographics are quite varied, individual institutions may wish to use a similar model to explore the specific experiences at their university and context. Finally, we collected data during a time that students were experiencing high distress, and it is likely that students that elected to participate in this study had the capacity to do so. Future studies may wish to consider ways to center the experiences of students whose perspectives are missing. Such strategies may include extending the period of time for participation, offering individual interviews for students who are less comfortable sharing in group settings, and offering focus group times outside of business hours.

As campuses prepare to re-engage in in-person teaching and service provision for their students, it is important to keep in mind that the higher education landscape has changed significantly and that the pandemic has made an indelible mark on our institutions of higher education. The innovations that have been developed, often by necessity, need to be considered for continued goodness of fit and implementation with our students moving
forward. Likewise, lessons learned from our students from historically minoritized backgrounds and identities need to be continued with the same sensitivity, compassion, and cultural humility as they have been implemented during the pandemic. Ongoing engagement and retention of undergraduate and graduate students representing the rich diversity of our campuses will remain essential as we enter the post-pandemic period.

As we move forward toward a post-pandemic society, this work will hold critical implications for higher education institutions in New York State as well as nationally and globally and will provide valuable and timely guidance regarding steps that may be implemented at the individual, academic, administrative, and policy levels to promote well-being and success for our campus communities as a whole and for our historically minoritized college students in particular.

References


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