The COVID-19 Emergency Remote Transition on College Campus: Inequitable College Student Experiences and Policy Responses

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Abstract

This study examines how inequality manifested during the emergency remote COVID-19 transition in higher education. We use 35 in-depth interviews with college students, conducted virtually, in real-time, during spring 2020 lockdowns, to examine how the transition impacted their lives. Students in the sample from lower-income backgrounds reported significant basic needs insecurity, financial instability, and academic struggles. Latino and Black students in the sample, in particular, reported financial instability, mental health crises, and academic struggles. Meanwhile, affluent white students and affluent Asian students in the study tended to face only minor setbacks or even flourish during this time. University and government policies exacerbated the negative experiences of marginalized students, often due to faulty assumptions that all college students have families who provide for their needs. While the particulars of this crisis were unusual, and this study took place at one institution of higher education, these findings suggest that higher education administrators must consider the implications of policies on the most disadvantaged students.

Keywords: COVID-19, higher education, educational equity, qualitative

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Higher education is typically thought of as a social mobility agent, but barriers prevent many students from succeeding in a system built for privileged, white students (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Jack, 2019). Higher education had to quickly adapt during the spring 2020 semester, with the COVID-19 pandemic, stay-at-home orders, an economic crisis, and soaring mental health problems (Karpman et al., 2020; Manning et al., 2021). Universities underwent emergency remote transitions, moving face-to-face courses online and requiring residential students to move out of dorms (Gillis & Krull, 2020). Existing quantitative evidence suggests a deepening of inequalities in higher education during the emergency remote transition, ranging from declines in enrollment concentrated among men and men of color in particular, to financial challenges disproportionately affecting students from low-income families, to elevated rates of mental health concerns, especially among Indigenous students, to basic needs concerns disproportionately affecting students of color across the board (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2021). However, little research demonstrates how students generally, and how students from different socioeconomic and racialized backgrounds, experienced or navigated these challenges.

We use 35 in-depth interviews with college students conducted as the remote transition was taking place—between March and May 2020—to investigate how students' housing, finances, mental health, and academics were impacted by the transition and the university and government policies governing the transition. To examine how the remote transition may have perpetuated inequities between groups of students, we investigate how students' experiences with the remote transition vary based on their class backgrounds and racialized identities.

Pre-Pandemic Student Basic Needs Insecurity and Mental Health

The American higher education policy landscape assumes students are financially dependent on their parents. Federal financial aid policy treats students under age 24 as dependents, even if they are fully responsible for their own finances (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Many upper-middle-class students experience an extended adolescence in which parents provide for most financial needs and play active roles (Hamilton, 2016; van Stee, 2022a). However, families with fewer financial resources generally treat college students as full adults, with corresponding economic and family obligations (van Stee, 2022a). Working-class college students tend to work to provide for themselves and sometimes to provide money for their parents (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Additionally, Black and Latino families are more likely to expect "reciprocal

support" between young adult children and their parents than white families (van Stee, 2022b).

Students' lives outside the classroom set up their conditions for learning and impact their academic success. Students with fewer economic resources spend more time working, have less time to study, and are more likely to have to miss class (Armstong & Hamilton, 2013; Jack, 2019; Thomas et al., 2021). Furthermore, basic needs insecurity—not being able to meet one's most basic food and housing needs—as well as mental health challenges prevent many students from fulfilling their academic promise. Unfortunately, basic needs insecurity was commonplace among college students before the pandemic, though a lack of consensus on how to measure this construct and a dearth of nationally representative studies measuring basic needs insecurity among college students limits our understanding of the problem.

Housing Insecurity

According to the only nationally representative estimate, from the National Post-secondary Student Aid Study, nearly one in 10 (8.8%) college students and more than one in 20 (5.7%) undergraduates at public four-year colleges reported being homeless or at risk of homelessness before the pandemic (Broton, 2020). In a national study of nearly 86,000 students at 123 (non-representative) institutions that opted into a study on basic needs security, 17% of respondents reported being homeless in the previous year, and 56% reported being housing insecure in the previous year in 2018, including 14% and 48% of students at four-year institutions, respectively (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). Estimates of housing insecurity from smaller studies focusing on regions or individual institutions are even higher and vary widely by type of institution and study methodology, ranging from 15%–52% (Broton, 2020). Experiencing housing insecurity during a student's first year of college has been linked to lower grade point averages (GPAs) and lower likelihood of degree attainment, after controlling for background characteristics (Broton, 2021).

Food Insecurity

Many college students also experienced food insecurity before the pandemic. Systematic reviews of literature have found food insecurity rates on American college campuses average between 33% and 51% (Bruening et al., 2017; Nazmi et al., 2019). In the large-scale national study of basic needs insecurity described above, 45% of all respondents and 42% of students at four-year colleges reported being food insecure in the past 30 days (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). Single campus studies indicate that rates of food insecurity vary by student demographics: Female students, students of color, and first-generation college students are more likely to experience food insecurity than their peers (Haskett et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2017[1]). Food insecurity is associated with

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1   Miles et al. (2017) did not define "students of color" in their research.

lower academic performance and worse mental health (Trawver et al., 2020; Wilcox et al., 2021).

Mental Health

Mental health challenges are also common among college students, and many mental health disorders develop during adolescence and young adulthood. Anxiety, depression, eating disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and alcohol use disorder are all common among college students, with at least one in 20 students suffering from each (Pedrelli et al., 2015). In the decade prior to the pandemic, suicide attempts, anxiety disorders, and depression increased by more than 50% among college students (Coleman, 2022). Students with worse mental health do worse academically and are less likely to graduate (Thomas et al., 2021), unless institutions provide necessary support (Coleman, 2022).

In order for colleges to be socioeconomic mobility vehicles, inequalities in academics cannot be addressed in isolation; disparities in finances, basic needs, and mental health must also be addressed. This became even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

College Students and the Pandemic

College students were impacted by the economic crisis of spring 2020. Most college students work (Hussar et al., 2022), and with positions concentrated in the service industry, students were especially likely to lose their jobs (Kinder & Ross, 2020). Additionally, their parents were at risk of financial hardship from lost hours or work, especially those from non-affluent backgrounds or Black or Latino families (Dias, 2021; Karpman et al., 2020). Rates of basic needs insecurity remained high during the pandemic. In spring 2020, the first nationally representative data on basic needs security including both homelessness and food insecurity were collected in the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. Importantly, these data are not directly comparable to previous estimates of basic needs security among college students, because these estimates are representative of all undergraduate students across the country, rather than a handful of campuses that were motivated to study these issues (Goldrick-Rab, 2023; McKibben et al., 2023). That spring, 23% of undergraduate students experienced food insecurity with low or very low food security in the last 30 days, and an additional 12% of students experienced marginal food security. Black students and Indigenous students, including American Indian or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students, had especially elevated rates of food insecurity, at rates near or above 30%, as did Pell Grant recipients. Additionally, 8% of undergraduate students reported experiencing homelessness in the past 30 days (Goldrick-Rab, 2023; McKibben et al., 2023). International students faced additional challenges because

they were often unable to return to their home countries, yet their basic needs were rarely sufficiently met by their US university (Wright-Mair et al., 2021).

Anxiety and depression rates soared during spring 2020: 69% of Americans experienced moderate or high depressive symptoms, and 40% experienced high levels of anxiety (Manning et al., 2021). Additionally, Black and Latino neighborhoods experienced much higher levels of COVID-19 in spring 2020 (Anderson et al., 2021), resulting in worsening mental health in these communities. College students experienced poor mental health, especially those forced to relocate and leave their peer communities (Conrad et al., 2021) and those who experienced basic needs insecurity (Soria, 2023).

Many college students did not have the resources to engage in remote learning. They often did not have access to the stable internet needed to complete coursework or needed to share their devices with younger siblings (Gillis & Krull, 2020). Additionally, many universities were unprepared for the emergency remote transition, as only 20% of public universities had previously offered online courses (Felson & Adamczyk, 2021). The problem was even worse for students who returned to households with minors, as college students often had to take on caregiving roles as most schools switched to remote learning and more than two thirds of childcare centers closed during spring 2020 (Domina et al., 2021; Lee & Parolin, 2021).

The federal government enacted the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) to combat the economic effects of the pandemic. The CARES Act included two payments to households (commonly called "stimulus checks"), temporary additional unemployment benefits, and other support for state and local programs to aid issues like food access (Elliott et al., 2021). Most college students under age 25 were excluded from receiving stimulus checks, as students are generally required to be labeled dependents on their parent's tax returns to apply for federal financial aid, and tax-classified dependents aged 17–24 were excluded from receiving stimulus checks (Nguyen, 2020). As part of the CARES Act, Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HERF) funding was distributed to schools and universities, with requirements for a significant portion to go directly to students (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021). In spring 2020, just 13.0% of all undergraduate students and 16.2% of undergraduates experiencing food insecurity reported receiving emergency aid across the country (McKibben et al., 2023). The overall effect on students, however, was inconsistent and insufficient to enable full inclusion of all students.

Methods

This paper uses in-depth interviews with 35 undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a large flagship public university in the southeast. The interviews took place between March and May 2020 and most students considered themselves sophomores. These interviews were the fourth wave of a broader project that began when the students started their first semester in fall 2018. The original

sample was created based on a survey sent to all first-year non-transfer undergraduate students in September 2018 who were at least 18 years old. A survey question asked if the student was willing to be contacted about completing an in-depth interview. Of those who said yes, purposive sampling was conducted in order to maximize diversity by race/ethnicity, gender, and social class background, such that we randomly selected three students at the intersection of each social class category (working-class, lower-middle-class, and upper-middle-class), each gender in the study (men and women), and each racial group in the study (white, Black, Asian, and Latino) generating a total of 48 students and then selected two additional students fully at random to generate a total sample of 50 students.[2] For instance, there were originally two working-class white women, two working-class white men, and so on. The sample originally consisted of 50 students, though, as is common for longitudinal interview projects (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013), attrition did occur each wave, resulting in a total of 35 participants in this wave. This level of participation was surprising, given that students were in the middle of the chaotic spring 2020 semester.

For this wave of the study, the student demographics were 51% women and 49% men; 34% working-class, 31% lower-middle-class, and 34% upper-middle-class;[3] and 20% Asian, 29% Black, 29% Latino, and 31% white.[4] All of the original race/social class groupings are represented in this 35-student sample (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of Students in Each Racial/Ethnic and Social Class Grouping

	Working Class	Lower-Middle Class	Upper-Middle Class	Total
Asian	4	1	2	7
Black	5	3	2	10
Hispanic	4	3	3	10
White	2	3	6	11
Total	13	10	12	35

Note. Students identifying as more than one race are included multiple times, so totals do not sum. Students identifying as Hispanic and a racial group are included in both groups.

All interviews were conducted remotely after the remote transition was announced, and 83% of interviews were conducted within one month of that announcement. These

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2   If a student self-identified as more than one race/ethnicity, they could be selected for any of those racial/ethnic groups.

3   Social class was assigned based primarily on parental education and secondarily on student financial aid. For more details, see Gillis & Ryberg (2021).

4   The original interview sample of 50 students was 48% women and 52% men; 34% working-class, 32% lower-middle-class, and 34% upper-middle-class; and 24% Asian, 26% Black, 24% Latino, and 32% white (thus largely matching the demographics of this wave's participants).

interviews took place in real-time, when the students were still completing the spring 2020 semester or had recently finished it. As such, students provided in-the-moment accounts of their experiences and did not need to rely on retrospective accounts that may have glossed over initial chaos and struggles of the transition. They were asked about how the pandemic was impacting their lives academically and non-academically.

Interviews were conducted and analyzed by three of the authors. Each interview was digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim,[5] and uploaded to Dedoose, a cloud-based qualitative analysis application. Through a collaborative and iterative process of open qualitative coding, we settled on five broad topical categories that seemed to best represent the challenges the students faced during this time: finding housing after the remote transition, experiences in their new living environment, financial changes, mental health, and academic impact of the transition. The first author led analysis of mental health and academic impacts. The third author led analysis of financial changes, and the fourth author led analysis of finding housing and new living environments. Each researcher read all transcripts, writing memos and generating open codes of relevant themes or categories for analysis within each broad topical category assigned to her. For instance, within the interview section on mental health, generated codes included: self-reported depression or anxiety (or lack thereof), student sense of mental stability in their day-to-day life, and ways in which they attributed their (negative) mental health to impacting their daily functioning. Based on these codes, the first author inductively decided that the best way to categorize broader themes based on these codes were: improved mental health, declined mental health, or mental health in distress. Once each student's mental health observations were classified in one of the three categories, we could then analyze how each of those mental health statuses differed by race/ethnicity and social class within our sample and why those differences seemed to be occurring. As a check on each person's individual-led analysis, the researchers met weekly to discuss progress and the other researchers offered feedback to further refine the categories and analysis each person generated. The findings are largely descriptive in nature, documenting the challenges students experienced in different domains of life and describing how they varied by social class background and student race/ethnicity.

Findings

On March 12th, 2020, during spring break while most students were off campus, the university announced an emergency remote transition. Students could not return to live on campus unless they applied for an exemption. The exemption request form allowed for several criteria, but most students in the study reported assuming that only international students would be approved to stay (given that many countries closed

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5   Quotes in this article have been lightly edited to remove filler words.

borders). University communication generally implied that students should return to their parents' home, but that was not always a good option, creating a frantic need for many students to find new housing. While an emergency student aid fund did become available late in the spring 2020 semester, no interviewed students were aware of its existence, despite several being in precarious financial positions.

In addition to chaotic personal lives, students experienced chaotic academic transitions. None of the interviewed students' courses were previously online, so all courses had to pivot to remote learning. Students struggled to understand new course policies, structures, and assignments during the five weeks of remote learning before finals. Students did not have long to make up for academic deficits during the first weeks of remote learning.

Students' Housing Decisions

When campus closed, students' housing decisions were simple for some and challenging for others. Before the transition, 89% of respondents were living in campus dorms and the rest lived off campus. After the closure, 86% went to family homes, 11% stayed in off-campus housing or moved off-campus with friends or significant others, and one student remained on campus. Most students reported that moving back to family homes was the most practical option due to the abruptness of the transition. Gabrielle, a Latina woman from a lower-middle-class background, was already at her parents' house for spring break when the university went remote. When asked about her decision-making process, she said:

> I just automatically assumed, 'Okay, well I guess I'm going to be at home until further notice.' . . . even if we had come back from spring break at the normally scheduled time and then [the transition] was announced . . . I still probably would've gone home.

While living at home was practical for many, it was not always preferable. Even though most students made the same decision (to move back in with parents), we found the decision-making process was deeply unequal: Affluent students made choices that maximized their comfort and academic success while lower-middle-class and especially working-class students felt stuck with less-than-ideal options due to economic and family obligations.

For middle- and upper-middle-class students, returning home was an easy decision due to the privileges provided at home. Jessica, a white and Latina woman from an upper-middle-class background, said it "wasn't really a process. I was already at home and I would have wanted to be at home anyway, so I just stayed. It wasn't even a conversation." Students like Jessica experienced homes that were comfortable and met their needs. When upper-middle-class students sought alternatives, they made the decision to maximize their individual needs. For example, Tiffany, an upper-middle-class white

woman, stayed in her off-campus apartment (paid for by her parents) because she thought it would help her coursework: "My roommate and I [were] taking all the same classes for the same major. I thought it'd be really beneficial that we could watch all the lectures together and talk about assignments. . . . it's making it so much easier to transition." Because her parents paid her rent, Tiffany could choose the environment best for her academic success. Upper-middle-class students generally made decisions to maximize their personal needs free from additional obligations.

In contrast, working- and lower-middle-class students were stressed about where to live, having to juggle their individual needs with their financial resources and their families' needs. Several working- and lower-middle-class students specifically noted choosing their living arrangement due to finances. For instance, Gabriel, a working-class Black man, stated that "I really contacted everyone" trying to "find somewhere else to stay" to avoid his family's overcrowded home. Without financial means, he ended up completing coursework and sleeping on his family's couch. While returning home was the most practical decision for Gabriel, he reported that his personal and academic needs would have been better met in a different environment. Alejandro, a working-class Latino man, stayed in his off-campus apartment in fear of wasting money on rent, while his family home was already crowded:

> I thought back to my home situation . . . we live pretty crouched over there. It's a three bedroom and it's my mom, my sister, my grandma and now me and my brother . . . I guess the other option would be the couch. And because I have a contract with my apartments here, I had to finish out the lease.

Thus, like some privileged peers, he chose to stay in an off-campus apartment, but for him it was due to a sense of financial obligation rather than optimizing academic wellbeing.

In addition to considering financial practicality, working-class students often factored in family needs when choosing their living arrangements. Jayden, a Black man from a working-class background, chose to sleep on a friend's couch instead of returning home in fear of spreading the virus to his family. He said:

> Originally I was going to go . . . directly home. And then I realized I was anxious because I was afraid that [COVID-19] was easily spread at college . . . so I decided to stay at the dorms as long as I could. And then afterwards I was like, alright, I'm gonna stay with a friend . . . I am crashing on a couch cushion . . . probably the majority if not all semester.

Instead of prioritizing his own needs, like having a reliable place to stay, Jayden felt obligated to experience housing insecurity in order to reduce risk to his family.

In contrast, Mina, an Asian woman from a working-class background, chose to return home to support her family, despite having alternative options.

> I tried exploring my options. My best friend comes from a very wealthy family and her dad said, 'Go quarantine with your two best friends at the lake house' . . . But at the end of the day, it just wasn't feasible and wasn't worth potentially not being there for my parents.

While Mina's wealthier friends used financial resources to maximize their desires, she felt obligated to return home to fulfill a caregiver role for her family.

While most students returned to their family homes, the ease of making that choice and the reasons why varied along class lines. Upper-middle-class students chose environments that maximized comfort and/or academic success. Lower-middle-class and working-class students prioritized family obligations and chose less-than-ideal options due to economic precarity.

Students' Experiences Adjusting to New Living Environments

We next examine students' experiences adjusting to their new living environments, including their academic experiences as well as their lives more generally.

Students' Academic Experiences

All students indicated some difficulty adjusting to their new pandemic lives, including difficulties completing schoolwork at home and struggling with new routines. Aaliyah, a working-class Black woman, described a common struggle of being "easily distracted" with online synchronous courses. She explained: "I'm sitting on my couch . . . pick up my phone and this professor's talking about something and I don't care. . . . but in [face-to-face] class I can't do that because I sit in the front most of the time."

For some, academic disengagement was one of many challenges brought on by their new environments. Working- and lower-middle-class students, in particular, experienced additional challenges related to their environments, while upper-middle-class students generally indicated relatively seamless transitions back into their family homes.

Affluent students enjoyed private workspaces, home-cooked meals, and leisure time. Jessica, an upper-middle-class white and Latina woman, rotated between several private workspaces in her home. She explained: "I'm avoiding my room right now . . . I try to mix it up and go different places." Like many of her affluent peers, she described the pandemic as a break from her busy campus life to establish better diet, sleep, and relaxation routines. She explained, "I'm also making a very strong effort to relax. I'm sleeping more, I'm eating better food, cooking more . . . just doing things that I didn't necessarily prioritize . . . I'm pretty happy considering the circumstances." Likewise, Dan, an upper-middle-class white man, stated he was spending his time "watching movies and stuff . . . [it's] pretty relaxed." Increased relaxation and healthier habits

were possible due to socioeconomic privilege, as their parents or guardians generally resumed caring for their needs while at home, including buying groceries and cooking most meals.

Meanwhile, most working-class students' living arrangements brought challenges, including lack of private workspaces or reliable internet connections, making remote coursework even more challenging. Mina, a working-class Asian woman, stated that the only "strong wifi connection anywhere in the house [is in] the common living space," but it is very loud, so, "if I was to bring my laptop there, you would hear dogs barking, screaming, and just all the background noise." Similarly, Elom, a lower-middle-class Black man, returned to a household of six people, all working from home and sharing the same small common workspace.

Students' Daily Life Experiences

Additionally, non-affluent students needed to make sacrifices for their family needs. For instance, Elom, the lower-middle-class Black man, stated that when he was on campus, he was not expected to contribute financially to his parents' groceries and bills, being able to put his energy and resources to his own needs. However, he returned home to a highly distracting environment with more personal and financial responsibility. He explained:

> There's no way I can focus here. On campus I can focus for five hours. Grind out some work. Here? No way because I have family here . . . family duties, family needs . . . that was the whole point of in-person [education]. You go so you can just go focus, you know, and go have that library access where you can like zone in . . .

Despite knowing that they would be returning to higher-stress and difficult living environments, most students did not consider applying for exemptions to stay on campus in fear they would take the opportunity away from others who needed it more. Gabriel, the working-class Black man sleeping on the couch of his family's overcrowded apartment, stated:

> Even though it's been really rough being here, I technically have a place that I can come back to . . . I know there's a lot of international students that can't go back . . . So I didn't want to stop anyone from being able to actually stay.

Staying on campus did not guarantee basic needs were met. Ming-Na, an international student, was granted permission to stay in the dorms due to a lack of flight options to return home but suffered severe social isolation as a result of campus policies. She was only permitted to leave her dorm room in very limited time windows. She found herself depressed as she lost sense of time and developed immense fatigue from being isolated:

> My schedule is just very messed up . . . constantly staying in one place . . .
> I would sleep very late and get up very late, and sleep very long periods of
> time, even 12 hours . . . I can feel myself not be that healthy. It's showing up
> physically, I got fatigue a lot of times.

Due to limited hours at the dining hall and the disconnection of her dorm hall's stove,
she also struggled to consistently access food. The exemption policy's implementation
left out many housing insecure students and those who did qualify suffered negative
physical and psychological consequences from food insecurity and a lack of social
interaction.

While each student's options, decisions, and environment were unique, patterns
emerged: Affluent students had adequate space and resources while non-affluent stu-
dents had to navigate spaces that did not meet their basic physical, psychological, or
academic needs—even when they qualified for exemptions to stay on campus.

Financial Problems

Job Loss and the Ability to Rely on Parents

Students experienced a domino effect of financial problems, as they lost on-campus
housing as well as on- and/or off-campus jobs. Record high unemployment levels made
it uncertain when they would find another job. Nevertheless, these financial challenges
were not experienced equally by all students. Students from lower-income backgrounds
saw an increase in their financial precarity while students from higher-income back-
grounds saw a decrease in financial precarity as their parents took over all their bills.
For example, Jayden, the working-class Black man who was "just crash[ing] on a couch
cushion" at a friend's house, was struggling financially due to being laid off. Despite
constantly applying to jobs, he was so far unsuccessful at the time of his April inter-
view, had no idea how he would pay any rent, and was worried about being kicked out.

Similarly, Alejandro, a working-class Latino man, was in a financially dire situation
when he lost his restaurant job and began experiencing significant food insecurity. He
euphemistically stated that he was "under-budgeting" his costs, cutting everything
possible in order to continue to pay rent on his off-campus apartment, including eating
very little food each day. Because he came from a low-income family, he could not turn
to his parents for financial help. He explained:

> I was worried about dinner cause I didn't have money and I didn't quite
> frankly have food at home. And I was like, 'Hey Mom, could you like
> Venmo me five bucks or something?' And she said, 'Alejandro, you know
> that I don't have money either.'

The financial crisis affected lower-income students directly through a loss of their own
financial stability, and it also affected the financial stability of their parents.

In contrast, students from middle- and especially upper-class backgrounds were able to return home and rely on their parents financially. For instance, Santiago, an upper-middle-class Latino man, had all expenses covered by his parents. When he was asked if he would be applying to any job openings, he replied, "It's not necessary for our family situation" and that he would rather "be at home and stay safe and healthy." Santiago's example highlights the stark contrast between people of different class resources—for some people it was a choice to stay home and not worry about lost income.

Affluent Students Kept Internships

Even more unequally, upper-middle- and upper-class students in the sample were the only students to keep their jobs through massive layoffs in March 2020. Affluent students were generally interning or working jobs in their fields (rather than service-sector jobs to pay their bills) and this type of middle-class work was largely able to switch remote. For example, Han, an upper-middle-class Asian man, was completing a paid internship in spring 2020 which easily transitioned remotely. He explained that prior to the pandemic the internship was "already 50/50 split in office and remote." When the pandemic hit, the office just "sent everybody home" and he continued working. Han was able to retain his internship income, and he was already in a good financial position due to his background. Similarly, when asked about upcoming summer 2020 plans, it was overwhelmingly the affluent students with summer internships whose workplaces said their jobs were still secure whereas most working-class and lower-middle-class students were informed that their positions were cut before they even had a chance to start. Students' financial resources going into the pandemic predicted the financial (in)security they experienced with the remote transition, with their own jobs, and their family's financial situations.

No Knowledge of or Access to Safety Nets

Students were largely unaware of any safety net options to help them financially. Just one student signed up for unemployment benefits, and he only did so after explicit instructions from his work supervisor. No other interviewed students were aware that they were eligible for unemployment or other government benefits. Some students were aware of the discussion of stimulus checks, but they were ineligible, as even those who were financially self-sufficient qualified as dependents. Most students lost their future summer jobs. But, as the jobs had not yet started, they were not eligible for unemployment (though, again, no students mentioned this). No student was aware that they were eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Likewise, no student was aware of the school's emergency fund that, according to the university website, was "for any additional needs caused by the pandemic including relocation home, return from study abroad, medical and food needs, temporary housing, transportation,

and more."[6] No student could recall receiving any emails or announcements about the funds, as the announcement came weeks after the remote transition was announced. As such, students in the sample were unaware of any university or government safety nets to help them during this time, resulting in increased basic needs insecurities.

Mental Health

Students reported experiencing a wide range of changes in mental health through the emergency transition: Of the 35-student sample, 11 had improvements in mental health, 20 had minor declines, and 4 had major mental health crises. Within our sample, students with greater socioeconomic resources typically experienced less mental health decline than those with fewer resources; meanwhile, students with a prior history of mental health concerns and/or students racialized as Black tended to have greater mental health decline.

About one third of the students saw their mental health improve. Sergio, a lower-middle-class Latino man, was struggling before the pandemic hit. He was taking six difficult courses, working, and struggling to create a consistent schedule. When he returned home, however, his parents were able to take over his bills, and he was able to create a more stable schedule as his coursework lightened. He explained the transition as:

> So far so good. I think I've gotten a lot healthier with it. Just making a concrete schedule and not being so overwhelmed that I feel the world spiraling down upon me. So [my mental health has] definitely improved. It's definitely become a lot more stable.

Likewise, Scott, an upper-middle-class white man, noted that his mental health had improved since going home because he was "socially exhausted" and this was a good opportunity to recover from burnout. Both men were able to improve their mental health because they had access to resources to reduce the burdens they were facing pre-pandemic.

Most students experienced a decline in their mental health, though this was minor for many. Jessica, a upper-middle-class white and Latina woman, described that she was upset to be missing out on her normal routines and celebrations, and that she was generally feeling down due to the collective suffering of the pandemic: "[I'm] stressed. Not personally, like I don't have any individual stressors, but the whole collective grief thing is very stressful . . . then there's anticipatory grief . . . I love my birthday and my birthday's on Sunday and I can't do anything which sucks." Jessica acknowledged that because she had the resources to avoid "individual stressors" of the pandemic, such as

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6   https://www.unc.edu/coronavirus/emergency-grant-funding/ Accessed 27 December 2021.

unstable housing, potential exposure, or economic instability, she was able to avoid worse consequences for her mental health.

Several students with a history of mental illness experienced a major mental health crisis. Mina, a working-class Asian woman, struggled with bipolar disorder. While at home, she had a "massive episode" and, she explained:

> It's very difficult for me to be home. I just have a lot of mental challenges that this isn't a conducive location for. I started packing my stuff and I was about to leave [home] but at the end of the day I just couldn't.

Mina had the opportunity to go to a wealthy friend's lake house, but she stayed home due to her obligations to care for her sick mother. Thus, she stayed in an environment that exacerbated her mental health crisis for the remainder of the semester.

All but one Black student in the study experienced a mental health decline and both Black students with a history of mental illness had major mental health crises, likely due to a confluence of inequities: Black communities were being hit harder by the initial COVID-19 wave, Black students were less likely to have access to mental health services, and Black students had fewer college friends in their hometowns with which to stay connected. Aniyah, a Black woman, explained that she fell into a mental health crisis:

> I did not handle the first month and a half in quarantine. For the first three weeks I did not answer my phone, didn't answer my email. I was just very frustrated and sad and anxious and having panic attacks frequently.

As a result, she went three weeks without touching her coursework. After she started taking "baby steps" toward academic work again, she was behind and continued to struggle with her mental health. In addition to Mina and Aniyah, the other two students in an extended mental health crisis were a Black man and a Black/Latino man.

While any student could face mental health challenges, in our sample those with a history of mental health disorders, those racialized as Black, and those with fewer socioeconomic resources experienced worse declines. Those with financial resources and no history of mental illness were generally able to keep their mental health decline minor or even use their increased resources at home to improve their mental health.

A lack of support for students exacerbated mental health crises. Makayla, a lower-middle-class Black woman, was unable to continue seeing her college therapist when she was forced back home in a different state. While the university did enable its therapists to use telehealth so that in-state students could continue to receive services, most states did not change licensing requirements for therapists. Makayla's therapist, licensed in North Carolina, was unable to meet with her via telehealth while she lived in a different state.

Academic Experiences

Many students struggled academically during this time, though some students flourished. Of the 35 students interviewed, 12 were doing well academically (doing as well as or better than normal), nine were doing okay (some small issues, but managing fine), seven were doing poorly academically (some issues that might seriously impact them academically but getting by), and seven were in academic crisis (active crisis resulting in an academic catastrophe).[7]

Scott and Elom had completely opposite academic experiences during this time. When Scott, a white man from an upper-middle-class background, was asked if he thought the transition was impacting his academics, he responded: "No, it's probably better actually. There's less distractions . . . The social aspect of my life has been eliminated. So I've been reading a lot, doing schoolwork." In contrast to Scott's increased free time for academic work, Elom, the Black man from a lower-middle-class family, was in an academic crisis due to mental health distress, family distractions, and work obligations. Without his typical academic resources like the library, Elom's grades were in free fall. While some students experienced the remote transition as an opportunity to focus more on academics, many like Elom struggled to get by. These contrasting stories demonstrate the general pattern we found whereby few upper-middle-class students were struggling, some lower-middle-class students were, but most working-class were. Social class differences were primarily due to non-affluent students' needing to work, more precarious housing, more family obligations, and fewer protective resources that were highlighted in previous sections.

Racial inequality also resulted in non-academic factors disproportionately negatively impacting Black and Latino students' academic success. Black and Latino students in the sample described having parents laid off from work, needing to help siblings with remote school, and having family members sick/dying from COVID-19. For instance, Catalina, a Latina woman from a lower-middle-class background, spent little time on her academics because she was caring for COVID-19 positive family members and then had to self-quarantine. She explained:

> Kind of hard to focus on my work and not be super distracted. Because last week I was dealing with having to take my sister food and take my brother-in-law food and make sure that they were okay [due to a positive COVID-19 test]. And then this week, making sure that we're okay . . .

Many Black and Latino students also had to help their younger siblings with their remote coursework. This obligation took students' time and prevented them from

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7   Students who were classified as "doing poorly" or "in crisis" are referred to as struggling; students classified as "doing well" or "doing okay" are classified as not struggling.

having the quiet space and satisfactory internet for their own work. As Gabriel, a Latino man from a working-class background, explained:

> Being home is definitely tough though because I have a lot of siblings and . . . internet is not great and that was tough when I was still trying to do classes . . . I get it done in the living room, late at night. I've been submitting everything late because I try to wait and so everyone's asleep and I work in the quiet.

Gabriel was unable to do work or attend class during the day because his school-issued laptop was needed by family members. With four siblings, Gabriel found his time and resources depleted. With these new family obligations, Catalina and Gabriel did not have the time, resources, or mental space to focus on academics as they did when they were away at college. As a result of these increased family obligations, Latino and especially Black students were struggling academically much more than their Asian and white peers.

The university recognized that many students were academically struggling during this remote transition and changed its pass/fail policy. In a typical semester, students could only pass/fail elective courses and only if they submitted the form by midterm. For spring 2020, students could wait until after final grades and could pass/fail any courses. For instance, Jayden, a Black working-class man, was in academic crisis due to family and work obligations:

> I work at a restaurant and me dealing with trying to respond to the university plus my outside personal life, like my family, that's impacting me in my classes because I'm not really focusing on my classes as much as everything else that's going on.

Because of the long shifts and high family obligations during this time, Jayden was worried about his GPA, and especially his performance in his language course, a general education requirement. The pass/fail change prevented a catastrophically bad semester GPA. However, the policy does nothing to help students at risk of failing courses—and Jayden was on track to do so.

In contrast to the desperately needed, albeit incomplete, lifeboat the pass/fail policy served for disadvantaged students, those who were advantaged economically and/or by their place in the racialized hierarchy were able to use the policy strategically to improve their GPAs. Nikhila, an Asian woman from an upper-middle-class background, explained that while she was doing well in her courses and did not expect to pass/fail anything, she liked knowing that she had the option if any courses were to bring down her GPA: "I've done pretty well this past semester . . . So, if it's a gen ed and it hurts my GPA, then I pass/fail. But if it helps it then I wouldn't pass/fail." Nikhila plans to strategically use this new policy to increase her GPA; she will pass/fail anything that would bring her GPA down, but she will keep the credits that would raise it, ensuring her GPA will stay the same or likely increase. Thus, the well-intended

policy had unintended consequences of enabling privileged students to boost their GPAs, widening the gap based on resources available to weather the pandemic crisis. They will come out of the semester with the grades and foundational knowledge that will put them even further ahead.

Discussion

While several quantitative studies have documented the prevalence of stressors or outcomes during the pandemic (i.e., U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2021), this study analyzes *how* students experienced interconnected problems like housing and academics, providing insights into *how* students experienced higher education during the pandemic. We provide insights into how inequitable student outcomes came about (such as how the only student who signed up for unemployment insurance did so at the instructions of his boss). This study complements larger-scale studies by analyzing students' interpretations of their own experiences in real-time, including the impact of specific policies.

Students in this study reported having varying experiences of the emergency remote transition in spring 2020 based on their social positions. For most affluent students in the sample, the transition was stressful and inconvenient, but it did not bring economic or academic hardship. Well-resourced students had to move out of their dorms, but they were able to choose housing that prioritized their academic needs and wellbeing. Their parents overwhelmingly took over bills including housing, food, and non-essentials. Many of their parents' jobs became remote, but their parents generally prioritized the students' academic needs and private spaces throughout the home. These students mostly maintained their spring and/or summer internships that transitioned to be remote. Some had minor mental health declines, though many saw improved mental health. All were on track to end the semester without declines in their GPAs. Affluent students were still generally on track for their original college trajectory. In contrast, students in the sample from lower-income backgrounds faced difficult decisions about where to live, navigating housing insecurity, food insecurity, and home overcrowdedness. The transition brought havoc and sometimes catastrophe to their living environments and financial situations, with corresponding impacts on their academics.

Racial inequality also manifested during the emergency remote transition: Most Black and Latino students in the sample lost their jobs, as did many of their parents, creating intense pressure to find a new job to provide for the family despite high national unemployment rates. They additionally often took over caregiving roles in their families, including for younger siblings, older adults, and COVID-19 positive family members. Many Black and Hispanic students in the sample experienced moderate to major declines in mental health and academics. Even if they managed to pass all courses,

Black students, in particular, ended the semester with fewer skills for future classes and a far worse financial position that could jeopardize their academic future.

Uneven impacts of the COVID-19 and associated economic crisis (Anderson et al., 2021; Enriquez & Goldstein, 2020) are well documented. However, their impact on college students has been less explored, especially the interplay of non-academic and academic struggles. College education sets the foundation for future careers and is the only realistic pathway for upward economic mobility for many students, making it critical to understand these disparities.

We also analyzed the ways in which policies exacerbated rather than ameliorated disparities. Government policies are built with the assumption that college students are financially dependent on their parents who can and will financially support them (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). While this does largely fit the upper-middle-class parenting approach (Hamilton, 2016), the assumption does not hold true in non-affluent households. Policy decisions like excluding college students under age 25 from stimulus checks are part of a broader policy landscape that disproportionately hurts lower-income students (Goldrick-Rab, 2021). Additionally, lower-income college students were largely excluded from existing unemployment benefits. Most students in the sample lost their summer jobs that are a core foundation of their yearly earnings. However, those lost wages did not qualify students for unemployment, as their jobs had not yet started, even if they had already signed contracts. Furthermore, students suffered because there was not a national policy to enable cross-state telehealth therapy so they could continue to see their state-licensed therapists even when they were forced to return to a different state.

University policies also exacerbated disparities. On-campus students were required to return "home," which led to housing insecurity, overcrowding, and couch surfing among interviewed students. Students in the sample who qualified for on-campus exemptions suffered from food insecurity and poor mental health. Insufficient communication regarding the university fund or government programs prevented many qualified students in the sample from applying. Academically, many instructors' classes became inaccessible, requiring synchronous Zoom sessions that students who had new work/family commitments or insufficient technology were unable to take part in. By relegating leadership on course instruction to individual instructors, and revising the pass/fail option, the onus of widespread academic struggles fell to students and was treated as an individual problem for students to solve (i.e., figure out how to pass despite inaccessible instructional formats), rather than ensuring inclusive teaching was occurring (Gillis & Krull, 2020).

Limitations

This qualitative study shares the experiences of 35 full-time students, under age 25, with no children of their own at a single well-resourced residential college. The typical

college student, nationally, does not meet these characteristics (van Stee, 2022a), and we are unable to show pandemic impacts on student parents, part-time students, commuting students, or students attending community colleges. Students at less-resourced universities, and students who do not fit the mold of for whom colleges were designed were likely impacted by the remote transition even more.

The study sample design was decided before the pandemic began. As a result, we do not have a sample that would let us explore all of the dimensions of inequality that became salient during the pandemic, such as disability status, sexual orientation, or student nationality. Likewise, the original study sample design did not include a category for American Indian students, a population that other studies show was disproportionately impacted by the pandemic (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2021). While our 35-student sample does include a variety of social class and racial/ethnic backgrounds, as a group they do not represent all social positions that future studies will need to explore to continue describing how the pandemic differentially impacted different groups of students.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Higher education policymakers tend to rely on the assumption that college students are dependent on parents who can pay for their tuition and living expenses out-of-pocket. This assumption does not match the reality of most students in higher education today—either in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or in better economic conditions. While many upper-middle-class parents view college students as extended adolescents, this perspective is not consistent with the financial or cultural realities of students from less affluent backgrounds, Latino students, or Black students (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; van Stee, 2022b). The consequences of this assumption have always been felt by marginalized students for whom it does not hold true, and they were exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. Students' experiences of the COVID-19 crisis and policy responses to it, as illustrated in this study, demonstrate the harmful consequences of this assumption. Housing, financial aid, and emergency preparation plans need to be constructed with college students' financial realities in mind; we must not assume that all college students have family support they can fall back on. In fact, sometimes college students are co-providers or co-caretakers for family members even when they are unpartnered and childless. Many other students are financially self-sufficient even if they are forced to fill out FAFSA paperwork indicating dependence on parents (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

To create policies that serve students equitably, higher education institutions must recognize the lives that their students live outside of the classroom. Measuring the prevalence of basic needs insecurity on campus through student surveys, asking students about their caretaking responsibilities on registration forms, and incorporating conversations on basic needs security and mental health needs—and resources to address

those needs—into advising standards are all ways to capture students' experiences and the barriers they face to succeeding academically. As the old saying goes, what gets measured is what matters. With that knowledge, faculty and institutional policymakers can craft meaningful institution-level policies for students, and proactively share relevant federal, state, and university resources to support students' holistic needs, in times of national crisis, and for times of personal crisis.

Institutional policies must be equity-centered. Rather than creating policies for the (assumed) typical student, policies should be created around students with the most needs. Spring 2020 policies falsely assumed students could easily return home to parents; that they would have stable internet and private workspaces; and that they would have few caretaking/work obligations preventing them from completing synchronous coursework (Gillis & Krull, 2020). University policies should be based on students with the most need rather than requiring individual students to navigate disparate accommodations and supports across the university. This may mean investing in basic needs and mental health for students. Information on existing resources should be brought to students, rather than placing the onus on students to seek it out. This can be done without much expense. For example, a standard syllabus could contain information on the resources available on campus and in the community around food access, stable housing, mental health, and more (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2020). Student advisors should be trained on the needs of their students and the resources available for them. They could also have access to referral programs so they can directly connect students in need with available resources. This information can also be made easy-to-find on college websites.

Colleges must recognize that non-affluent students have more to lose when access to campus is restricted (such as in public health emergencies or natural disasters). Students from lower-income families rely more heavily on campus for workspaces, internet, and computers (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Jack, 2019). Thus, when universities are considering restricting student access to campus, they must take the disproportionate impact into account. Policymakers and higher education administrators must consider the implications of potential policies on the most disadvantaged students rather than their assumptions about "typical" students.

Conclusion

College students have obligations beyond their academics. Students' academic success is fundamentally shaped by their living situations, their basic needs (in)security, and their mental health. Campuses support some of these needs by providing accessible internet, on-campus housing, and dining halls but fall short of equalizing access to higher education (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Goldrick-Rab, 2016). When a crisis hits, those with more obligations during college pick up even more, such as caregiving for family or working more hours.

For colleges to serve as pathways for mobility for students of all backgrounds, we cannot continue to rely on incorrect assumptions about the college student population. We cannot ignore how policies exacerbate disparities in students' experiences rather than eliminate them. The pandemic may have been an unusual crisis, but higher educations' response to it was rooted in our past, which will continue to choke the potential of students in our present if we do not change our policies to better reflect their experiences.

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