

# Journal of Graduate Education Research

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Volume 5

---

2024

## “Roadblocks and passageways”: Pandemic lessons for helping graduate students survive and thrive in times of crisis


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### Recommended Citation

Park, Eunsong; Shdaimah, Corey S.; Aggarwal, Nikita; and Garzón-Hampton, Amy (2024) "“Roadblocks and passageways”: Pandemic lessons for helping graduate students survive and thrive in times of crisis," *Journal of Graduate Education Research*: Vol. 5, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/jger/vol5/iss1/4>

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## “Roadblocks and Passageways”: Pandemic Lessons for Helping Graduate Students Survive and Thrive in Times of Crisis

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### How to cite this article:

Park, E., Shdaimah, C. S., Aggarwal, N., Garzón-Hampton, A. (2024). “Roadblocks and passageways”: Pandemic lessons for helping graduate students survive and thrive in times of crisis. *Journal of Graduate Education Research*, 5, 8-20.

### ABSTRACT

Graduate students and universities continue to be challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative study explored how U.S. graduate students (n=19) experienced and navigated pandemic challenges to their education by using Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field. Respondents' abilities to manage changes caused by the pandemic were largely dependent on the capital they or their informal networks had and the field where they positioned during pre-pandemic and pandemic. Institutions' characteristics and supports greatly influenced students' habitus and sense of belonging. Study respondents' ability to maintain their educational trajectories was tied to both their assessment of their institution as caring and inclusive and their own existing resources. Overall, respondents considered themselves “super lucky,” recognizing their privilege and the relative safety that allowed them to continue their education, and expressed compassion for people who faced struggles greater than their own. We provide recommendations for how students and institutions can create sustainable and inclusive support systems to enhance graduate students' abilities to adapt and respond to individual and social crises.

### Keywords

Graduate students, Graduate education, COVID-19, Habitus, Crisis Institutional support

### STUDENT EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19

Institutions of higher education navigated unprecedented challenges during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, including changes in student recruitment, retention, and engagement. Students reported difficulties adjusting to educational changes and taking full advantage of online learning opportunities (Baloran, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Kapasia et al., 2020; Kee, 2021). Studies worldwide reported heightened levels of PTSD, anxiety, loneliness and isolation, and depression among students pursuing higher education (Baloran, 2020; Cohen et al., 2020; Craig et al., 2020; Kapasia et al., 2020; Rakhmanov & Dane, 2020). Studies also reported microaggressions and racial disparities, including increased vulnerability to COVID and poorer care and outcomes (Gray et al., 2020; Jones, 2021). An emerging body of literature reported that students dissipated emotional burdens and distress by utilizing a variety of coping strategies (Raaper et al., 2022; Velarde-Garcia et al., 2022). Moxham et al. (2022, p. 3) found that “staying connected” to social networks and “creating a routine” and “exercise” were among the main coping strategies employed by nursing students.

Literature indicates that a sense of belonging among traditionally excluded student populations can develop when institutional environments foster a feeling safe, valued, and understood. One mixed-methods study on inclusive learning environments in nursing education (Dowling et al., 2021) found that a sense of safety enhanced student well-being, cognitive development, increased engagement, motivation, satisfaction with learning, and confidence. Imeri and colleagues (2021) suggest that graduate students may be better positioned for a successful education, even when facing serious challenges, if institutions implement tailored support strategies.

COVID-19 provides an opportunity to better understand what allows students to survive and thrive during times of individual and collective crisis. In light of ongoing public health concerns, natural disasters, and political upheaval, it is important for institutions of higher education to better understand how to support students and help them work toward academic and professional goals, or, in the words of one respondent, to set up “passageways” rather than “roadblocks.”

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study examined personal and institutional characteristics which provided sustainable support systems for graduate students during times of crisis using Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) concepts of capital, field, habitus, and hysteresis. We chose this framework for its insights into the totality of student experiences as they unfold over time and for its attention to the interplay of personal, social, and institutional factors (Bathmaker, 2015; Bathmaker, 2021). Bourdieu (1977) defines capital as resources possessed by individuals and groups, which take three primary forms. Economic capital includes money, material ownership, and property rights; social capital includes social connections and networks; and cultural capital is the resources an individual acquires throughout life (Richardson, 1986). Cultural capital often manifests in knowing how to successfully navigate social situations and settings (Fearnley, 2020). Bourdieu’s concept of field is comprised of often overlapping social structures, such as educational institutions or families, where individuals are situated. Field can foster or impede the creation and maintenance of various forms of capital. For example, an educational institution (field) can hold social events for its students to help foster peer networks (social capital). Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is the relationship between the social structures and experiences accrued over a person’s life (Maton, 2008). Crisis (which Bourdieu described as hysteresis<sup>1</sup>) occurs when there is disequilibrium between the habitus and the field. The struggle to adjust one’s habitus to respond to adverse changes occurring (like a pandemic) in the field can result in crisis (Bourdieu, 2000; Donovan et al., 2017). In this study, we use the lens of capital, field, habitus, and crisis to analyze how graduate students adjusted to changes in their

educational experiences and explore the implications of these experiences for graduate schools in helping students manage their education during times of personal or collective crisis.

## METHODS

In this study, we analyzed data from interviews in the fall of 2020 with 19 graduate students and recent alumni. We asked: 1) how challenges caused by COVID-19 impacted them, 2) how they coped with changes, and 3) what supports were helpful.

## SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

We recruited study respondents through existing networks and snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019). To capture diverse experiences, we recruited participants from different schools and disciplines in different stages of their respective programs. Most were women, pursued a master’s degree, and lived with family members, significant others, or roommates. See Table 1 for participant characteristics.

**Table 1**

*Characteristics of the Interview Sample (N = 19)*

Gender	14 Women (73.7%)
Identity	5 Men (26.3%)
School Type	13 Public (68.4%) 6 Private (31.6%)
Academic Discipline	5 Health professions (26.3%) 6 Helping professions <sup>2</sup> (31.6%) 3 STEM <sup>3</sup> (15.8%) 3 Business (15.8%) 2 Social sciences and humanities (10.5%)
Degree	12 Master’s (63.2%) 7 PhD (36.8%)
Domestic/ International	15 Domestic students (78.9%) 4 International students (21.1%)
Graduation status	18 Current students (94.7%) 1 Recent graduate (5.3%)
Living Arrangement	9 Living with their spouse/partner or children (47.3%) 5 Living with parents/grandparents (26.3%) 4 Living with roommate(s) (21.1%) 1 Living alone (5.3%)

<sup>1</sup> We adopt the term crisis due to derogatory associations of the term hysteria/hysteresis.

<sup>2</sup> Includes master’s level social work, counseling, education, and psychology programs

<sup>3</sup> Science, technology, engineering, and math

Participation was voluntary and confidential; we referred to respondents by chosen pseudonyms except for one duplicated pseudonym that we changed. Study procedures were approved by the authors' IRB. Semi-structured interviews lasting between 45-80 minutes were conducted virtually by the second author, a third-year PhD student, and PhD students in the first author's doctoral-level qualitative research class, including the third author. Authors' experiences of attending/teaching graduate school during COVID-19 provided generative insights for data collection and analysis (Cousin, 2010). We mitigated bias by using multiple interviewers and a three-person data analysis team comprised of students and faculty (Padgett, 2017). Interviews were transcribed using automated technology and cleaned by the research team.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The authors implemented a multi-step process that began by reading through transcripts while listening to recorded interviews to check for accuracy while immersing ourselves in the data. We then selected one transcript for simultaneous independent coding using codes grounded in the conceptual framework (e.g., cultural capital) and emergent from the data (e.g., super lucky) (Bowen, 2006). The authors discussed our independent codes and created a consensus coding scheme which the first two authors used to code the remaining interviews, revising as new codes emerged in subsequent interviews. The third author served as a quality check by coding two interviews. The first two authors met weekly for peer debriefing to discuss coding and their understanding of the dataset as a whole (Maxwell, 2012). All four authors collaborated on the final data analyses and interpretive framing.

## FINDINGS

We report our findings analyzed according to Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and crisis. A summary of themes, codes, and exemplary quotes is provided in Table 2, followed by narrative detail.

**Table 2**

*Summary of Themes Codes and Exemplary Quotes*

Themes	Codes	Exemplary Quotes
Economic Capital	Employment Housing Financial support	I don't ever feel like complaining too much because...I'm gonna come out with a master's degree and that's just a huge privilege in general... I've been able to stay home, rely on my parents, even [when] I was unemployed for...three full months. And even during that time, I was still able to be at home, be completely secure and not be too worried for basic things. <i>(Ally)</i>

Social Capital	Inside information Coping mechanisms Networks Peers	The group of people that they selected to the program [is] an empathetic group of people and I think there's just sort of an understanding that this is a rough time for everybody. It's not a competitive program. We're not trying to outrank each other. With the election yesterday: "How's everybody doing," "I know we're all stressed. Remember to take care of yourselves." <i>(Jill)</i>
Cultural Capital	Academics Family Geography Virtual learning	This has really negatively impacted my relationship with my cohort because we... start[ed] in September, we're all new. We start to slowly get to know each other and, you know how long that takes. And then March...it just all ended.... we all used to do work in the same space of grad student lounge and so I definitely don't see my cohort anymore. I don't talk to them. And then some people who I started to make friendships with also didn't come back to the city. <i>(Molly)</i>
Field	Communication Feeling supported Virtual proficiency Institutional or department culture	[My advisor] has always wanted to find out how I was doing mentally and that I was coping with all the changes in the world. And also my department. Actually, my entire program. Also with the death of George Floyd and all the racial issues that happened concurrently with the pandemic...they had some sessions with all students just to discuss how graduate students were feeling about that, how they're processing the racial tensions in the country. Actually, they actually even bought, they purchased certain books, two books on racial tensions for all the students in the program. And sent them in the mail to us to read. And so we are having book club discussions about that, just so that we can keep the conversation going. <i>(David)</i>
Habitus	"Super lucky" Compassion Pandemic opportunities	[Y]ou can't just rely on routine and habit, [which are] pretty much worthless at this point, whatever your reference points were before... especially when you're trying to develop a product or service or a mission or whatever it is, considering the way the world is and hearing the things that people are struggling with, has provided opportunity for innovative ideas and being very clever...there are so many chances for students to be coming out of school to start their own businesses, to start their own initiatives, to look at things entirely different. And I think that is a huge bright spot. <i>(John)</i>

## CAPITAL

### Economic Capital

Economic capital was primarily manifested through living situations as they related to financial stability and their ability to study. No longer able to afford housing, Zoe moved in with her boyfriend and his daughter. "Prior to the pandemic... I could afford to live by myself and work and go to school. After that, though, [it] wasn't an option for me to work and support

myself and go to school.” While Zoe struggled to balance her new responsibilities with her graduate student workload, she was grateful for the financial security that enabled her to remain in school. After losing her job, Ally moved in with her family. Similarly grateful for her safety net, Ally struggled to concentrate while dogs barked, and her mother taught virtual kindergarten in the next room. David “had to request extensions on almost all deadlines for my courses,” forced to work at home with two young children. He explained: “before the pandemic, my strategy for work was to do my work in the office... [During the COVID lockdown] it was difficult for me to work productively at home [except] in the middle of the night.” John’s spacious home that he shared with pets and his partner “made his life a lot better.” He mused that in closer quarters “I would have had a really, really hard time.”

The second most prevalent concern was health costs. Linda refrained from going to the emergency room after contracting COVID-19 because of concerns that her school insurance might not cover the cost. Her health insurance-related concerns grew upon graduation without job prospects, contrary to pre-pandemic expectations of immediate employment with health benefits. As a student in a health-related profession, her own experience led Linda to question her own professional path and the healthcare system more broadly.

While most respondents suffered losses, some saw benefits. Biochemistry engineering student Dan gained valuable experience “working in a COVID lab” that helped him get his “foot in the door in an industry.”

### **Social Capital**

Existing social capital was key to respondents’ pandemic experience. Molly lived with her “friend who was also a PhD student last year.” She explained: “talking with her, debriefing at the end of the days, definitely keeps me sane because... I haven’t left the house in five days.” Virtual instruction left many respondents disconnected from their academic institutions and peers. Sophia moved away from her university to live with her husband. While satisfied with the emotional and financial benefits, she suffered academically: “[Philosophy students] heavily rely on interactions between students and [between] the students and the teachers...the pandemic and online process made this harder.”

Loss of informal interactions also reduced academic support. Helen perceived reaching out to peers virtually as intrusive because she was unable to gauge people’s openness to conversation like she would during in-person interactions. Others similarly noted that lack of face-to-face encounters necessitated formal meeting requests with advisors or instructors. Such concerns were pronounced among international students, like Molly, who had limited opportunities to build pre-pandemic relationships: “Th[e pandemic] has really negatively impacted my relationship with

my cohort because ...we started to slowly get to know each other [in September]...and then [in] March...it just all ended.” Conversely, the uncertainty and confusion of the pandemic brought first-year student Jessica closer to her peers.

It was really helpful to have friends in the class [and]...not go through it alone and just ask for help and support others when they need it and have some solidarity. We always joke that we’re trauma bonding cause this has been very extreme.

Academic support and social connection among peers were key strengths for respondents who had them. Respondents noted the difficulty of their academic experiences when such ties were absent, which some tried to remedy. David was one of several respondents who created co-learning opportunities; he and a peer “set up study groups virtually and we almost meet every other day... [T]hings have improved education-wise, learning-wise [so they can] keep...learning at a steady pace.”

### **Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital represents non-economic factors such as family, language, values, and social mobility. Involvement in his educational institution as a teaching assistant gave John access to insider information. “I get a little bit more information or maybe earlier information because I’ve TAed... I already knew what they were projecting ....[which] makes it easier for me.”

Respondents described adaptations that helped them cope with new educational and personal realities. Helen used special eyeglasses, eye drops, and dual monitors to cope with prolonged screen exposure. Zoe relied on her refrigerator calendar to manage increased personal, family, and school-related obligations. Bella appreciated virtual learning opportunities: “this pandemic [is] actually telling people ‘you actually can start study[ing] in another way.’” Molly devised a system of structured breaks to avoid “working 24/7.” Jill, who described herself as “a pretty anxious person,” sought counseling. Other respondents used exercise for physical and emotional relief. Brian found running “really beneficial, just to get out of the house and...see some greenery.” Bella’s exercise routine provided her with a sense of normalcy; she tried to “work out every day and try to have a regular life.”

Respondents took precautions to protect their own health and their loved ones, mitigating concerns through actions they were able to control, although these tradeoffs often exacted a social price. Jessica was frustrated by the cavalier attitudes of her peers and administrators in her health-related course of study and also felt isolated by her discordant experience:

Now that I know that people in our class have COVID, I’m definitely...wary about going in.... Which kind of sucks, because the building is beautiful, it’s got ...a

nice library, and obviously spending more time with classmates would be great...

Students whose education required experiential training, such as internships or laboratory work, found the virtual environment especially divergent from their graduate school expectations. However, most students believed that their university adaptations were justified.

## FIELD

In this study, the primary field of interest was the graduate institution in which each participant was situated. Students in universities with existing IT infrastructure that had already been utilizing technology in teaching fared better at the onset of the pandemic. Respondents also noted the program type and culture, the institution's willingness to engage with other pressing social issues that impact students, and institutional communication as factors within the field that influenced their experience.

### *Institutions' Type, Culture, and Resources*

Becca's university had hybrid in-person and online learning prior to the pandemic. "we already had Zoom as a platform that we knew how to work...that familiarity that we had with these online platforms was very helpful in just transitioning over." David also found his school very helpful when he had computer difficulties.

the IT support teams [at my school] have tried to put a lot of troubleshooting information online and try to make it simple. I've had one person remotely access my computer ... and fix what needed to be done. So I think that's very important for people who are not tech-savvy.

In addition to technical support, respondents reported helpful pedagogical adjustments. John's school changed curricular content to enhance students' learning: "they flipped the semesters [of a core content course] because the 2nd semester's big project actually fits better if you are remote." In contrast, Linda's school was unprepared and ill-adapted for the virtual learning that COVID-19 precipitated. "They bought some online [simulation] programs that allowed us to 'practice' medicine ... Honestly, the things that they implemented didn't help me at all...[when] we couldn't be on [in-person] rotations."

The six respondents studying in helping professions (e.g., social work or teaching) and those in smaller programs felt supported by their university or program.

I'm just lucky, because [in my field], they're very supportive people, they're like, "we know how you feel." They're validating me, they're telling me like, here are my options, and that I can contact them

whenever. So I...really felt supported. (Anne, counseling program)

A number of other students described how their university or department culture or environment impacted them personally and academically.

David, characterized his "small [health] program" as "big on a culture of togetherness while learning advances in science." Holistic caring was a hallmark of school culture that shaped his graduate experiences.

[My advisor] has always wanted to find out how I was doing mentally and that I was coping with all the changes in the world. And also my department, actually, my entire program. Also with the death of George Floyd and all the racial issues that happened concurrently with the pandemic...they had some sessions with all students just to discuss how graduate students were feeling about that, how they're processing the racial tensions in the country. They actually even bought...two books on racial tensions for all the students in the program and sent them in the mail to us to read. And so we are having book club discussions...[to] keep the conversation going.

David was "impressed" and "relieved" that his school addressed racial tensions. "The leadership around me has been empathic and concerning and responsible." The institution's choice not to live in a bubble helped David feel supported.

In contrast, Dan's large university had a poor record of responding to health-related crises. He described a pre-pandemic incident where the university's inaction and inappropriate medical care allegedly contributed to a student's death. Dan believed this tragic, well-publicized incident led to his university's better pandemic response, an example of how pre-pandemic factors could influence institutional responses to the pandemic.

### **Communication**

Communication played a major role in student assessments of school performance. These views shifted as communication strategies and student needs changed. Respondents described varied and multiple information sources, including program directors, department heads, advisors, and university-level administrators. Regardless of their source, quantity and quality of communication were important.

### **Roadblocks or Passages**

Communications gave respondents the sense that their institutions cared, even when they merely conveyed a lack of new information. Dan's department head "was very proactive...as soon as he found out big news or any teacher had big news, they would email the students. So I never really, actually had to go out of my way to find stuff out." Conversely, lack of communication characterized Linda's pandemic

education: “weeks [w]ould go by and we wouldn't hear anything from our school...they didn't update us on the progress of anything...We were sitting at home and we're like ‘cool, so what are we doing, am I graduating in December?’”

Initially, “daily emails” made Mary feel “like things were being told to us in a transparent and genuine way.” Over time, she and her classmates suspected that the school’s guidance “was driven by...risk aversion or brand reputation risk, and not what [students] cared about, which was just science and safety.” The “shift toward fear tactics” and “[very complex] guidance [which] formed a bit of a maze about what gatherings you are or are not allowed to do” caused mistrust when Mary started “to feel like the administration is more interested in setting up roadblocks than setting up passages.”

Mary’s suspicion that student wellbeing was secondary was echoed by other respondents who reported unsatisfactory institutional responses. Dante’s university’s response was “iffy” when it “made national news because we brought all the students back and then like two weeks later sent everyone home because cases were spiking.” Dante criticized his university for sending inconsistent messages.

you're still expected to go into [the] lab and get research done, which was kind of at odds with what the Chancellor was sending out with his emails...[W]e weren't sure what to make of [the] inconsistency between the Dean of grad students and higher administration.

Dante noted conflicting messages: “we're going to follow the local [government guidance], but actually, we're not,”

Mary and Dante’s experience contrasted markedly with John’s: our university has done a good job communicating with the students about what they're doing and why they're doing it. The ‘why’ is really important because regardless of how much you have science literacy and believe in it, you want to know that these things are being done intelligently and not haphazardly.

Transparency bolstered John's trust in his institution’s guidance. Dan similarly appreciated his supervisor, whose “strict adherence to COVID guidelines is justified” and “reinforces the idea in our minds that COVID is a really serious illness, and it's something that we shouldn't take lightly.”

### Feeling Supported: They Care

Respondents appreciated hearing a diverse set of institutional actors who addressed different aspects of their education. Some took advantage of pre-existing channels of communication; Helen’s department used weekly seminars to touch base and share information. Helen also had a department chair “always willing to have a meeting” and an advisor who “care[d] about me a lot.” While students did not avail themselves of all services offered, those who received regular and appropriate communication felt that when and if they needed assistance,

their institution would be responsive. Jill got a sense from her university that “they care”:

We get a lot of email blasts from the [Large University] about everything. I'm not gonna lie and say that I read them all. I appreciate that they're checking in... I haven't felt out of the loop and from the beginning... [My program director] was checking in and keeping us updated and I didn't feel like it was over-communicative. I thought it was the perfect amount like she was listening... She took a poll to check in and see how we were feeling about online versus possibly going in.

One facet of Jill’s satisfaction echoed by other respondents is that her university communicated to elicit student feedback, rather than only to disseminate information.

Respondents’ assessments of institutional communications were largely based on what these communications implied or signaled. Compassion and recognition of student difficulties offered comfort, reassurance, and connections. Institutional communications that seemed cavalier or out of touch made students feel that their institutions were callous or dismissive. When asked what advice she would have for administrators or faculty, Linda replied that “although this probably seems like a leisurely time for students”, institutions should know that it is “still a very challenging time.” For example, she shared that lack of “structure” and “face-to-face interaction...might very very negatively influence the [a]bility to study and their ability to focus” for students who needed these. In this regard, respondents appreciated all forms of flexibility that could be adapted to individual student needs and priorities. These included pass/fail grading, changes in the types and number of required internship hours, and liberal extension policies. Brian’s university prioritized student wellbeing: “They were hyper understanding and very flexible in terms of trying to make sure that everybody was taking care of themselves, first and foremost, instead of stressing about academics.”

On the other hand, some students who were frustrated by their institution’s responses indicated that institutions did not center on student well-being. At least two students (Linda and Zoe) believed that their schools should have considered partial tuition reimbursement. Linda shared her frustration: “I wasn’t doing anything. I wasn't learning anything...I was paying for all the fees that the school charged us... my school decided to increase tuition...”

### HABITUS

Study participants explicitly described how their habitus impacted their ongoing experience of graduate education. Findings regarding habitus included recognition of relative good fortune and privilege, critique avoidance of self or others, and new opportunities.

## **Pandemic Opportunities**

### **“Super Lucky”**

An overarching theme was a sense of being fortunate, often in comparison to imagined others. Despite losing her job employment and housing, Ally felt “super lucky” to be able to move back into her childhood home.

I don’t ever feel like complaining too much because...I’m gonna come out with a master’s degree and that’s just a huge privilege in general ... that I’ve been able to... rely on my parents, even [when] I was unemployed for...three full months [and] be completely secure and not be too worried for basic things.

Jill was grateful for her parents’ “generosity” in paying part of her tuition, and being spared the worry of having to care for others:

I don’t have any caregiving responsibilities, no children, no elderly family to take care of right now. As I understand it, it’s very, very difficult to both parent and work from home full-time during a pandemic, so I’m immensely grateful that’s one less thing... [I] count myself among the lucky ones.

Linda’s partner helped her maintain housing: “if I [were] single, if I [were] by myself, this would be a very different conversation.”

Other respondents considered themselves fortunate academically. Dan had already finished gathering laboratory data before the shutdown, which would not have been possible after access to campus facilities became inaccessible. He compared his situation to lab mates who were at the earlier stages of their research.

I lost maybe a month or two in the lab time. I was writing a paper to get published so I focused on that rather than gathering data for other papers [at a lab]. So, I didn’t miss too much, but... I have lab mates that really needed those two months of time.

Similarly, Dante considered himself lucky compared to his undergraduate students and his graduate student partner, because his graduation date and “timeline [weren’t] significantly affected.”

Respondents are often managed by pooling resources or relying on friends, family, or significant others. Despite hardships, participants were grateful for the ability to progress on their educational goals, often noting that this was not a possibility for everyone.

While some respondents were uncertain of the long-term impact of COVID-19 on their future plans, a few saw opportunities stemming from the pandemic. John observed that new insights and new needs provide openings to

...think things through differently...[H]earing the things that people are struggling with, has provided an opportunity for innovative ideas and being very clever...there are so many chances for students to be coming out of school to start their own businesses, to look at things entirely different. And I think that is a huge bright spot.

Becca learned “about how to be ethical and how to create boundaries” in the virtual world that she had not considered before by being “forced to go out of [her] comfort zone and try new things and test new technology” during the pandemic. David welcomed the increased use of virtual platforms that created employment possibilities that were not geographically limited.

## **DISCUSSION**

We analyzed our findings using Bourdieu’s lenses of capital, field, and habitus. Respondents pre-existing cultural, social, and economic capital played a key role in their ability to continue their education with little disruption. Respondents often relied on a combination of resources and support such as living with a family member and having a peer network to remain in graduate school. These social networks helped students stay on track academically; some respondents also used them as spaces to “feel okay and not go through things alone” (Jessica). While social support mitigated immediate financial, emotional, and academic concerns, it seemed less effective in relieving concerns related to future employment or health worries.

Access to cultural and social capital was particularly challenging for the self-identified international students in our study (Bella, Helen, Sophia, and Zoe). All four struggled with remote instruction and reduced social ties with peers. John, who was not an international student himself, also noted such concerns. This is consistent with literature reporting that international students may lack social networks, including peers, which can make it hard to acculturate, adjust, achieve a sense of belonging, or experience stable mental health (Han et al., 2017; Matusitz, 2015; Yakunina et al., 2013). The same may be true for others whose pre-existing social capital is not well-matched for higher education settings, such as first-generation students, or those who are immigrants.

In the face of many challenges, students’ habitus was characterized by a shared appreciation, empathy, and further understanding. One central finding was the development of what we call a “super lucky” narrative. Super lucky narratives conveyed a sense of good fortune even when respondents’



situation was not optimal. They included gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003) for their own economic and social capital (e.g., financial resources, a job, or being in their country of origin), which they compared to imagined others who may have had to leave school due to job or financial loss, or who were far away from family and familiar surroundings. They expressed empathy for these imagined others, often within a social justice framework that centered on the experience of immigrants, racialized minorities, and those who struggled financially or socially. Super lucky narratives that construct respondents' conditions in a relatively positive light and avoid criticizing others warrant further exploration as a possible protective factor or coping mechanism in the face of crisis or ongoing hardships.

The fact that respondents were enrolled in graduate programs (field) implies that our respondents possessed sufficient capital to navigate higher education coming into the pandemic. Nevertheless, respondents with less social and economic capital to fall back on (e.g., international students, students with less financial means, or students away from family) experienced added challenges during the pandemic. This provides support for Bourdieu's (1984) contention that institutions of higher education were set up to reward the upper classes and devalue students from the lower and working classes. Students in our study with less financial or social capital, as well as less facility and experience with US higher education, struggled more than respondents who had these resources. Our findings suggest that Bourdieu's argument may apply to other axes of privilege and marginalization, such as nationality or ethnoracial identification.

Respondents' habitus included an adaptation of existing capital within their institutional field. In some cases, these were simple or temporary adjustments to personal space, such as creating a desk from an upside-down hamper or changing one's living situation or routine. In the academic setting, students found new ways to study such as virtual study groups, which often improved their learning. When academic or living adaptations were compromised, students mitigated their fears and frustrations by exercising, using adaptive tools, or connecting socially. Many respondents viewed their adaptations with pride and humor, which may have enhanced their sense of self-efficacy and alleviated feelings of despair or hopelessness. Some respondents also saw opportunities for the future, envisioning new career paths and learning opportunities or, as in the case of John, a chance to rethink what mattered to him in life.

As they recounted examples of resilience in the face of difficulty, respondents noted that how they were situated academically impacted their pandemic experiences. One factor that came up repeatedly was their area of study, which is consistent with Chirikov et al. (2020) finding that students from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields reported fewer mental health concerns than students from outside of STEM fields. We also found that respondents' fields of study mattered in distinct ways. For example, respondents in

the helping professions appreciated the stance and attitude of peers and institutions that seemed primed to understand the emotional toll of the pandemic and meet it using professional sensitivity to the need for empathy and support. At the same time, most respondents from biomedical fields felt they were joining a crucial field during the pandemic, which came with job prospects and a sense of purpose. These were in contrast with students from humanities-related majors, who shared more concerns about their chosen field and did not indicate specialized awareness or acknowledgment of the pandemic impact on students. Respondents also noted that the timing of the pandemic in relation to their stage of education or training influenced their experiences and perceptions of disruption. Respondents felt cared for by their institutions when their institutions communicated regularly about important news or the progression of COVID-19. They also noted the importance of institutions actively soliciting input on how students were doing and creating channels for ongoing two-way communication between students and the administration. Our findings also support Imeri and colleagues' (2021) recommendations to create safe environments for communication, indicating prioritizing to avoid flooding and cultivating good relationships (e.g., between students and advisors, mentors, or department-level administrators or support staff) that can be adapted to various circumstances and address students' non-academic needs.

One qualitative study exploring non-traditional student experiences during COVID-19 found that non-traditional students rarely utilized formal institutional support (Raaper et al., 2022). In contrast, another study showed the benefit of the communication model used by the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee (UWM) (Brown, 2021, July 27), when it found through a school survey that approximately 70% of students and staff were experiencing traumatic symptoms affected by the pandemic. UWM has more students of color and vulnerable students than any other University of Wisconsin System institution, and many experienced deaths of family members or friends and heavy caregiver burden. In response to this finding, the school launched several programs designed to help students return to campus, including creating meditation spaces and guided discussion. Our study respondents indicated that racial and ethnic minority groups often faced what is often referred to as "twin pandemics" of systemic racism compounded by COVID-19 (Hershberg & Sandmeyer, 2021; Jones, 2021), which may also contribute to the disproportionate negative impacts found in Brown (2021) and corroborates that institutional support seems to be particularly critical to students who experience other forms of marginalization or struggles that can compound their experiences and the impacts of crises.

## LIMITATIONS

This study has important limitations. The first is the sample size. While 19 respondents may be considered a small sample, it meets Nelson's (2017) "conceptual depth criteria" (p. 559) in that it is of sufficient size to provide important insights into

graduate student experiences during the pandemic. We recruited through pre-existing networks and snowball sampling, which may have introduced sampling bias. To mitigate the possibility of sampling bias in recruitment, we made efforts to include participants with diverse backgrounds, disciplines, and academic settings. Another potential sampling bias is that our respondents were all students who remained in school or who graduated; we did not interview students who dropped out of school. This means that our respondents' experiences may not reflect the experiences of those who were unable to sustain graduate education during the pandemic. Additional research is required to better understand the pandemic experiences of this latter group including how they fared upon leaving and whether they returned to graduate school. Based on what our respondents shared, it is likely that students who halted their education may have been more marginalized and have had less capital than current study respondents, which bears further investigation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings suggest recommendations to support graduate student success during episodic or ongoing hardship; these suggestions may also enhance graduate students' general well-being. At the individual level, students should consider whether graduate education is financially and socially feasible. If possible, they should identify and develop necessary capital prior to embarking on graduate education and seek institutions that can augment their existing personal capital – for example through the provision of financial aid or mentorship programs. If universities and graduate schools wish to attract and retain a diverse student body, they must be aware of the need for different types of capital and how such needs for capital may impact student educational success. Programs that facilitate student financial stability may include paid internships and campus employment opportunities, as well as expanding government-supported programs such as federal work-study.

Our study also points to the need for institutional efforts toward meaningful social inclusion rather than placing such responsibilities exclusively on students. Coe-Nesbitt and colleagues (2021) defined graduate student thriving as a “holistic, interconnected, and multi-dimensional construct” (p. 4). Engaging and connecting were two of six overarching themes that graduate students in their study identified as components of thriving, characterized by a sense of belonging and involvement in academic and social activities, that were echoed in our findings. University-based peer and community networks may provide important safety nets during times of personal or societal upheaval and may foster inclusion more generally. For example, a mixed-methods study found that undergraduate students in a peer mentor program achieved better academic outcomes, and more students remained in school for both first-generation students and non-first-generation students (Graham et al., 2022). We therefore recommend institutional support for peer mentoring or study groups that may facilitate academic and social integration, as

well as campus activities to create and foster community among students. Since graduate students are less likely than undergraduate students to live on campus, universities may need to carefully and creatively target such efforts to coincide with students' presence and be sensitive to how they access and use university spaces and events.

Our findings underscore the need for holistic consideration of graduate students, for whom their studies are but one part of their multifaceted lives. The literature that corroborates our findings points to the importance of overall well-being on student academic performance and success. It also points to the importance of recognizing the varying resources and needs among a diverse array of students, which necessitates a flexible approach. A combination of templated responses such as peer mentoring systems should be paired with more personalized responses. Our study indicates that such investments can be beneficial for students, especially during times of crisis, and can also help with student recruitment and retention; these measures of success also contribute to the university's reputation and ranking, making them worthwhile institutional investments.

Our study also points to pandemic-generated adaptations which may be beneficial during “normal” times. Mirroring study respondents' resourcefulness and learning in adversity, we recommend that universities take stock of promising adaptations. For example, virtual or flex classrooms, where some students are virtual and others face-to-face, may help universities recruit and support students outside of their geographical areas (Hill, 2021; National Center for Education

Statistics, 2021). Regularly recording lectures (with adequate privacy provisions) with closed captioning technology is another adaptation suggested by our respondents as being overall beneficial to their learning. We recommend working closely with students, who can best articulate what they find most helpful. Consistent and reliable communication with students will allow institutions to learn about health, safety, and other concerns. Institutions should establish channels for under-resourced students and marginalized students so that their voices and concerns can be heard and addressed.

Finally, our study shows the importance of personal attitude in students' coping with upheaval. Individual students may cultivate gratitude or a positive outlook. Our findings also indicate that student attitudes do not develop in a vacuum; students are greatly influenced by the responses and culture of their institutions. Our respondents were concerned about societal issues of social justice and fairness and were appreciative of institutional responses to calls for racial justice. We recommend institutions pay attention to the special needs of students and people who are marginalized in society.

## CONCLUSION

Even as the challenges wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic wane, universities continue to struggle with enrollment,

retention, and student success. Study respondents described varied adaptations to the crisis based on an intersection of their individual circumstances and the institutional environments in which they were situated. Prominent resources that impacted their experience were cultural, social, and economic capital. These forms of capital were sources of concern and strength. Respondents developed and used innovative strategies to manage academics, social lives, and financial challenges that emerged from the pandemic and maximize their capital.

Their abilities to manage these factors were often dependent on support and resources that they had, or that their informal networks could provide, to forge ahead with their graduate studies despite the challenges. Institutional characteristics (e.g., supportive environment and involvement in racial/social issues) greatly influence students' habitus (experiences and attitudes) and augment or detract from their social, institutional, or economic capital. This underscores the important role of institutions during crises and more generally in their ability to enable respondents to pursue their education, especially when respondents struggle. As a group, respondents in this study considered themselves super lucky, highlighting recognition of the relative safety and privilege that allowed them to continue their education, especially when these were accompanied by academic, financial, and administrative institutional support.

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