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**Understanding the  
Impacts of COVID-19  
Pandemic for  
Undergraduate Students  
attending an HBCU:  
Insights from Student  
Voices**



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## Executive Summary

Limited attention has been paid to the impact of COVID-19 on college students who are attending minority-serving institutions, despite the disproportionate toll COVID-19 has on minoritized communities and the worsening of pre-existing inequity brought about by the pandemic (Kantamneni, 2020; Kimbrough, 2020; Strada, 2020). It is vital to understand experiences with COVID-19 among college students who are attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which serve as primary educational pathways for Black students in the U.S. Themes from our interviews with 41 students attending an HBCU highlight that students are experiencing significant work-related, academic, financial, and socio-emotional challenges related to COVID-19. Stressors and concerns were viewed by students as interrelated and cumulative. In addition, themes from the interviews suggested that student stressors must be viewed within the contexts of the higher education institution, student life experiences and circumstances, and their positionality within large structural systems. Given the far-ranging and ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on higher education, this Research Brief concludes with recommendations to advocate for and support students.

## Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic led colleges across the U.S. in the spring of 2020 to close their campuses, educators, staff, and students were forced to quickly adjust to virtual course delivery, residence halls closures, and the growing threat of the virus to campus safety. The fall 2020 term has forced higher education to continue to grapple with the ongoing implications of the virus, including shifting re-opening plans, COVID-19 safety protocols, and virtual student learning.

At the same time, data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have demonstrated that racial and ethnic minorities individuals are disproportionately negatively impacted directly by the COVID-19 virus (CDC, 2020). Beyond these direct impacts, pre-existing inequities in healthcare, education, and the labor force have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Work to understand the scope of these worsening societal inequities is ongoing within social science (Van Bavel et al., 2020).

The consequences nationally of these existing and worsening disparities are already being seen in education. In a nationally representative survey of 10,000 adults, disparities were seen in who had canceled or changed their education plans as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Latino (50%) and Black (42%) Americans reported higher percentages of disrupted education plans than did White (26%) respondents (Strada, 2020).

Vocational psychologists have called for scholars, practitioners, and employers to address employment and vocational concerns that disproportionately impact workers who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), women, and low-income (Kantamneni, 2020). In addition, scholars have highlighted the importance of understanding young people's perspectives and realities as they face the economic and social crisis wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic (hereafter referred to as COVID-19; Blustein et al., 2020). COVID-19 has worsened public education's existing challenges of "government funding, student mental health, diversity and inclusion, and affordability" by straining federal, state, and institution funding during a time of increased mental health needs, growing inequity, and budgetary shortfalls (Kimbrough, 2020, para. 2).

Inequities in higher education have been well documented and evidence suggests that these inequities have been exacerbated by COVID-19. For example, a Center for American Progress study outlined gaps in spending for minority and White students across states and nationwide: colleges spend \$1,000 less per Black or Latino student than for White students, resulting in public colleges nationwide spending \$5 billion less per year educating their minoritized students. At the same time, colleges have become increasingly less affordable. In 2013-2014, only 35% of 535 four-year institutions were affordable to low-income Pell-recipient students. Four years later in 2017-2018, this number had fallen to 25% (Murakami, 2020). Noting these challenges, this summer, lawmakers called for forgiving student debt and doubling Pell grants to stem the tide of increasing educational disparities, but the law stalled (Murakami, 2020).

Since the onset of COVID-19, much of the focus of its impact on higher education has centered on predominantly White four-year institutions. Less attention has been directed toward how campus closures, campus pandemic responses, and alterations to classroom instruction impact students who are attending minority-serving institutions (Kimbrough, 2020).

It is therefore critical to understand and support students attending other types of institutions of higher education, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). HBCUs have a longstanding legacy of supporting Black students, graduating a fifth of Black bachelor's degree holders despite accounting for only 3% of U.S. higher education institutions (Lomax, 2015). A national survey of graduates demonstrated that Black HBCU graduates were more likely than non-HBCU graduates to report receiving mentorship and support while obtaining their degree. In this same study, Black HBCU graduates were more likely than non-HBCU graduates to report completing an internship or job that allowed them to apply their classroom learning (41% as compared to 31%; Seymour & Ray, 2015).

The purpose of this Research Brief is to add to our understanding of HBCU student experiences of COVID-19, whose voices have been relatively absent from recent national collegiate surveys. Elevating the voices and experiences of students themselves provides important direction for educators, administrators, and policymakers.

## **Procedures**

This Brief presents findings from the College Internship Study, which is a national mixed-methods longitudinal study of internship programs conducted by the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison).

One research question guided the findings: How have undergraduate students attending HBCUs experienced COVID-19 and its implications for their educational and career development?

The findings presented in this Research Brief are from data collection at a large, public, four-year HBCU located in a metropolitan area. Results are based on individual phone interviews with students (n = 41). These data were transcribed and analyzed in MaxQDA software using Sandelowski's (2000) fundamental qualitative description method by systematically identifying and presenting patterns from the data. The phone interviews were completed in spring 2020 and lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. During this period, many counties and states in the U.S. saw rapid rises in the numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths. Of note, these interviews occurred prior to the summer 2020 nationwide outcries and calls for justice regarding police brutality.

The purpose of this Research Brief is to illustrate and highlight HBCU student perspectives and experiences with COVID-19. Particular attention is paid to the implications for college administrators, professors, and advocates who seek to support students. In each section below, we summarize themes from our interviews alongside data from national surveys. The Research Brief concludes with suggested recommendations for educators, staff, and institutions to support students.

## Student Experiences with the Covid-19 Pandemic

Interviews with students occurred following restrictions to face-to-face classroom teaching in Spring, 2020. As such, we were interested in exploring how students' academic trajectories, career development, and internship experiences had been impacted at the onset of COVID-19. In our interviews, students expressed stress related to their internship involvement, academics, future career and academic success, financial insecurity, and socio-emotional well-being. In the sections below, each of these is described and student voices are highlighted to illustrate themes. Findings are contextualized within national data from various large-scale surveys undertaken in spring and early summer.

### Academic Impacts

The academic impact of COVID-19 on post-secondary students nationwide also has been the focus of numerous large-scale surveys, with focus areas ranging from the experience of online learning to students' anticipated shifts in their academic trajectory. The specific challenges of online learning have been described, with an eye toward the realities of online modality and course design, particularly in the context of a sudden shift to remote learning during the spring semester (see Means & Neisler, 2020; OneClass Blog, 2020).

In one survey of student academic experiences, 15,677 primarily undergraduate students from 21 non-HBCUs across the U.S., students reported the most difficulty with group assignments and research laboratory exercises (Blankstein, Frederick, & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020). Across various surveys (Blankstein, Frederick, & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020; SSCCC, 2020), students have expressed needs for greater IT and technical resources, learning support for students with disabilities, affordable books, library resources, and internet access.

In our interviews, concerns related to online learning loomed large for students. Importantly, only two students noted being unconcerned with courses moving online. At the time, these students indicated that this transition was helpful because it eliminated their commute to classes. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of students reported online learning challenges resulting from the move to remote instruction. These included challenges related to technology, the modality of instruction, faculty support, and student factors.

Students named difficulty learning while using the online technology including having difficulty asking questions, slower faculty communication, isolated learning experiences, and faculty technical difficulties that inhibited learning. Several students shared perceptions that faculty were inconsistent in their support of students, perceptions that some faculty may have felt the need to assign more work to "make up for" the online transition, and a feeling that some faculty perceived students as "lazy" rather than appreciating the challenges that students were grappling with related to COVID-19. As students wrestled with a variety of stressors, they expressed frustration that they were receiving less academic learning support alongside greater expectations. One student shared their exasperation as follows:

And especially during this time, I feel like professors are overdoing it. As in, if we actually have class, they wouldn't give us as much work because we are active in class. And at the end of the semester we're realizing - "why did we fail?" It's because they're grading us hard, and they're not really taking into consideration that, hey, there's a lot. A lot of people don't learn just looking at a computer. They learn face to face.

Themes from our interviews also revealed that many factors were impacting student learning as a result of COVID-19. For example, students described their struggles to learn remotely due to increased distractions, low motivation, depression, and an interruption to study habits and routines that had worked well prior to COVID-19. Some students noted the acute negative impacts on their learning and skill-development in STEM courses that involved in-person projects or groupwork, labs, technical equipment, or required out-of-class faculty support. One student described the challenges of being an essential employee and full-time student:

It's definitely very hard because I feel like there's no slack given when it comes to student work. They don't care for the most part, if you're still working, or essential worker, or you're going through stuff. You still have to balance so much, but teachers still are expecting so much out of you during this time.

Although students expressed challenges with faculty, some students also expressed appreciation for the support they had received from individual faculty, their academic department, or their institution as a whole. Students in our interviews expressed that the support primarily involved greater leniency around academics. One student said,

My university, they've kind of been helping, they've been helping because at first a lot of people couldn't do the online class thing because some people don't have, you know, WiFi at home and things like that. So, they would, they gave us an option to pass or fail, like it won't hurt your GPA or anything, so I think that was nice of them to do that because a lot of people don't have the same resources as they do as if they was at school.

Students noted a desire for greater support from their faculty and academic departments to enable students to engage successfully in their learning.

In summary, the vast majority of students experienced negative impacts of COVID-19 on their learning experience. Students noted a desire for greater support from their faculty and academic departments to enable students to engage successfully in their learning. These narratives add needed complication to our understanding of the difficulties with which students attending an HBCU are grappling.

### **Internship Impacts**

COVID-19 created massive disruptions to undergraduate student internships. National data indicates that many internships were cancelled, some went fully remote, and others were delayed or cut short (Chan, 2020). According to Glassdoor, half of internship openings have been cancelled since the onset of COVID-19. As compared to one year earlier, internship hiring in May of 2020 had fallen by nearly 50%. The greatest declines were evidenced in the following industries: travel and tourism, information technology, architecture and civil engineering, telecommunications, and media and publishing (Stansell, 2020). Results from survey of 1500 undergraduates at Arizona State University conducted in late April 2020 highlighted the widespread effects of COVID-19 on undergraduate students' work lives. According to the survey, 40% of undergraduate students reported that they lost an internship, job, or job offer as a result of the pandemic.

In terms of income, students reported a 31% decrease in wages and 37% decrease in the amount they were working; 60% of the sample indicated that a family member had experienced a reduced income (Aucejo, et al., 2020). Similarly, another survey found that 23% of students had a job or internship cancelled, 35% had their internship modified, and 12% had to alter their plans to financially support themselves or their families (Global Strategy Group, 2020). Although rates of job and internship loss vary across survey samples, the data reveal a concerning trend: 23-40% of students have reported losing a job or internship as a result of COVID-19. This trend was reflected in our interviews as well.

Many of the 41 students whom we interviewed shared a belief that their internship experience had been impacted as a result of COVID-19. Seven students reported that their internships had moved online, one student had obtained an unpaid online internship related to COVID-19, and another student's internship had changed for the worse in terms of increased workload and reduced contact with supervisors or mentors due to understaffing.

Beyond altered internship experiences, our interviews revealed that COVID-19 affected the internship application process. Students who had been or were in the process for applying to internships indicated that their experiences were significantly impacted because of COVID-19. Seven students reported difficulty finding internship postings, four had internship offers rescinded or cancelled, and one reported that their internship had been postponed. One student had been accepted to a prestigious summer public health internship that was cancelled, which left the student uncertain of how to meet her educational goals and prepare for graduate school. The student described this in this way, "I'm actually kind of hurt about it. Because, yeah, I was really ready and excited to be able to pursue something that I'm really interested in.... So, yeah, I kind of felt a little crushed about that." Two students reported struggling with the ambiguity of not knowing the status of their pending internship applications. Another withdrew their applications due to pre-existing health conditions and fears related to possible risk of exposure should they be accepted into the internship. Some students shared their concerns about continuing to apply for internship opportunities moving forward. One student noting their uncertainty around internship applications, said:

I am planning to. I was planning to. But because of this whole Covid-19 business, I don't know how possible that will be.... Because certain jobs are cancelled, put on hold. So, it's like, do I even apply? Is it worth it to apply? But, regardless, I still think it's worth it to apply because you never know how long this thing might last.

In summary, national data and data from interviews with students attending an HBCU highlighted the widespread implications of COVID-19 on disruptions to internships. This leaves large groups of students without access to these potentially transformative career development experiences.

**COVID-19 has resulted in widespread disruptions to internship experiences, leaving large groups of students without access to these potentially transformative career development experiences.**

## Graduation and Future Employment

Initial data suggests COVID-19's potential long-term ramifications for students' graduation trajectories. Findings from the Arizona State University survey revealed that 13% of student respondents reported delaying graduation and 11% reported withdrawing from classes due to COVID-19 (Aucejo, et al., 2020). Students in this survey also reported heightened levels of pessimism toward their future employment opportunities (Aucejo, et al., 2020). Results from another survey revealed similar concerns. Seventy-seven percent of the 1,010 undergraduate students nationwide who responded to a May 2020 poll from the Education Trust and the Global Strategy Group said they were worried about being able to stay on track to graduate. Those concerns were highest among Black (84%) and Latino (81%) students. notably, the survey did not specify why students were experiencing these concerns, making it difficult to ascertain intervention points.

Within our interviews, students echoed these concerns. Students shared feeling worried about successful course completion, staying on track, and life post-graduation. For some students, this was related to the specific challenges of online learning and support. Others described difficulty contacting advisors or faculty about capstone project expectations. They shared their fears that this would interfere with their ability to graduate that spring. One student expressed difficulty obtaining course accommodations from an instructor after the student was herself hospitalized for COVID-19. Another student shared concerns about the connections among online learning, course completion, and successful graduation in this way:

I want to say I've been coping pretty well.... I'm just kind of preparing myself for the worst situation possible, like whether I need to drop the class or whether I need to switch to pass or fail, whether I may have to stay an extra semester instead of graduating when I wanted to because of one class or not.

In terms of post-graduation employment, many students shared anxieties about the ability to find employment. Four graduating seniors with whom we spoke expressed concerns about their ability to find work due to hiring freezes and an economic downturn. One noted that his concerns about his post-graduation employment was complicated by a perceived lack of job-search support from his academic program. He said,

I graduate in three weeks and I don't have any interviews lined up, I likely won't get any interviews lined up unless they're trying to do a Zoom interview. And on top of all of that, my chair has now become super busy because of the corona, trying to figure out what's going to happen, how we're going to do these grades, just super busy.

A few students cited the prospect of increased opportunities for telework arrangements in the future. Even students who, at the time of the interviews, were not experiencing acute financial distress and felt "okay for now" indicated feeling concerned about the future. In particular, students expressed sentiments that their futures seemed precarious as they imagined the challenges to successfully transitioning from college into the workforce. One student commented about this sense of uncertainty about finding employment in their chosen field in this way: "It just depends on when everything goes back to normal. And even that normal is not going to be what it was

Although further longitudinal data is needed to understand the longer-term implications of COVID-19 on career disruptions, preliminary findings highlighted significant concerns and stress associated with students' future academic and career trajectories.

before.” Despite the shared sense of concerns about the future, students at the time of our interviews expressed hope that COVID-19 would remit, the economy would recover, and they would be able to find paid work post-graduation.

Although further longitudinal data is needed to begin to understand the longer-term implications of academic and career disruptions wrought by COVID-19, preliminary findings from these interviews highlighted significant concerns and stress associated with students’ future academic and career trajectories.

### **Financial Insecurity and Stress**

Findings from national surveys highlight COVID-19’s critical financial fallout for college students, particularly low-income college students. The Healthy Mind Network (HMN) surveyed a nationally representative sample of 18,764 students on 14 campuses in spring 2020. Sixty-six percent of the sample reported that the pandemic led to increased financial stress (HMN, 2020). In another study, one fourth (27%) of community college students surveyed reported an inability to pay their mortgage, rent, or utilities because of COVID-19’s impact (SSCCC, 2020). In a national sample of 1,010 students conducted during spring 2020, 43% of low-income students indicated that they had skipped or reduced their meals as a result of income insecurity related to the pandemic. Importantly, almost half of students (47%) nationwide thought they could not afford basic expenses such as housing, food, and tuition if COVID-19 persisted for two more months (Global Strategy Group, 2020).

In another study, 20,000 students from 40 institutions responded to the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium’s COVID-19 Institutional Response Student Survey in April 2020 (Blaich & Wise, 2020). Thirty-eight percent of the sample reported worrying often or very often about paying their bills and 15% worried about having enough to eat on a daily basis. Among Black students, these rates were more concerning; 48% of Black students reported worrying about paying their bills and 27% were concerned about day-to-day eating (Blaich & Wise, 2020). The financial concerns reported by students across these national studies extend beyond worry or stress, and for many students involves facing both food and housing insecurity while attending college. To date, little to no data exist regarding students attending HBCUs.

Students in our interviews shared their significant concerns and stress related to financial insecurity. Several reported fears that they would not be able to afford their housing, pay tuition, or support their families and themselves. Students shared ways in which campus closures contributed to a scarcity of resources available to provide financial relief for struggling students. For example, one student described it in this way:

Well, I remember campus, they used to have, like, a little food drive thing, and then people that don’t have money to buy food, they used to provide it for them. So, there are a number of things that you can get. Like, you can get two vegetables or one peanut butter. They used to do that all on campus. But because campus is closed, it’s just like you can’t do anything.

Another student expressed shared the following concerns:

I don’t have a job. My rent is due soon. I don’t know how I’m going to pay for that. I have to spend money on groceries that I really don’t have... My mom, she’s working. She has a whole bunch of kids at home she has to take care of.... she can barely send money to me.

The student went on to describe that she had applied to, but been denied funding through a campus initiative to provide financial relief to students:

I applied for it, and I ended up getting denied. Like, I only applied for -- I spent, like, \$400 on groceries, and... my rent. That's the only thing I had in my pocket at the time. And for me to have hope, like, maybe I'm going to get this money that I need, and find out, oh, a lot of people applied for it. That's why they can no longer accept my application. It's really sad because I did the application literally the day of. As soon as I got the e-mail I did it. It's not like I waited like three or four days. And ever since the third day, they just shut down everything, the whole site. So, I was confused.

Ambiguity and stress related to financial insecurity were complicated by the systems with which students interacted, including campus policies and procedures, familial systems, and work-study or job policies and procedures. For example, one student reported the ways in which uncertainty about tuition rates for out of state student was contributing to her stress. She said:

I think the only thing that added more stress on top of this is that my school recently sent out an e-mail saying that they're planning for the fall semester to be online as well, which is frustrating and concerning for me and a lot of other students. Because in terms of the financial aspect of it, I feel like because I'm an out-of-state student and I'm no longer required to be in the state that I'm paying to be in, it's kind of confusing on how they're charging us in terms of like revenue fee status...So, yeah, everything is just going up in flames right now.

Another student shared the ways that their internship ending and possible job loss had triggered significant financial insecurity:

COVID has just put us in positions where, you know, I don't even know if I'm going to get hired the next semester. But because my internship ends, I'm going to be out of probably seven grand in tuition money. So I don't know how I'm going to pay for next semester. My parents can't help me, so it's -- it's just a lot happening [laughter] at one time. And, you know, COVID's about to put me out of my only job I have left. So I don't know how that's going to work ... for next semester, if there's no school, then I'll be out of my only job.

Finally, several students expressed that their financial and employment stress intersected with concerns about health for themselves or their family members. Some were concerned about finding or resuming employment due to a fear of endangering family members. One student said it in this way, "...I don't want to really go into a job that I can get it and then come back and give it to my grandmother. So, I've been trying to find ways I can get some money without having to put anybody in danger and myself in danger."

In summary, both national survey data and HBCU student narratives point to serious financial concerns students are facing as a result of COVID-19. In our interviews, students attending an HBCU expressed their efforts to ensure their financial security alongside fears that they would no longer be able to support loved ones, pay for school, or meet their basic needs.

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## Social Emotional Impacts and Coping

Although the socio-emotional impact of COVID-19 on college students has been less of a focus within national surveys, some have highlighted some concerning statistics regarding the state of college student mental health. In the nationally representative sample of students surveyed by HMN, 86% reported concerns about their personal safety and security (HMN, 2020). In the Global Strategy Group's survey of 1010 students nationwide, 73% were concerned about developing or worsening mental health concerns. Alarming, more than a third of students (36%) reported being concerned about their risk of developing substance use disorder as a result of COVID-19 (Global Strategy Group, 2020).

Students we interviewed expressed far-ranging socio-emotional impacts from COVID-19, including quarantine-related strain, ongoing experiences of loss, mental health challenges, and interruptions to self-care habits such as exercise. In terms of quarantine-related stress, some noted strains due to familial stress or responsibility whereas others focused more on the environment itself (e.g. home was crowded or distracting). Emotional reactions included disappointment related to missing out on internship experiences, learning, the overall collegiate experience, and "ruined" graduation celebrations. Students expressed that these disappointments or losses were "depressing." One student who had recently transferred from a community college and had just moved back home stated: "So that was kind of sad because at this point now, I feel like I really only got to spend one semester at [institution] and I always had my head in the books, and now I'm like dang..." Additionally, several students named mental health impacts. As one student succinctly put it, "A lot of other people are getting exposed to their own underlying mental health issues."

A unique theme that emerged from our qualitative interviews highlighted the relevance of positive and effective coping strategies students utilize to manage these unprecedented stressors. Specifically, many students in this sample reported coping through a variety of intra- and inter-personal strategies. The most mentioned intrapersonal coping strategies included cognitive practices that facilitated internal coping (e.g., "trying not to worry" or "doing my best") and personal habits that helped one cope. These personal habits included: "staying busy", watching TV, exercising, spending time outdoors, engaging with spiritual beliefs, and for those who were living with roommates or family, finding ways to spend time by oneself ("just try to get my own space in the house"). Students often indicated that these practices directly impacted their mental health and well-being. For example, one student said, "I mean for my own mental health, I write in this app call Evernote, kind of like a diary. I just kind of write in it, you know, whatever's on my mind." One student described a daily effort to prioritize spending time outside: "I try to at least incorporate one hour outside. So, whether that'd be like yoga, reading. I got back into reading." Another student described their efforts to remain active in order to protect their health and wellness. They said, "I wouldn't try to stay dormant. Despite being in the house I try to find something to keep my mind, stay occupied because I don't want to just sleep all day."

Interpersonally, students named spending time with family and regular check ins with mentors, friends, and classmates as critical supports. Students frequently noted reconnection with friends as well as intentional efforts to stay in regular communication with peers and classmates for both emotional and academic support, as indicated in this statement: "I also have friends that are checking to, you know, make sure I'm doing okay mentally." Parents and family were commonly described as primary supports, whether through regular phone calls or virtually. One student put it this way, "I'll call my parents and I'll facetime them. So, I'm still able to talk

to people. It's just not like face to face." Finally, several students highlighted mentors and advisers, and efforts from their institution, who had outreached to them to check in. One student said, "My mentor and organization advisor reaching out to me consistently, as well as another mentor that I have outside of the school. They always check in on me to see how I'm doing.... everybody in my life is pretty supportive about everything." Another student shared the ways in which hearing from campus communications and mentors helped them to feel more aware and less "like you are left in the desert." They said,

Mentors reach out and make sure everybody is doing good. The liaison for my internship has reached out to me like personally to see how things are going.... And with school, there's been a lot of emails like staying up to date and, you know, staying in contact with students. Letting them know what situations that are going on.... I do appreciate them actually putting in the effort to keep students in the loop of things and letting them know what's going on.

In summary, although national data on students' socio-emotional experiences with COVID-19 are more limited in scope, students attending an HBCU described the mental health and emotional toll of quarantine and COVID-19-related stress. Importantly, students articulated the many strategies and supports they were using to cope with the multi-dimensional facets of the impacts.

Students described the significant mental health and emotional toll of quarantine and COVID-19-related stress, while also articulating the many strategies and supports they were using to cope.

### **Differential Impacts of Stressors across Students**

COVID-19 has evoked a range of stressors across domains for students in this sample. COVID-19 itself serves as health-related stressor, as evidenced by increased anxiety and worry about health, safety, and potential loss of loved ones. However, as students in our interviews outlined, stress regarding COVID-19 extends far beyond health-related worries. Importantly, stressors in each of the domains described above are not mutually exclusive, but rather for many students are interrelated. For example, stressors related to future career development were connected with impacts on mental health=. Similarly, stressors related to finances were connected with socioemotional impacts and students' ability to access coping resources.. This is consistent with preliminary evidence suggesting that students are experiencing stressors across multiple life domains. For example, in the Student Senate for California Community College survey, community college students shared ways in which they saw heightened stress related to mental health, academic performance, and financial insecurity (2020).

Emerging evidence also indicates that stressors differentially impact students and can only be understood in context. For example, in one large survey of undergraduate students, students who identify as transgender or non-binary, students of color, and those who act as caregivers reported higher levels of concern for both physical and mental health as compared to cisgender, White, and non-caregiving students (Blankstein et al., 2020). In another study, students across racial groups were similarly worried about academic success, but Black and Latinx students reported nearly twice the levels of concern around basic needs such as food, housing, and bills as compared to their White peers (Blair & Wise, 2020). In terms of socio-economic disparities, results

from one survey suggested that lower-income students were 55% more likely to delay graduation as compared to their higher-income peers and initial evidence suggested that the students from lower as opposed to higher income backgrounds projected larger detrimental impacts on their GPA following the onset of COVID-19 (Aucejo, et al., 2020).

Themes from our student interviews revealed that some students reported stress across various domains. As one student said, “And it [quarantine] causes a lot of different stresses, which is also probably taking a toll on why I’m not focusing as well as I would if I was in a classroom setting.” However, not all students experienced stress in the same ways. For example, although most of the students in our interviews reported academic stress and adjustment, for some students this increased stress was not reflected in other areas of their lives. The impact of COVID-19 was described differently for some students with greater supports, fewer financial concerns, and clear academic or career plans.

Some students shared the ways that their life experiences and identities shaped their responses to COVID-19. Many students were balancing numerous responsibilities outside of their academics. For example, a returning student and mother noted that she had to balance working from home, caretaking, and online course completion while simultaneously managing a decrease in social support and childcare availability. Another interviewee described their perception of the ways that these multiple role stresses often went unseen on campus:

Because I know sometimes it can be challenging for professors to view students as, you know, also adults who are still struggling with this. And so, yeah, once the university kind of made us all be online for the rest of the semester, it’s definitely been a constant reminder that we are also adults, we also have issues, we also have families.... everybody has had this huge shift in their lives, not just you guys.

Another student described the ways that significant financial stress associated with the onset of COVID-19 intersected with their worries about the future in this way:

I didn’t file for unemployment yet because I’m still thinking, like, maybe I can still get a job. But it’s just, I don’t want to get sick doing that job. And I know if I ever want to travel, my parents are older people. So I know, like, before I go home if I’m carrying it, I can get them sick. And I know they have medical issues as well, so. And I have sisters that they have to take care of. And if my parents are no longer in the picture then everything that they were supposed to do is on my shoulders now. So that’s probably going to mean, like, I’m going to have to drop out of school. I’m going to have to basically give up my whole life to take care of my sisters.

Throughout our interviews, students’ narratives often contained overlapping privileges or disadvantages that uniquely informed their experiences. For example, one student who had recently graduated and was planning to begin a post-graduation start-up company noted that he had already planned to move home and stay with a parent over the summer to save money. For this student, COVID-19 had not changed his plans significantly, and his familial resources had enabled him to plan for an entrepreneurial post-graduation plan. Another student noted that his struggle with mental health and academic habits after courses moved online were tied to his military service:

So, like I guess, being a military type person, I really value the structure, having a routine and then doing the routine. But then, you know, I would adapt, or whatnot. So, in approaching the COVID situation, my schedule and my program that I was used to got, you know, uprooted, and then it's still kind of like, the information on the situation isn't necessarily coherent, like it's not clearly defined.

For all students we interviewed, COVID-19 served as a stressor in and of itself. However, COVID-19 did not serve as the "great equalizer." Instead, students spoke to the ways stressors were both compounding and interrelated across life domains, and this cross-domain stress was informed by students' life experiences and identities.

**COVID-19 does not serve as the "great equalizer." Stressors related to COVID-19 were both compounding and interrelated across life domains, and this cross-domain stress was informed by students' life experiences and identities.**

## Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, students' experiences of barriers and challenges related to COVID-19 are having important work-related, academic, financial, and socio-emotional implications. Themes from interviews with 41 students attending an HBCU highlighted concerns that crossed boundaries of academic performance, internship experiences, mental and physical health, financial insecurity, and career development. Students spoke to their fears and concerns about moving through their academic program and what future employment opportunities would be available to them given the economic downturn. Students expressed various socio-emotional impacts of COVID-19, including worsening mental health as well as positive, adaptive coping they had developed to manage the stressors of the time. Moreover, themes from student interviews revealed that the impacts of COVID-19 are best viewed in a cumulative manner and within the context of their educational institution, personal life characteristics, and positionality within larger societal systems. Students have experienced numerous stressors and challenges that cannot be viewed in isolation or solely at the individual level. Disrupted internships, challenges with remote learning, financial stress, and social emotional impacts are interconnected. The inequities laid bare by the ongoing economic and institutional conditions are not new or novel. Stress occurring across life domains can have uniquely deleterious impacts (Morales & Guerra, 2006; Sternthal, et al., 2011). However, the impact of this stress is informed by the presence of student coping strategies and supports. In the sections below, we offer specific recommendations to advocate for and support students.

**The impacts of COVID-19 are best understood in a cumulative manner and within the context of students' educational institution, personal life characteristics, and positionality within larger societal systems.**

### Supporting Students' Academic Development

- Students reported a range of challenges with and needs related to online learning during spring semester. Given the challenges for faculty and students alike to remote learning, we recommend continued multi-tiered assessment of online learning experiences for students to understand strengths as well as opportunities for support or improvement at both the classroom and institutional level. For example, in prior studies students of color have noted that institutions need to improve services related to studying

tools, academic advising, and tutoring as key areas for online learning (Global Strategy Group, 2020). In addition, students in our interviews emphasized the importance of out-of-classroom instructor support to their academic success.

- Given the degree of stress and difficulty expressed by students regarding remote instruction and the strain on faculty engaging in remote instruction, we encourage continued faculty support in re-configuring teaching practices to be in line with inclusive best practices.

### **Supporting Students' Internship Completion and Career Planning**

- In our sample, students expressed ambiguity and uncertainty around resources or opportunities for internship completion. We recommend consistent, clear, and frequent communication with students from internship employers and educators about what opportunities are available, as well as conversations about what learning experiences are available.
- Students reported not receiving responses from potential internship employers. As such, we encourage employers and campus support staff to wrap up "loose ends" in order to ensure that students know the outcomes of potential opportunities or job postings. This will allow students to move forward with educational, financial, and future career planning. Given the ongoing uncertainty and precarious nature of work due to the pandemic, consistent, clear, and ongoing communication with students is needed among students, internship employers, and educators.
- Students expressed concerns about the academic and career implications of unfulfilled internship opportunities. Where possible, institutions and local employers are encouraged to work together to identify opportunities for adapted internship and/or experiential learning opportunities that meet students' career development goals.
- At the time of our interviews, students expressed uncertainty about the future, but remained hopeful about returning to so-called 'business as usual.' Given the rapidly evolving state of COVID-19, it is likely that these students' needs will continue to shift as they progress through this academic year. Therefore, we encourage career advising staff and other educators to engage in active outreach to support students and recent graduates in their educational and career goals (re)assessment and planning.
- Given the uncertainty on many campuses regarding plans for future terms, faculty and staff are encouraged to continue to communicate clearly and frequently with students about graduation requirements and academic planning as campus-based updates are announced.

### **Supporting Students' Financial Distress and Instability**

- Students have also reported increased levels of financial stress and duress. Again, the data from these qualitative interviews mirror dire national trends (SSCCC, 2020).
- Moreover, students may not be aware of resources in their community or have assistance navigating complex financial systems. Therefore, we recommend that educators and institutions offer financial planning resources and guidance, financial support, and assistance to students in identifying resources. In doing so, it is important to consider resources based on campus (e.g., food pantries to serve food insecure students) and those that can be offered remotely (e.g., reimbursement for books or laptop computers).

- Clear communication and marketing strategies are needed to educate students, staff, and faculty about available financial resources, particularly for the many students who face challenges meeting basic needs. This may also include institutions utilizing targeted and individual communication with students who are experiencing heightened financial insecurity.

### **Supporting Students' Socio-emotional Well-being & Bolstering Coping Resources**

- Results from our interviews highlight the importance of considering the numerous intra-and interpersonal resources and strategies students utilize to cope in challenging times. It is noteworthy that several students specifically mentioned outreach from academic and employer mentors as important forms of support. These mentor relationships, particularly during times of stress, serve as another significant form of social support alongside peers and family members. Mentors, employers and former supervisors, and advisers are encouraged to conduct regular check in with students.
- Students both in our interviews and nationally (SSCCC, 2020) reported increased mental health concerns during COVID-19. There is a critical need to make mental health more accessible to students. Students nationwide have reported this would be helpful (78%), but only about a third indicated that their university had made these services accessible (32%), and less than a quarter of Black students indicated that these services are accessible (24%; Global Strategy Group, 2020). Therefore, we recommend supporting student mental health be a priority for higher education institutions. This could involve increasing access to accessible virtual counseling and crisis services, providing resources to bolster coping, online or self-help resources, and fostering virtual peer support networks.
- Mechanisms to bolster student coping resources also may include those designed to support students' personal habits and practices, such as movement or exercise, forums or community events designed to promote student engagement with one another and with faculty out-of-classroom, portals that may enhance student social connections with one another, and accessing meditation or mindfulness practices.
- Educators and institutions are encouraged to send out regular, clear, transparent, and direct communication addressing the well-being of students.
- It is important to note that these interviews occurred prior to widespread uprisings due to national incidences of police brutality and ongoing racial injustice following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Increased efforts are needed from postsecondary institutions, educators, and internship employers to support BIPOC students through vicarious racial trauma (see Williams, et al., 2020 for recommendations).

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