Improving Graduate Student Recruitment, Retention, and Professional Development During COVID-19

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Abstract This study explores graduate students' academic support and preparation perspectives during the global pandemic. Study participants (N=4) volunteered to engage in reflective journaling for sixteen weeks to document learning challenges during the COVID disruption. Findings from the study focused on concerns for student well-being, including (1) creating opportunities for collaboration, (2) developing and maintaining a sense of belonging, and (3) enhancing personalized coaching and mentoring. Results are discussed regarding implications for graduate student program persistence and completion. More research is needed to explore the dimensions of graduate student engagement, academic well-being, scholarly development, mentoring needs, and acquisition of professional identity as graduate scholars.

Keywords: *graduate school, COVID-19, graduate student enrollment, graduate student well-being, graduate student persistence*

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1. Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic's impact on universities' operations and instructional delivery across the country is profound. Venit [1] concludes that the pandemic challenges reshaped the entire higher education industry, including the necessary changes needed in student retention. Venit [1] explains that many of the changes implemented to adapt to the pandemic crisis represent work that higher education should have done a long time ago to improve its service and support for student success. Graduate and professional schools were particularly challenged to reevaluate systems and procedures for sustaining academic health. Lamb (2021) surveyed over 800 graduate enrollment leaders to explore adaptations implemented in recruitment and admissions strategies during COVID-19. The long-lasting impact of COVID-19 demands inspection of policies and procedures across societal norms. Graduate and professional students carry additional demands compared with their undergraduate counterparts that only exacerbate the stress and angst associated with the rigor of advanced study [2].

This paper explores the potential implications of COVID-19 for the leadership of graduate and professional education programs. Issues impacting graduate students, including economic uncertainty, mental health fragility, sustaining scholarly productivity in the face of other responsibilities, and concern for the general welfare, require agile approaches to accommodate the unique needs of graduate students [3].

2. Statement of the Problem

Graduate and professional academic programs face an array of adaptations to address a new higher education landscape resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Kinzie [4] posits that the widespread disruptions "are an opportunity for improvement." Improvements in graduate and professional education include historical challenges and new issues that leaders must confront due to the global health event. Longstanding challenges in advanced education include issues such as lacking diversity and responding to the needs of nontraditional learners. Kinzie (2014) revealed that conceptions of merit in the graduate admissions process along racial lines in highly selective programs contribute to issues of inequity. Opportunities for improving recruitment, retention, and support in graduate and professional education include three key areas: scholarship, collaboration, and inclusive excellence.

2.1. Literature Review

The brief review of literature underpinning this inquiry focuses on relevant scholarship guiding graduate education theory and practice

2.1.1. Theoretical Perspective

Various seminal concepts and frameworks offer insights to inform decision-making about the changing landscape of higher education following the extensive disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Burke [5] explains that the depth and breadth of higher education theory commands a focus to connect the most relevant literature as a lens for making decisions about the future of programs and instructional models. Namely, the effect of social interaction on attrition compels attention to programmatic strategies for engaging students in meaningful activities that add value, enhance preparation, and improve the professional practice of faculty, staff, and administrators with responsibility for supporting graduate students through the academic journey. Specifically, areas of student engagement at the graduate level include (1) student research and scholarship, (2) diversity and inclusion, and (3) professional identity development.

2.1.2. Promoting Research and Scholarship

Russell [6] suggests that starting student research at the undergraduate level is an impactful method of recruiting and preparing students for graduate academic programs. When combined with faculty mentorship, exposure to graduate-school-level academic curricula, and socialization experiences, early research exposure is considered crucial to the effective recruitment and retention of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Promoting graduate student research begins with strategic efforts to articulate the rigor needed in graduate study and help students develop a scholarly identity.

The three-part mission of higher education emphasizes the goals of research, teaching, and service (Binder, Chermak, Krause, & Thacher, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative that the onboarding of graduate students focuses on the research objective in pursuing graduate study.

Holmes and Willis [7] conclude that graduate students are expected to become engaged and productive members of the academic learning community and promote the advancement of scholarship and research regardless of the field of study a person embarks on [7].

2.1.3. Inclusive Excellence in Graduate Education

Longstanding challenges in advanced education include issues such as lacking diversity. Kinzie (2014) revealed that conceptions of merit in the graduate admissions process along racial lines in highly selective programs were a factor contributing to issues of inequity. Griffin et al. [8] revealed that campus racial climate impacts persistence. The near absence of minorities in certain postbaccalaureate programs demands expedient change to reverse concerning trends that perpetuate historical inequities.

The Campus Racial Climate Framework from *The Center for the Study of Higher Education* at Pennsylvania State University outlines the critical categories of consideration necessary to successfully evaluate current institutional priorities and outcomes. Applying a heuristic approach offers an evidence-driven method for developing and implementing strategies for navigating change to achieve measurable objectives.

2.1.4. Table: Framework to Measure Inclusion

(Hurtado, et. al., 1999; Milem, Chang, & antonio, 2005)
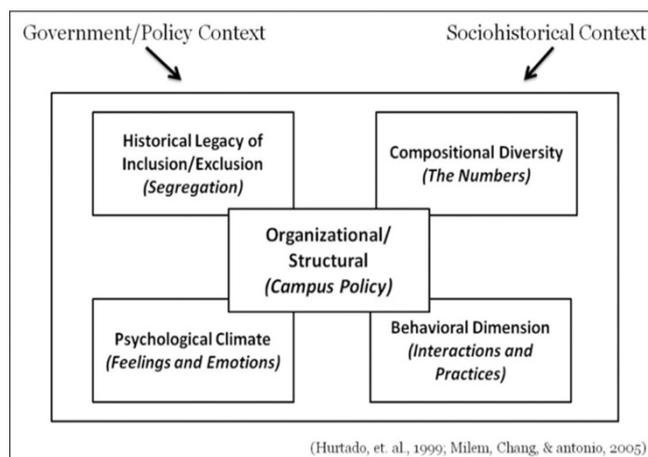
Figure 1. The above figure represents a framework to consider when measuring inclusion/belonging on campus

Policymakers and higher education leaders recognize the persistent disparities in graduate education in the United States, but initiatives still fall short of the goal to increase presence and completion. Scholars assert that universities must pledge financial resources that confirm a commitment to diversity by funding capacity-building efforts. Willis [9] indicates that mentoring is another critical factor for promoting student success.

2.1.5. Professional Identity Development

Findings by Liddell et al. [10] reveal that graduate students believe that out-of-class experiences have a more decisive influence than instruction on developing professional identity in a student affairs graduate program.

Jackson (2015) details Pre-Professional Identity (PPI) formation for graduate student preparation. The premise of PPI is that matching student outcomes to employability skills is too narrow; a broader approach that captures elements of the culture, conduct, skills, ideology, and qualities of a student's intended profession is optimal. Furthermore, Jackson (2015) promotes the need for a "communities of practice" approach to serve graduate students and prepare for optimal entry into the profession. This approach includes:

1. Professional associations
2. Social societies
3. Engagement with employers

3. Methods

Lutz and Paretti [11] advocate reflective journaling as a qualitative method for understanding student experiences. Capturing lived experiences is possible through periodic documentation (journaling) of attitudes, perspectives, feelings, and beliefs.

Furthermore, reflective journaling provides participants with an outlet for sharing information freely with the ability to broach a wide array of topics under the overarching line of inquiry. The following overarching research question (RQ) guided this study's methodological approach and inquiry.

Table 1. The Reflective Journaling Approach

Step	Description
Step 1	Recruit participants willing to share insight about personal experiences. A recruitment meeting provides the chance for organic connection and explanation. The reflective journal reveals rich and thick descriptions without the potential for bias or impediments of traditional qualitative approaches.
Step 2	Establish a process for the submission of journals and a schedule for collection (i.e., email for electronic collection).
Step 3	Close the data collection phase at a specific date to end the reflections and engage in traditional document analysis that includes coding and development of themes.

RQ: How do graduate students perceive academic support and preparation following the COVID-19 pandemic?

The above-mentioned RQ directed an inquiry that prompted critical reflection by three individuals who had recently completed advanced degree programs in health and education. Focusing on the role of mentoring was possible through semi-structured, open-ended questions discussing the activities, interaction, communication, and investment of individuals identified as mentors by the participants. Patton [13] explains that a qualitative research design documents the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs deriving from the experiences of humans.

3.1.1. Sample Population

The participants in this study voluntarily provided demographic information. Recruitment to participate was possible through online social media solicitation for volunteers. The parameters for inclusion relied on enrollment status as a graduate student and willingness to disclose information relating to the nature of experiences as a student during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Demographics of Participants

Participant	Degree level	Ethnicity	Gender
Participant #1 "Sean"	Masters level	Hispanic	Male
Participant #2 "Francis"	Masters level	Hispanic	Female
Participant #3 "Paul"	Masters level	African American	Male
Participant #4 "Rita"	Masters level	African American	Female

3.1.2. Ethics and Confidentiality

The participants in this study had pseudonyms to protect against identification, and any information that might risk the anonymity of any specific location or individual is omitted. Ethical considerations and confidentiality are paramount in research, and this study follows best practices in the development of this manuscript. The participants volunteered to engage in the reflective journaling, and the data submissions were saved on a password-protected device and deleted following the analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings from this study reveal that graduate students require specialized support and attention to create a sense of belonging and value. In particular, the following themes confirm student perspectives of graduate education during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) creating opportunities for collaboration; (2) developing and maintaining a sense of belonging; (3) enhancing personalized coaching and mentoring. The analysis of the reflective journals provided by four graduate students over the course of 16 weeks offered candid insights into experiences and feelings that build a case for the emerging themes that confirm the literature and drive the need for the reexamination of strategies regarding the recruitment, retention, and support of graduate students.

Theme 1: Create Opportunities for Collaboration to Inspire Feelings of Belonging

The participants documented the need for opportunities to collaborate with other graduate students in addition to class projects. Sean documented, *"the pandemic really made my pursuit of my master's degree even more isolating than before [the pandemic] and made me want more of a connection with my classmates outside the classes,"* noting the importance of collaboration and belonging.

Francis admitted "it was hard to stay engaged because it felt like I was alone and that no one cared if I was even participating; I wish graduate students had more presence as far as group activities and opportunities to meet one another and the faculty who we only know through a course shell sometimes." Rita revealed, "I have never felt like I was actually part of the university even before the pandemic because all of the activities and support seem to focus on freshmen and undergraduates most of the time, which does not even work with my schedule or align with my interest – I would welcome more professional experiences."

Jackson's [12] position about the unitality of professional development activities and engagement validates the participants' feelings regarding the need for collaboration. Furthermore, the finding from Liddell et al. [10] about the importance of out-of-class experiences reverberates the sentiment of the study participants in their reflective journals.

Theme 2: Establish Distinctions that Promote Graduate Study

The reflective journal by Francis concluded "graduate students need recognition programs that help us get ready for career advancement beyond entry-level type activities which seem to be the most prevalent on campus. I would like to see networking opportunities specific to my area of study." Paul shared, "graduate study should be a point of pride at the institution and have a special place within the study body."

Sean expressed, "being a graduate student is something that I wish had more prestige because it's not something that everyone does, and people have a deeper understanding of the need for more knowledge." Rita reflected, "I am proud to be a graduate student and want more people to take me seriously among other students because it is not a good feeling to have people treat you like you have no experience."

Theme 3: Personalized Mentoring and Coaching Enhance the Perception of Support

All the participants spoke about the need for personalized mentoring or coaching. Sean submitted, "mentoring is one thing that makes me feel like I have support. During the pandemic, engagement with my professor was one of the most impactful things that helped me persist and stay on track." Rita stated, "Coaching by staff in the graduate school was a godsend because it seemed like the only support through the pandemic." Paul and Francis both provided reflections that aligned with the importance of mentoring and coaching as well. Paul revelaed, "mentoring is one of the main supports and I like it because it's personal and not just someone asking me to take a number and wait on hold or go back and forth over email."

5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted operations across all industries, including higher education. Specifically, graduate education, which has historical issues with recruitment, retention, and support for underrepresented students, must learn lessons from the widespread changes of the pandemic. Taking away best practices that resulted from the rapid changes brought on by emergency contingency plans for the pandemic may sustain new approaches that hold promise for reaching and recognizing students who have long been negatively affected historical marginalization.

6. Recommendations

As more students enroll in graduate and professional degree programs, a need exists for institutions to enhance support and recognize nuances that make the pursuit of a postbaccalaureate degree a unique experience. Further research is necessary to promote strategies tailored to meet the unique needs of graduate students.

Future studies should explore the utility of professional identity development, graduate student engagement, and mentorship/coaching regarding student success and persistence. Understanding and differentiating the nuances of graduate education may hold great promise for accelerating the call for increasing enrollment in graduate education across the United States, with a focus on diversity and inclusion. A diverse student body creates learning experiences that reflect a changing society ripe for innovation, creativity, and scholarly expression that illuminates the power of learning as a pathway to progress.

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