



## Students of Color and COVID-19: Experiences, Coping Strategies, and Supports


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### Abstract

The coronavirus disease of 2019, known as the COVID-19 pandemic, is a disaster event that posed significant physical, social, financial, and mental health risks to college students. Disproportionate experiences of stressors position students of color as a population particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of COVID-19, thus, the current study assessed the impact of COVID-19 on undergraduate students of color in the United States. Students participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews about their experiences with stressors during the pandemic. Data were analyzed using conventional content analysis and revealed themes including **(a) the pandemic's impact on students; (b) basic needs as college students; (c) strategies used to cope with stressors; and (d) supports desired from institutions and faculty.** Findings inform colleges and healthcare providers of the most salient concerns for students of color and the sources found helpful. As such, these findings may guide effective prevention and intervention strategies to minimize the effects of future disasters.

Keywords: *college students, disaster response, COVID-19, students of color, higher education, coping strategies*

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## Introduction

College students at over 1,900 institutions of higher education (IHEs) in the United States were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (*The New York Times*, 2020). The pandemic led to significant disruptions in educational experiences, with over 60% of United States IHE courses remaining at least partially remote 1 year after the COVID-19 outbreak (Klebs et al., 2021). Within this timeframe, nationwide IHE enrollment in the United States declined by approximately 4% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), and approximately one in five nationally surveyed college students indicated the need for additional time to attain degree completion (Klebs et al., 2021). College students across the United States reported increased rates of mental health symptoms, such as depression or anxiety (Klebs et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Molock & Parchem, 2020), and concerns about post-graduation job prospects. Such effects have most significantly affected students of color (Reyes-Portillo, 2022)—especially on subpopulations (e.g., Black and Latinx students) that were most greatly affected—which require greater understanding.

### Identify the Adversities

The first aim of the study was to identify the adversities experienced by students of color during the COVID-19 pandemic, including how the pandemic affected students' hopes and dreams. Existing research on individual and institutional challenges faced by students of color during pandemics is limited. This is surprising because the COVID-19 pandemic presented a higher risk of negative outcomes to college students of color (Klebs et al., 2021). Students of color have reported relatively greater financial, housing, academic, and career disruptions, as well as more mental health problems including stress, anxiety, and depression (Molock & Parchem, 2020; Reyes-Portillo, 2022). They have been disproportionately affected by the stress and strain associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Klebs et al., 2021).

As outlined by intersectionality theory (Davis, 1981; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991), students of color were impacted by a complex array of risk factors that stem from interconnected systems of oppression based on their multiple identities (Rosenthal, 2016). They faced the aforementioned pandemic-related risks associated with their identities as college students; marginalization-related risks associated with their identities as persons of color; and additional pandemic-related risks associated with the intersection of these two identities. Even before the pandemic, college students of color experienced everyday stressors related to minority status, including elevated degrees of stress (Liu et al., 2019; Meyer, 2003), discrimination (Stevens et al., 2018), and racism (McClain et al., 2016).

Elevated stress levels in students of color, also referred to as *minority status stress*, have been linked to negative physical and mental health outcomes (McClain et al., 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2013). Similarly, experiences of discrimination and racism have been associated with negative academic performance and elevated minority status stress and feelings of being an imposter (McClain et al., 2016; Stevens et al., 2018). The unique everyday stressors, which students of color experienced, may have been further exacerbated by the pandemic-related risks they have faced.

In addition, students of color may have experienced unique pandemic-related stressors associated with their minority status. The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted people of color (Tai et al., 2021), as

those with a racial minority identity were at an increased risk for COVID-19 exposure (Vahidy et al., 2020); worse COVID-19 outcomes (Tai et al., 2021); higher rates of unemployment (Couch et al., 2020); higher rates of suicide (Mitchell & Li, 2021); as well as an increased rate of discrimination and racially motivated assault (Chen et al., 2020). Non-white college students have reported disproportionate concerns about healthcare access and financial difficulties associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Aubé et al., 2021).

We thus hypothesized that students of color would report their experiences associated with their identities as college students, as members of racial minority groups, and their unique experiences stemming from the intersection of these identities.

Existing disaster research provides useful insights regarding the short- and long-term consequences of disaster events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic for college students. Disasters events are typically defined as having three features: (1) possibility of harm or death to a large cluster of people; (2) disturbance of social operations (i.e., resources, services, social networks); and (3) secondary consequences, including mental and physical effects among the population affected (Goldmann & Galea, 2014). Abundant evidence indicates that disaster events are risk factors for negative physical, financial, social, and mental health outcomes in college students (Bistricky et al., 2019; Bonanno et al., 2006; Self-Brown et al., 2014).

### Coping With COVID-19 Challenges

The second aim of the study was to assess how students of color coped with challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although disaster events have been associated with adverse outcomes, the pathways to developing maladaptive and adaptive outcomes are influenced by the interactions between various risk and protective factors at different system levels (First & Houston, 2022; McDonald-Harker et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2018; Lowe et al., 2015).

Risk and protective factors are intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors that increase or buffer maladaptive development or functioning, respectively (Racine et al., 2020). People who experience an accumulation of protective factors tend to have an increased capacity to recover from stress, also referred to as resilience (Gartland et al., 2019; Masten & Labella, 2016). Promoting student resilience during and after disasters is necessary to prevent student mental health problems, ensure academic continuity, and mitigate negative individual and societal outcomes that are associated with student drop-out rates. Individual resilience, which includes coping strategies, has been associated with the ability to rebound from adversity and traumatic experiences (First & Houston, 2022). Thus, identifying coping strategies allows us to understand intrapersonal factors that may mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic.

To date, no studies have identified coping strategies that students of color employed during the COVID pandemic. However, we hypothesized, based both on literature and theory, that students used coping strategies involving social interactions during the pandemic, as literature has shown that coping strategies were employed by college students during the pandemic and theory emphasizes the significant role of social support in the face of adversity (Cassel, 1976; Chonody, 2021; Papouli et al., 2020). Related to the hypothesis in our first aim, that students of color experienced unique experiences stemming from their intersectional identities, we also hypothesize that the coping strategies they utilized will also uniquely be tied to their identities and require greater understanding.

Social interactions have been shown to be especially critical in the physical and psychological health and flourishing of students of color (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2014). Optimistic re-appraisals and cognitive restructuring have also been associated with positive outcomes in physical and mental well-being across different countries during the pandemic (Kirby et al., 2022; Morales-Rodriguez, 2021). Relatedly, meaning in life has been associated with higher life satisfaction and lower psychosocial difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lin, 2021). Further, “purpose” has been shown to be a source of strength that

moderates stressors, such as race-related stress, for students of color (Walsh-Blair, 2015). The findings of the current study provide new insights into the coping strategies that students of color have employed as mechanisms of individual resilience during the pandemic.

### Types of Needed Institutional Support

The third aim was to determine the kinds of institutional support students of color needed during the pandemic. Literature on institutional support for college students during disasters is generally lacking, and research on interventions for college students of color during the COVID pandemic is especially limited. That said, colleges have been one of the most influential institutions to provide resources for college students during disasters, and these institutions are required to create and develop emergency plans for disaster situations (Edwards & Goodrich, 2009; Kapucu & Khosa, 2012). Additional research is thus needed to understand the supports students need to prevent or recover from the negative outcomes they may experience.

Past research on disasters shows that school and university responses were influential in supporting students and communities as they recover from disasters. Early and consistent communication has been helpful in fostering a sense of safety for students during disasters (Kaniasty & Norris, 2009). Relatedly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, resources that have been suggested as helpful for first-generation students included computers and internet connection; provision of necessary online course materials; increased contact hours (e.g., lecture, office hours); and fast and clear communication from faculty and departments (Mates et al., 2021). Post-disaster, institutions also provide students with a sense of community and help them readjust to academics (Richardson et al., 2015).

Institutional faculty (e.g., advisors, professors) have been found to be especially critical in facilitating positive outcomes for college students of color, especially through empathy and flexibility (Carales & Lopez, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, programs with a trauma-informed care approach have been incorporated into higher education, which have been shown to foster an environment of cultural responsiveness and inclusivity, safety, reliability, and empowerment for students (Barros-Lane et al., 2021). We thus hypothesized that college institutions would have a highly influential role in mediating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students of color.

To fill existing knowledge gaps, this current qualitative study assessed the impact of COVID-19 on undergraduate students of color in the United States. The principal aim of this study was to explore the unique experiences of this particularly vulnerable population. To fulfill the three study aims, we asked the following research questions during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. How are students of color being impacted by COVID?
2. How are students of color coping through the pandemic?
3. What kind of support do students of color need during the pandemic?

## Methods

### Participants

Participants in this study were undergraduate students of color ( $N = 13$ ) who attended a 4-year university or college in the U.S. that closed in-person classes in response to COVID-19. Two were first years (15.4%), four were sophomores (30.8%), four were juniors (30.8%), and three were seniors (23.1%). Among participants who indicated their age ( $n = 7$ ), students ranged in age from 19 to 37 years and averaged 23 years. Additionally, eight students (61.5%) attended a public institution, while five (38.5%) were at a private institution.

Among the participants, 10 (76.9%) self-identified as female, and three (23.1%) as male. Two of the participants (15.4%) identified as belonging to the LGBTQ community. Four students (30.8%) self-identified as Black, four (30.8%) as Asian, four (30.8%) as multiracial, and one (7.7%) as Latinx. Four participants (30.8%) identified as first-generation students, and four indicated being Pell Grant recipients. None of the participants were international students. Five of the participants (38.5%) were out-of-state students, and six (46.2%) had to move out of on-campus housing following the COVID-19 outbreak.

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling techniques through email, social media, and web platforms. Students from Boston College were excluded in order to avoid potential conflicts of interest. The study was approved by the Boston College Institutional Review Board.

## Procedures

Eligible participants were provided the option to participate in this qualitative section of a mixed-methods study. The larger mixed-methods study required participants to fill out a survey through Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap; Harris et al., 2019), at the end of which eligible participants were invited to partake in an interview—the focus of the current study. In-depth (Johnson, 2002), semi-structured (Seidman, 1991), audio-recorded, individual interviews were conducted virtually by graduate research assistants with participants who consented when beginning the interview. Participants were assured that identifying details would be redacted, and responses would only be reported in aggregate form, drawing from themes across all interviews. Upon completing the interview, each participant was compensated with an electronic Amazon gift card.

Interview topics included participant roles and responsibilities as college students; experience and challenges with the COVID-19 outbreak; mechanisms used to cope during COVID-19; resources and support received during COVID-19; support that would have been helpful; and insights for future pandemics. Following open-ended questions, the interviewer probed with additional prompts to gain a deeper sense of participant experiences. Interviews lasted an average of 41 minutes.

Recordings of all interviews were transcribed with identifying information redacted. Transcriptions were then verified prior to analysis through the process of listening to recordings and correcting the transcripts, as needed.

## Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were qualitatively analyzed using conventional content analysis approaches (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A team of five research assistants began the coding process by reading through their **assigned transcripts multiple times. All transcripts were then coded, drawing from participants' exact** wordings, as much as possible, to capture key thoughts and concepts relevant to the research questions. Codes were checked by another research team member, and discrepancies were resolved through group discussion.

Common themes observed from codes were then inductively identified, and codes were categorized into themes accordingly. Major topic areas of themes include: (a) unexpected COVID-related changes; (b) COVID-related academic, health, social, and financial stressors; (c) **COVID's impact on mental health**; (d) institutional supports provided/not provided/desired; (e) supports received from family and friends; (f) supports received/desired from professors or advisors; (g) coping strategies; and (h) the impact of COVID on hopes and dreams. These topic areas were continuously refined throughout the coding process. Themes were again checked by a different research team member to ensure accuracy and consistency across transcripts.

In the final phase of the analysis, overarching domains were identified based on themes. These domains form the basis of results discussed in the Results section. Throughout the process, members met weekly to evaluate codes, discuss emerging themes, and finalize the research findings.

## Reflexivity

As part of content analysis training, each researcher reflected on their positionality in relation to students of color within a college environment, particularly during the times of COVID-19 (Tracy, 2010). The researchers acknowledged that their own experiences—as college and graduate students affected by the pandemic—may interfere with the objectivity of the analysis. Additionally, each of the researchers has a personal interest and **research background in youth development and social justice, leading to the current study's centrality on students' minority status in relation to the pandemic. Therefore, the** researchers were cognizant of how their **expectations, values, and biases may shape the qualitative analysis. Members' positionalities were examined,** and discrepancies between the research members were also discussed during all phases of the research process to ensure the study's integrity and credibility.

## Results

Four overarching domains emerged from participant accounts of their experiences during the pandemic: (1) **the pandemic's impact**; (2) unfulfilled basic needs; (3) resiliency; and (4) protective factors. The first domain included ways that the pandemic impacted the livelihood of participants through sudden changes and losses. The second domain captured unfulfilled needs that participants believed they required to flourish during the pandemic. The third domain reflected ways in which participants displayed physical, mental, emotional, and social resilience in response to the pandemic. Finally, the fourth domain identified protective factors (institutional and faculty support) that participants named as being needed amidst pandemic-related stressors. These domains were broken down further into subthemes, as detailed below.

### Domain 1: The Pandemic's Impact on Students

Participants described *sudden changes* brought about by the pandemic and how they negatively impacted their livelihood in two major ways: increased responsibilities and decreased support resources. First, sudden changes in logistics (i.e., housing, curriculum, class structures, transportation) and health concerns for themselves and their family members brought about *increasing personal and familial demands*. For example, one participant spoke in detail about added concerns when they were suddenly unable to rely on their **roommate's car**, which made “getting around ... really hard.” In addition, they mentioned increased financial burdens, as the alternative modes of transportation would be to “buy a Lyft or an Uber [ride]” and “those prices have increased drastically.” Concerns for personal and familial health were also mentioned by most participants as becoming a priority with increased caretaking responsibilities:

My body is also not responding very well to stress, so I've been constantly just sore, and family members' health is a big thing for me. My grandma, she's over the age of 70 and she lives with us, so I'm making sure to spend extra time just making sure that she's safe, as well as everybody else in my family's safe.

Second, participants explained that sudden changes associated with finances (i.e., job loss) and future plans (i.e., obscurity of future employment and semesters) led to *decreased physical and mental resources* to support their livelihood:

I think, financially, it definitely is stressful just because your expenses are not going to change, but obviously, a source of income has been definitely decreasing ... And trying to think about ... what can we do now, how long are we going to be out of employment ... **And it's just hard to shape anything just** because the job market is fluctuating, but then also so many opportunities are closing down.

Many others expressed similar concerns over losing jobs and facing subsequent consequences (“So it's been



kinda hard because I was using [the job] to cover my rent costs and obvious things like food ... ”). Some described worrying about uncertain futures and questioning decisions to return to campus, study abroad, or **continue pursuing a college degree. The question “What’s gonna happen next year?” was of greatest prevalence across participants.**

Additionally, students described perceived decreases in on-campus experiences and resources. These experiences fell into one of four categories: (1) general experiences related to being a college student (i.e., graduation, campus lifestyle, in-person class discussions); (2) access to campus resources (i.e., study spaces, career centers); (3) continued pursuit of academic and career-enhancing opportunities (i.e., internships, study abroad programs); and (4) interactions with peers and faculty. Participants discussed emotional responses of sadness, anger, and frustration, and identified these sudden changes and losses to be major sources of exacerbated stress and anxiety.

## Domain 2: Basic Needs for Flourishing

**The sudden changes and losses of the pandemic exposed students’ key needs that were required for flourishing as college students during the pandemic.** Across interviews, students described basic necessities that included (a) academic needs; (b) connection/relationships; (c) physical needs; and (d) financial needs.

*Academic needs* included access to technology and study spaces. Participants described the challenge of losing **access to customary study strategies/resources, such as “us[ing] campus resources like study rooms” and “studying in groups,” which affected their motivation and focus. Participants described that studying in their homes made it difficult to “get that initial momentum” and that a “mindset switch” was required to focus** on academics in the absence of campus resources. Additionally, many participants mentioned access to technology as vital. And in the absence of technological resources, students petitioned for support from their institutions (discussed further in the domain *Student Responses*).

*The need for connection and relationships* was also widely referenced by participants: **“I still make sure to communicate with those around me, so I don’t feel too lonely”; “it’s best to make sure everyone feels loved during these times.”** The lack of connection participants felt was especially magnified by the suddenness and drastic nature of the change. Moreover, the unmet expectation of college as a social experience elicited frustration in a number of participants:

**I feel like it’s just frustrating to be isolated socially because a lot of the college experience is about hanging out with your friends, doing things together like enjoying each other’s company. But now that we’re working remotely, learning from home, and such, it’s harder to get those social experiences.**

A number of students also expressed longings for more meaningful relationships with professors. One participant stated that **without the personal connection to professors as in a normal semester, “the motivation and the interest in classes and also how much I’m getting out of it has just kinda shot down.”**

Another prevalent theme among students was disruption in their ability to meet certain *physical needs*, including biorhythm, movement, sleep, and housing. Lack of physical separation between spaces and a **decreased sense of having “things to do” and “people to see” led to the blending of time and space** between different activities (e.g., work, study, sleep, rest), ultimately leading to the deterioration of participant routines:

**A lot of my classes don’t have Zoom meetings, so ... you do the work by yourself, and then you submit a paper, and so there’s not any contact along the way ... . And so it’s really easy to just be like, “Ok, I’m gonna do this thing today,” and then next thing you know, you’re sleeping and it’s 3 p.m., and the next thing you know you’re sleeping, and it’s the next day already. And it all just feels like one big nap.**

Several participants ascribed the development or exacerbation of mental health problems to the collapse of their normal routine. Housing was also recognized as a primary physical need that was disrupted in the pandemic, as many students were displaced from their housing arrangements.

Students also uniformly echoed the importance of *financial needs* being met. Unlike the prior needs, financial needs were described as a means to an end that allowed *access* to fulfillment of other needs. In other words, many of the needs that college students require to flourish were contingent on finances, and, thus, financial needs permeated to other areas of life. As discussed in the first domain (*Pandemic's Impact*), students had consistent or increased financial demands, sometimes compounded by the loss of employment. This loss **affected students psychologically, heightening anxiety and stress levels. One participant admitted, "It's a little bit anxiety-inducing to think about how I am going to pay for groceries." Another participant noted, "I don't have a job, I'm paying rent, and I still have to finish my schoolwork ... that would be stressful for anybody."**

### Domain 3: Student Responses to Stressors and Unfulfilled Needs

Despite the challenges, participants consistently cited *continued pursuit* of academic, extracurricular, and social goals, as well as creative ways of coping. Some participants described finding new ways to *recreate and adapt daily routines and study spaces*. For example, participants detailed new routines of waking up at the same time every day, **doing "the little things in the morning" like brewing coffee and making the bed, and participating in daily habits of exercising and cooking for increased energy and motivation: "[it] make[s] me feel present and grounded so that I have energy to go back and continue working."** Others attempted to recreate study spaces virtually:

I go on Google Hangouts with friends, and so ... **there's a little face in the corner. If I start napping my friend will be like, "Wake up! No napping!" I think just calling and scheduling work with others has been really great because then I feel like there's the consequence of letting someone down and having someone else holding you accountable.**

Students recognized the importance of establishing structures of accountability with boundaries of time and space to increase their motivation towards their goals.

Additionally, many students petitioned for support from their institutions, and some were provided with computers by their institutions while others received refunds and lowered tuition. Still others sought out government resources, such as money from the CARES Act. Several participants also referenced efforts by other students to ensure housing needs were met, including petitions to grant international students on-campus housing, as well as student-generated lists of homes open to those without a place to stay.

Also, interestingly, a number of participants highlighted positive experiences with online learning, citing that **they felt it was "more aligned with [their] learning style" and that they feel it "has been really beneficial."** Some students appreciated that recordings allowed them to rewatch parts that they needed to review. Appreciation and preference for online learning over in-person learning were more frequently expressed by commuter students and students who experienced online courses prior to the pandemic.

Another common coping strategy among multiple participants was *maintaining connections* with friends and family. They described active efforts to seek out in-person and virtual interactions with family and friends as sources of comfort, relief, and pleasure. Participants emphasized family as playing an especially salient role during the pandemic. Some students viewed increased family time as a silver lining to the pandemic and described family members as critical for maintaining their mental health. However, family could also be a source of stress due to increased responsibilities and roles. Additionally, moving back home often required an **adjustment period, involving "re-navigating the relationship" and sharing spaces with other family members.**



Students also described several concrete ways they *shifted perspectives* or reframed losses to make meaning **out of the pandemic's impact. First, just as losses were clearly recognized, so were the things they were deeply grateful for.** Through attending to personal and collective emotional responses to losses, many participants reminded themselves that they were not the only ones struggling.

I think I just allowed myself to be sad ... **I didn't get the graduation that I thought ... My plans didn't go the way that we were expecting it to, but then also thinking about the other people in my community who have been a lot more impacted by COVID. I've had family members of mine that have gotten sick or family members of my friends getting sick, and so what's helped me to kinda put it into perspective like, yeah, it sucks, but it sucks for everybody.**

Participants noted that experiences of loss were collectively shared across their friends, family, and larger community, and thus expressed sympathy for themselves, as well as others. Further, many participants recognized areas of gratitude and further sought to extend help to others. For example, a participant described **how "it's really easy to get caught up in your own situation," but also how "more, now than ever, we really need to build community and reach to each other."** Also among participants who reframed or shifted **perspectives, some were able to make meaning of the pandemic's impact in the context of historical underpinnings and macro-level social issues.**

Students in high school are given free ACT prep or SAT, and a lot of schools are waiving those test scores, so that they'll be able to apply for college. And so, especially for me, coming from a low-income, minority community has made me reflect a lot on how there's been a lot of institutional barriers placed for students to not continue higher education and just how quickly those barriers could be removed.

Another participant cited their own experience of automatically being labeled as a COVID-19 carrier because of their race, prompting them to reflect on anti-Asian racism in the United States and people's irrational and discriminatory responses to fear. Thus, participant experiences with the impacts of the pandemic sparked newfound awareness of various social justice issues in the United States.

#### Domain 4: Institutional and Faculty Supports

Although students displayed resilience in finding ways to cope with their circumstances, the fulfillment of their needs also largely hinged on the ability of institutions to provide support, which is why participants emphasized the importance of receiving support from institutions and faculty. It was critical that institutions and faculty both acknowledge *and* respond to student losses and difficulties by (a) communicating with students; (b) modifying academic policies; (c) providing resources to be academically successful; and (d) providing resources to cope with stressors and be mentally healthy.

First, institutions and faculty needed to *communicate clearly with students*. Forms of communication varied across institutions, but students reported that **"weekly emails" and "updates" were helpful. One common complaint involved logistics of the move-out process, with many students finding their institutions' process insufficient and confusing. One student said, "A better coordination of the plan could've been executed" and that many students were "confused" due to conflicting emails.**

While students were understanding of the turbulence of the situation, they nonetheless emphasized the need for clear, straightforward communication. Notably, a majority of participants expressed the importance of personal communication with faculty members. Professors who personally reached out to students were perceived to be understanding, caring, and emotionally supportive. Referring to a conversation with a professor, one participant stated, **"I haven't felt like I needed to lean on adult support all that often for emotional things ... But now it's really nice, especially living at home again."** Another participant who was

abroad at the start of the pandemic shared about being touched and feeling cared for by a professor who emailed to make sure the student was okay abroad.

A second way in which institutions and faculty members supported students was through *modifying academic policies*. Helpful adjustments included deadline extensions; restructuring of exams and projects; reduction of number of assignments; lecture recordings; and adjusted class times. Participants also appreciated when professors were more lenient with grades and cognizant of the adjustment process to the online format. On the institutional level, a particularly valued change involved expanding the option of taking classes Pass/Fail. One participant stated that this option was **“the biggest thing that I think is really helpful.”** Establishing a Pass/Fail **grading system alleviated academic stressors during a time when “academics are not the number one priority on people’s minds.”**

Institutions further helped buffer against pandemic-related stressors by *providing resources to be academically successful* (i.e., financial, technical, and logistical resources). For example, one participant requested and received a computer from their institution. Another participant was paid for the hours they would have worked their on-campus job if it had continued throughout the semester. A first-generation, low-income participant received reimbursement for their flight home and resources to assist with the move-out process. Also important was the need to *effectively communicate* these resources to students. Several participants expressed frustration at not knowing about key resources offered to students. Regarding an emergency fund created by their institution, one participant said:

You only hear about events, funds like this, things going on campus, if it’s word of mouth. Literally, it was frustrating, because I was telling a lot of my friends, and many of them had no clue ... . And it sucks because there are students who are dealing with more dramatic situations ... who don't even know about this fund.

Others echoed this concern about the **lack of “publicity” surrounding resources and discussed needing to “take the initiative” to discover and receive supports.**

In addition, students described ways that institutions could have played an essential role in *providing resources to cope with stressors and to be mentally healthy* (i.e., offering mental health and career counseling) and **their institution’s shortcomings in doing so. As one participant explained, students who had been using counseling services on campus “might just be out of luck because everything’s closed down.”** Another participant described frustration with being put on a waiting list for 2 months, commenting, **“I wish they had more services to offer and just more people to help because there’s no reason someone should wait that long to talk to a counselor.”**

Finally, participants noted that a considerable pandemic-related stressor was planning for their careers—especially in getting internships and jobs. One participant described how various career-related online events organized by their institution (e.g., informational webinars, resume-**building workshops**) **helped them “stay on track of my career and what I’ve been wanting to do.”** However, they still found that the institution fell short in communicating resources for finding online internships and jobs, once again underscoring the need for communication of resources.

## Discussion

This study attended to a population of college students of color who have experienced the COVID-19 **pandemic and offered rich accounts of the pandemic’s impact on these students and the strategies they have** relied upon to cope with the pandemic. Results of the current study confirmed that the pandemic proved to be a challenging and tumultuous time for college students of color in the United States. Our findings revealed an

interplay between risk and protective factors on the individual and institutional level **that affect students'** ability to cope and thus provide implications of the ways that institutions should best support students during the pandemic.

## The Impacts of COVID-19

The narratives provided by our participants are consistent with those of existing literature that examined **college students' academic, social, and emotional difficulties during the COVID-19** pandemic. Similar to students and workers who faced disruptions in classrooms and academia, participants who were abruptly transitioned to online classrooms had difficulty concentrating and engaging with the curriculum (Nic Dhonncha & Murphy, 2021; Vasiliadou, 2020). However, in the current study, while some students preferred in-person learning, others showed a preference for online classes, and many cited both positive and negative aspects of online learning. These mixed reactions are consistent with the literature that suggests online engagement and learning satisfaction are impacted by a variety of individual and contextual factors (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021; Hong et al., 2021; Shen et al., 2013).

The transition to online classrooms was only one consequence of the pandemic. Other sudden changes were described to be even more jarring and impactful. Initially, many were faced with sudden logistical demands related to moving off-campus, as well as academic and work-related changes. Such abrupt transitions may be particularly salient for students of color, who experienced various disturbances and reported disproportionate concerns about healthcare access and financial difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic (Aubé et al., 2021; Molock & Parchem, 2021). Participants consequently described feelings of loss of control and increased anxiety, as well as uncertainty about the future and a diminished ability to plan for academics and careers.

Students faced long-term shifts in living situations and increased responsibilities, too, similar to members of the workforce who juggled additional, multiple roles (e.g., being a parent, cook, teacher) during the pandemic (Kasymova et al., 2021; Syrek et al., 2021). First-year college students and students with siblings who returned **home during the pandemic felt "invaded" by parents and needed greater privacy and space, respectively (Hall & Zygmunt, 2021)**. Many of our participants relatedly described increased competing responsibilities (e.g., helping siblings with homework) and adjustments to life at home (e.g., arranging study spaces with family). Responsibility and focus on family may be particularly pronounced for students of color for whom there may be a cultural emphasis on family and significant expectations for supporting family (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Harwood et al., 2002). Families of color tend to rely on family and community support (e.g., sibling **caretaking**), which has been found to affect students' educational aspirations and school success (East & Hamill, 2013; Goldberg, 2020). Thus, the transition home may have impacted students of color more markedly compared to White college students.

Further, the college experience consists not only of academic learning but also of formative experiences, related to identity exploration and greater independence (Jones et al., 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This social rite of passage seems to be considered the greatest loss, as students described lost experiences related to being a college student and a sense of isolation from peers. Relationships with peers are particularly important and impactful for emerging adults as they provide a sense of community, contribute to the development of self and identity, and promote college persistence (Doumen et al., 2012; La Greca & Prinstein, 1999; Renn, 2020; Goguen et al., 2010). Healthy relationships with peers, mentors, and the community especially benefit the psychological and physical well-being of students of color (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2014; Walsh-Blair, 2015).

Additionally, students of color increasingly develop their ethnic identity during the transition to and throughout college (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Syed & Azmitia, 2009; Zhou et al., 2019). Consequently, even despite an increased presence of family for many students, they may still feel that their needs for social interactions and growth in identity and self-determination are largely unfulfilled.

## Student Coping During COVID-19

Our study also provides new insights into ways that students coped through the pandemic. Participants described ways they have creatively reconstructed some sense of normalcy—albeit recognizing that these arrangements were temporary solutions—and continued pursuing their academic goals.

Students attempted to re-create social interactions through virtual platforms, consistent with the Stress-Buffering Hypothesis, which proposes that social support protects against the negative effects of stress (Cassel, 1976; Szkody et al., 2020). However, these virtual interactions were not interchangeable, long-term substitutes for in-person interactions due to limitations in providing a tangible sense of connection. Still, most, if not all, of the participants were driven to continue pursuing their studies and engaged in coping strategies to ensure their academic success.

Students of color may have felt pressure to do well in studies despite the pandemic, due to the emphasis of education as a key to getting ahead by racial minority parents (Hall & Zygmunt, 2021). Relatedly, many participants strove to balance productivity (e.g., arranging virtual study sessions) and self-care (e.g., spending time with family), and strongly advocated for their needs to their institutions.

Notably, students also outlined several ways they have made meaning of the pandemic. Participants shared compassionate perspectives, recognizing that the time was challenging for all due to the novelty of the pandemic. Many held complex feelings of both loss and gratitude, simultaneously grieving losses while recognizing aspects for which they were grateful. This finding is agreeable to studies that show that gratitude has been found to moderate the relationship between rumination and post-traumatic growth (Kim & Bae, 2019). Participants also found meaning through taking perspectives beyond-the-self. A handful of students focused on actions they could take in their communities. Some students described viewing the pandemic in the context of other historical challenges. Other students noted faith and religion as providing a greater perspective.

Using beyond-the-self perspective, as a coping strategy, **is consistent with Lin's report (2021) that holding some "meaning in life" was associated with higher life satisfaction and lower psychosocial difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic.** Purpose is often associated with contributing to the world beyond oneself (Liang et al., 2017), and, accordingly, perspective-taking beyond the **self may have played a critical role in students' sense of resiliency and meaning-making during the pandemic.**

## Responses From Institutions and Implications for Interventions

Despite student displays of resilience, the pandemic had far-reaching impacts on student ecological systems beyond their microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), thus, there were limitations in student ability to respond to the pandemic at the intrapersonal level. Participants described interpersonal and contextual supports that were needed from institutions and faculty. For example, in disasters, it is important that higher education institutions provide clear communication about emergency information and risk management using straightforward language and easy access through various channels (Kapucu & Khosa, 2012).

The need for clear communication was also emphasized in participant narratives. In a period wrought with uncertainty and rapid transitions, transparent policies helped ease student anxiety and allowed them to regain a greater sense of control about their future. Further, students described resources that were offered but were not easily accessible due to lack of communication. Thus, clear communication about information, logistics, and resources should be a high priority for institutions during future disaster events.

Also, **importantly, faculty and institutions needed to acknowledge that life could not go on as "business as usual."** Faculty and institutions should respond to student losses and difficulties by both (1) communicating

acknowledgment of the pandemic as a disaster event; and (2) taking action through (a) policy changes; and (b) provision of resources. Consistent with past literature on college responses to disaster events, it was important that such acknowledgment was offered at both the institutional and personal levels (Carales & Lopez, 2021). At the personal level, participants described faculty members who understood that students could not function at full capacity and provided flexibility (e.g., grading, deadlines) as most helpful. At the institutional level, policies allowing flexibility and leniency (e.g., degree requirements, grading policies) also needed to be established. Such flexibility may be particularly needed for students of color who are disproportionately impacted during disaster events and can help students by decreasing barriers towards expectations and increasing **students' confidence in their ability to meet requirements**.

Participants additionally pinpointed several resources that they were unable to access on their own and needed to be provided by institutions. These included contextual factors of (a) academic resources (e.g., technological, financial, logistical); and (b) resources to cope with stressors (e.g., career counseling, mental health services). These results align with the four key domains—neurocognitive, academic, environmental, campus ethos—that were previously identified by Harris III and Wood (2016) as factors that particularly influence the success of male college students of color.

Institutions should prioritize alleviating various contextual stressors that students of color face by providing practical resources, which should be examined to identify those that are most impactful to students of color. In particular, it is vital that institutions direct resources to counseling and other support services. For example, adapting career counseling and services to a more accessible online format is one way institutions can help mitigate stress relating to uncertainty about the future.

## Limitations

It should be noted that the current findings are descriptive in nature and are drawn from a small sample of college students of color across the United States. Our sample of students included several ethnic subgroups, and generalizability of the results is limited to the subgroups in our sample. Our sample does not include any international students and includes only one student who identifies as Latinx. Participants also do not include students who have dropped out of their studies and thus may be considered a successful sample of students.

In recognition of the diverse experiences of students of color, future studies should attend to a focused population of those students (e.g., international students from East Asian countries). Latinx students may be a particularly important subgroup to examine, as they have been identified as a population with disproportionately higher concerns about healthcare access and financial difficulties during the pandemic (Aubé et al., 2021).

When interviewing participants, we did not specifically focus our research question on students of color, thus, the interview questions did not inquire about experiences of students of color as related to their racial identity. Although several students voluntarily shared experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic that were related to their racial identity (e.g., discrimination, disparate access to higher education), discussions of racial dynamics and the pandemic were not a salient theme across interviews. Such topics may have been more prominent had they been explicitly asked—especially given the national discussions and protests around race during 2020 and an increased risk of exposure to racially motivated discrimination (Chen et al., 2020; Reuters, 2020).

This current study is also cross-sectional and limited to a single time period. After the initial onset of COVID, the impacts of the pandemic may have fluctuated due to prolonged periods of quarantine, introduction of stimulus bills, protests, elections, and vaccine rollouts. Such events may have shifted the experiences of students of color, so future studies should examine student experiences at different time points during the pandemic.

## Conclusion

Despite limitations, this current study used a qualitative approach to comprehend the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students of color in higher education. This initial study provides preliminary data on shared experiences of students of color. It also provides a unique understanding of student perspectives on the coping strategies and supports that they require to be successful. The researchers have implemented rigorous methodology that ensure credibility, dependability, and confirmability of results. Thus, the study has many strengths in providing rich, unique accounts into the experiences of students of color during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings of the study should be utilized by institutions, faculty members, and policymakers to understand the experiences of students of color in times of disaster and to identify equitable resources that should be provided to support a population of students who may be disproportionately impacted by disaster events.



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