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“...Building the Plane While it’s in the Air”

Examining Institutional Response to COVID-19 and Impacts on Graduate Students

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— Abstract —

As a result of institutional neglect and under preparation, graduate students threaded their way through the COVID-19 pandemic and racial injustices across the U.S. with minimal to no support and resources. In this manuscript, we discuss the oversights in institutional response, and management of these crises, explicating the difficulties that ensued from the academy’s failure to anticipate, critically consider, and meet the nuanced needs of graduate students before and during the COVID-19 crisis. We also highlight intersectionality as a valuable framework that enables us to identify, analyze, and address the range of concerns of graduate students. Lastly, we posit three recommendations that institutional leaders can consider as they develop critical encompassing crisis management plans that center graduate students and their unique needs, while striving to create equitable educational environments for them. Specifically, we urge higher education stakeholders to: engage intersectionality in institutional decision-making, empower graduate students through collaboration, and apply lessons learned from both current and past crises.

Keywords: COVID-19, graduate students, crisis management

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The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted the flow of operations within institutions of higher education. As a result of this devastation, many college and university officials across the nation have begun (re)strategizing as it has become painstakingly clear that they were not prepared to deal with a crisis of this magnitude (Evans, 2020). In particular, higher education leaders at various levels did not account for the varied needs of graduate students in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the graduate student population, across the board, experienced disproportionate levels of misinformation, academic hardship, and financial insecurity (Brig-Ortiz & Andrews, 2020; Flaherty, 2020c; Foley, 2020; Zahneis, 2020), further compounded by the effects of racial crises that co-occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic (Boyd, 2020; Kim, 2020). In sum, graduate students, especially minoritized individuals, found themselves forced to navigate the impacts of simultaneous crises with limited support, resources, and protection (Bedford, 2020; Zahneis, 2020).

In this manuscript, we underscore the complex identities of graduate students and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also use the lens of structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) to discuss the layered effects of institutional praxes and crisis response on graduate students. We then posit tangible recommendations to help institutional leaders honor graduate students and meet their specific needs. As educational leaders continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and work to meet the new demands of their field, these stakeholders must focus on graduate students. By employing a proactive and critical approach to matters concerning graduate students, higher education leaders can support graduate students and respond to their evolving needs both during crises and on a daily basis.

Literature Review

Graduate students study for advanced academic qualifications, such as graduate certificates, master’s de-

grees (e.g., M.A., M.S., M.F.A.), professional degrees (e.g., M.D., J.D., D.D.), and doctoral degrees (e.g., Ed.D., Ph.D., PsyD; Council of Graduate Schools [CGS], 2008; Gardner & Baker, 2019). Graduate education is vital to advancing academic disciplines, including education, science, social sciences, humanities, medicine, and technology, and allows graduate students to become experts in their field (CGS, 2008). Prior to COVID-19, graduate student enrollment was rapidly increasing in the United States. Specifically, from 2009–2019, graduate student enrollment in master’s, doctoral, and professional programs (i.e., law, medicine, and dentistry) increased by 8%—from 2.8 million to 3.1 million students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). Given this rise in graduate student enrollment, it is imperative that higher education leaders employ inclusive and equitable approaches to serving these students. For institutional leaders to do this successfully, they must veer away from the tradition of focusing primarily on undergraduate students and acknowledge that graduate students, too, need adequate care and support to thrive in school (Gardner & Barker, 2019).

Graduate Students at the Intersections

Although graduate students are often treated as a homogeneous group and categorized solely by their educational status (e.g., Austin, 2002), this student population consists of people with multiple, intersecting identities (Anaya, 2011; Brunσμα et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2017; Charleston et al., 2014; Goldberg et al., 2019; Ramirez, 2013). Put differently, graduate students have varying combinations of coexisting identities. Some of these identity categories include: race and ethnicity (Brunσμα et al., 2017); nationality and immigration status (Hyun, 2019); gender identity (Goldberg et al., 2019); sexual orientation (Dentato et al., 2016); dis/ability, and general health status (Carter et al., 2017); socioeconomic status (Turner & Juntune, 2018); religion and spirituality (Means et al., 2018); first-generation or first-in-family status (Martinez, 2018); (non-)native speaker status (Ogun-

sanya et al., 2018); age (Gardner & Barker, 2019); caregiver status (Anaya, 2011); and military and veteran status (Dobson et al., 2021). As a result, graduate students’ life-worlds and needs sometimes overlap but can also differ vastly. Consistent with their holding an amalgam of coexisting identities and positionalities, graduate students have great or subtle distinctions in their lived experiences and needs. These nuances in experiences are present during crises and are likely to be exacerbated during such times (Zdziarski et al., 2007). To this point, there is a call to action for higher education leaders to honor the multiplicity of truths and experiences that exists among graduate students (Gardner & Barker, 2019).

Graduate Students and Interlocking Systems of Oppression

Research that primarily centers dominant white narratives has historically informed the academy (e.g., Austin, 2002). For this reason, it is unsurprising that the complex identities of graduate students are often disregarded by those across academe. Scholars (e.g., Brunnsma et al., 2017; Byrd et al., 2019; George Mwangi et al., 2019) are, however, beginning to heavily critique the invisibility of graduate students’ intersecting identities and experiences in existing literature, leading to calls for more critical scholarship about graduate students (Brunnsma et al., 2017; Gardner, 2008). In the sections that follow, we highlight scholarship grounded in intersectionality that sheds light on graduate students and the various impacts of the converging COVID-19 pandemic and racial injustices across the United States.

Racism and Graduate Students. Racism is a eurocentric practice of oppression that encourages the dehumanization of people based on race and grants power and privilege to white people through individual interactions, institutional systems, and cultural norms (Banaji et al., 2021; Bell, 1992; Patton, 2016). The deeply embedded preservation of whiteness in U.S. higher education creates a hostile educational environment for racially minoritized graduate stu-

dents (Barker, 2016; Espino, 2014; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Harris & Linder, 2018; Ramirez, 2017), reinforcing feelings of stress and weariness among them (Hubain et al., 2016). As a result, racially minoritized graduate students often feel tokenized, invisible, dismissed, and discriminated against in their institutional environments (Brunnsma et al., 2017). These feelings were amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, as Black graduate students, in particular, had to withstand not only the effects of COVID-19 but also the effects of the hypervisibility of Black death during the pandemic. Explicitly, the viral video of the murder of George Floyd stirred up deep anger and pain within Black communities, leaving its members, including Black graduate students, emotionally taxed and (re)traumatized (Boyd, 2020).

Similarly, Latinx graduate students often endure educational environments that make them feel unwelcomed (Holloway-Friesen, 2019; Ramirez, 2017). Some Latinx graduate students have even reported that faculty members show preferential treatment to their white peers and have low expectations of them (Espino, 2014; Ramirez, 2017). Likewise, Asian-American students (Buenavista et al., 2009; Museus et al., 2013; Osajima, 1995), Pacific Islander students (Gogue et al., 2021), and Indigenous students (Shotton, 2017; Willmott et al., 2016) must withstand educational environments that do not affirm their true experiences or tend to their specific needs, rendering them invisible. Therefore, in addition to living in an unwelcoming society, these students often have to maneuver inimical educational environments. Even more disheartening is the fact that Asian-American graduate students had to navigate not only the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which only worsened pre-existing challenges, but also the violent acts of anti-Asian hate which were being irresponsibly fueled by former U.S. President Donald Trump, who continuously referred to COVID-19 as the “Chinese” or “China” virus (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). From these reports, we further understand that institutional environments are a microcosm of society; that they thrive

on the same construct of whiteness that permeates the wider society, acting as incubators for toxic cultures of micro- and macro-aggression against racially/ethnically minoritized graduate students (Barker, 2016; Hurtado et al., 1999; Museus et al., 2013).

Racism, Sexism, and Graduate Students. Like racially minoritized graduate students who are also women, white women graduate students are susceptible to sex and gender discrimination. However, the experiences of racially minoritized graduate students who are women are far more complex than those of white women students because they experience discrimination in multiple ways at the same time (hooks, 1981) as a result of the intersecting sexist and racist oppressions in the academy and wider society (Walkington, 2017). On this basis, racially minoritized graduate students who are women, for example, are susceptible to feelings of invisibility in higher education (Squire & McCann, 2018). These feelings stem from dominant narratives which intentionally ignore women’s existence and contributions and can impede graduate students’ progress towards becoming independent researchers (Haynes et al., 2016).

Furthermore, as a result of multiple discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989), many graduate students who are Women of Color are disproportionately affected by racist and gendered expectations which intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hewlin & Roberts, 2020). Black women, in particular, experienced heightened effects, given their increased responsibilities (Gray & Brooks, 2021) and the escalation of anti-Black racism throughout the health crisis (Nakhaie & Nakhaie, 2020). Similarly, Asian- American women graduate students had to navigate not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also glaring anti-Asian hate which grew to uncontrollable levels during the COVID-19 crisis (Kim, 2020). Muslim graduate students also face blatant discrimination at school. Particularly, they expressed feeling unsupported and unprotected by their professors and institutional policies (Naji Amrani, 2017). Therefore, Muslim women graduate students face institutional oppression at the

intersections of sex, gender, and religion. Indigenous and Mexican-American women doctoral students also grapple with barriers to their education. Specifically, these women face aggressions, rooted primarily in heteronormative standards (Espino, 2014), during interactions with white faculty and peers both inside and outside of classroom settings (Shotton, 2017). It is also important to note that some women graduate students are parents or caretakers and may live with partners, children, parents, or other relatives. Therefore, given their familial responsibilities, which increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, many graduate student parents and caregivers found it difficult to meet program deadlines and expectations, reifying experiences of stigmatization and discrimination among them (Anaya, 2011; Pineault & Rouzer, 2020).

Classism and Graduate Students. Graduate students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds also experience discriminatory aggressions from their faculty and peers. These experiences often leave them feeling distressed and excluded (Smith et al., 2016). In addition, the normativity of middle-class status and experience (Smith et al., 2016) tend to leave graduate students from lower-income backgrounds feeling like they do not belong in graduate school (Ostrove et al., 2011). According to Zahneis (2020), the financial insecurity that these students endure on a daily basis only worsened with the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, graduate students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds were struggling to cover their raised internet bills, pay for resources that would enable them to conduct research and coursework online, and afford living arrangements. Along with dealing with new and increased bills, some graduate students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were even struggling to find a place where they could live and learn (APA Communications, 2020; Zahneis, 2020). In many cases, these issues were compounded by institutional budget cuts and hiring freezes, resulting from the financial constraints that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic (Brig-Ortiz & Andrews, 2020;

Flaherty, 2020c). These institutional actions then led to some graduate student workers, including some from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, being furloughed (Brig-Ortiz & Andrews, 2020), and others having their graduate assistantship offers revoked (Cordial & Randolph, 2021). This left many graduate students, especially those who are first-generation or from lower-income backgrounds, in a state of growing precarity (APA Communications, 2020).

Ableism and Graduate Students. Graduate students with dis/abilities are positioned on the fringes of the academy (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019; Stewart & Collins, 2014). This means that graduate students with dis/abilities tend to experience neglect and exclusion in their institutional environments (Carter et al., 2017; Miles, 2019; Morley & Lugg, 2009). To this point, graduate students with both visible and invisible dis/abilities face great barriers to their education, as they face an expectation to thrive in educational spaces that operate under ableist expectations and interactions (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019; Stewart & Collins, 2014). These inequitable practices, in turn, cause graduate students with dis/abilities to feel unsupported (Damiani & Harbour, 2015). This lack of support then pressures graduate students with dis/abilities to disclose their dis/abilities and need for accommodations as, oftentimes, this is the only effective means of receiving appropriate help and assistive technologies needed to support their learning (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019). Unfortunately, these issues of inequity and exclusion were exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis, as many faculty members were often unprepared to provide graduate students with dis/abilities with the various tools and resources required for their full engagement in class (Anderson, 2020; Custodio, 2020). This was evident across various online platforms used for teaching—the primary means of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, students with dis/abilities could not always access accurate speech transcriptions or sign language interpreters (Anderson, 2020). Thus, many graduate students with dis/abilities have not had comprehen-

sive access to online learning throughout this health crisis (Custodio, 2020).

Graduate Students Face Queerphobia and Transphobia. Homophobia and transphobia in higher education create hostile and discriminatory educational environments for graduate students who are part of the queer community (Dentato et al., 2016; Miller, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016; Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). As a result, these students face stigma, harassment, and hostile, ignorant, and insensitive comments from peers, faculty, and advisors (Dentato et al., 2016). In the wake of the pandemic, queer students experienced heightened concerns for their safety as many institutions forced them to leave university housing and relocate to potentially discriminatory and violent home environments (Brown, 2020). Furthermore, institutional databases and online learning platforms placed transgender students in dangerous situations where their dead names (i.e., legal name or given birth name; Goldberg et al., 2019) were put on full display (Brown, 2020), causing them to be outed (i.e., involuntarily revealing their gender identities) to faculty and peers. Furthermore, the experience of queer and transgender students becomes more complicated when racism and queerphobia interlock and target these students. For instance, Means et al.’s (2018) study notes that spiritual practices (e.g., meditating, praying, attending religious services, reading spiritual texts, and listening to spiritual music) are vital to the wellbeing of Black queer students. However, Black queer students have difficulty finding places to engage in these practices consistently as spiritual campus spaces tend to be white-centered, heteronormative, and/or Christian-normative, invalidating their sexual and racial identities (Means et al., 2018). Thus, queer graduate students with other minoritized identities experience a range of difficulties within their educational environments.

Xenophobia and Graduate Students. From the literature on international graduate students in the U.S., it is evident that these students experience: a lack of non-academic support (Hyun, 2019), issues nego-

tiating the healthcare system (Habu, 2000), immense pressure to become proficient in U.S. English (Ogunanya et al., 2018), financial and social concerns (Arthur, 2017), and anxiety about being far from home (Fritz et al., 2008). Furthermore, as a direct result of the xenophobic U.S. context within which international graduate students live and study (Barker, 2016; Hubain et al., 2016; Lee, 2007; Patton, 2016), international students, as a whole, were being compelled to enroll in, at minimum, one in-person course or face deportation, despite the immediate threats of the virulent COVID-19 pandemic. This policy, although it was later revoked, negatively affected international students across the board (Rosenberg, 2020). In addition to dealing with insensitive policy directives, however, international graduate students with racially and ethnically minoritized identities had to navigate the converging public health crisis and long-standing, violent anti-Black and anti-Asian racism which predate the COVID-19 pandemic but heightened during its wake (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). Thus, racially and ethnically minoritized international graduate students, unlike their white counterparts, often have to grapple with the challenges and complexities of concurrent institutional racism, cultural and verbal discrimination, and inhospitality (Lee & Rice, 2007). Therefore, while international graduate students may experience issues as a collective, an intersectional examination of this student population can reveal nuances in their identities, social realities, and needs.

Theoretical Framework

Grounded in critical legal studies, critical race theory, and other (un)documented Black feminist and activist efforts, Crenshaw’s (1989) intersectionality critiques “the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (p.139), rejecting single-axis frameworks, lenses, and approaches that ignore the multidimensionality of Black women’s realities. Although legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) initially introduced the term intersectionality to highlight the compounded

marginalization Black women face (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989, 1990), its origin dates back much further. Collins and Bilge (2016) point out that intersectionality has been around for a long time; its existence is marked by social movements, literature, and publications (e.g., Combahee River Collective, 1982; Cooper, 1988; Davis, 1981; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Lorde, 1981) by Black women that narrate Black women’s positionalities. In essence, without using the term intersectionality, Black women articulated the goals and purposes of intersectionality before Crenshaw’s explication of the term. Furthermore, adding to critical feminist discourse, other Women of Color documented the complexities of their oppression as well (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987; Morága, 1983; Morága & Anzaldúa, 1983). Thus, long before the term intersectionality surfaced, the theoretical and political works reflective of intersectionality were in motion (Nash, 2008). Since Crenshaw (1989) coined the term, however, many researchers and scholars have employed intersectionality as a critical lens through which they investigate and understand the identities, complexities, and experiences of various groups of minoritized people (e.g., Anaya, 2011; Charleston et al., 2014; Miles, 2019; Miller, 2018; Morley & Lugg, 2009; Ramirez, 2013).

Therefore, intersectionality is a powerful lens for examining minoritized populations and their identities, uncovering the interacting forms of oppression these groups encounter in their daily lives (Anders & DeVita, 2014; Crenshaw et al., 1995). Like other scholars who have used intersectionality outside of its original context, we, too, rely on its power to analyze and discuss the various ways institutional crisis management impacts graduate students. This approach can help us identify the social and institutional responses, dynamics, structures, and systems that contributed to the compounded, intersectional oppression of minoritized graduate students both before and during the pandemic. In other words, intersectionality is an analytic sensibility that can heighten our awareness of graduate students’ interlocking identities and distinc-

tive social realities, enabling us to recognize, examine, and sufficiently address the nuances among them. This work is important because intersectionality can help higher education leaders to develop policies, programs, and praxes that promote and support a radical, transformative, social and racial justice-oriented vision and agenda (Harris & Patton, 2019), ensuring that graduate students are always considered and protected by their institutions.

Discussion

Given its rapid spread (Ellis, 2020), the deadly COVID-19 virus forced higher education leaders across the United States and the world into a state of crisis management, where urgent and impactful decision-making was necessary. Unfortunately, some of the strategies U.S. higher education leaders deployed only served to reify confusion, panic, and financial and emotional strain among students (Culpepper & Goodman, 2020; Zahneis, 2020), magnifying pre-existing fragilities and inequities. This was particularly true for graduate students as institutional leaders failed to anticipate many of their nuanced needs during the crisis, let alone during the multiple crises occurring simultaneously. This contributed to a disproportionate impact from both the COVID-19 pandemic and the social unrest across the United States (Boyd, 2020; Foley, 2020; Hewlin & Roberts, 2020; Kim, 2020). In the sections below, we discuss four major points. First, we highlight the under-preparation of U.S. higher education for the COVID-19 pandemic which was complicated by systemic racism. Second, we challenge institutional leaders’ disregard for graduate students’ pre-pandemic challenges. Third, we explain the consequences of education leaders’ failing to amend their crisis management plans, based on insights gained from past crises. Fourth, we employ intersectionality as an analytic tool to sufficiently discuss and address the diverse concerns and needs of the graduate student population before, during, and after crises.

Ready or Not...

The term crisis refers to high-impact, chaotic events that impose uncertainty, require discretionary decision-making by leaders, and threaten organizational values, structure, and productivity (Mitroff et al., 2006; Wang & Hutchins, 2010; Zdziarski et al., 2007). Since crises are inevitable, institutional leaders, in concert with crisis management teams, generate crisis management plans that help reduce the impacts of calamities (Mitroff et al., 2006; Zdziarski et al., 2007). Crisis management plans typically include protocols that detail institutional responses and action strategies, communication and reporting processes, emergency contacts, risk management, procedures for collaborating with external community partners, and further action steps following a crisis. Additionally, crisis response teams comprise various constituents across an institution, including but not limited to administrators, faculty members, and public safety personnel. Despite these understandings, crisis management plans that do not consider intersectional approaches often result in gross institutional under-preparation for a crisis, ultimately leading to problematic institutional crisis response and management (Evans, 2020). Consistent with this finding, many higher education leaders blundered their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic as they could not fathom a crisis of its nature and meet the needs of their graduate students accordingly. As a direct result, COVID-19’s far-reaching, prolonged reverberations severely impacted graduate students.

According to Evans (2020), the academy was equipped to deal with local disasters but unprepared for a catastrophe as immense and pervasive as the COVID-19 pandemic. To this point, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, some institutional leaders found that their institutional crisis plans were of no use, while others found that they could rely on their crisis plans only during the early stages of the crisis (Liu et al., 2021), freestyling their way through the rest of it. In light of this, graduate students suffered the consequences of deficient institutional

crisis preparation and management (Culpepper & Goodman, 2020). In Liu et al.’s (2021) article, Morgan, a higher education leader, characterizes the situation as institutional leaders “building the plane while it’s in the air” (p. 6). This analogy emphasizes the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic caught higher education leaders unprepared and frantic, revealing that the academy was never really ahead of or in control of the situation at any point, but only reacting to a bad situation that had already taken off and begun soaring to new, incomprehensible heights. Thus, ready or not, COVID-19 slammed U.S. higher education. This beating put institutional crisis management under the microscope, unveiling the cracks in its foundation while offering educational stakeholders an opportunity to recreate new plans before the next novel devastation.

Graduate Students’ Pre-Pandemic Issues Went Unaddressed

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, graduate students grappled with multifarious challenges within the academy (Gardner & Barker, 2019), including attrition (CGS, 2010), a lack of funding (Flora, 2007), debt burdens (Pyne & Grodsky, 2020), and labor exploitation (Kezar et al., 2019). In an effort to call attention to these concerns, some graduate students, prior to COVID-19, protested for unionization and better compensation and benefits (Herbert & Naald, 2019). Many of these issues, however, remained unaddressed, causing graduate students to enter the COVID-19 battlefield with pre-existing personal and/or collective crises. For example, in February 2020, graduate student workers at the University of California Santa Cruz withheld undergraduate students’ final grades as a means of protesting for livable wages that would cover the high cost of living in the area (Flaherty, 2020a). However, instead of graduate students receiving the support they so desperately needed, institutional leaders severely punished the students involved in the strike by terminating their employment, rescinding their tuition remission, and

revoking student visas of participating international students (Flaherty, 2020b). These realities illustrate that institutional leaders sometimes ignore and silence the cries of graduate students, choosing to penalize them for disrupting inequitable practices instead of acting in their best interest by assessing their issues and addressing their needs.

In addition, higher education leaders have had plenty of opportunities to address and prioritize the long-standing, pre-pandemic issues affecting graduate students but have chosen not to. Not only have graduate students made their needs known through protesting, but research has also elucidated the plethora of challenges that plague them. Therefore, graduate students’ pre-pandemic issues did not have to crash into the hard-hitting COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, if higher education leaders had prioritized graduate students’ pre-pandemic issues, they could have resolved them prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, the issue here may not merely be one of institutional under-preparation for crises, but one of institutional leaders’ blatant lack of care for graduate students.

Forgotten Lessons for which Graduate Students Paid the Price

Colleges and universities have experienced the wrath of a wide variety of cataclysms that either seriously threatened or damaged their infrastructures, reputations, and prestige (Mitroff et al., 2006). Some of the most notable campus crises include the 1999 Texas A&M University bonfire disaster (Zdziarski et al., 2007), 9/11 attacks (Nelson, 2002), the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Cowen & Cowen, 2010), and the 2007 Virginia Tech Shooting (Wang & Hutchins, 2010). From these crises, there are six main lessons that higher education leaders should have grasped. First, the impossible is always possible. Second, transparency and clear campus-wide and community-wide communication are crucial (Zdziarski et al., 2007). Third, displacement can induce panic within the campus community (Cowen & Cowen,

2010). Fourth, in-person education can be disrupted at any time, forcing institutions to employ alternative methods of learning (Schroeder, 2020). Fifth, catastrophes often give life to human-caused disasters that were brewing well before the precipitating event (Mitroff et al., 2006). Sixth, crisis analysis, anticipation, and planning should not occur in isolation from others (Mitroff et al., 2006). Given the thorny institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, higher education leaders and institutional crisis management teams clearly did not learn from the oversights and failures of the past. To this point, poor communication (Zahneis, 2020), student displacement with little to no institutional support (Flaherty, 2020d), and a turbulent transition to online education (Foley, 2020)—institutional errors that exacerbated crises in the past (Schroeder, 2020; Wang & Hutchins, 2010; Zdziarski et al., 2007)—caused graduate students to experience undue psychological, emotional, and financial stress during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bedford, 2020; Brig-Ortiz & Andrews, 2020; Cho, 2020).

In other words, education stakeholders mishandled the COVID-19 crisis because they did not learn from the detrimental and, in some cases, fatal mistakes that institutional leaders made in the past. They also did not foresee and prepare for “the impossible”—a crisis of this enormity (Evans 2020). Then, adding to an already strenuous situation, multiple racial crises (e.g., hypervisibility of anti-Blackness, Black death, and the demonization of the Asian community) also transpired during the COVID-19 pandemic, which especially impacted minoritized graduate students (Boyd, 2020; Kim, 2020; Wright-Mair et al., 2021). Considering that institutional leaders were already struggling to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, it is only natural that the intermingling of the health and racial crises (Hewlin & Roberts, 2020) would further complicate crisis management. Therefore, in keeping with this logic, many institutional leaders gave up an opportunity to comfort, pour into, and advocate for minoritized students. In particular, in an attempt to

stand in solidarity with affected minoritized students, institutional leaders crafted and published statements of support. Alas, many of these statements (e.g., Harvard University President’s “What I Believe” statement) were deemed by graduate students to “not just [be] inadequate, but actively offensive” (McKenzie, 2020, para. 7). Many higher education leaders ended up mismanaging not only the COVID-19 crisis but also actions towards ongoing racism in the United States, adding insult to injury for racially minoritized graduate students.

Against this backdrop, many within the academy failed to take proactive measures that would have cushioned the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and ultimately lightened the load of graduate students during the health crisis. Explicitly, had institutional leaders adequately addressed their pre-pandemic needs, graduate students would have had fewer burdens to shoulder during the health crisis. Similarly, had institutional leaders critically considered the pre-pandemic struggles of graduate students when developing crisis mitigation strategies, they would have enacted appropriate measures to offset the exacerbation of these issues during times of uncertainty. As it relates to the multiple racial crises that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, we must acknowledge that higher education leaders do not have full control over societal issues and how they play out. They do, however, have full control over their own (re/in) actions.

On that premise, had institutional leaders been practicing accomplices in the fight for social and racial justice before the eruptions of 2020, they would have been equipped with the critical consciousness needed to respond to vile racial incidents with compassion and boldness. Thus, the lack of criticality on the part of many higher education leaders, plus their lack of preparation for the collision of different types of crises, resulted in mediocre institutional crisis response for which graduate students paid the price. Lastly, had institutional leaders used the fatal yet fundamental lessons from past crises to inform their institution-

al crisis management plans, graduate students would have been better protected and supported throughout the simultaneous health and social crises. On the strength of these assertions, avoidable institutional errors inflamed the natural disruptions of the global health crisis, as well as the already traumatizing effects of wider societal issues on graduate students. In turn, graduate students experienced amplified affective and financial burdens (Bedford, 2020; Culpepper & Goodman, 2020; Stinard-Kiel, 2020).

The Consequences are Steep Without Intersectionality

Higher education leaders often overlook the diversity within and across graduate students (Brunsma et al., 2017). Accordingly, many people across academe view graduate students through a single categorical axis (i.e., student status), resulting in the oversimplification and homogenization of their social realities (Brunsma et al., 2017; Gardner, 2008). As a result of this practice, the combination of graduate students’ intersecting identities, as well as the various roles in which they function both within and outside of their institutions, are often not factored in institutional decisions. These oversights then cause institutional leaders to miss the mark with graduate students, as their failure to apply intersectionality leaves them unequipped to mitigate myriad, concurrent intersectional crises befalling different members of the graduate student community. For this reason, minoritized graduate students, in particular, faced disproportionate impacts from the interflow of the COVID-19 pandemic and highly politicized racial crises. To put it differently, although the enormity and associated impacts of the health and racial crises cannot be ignored, institutional leaders’ inattention to graduate students’ intersecting experiences and needs when constructing crisis management plans caused them to be underprepared for the multiple crises that occurred. Essentially, this made a bad situation worse for the various subgroups of graduate students that ended up having little to no institutional support throughout the cri-

ses. The unresolved graduate student-specific issues that predated the COVID-19 pandemic also fanned the flames of an unsteady situation. By themselves, the pre-pandemic graduate student-specific issues heightened stress and strain among graduate students. Therefore, unsurprisingly, the combination of these pre-existing problems with the devastating effects of the coinciding COVID-19 pandemic and racial crisis resulted in acute distress among graduate student communities. In light of these realities, graduate students endured the steep consequences of institutional neglect.

Recommendations

Graduate students are complex beings who bring their whole selves to academic environments. They cannot check their varying identities and social realities at the door upon entering a graduate program. Rather, they contend with the (dis)advantages that accompany them every day. When institutional leaders refuse to acknowledge the plurality of graduate students’ realities, they put them in harm’s way, setting them up to experience catastrophes, especially during crises—as seen throughout the current pandemic. In the sections below, we offer three recommendations that institutional leaders can consider as they (re)develop comprehensive crisis management plans that consider the heterogeneity of the graduate student population.

Engaging Intersectionality in Institutional Decision-Making

First, higher education leaders should acknowledge that graduate students face various interlocking systems of oppression that ultimately lead to diverse experiences, challenges, and needs. This first step is essential; without it, they disregard intersectionality. Building on this, education leaders must then engage intersectionality as a framework, ensuring that they consider and meet the *mélange* of needs of graduate students. To do so, those in leadership positions must reimagine the rules of engagement that under-

pin higher education. This means rejecting whiteness as ideological and epistemological foundations of the academy and embracing criticality and intersectionality as the academy’s moral compass. Moreover, educational leaders and their crisis management teams must prioritize intersectionality when engineering institutional crisis management plans. Integrating an intersectional lens can help institutional leaders to nuance graduate students’ concerns, and respond according to their specific needs. The application of an intersectional lens also applies to decisions made before, during, and after crises. With intersectionality as a guiding tool, critical, equitable, and encompassing institutional crisis management plans are possible, as the intersecting needs of graduate students can inform institutional crisis preparation processes, institutional responses during crises, and institutional strategies towards recovery after crises. Without it, however, already vulnerable graduate students will be left out on the fringes and forced to advocate for their own survival, health, and wellbeing—the exact predicament graduate students endured amidst a global health crisis and social injustice.

Empower Graduate Students Through Collaboration

Second, institutional leaders can empower graduate students by creating opportunities for them to voice their unique concerns and needs. For example, these leaders can conduct listening tours that afford members of the various subsets of the graduate student population to voice their experiences and suggestions, thus demystifying how intersectionality operates. Of course, providing graduate students with a platform to speak their truth is not enough. Therefore, education leaders must act on what is shared, using graduate students’ actualities and recommendations to guide institutional activities. This translates to institutional leaders intentionally involving graduate students in institutional decision-making processes, ensuring co-constructed decision-making with their specific needs in mind. Additionally, it is

of key importance that institutional collaboration with graduate students occur at all institutional levels. This practice would allow for graduate students’ needs to inform the deeds of educators and administrators alike, giving rise to educational environments that serve diverse graduate students.

Apply Lessons Learned from COVID-19, Racial Injustices, and Other Past Crises

Finally, higher education administrators can use wisdoms gained from the COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustices rampant across society, and other past crises as guidelines when developing crisis management plans. In doing so, these education administrators will be: prepared to manage crises of the greatest magnitude; equipped to mitigate different types of crises occurring simultaneously; attentive to the intersectional needs of graduate students; mindful of the tendency for calamitous eventualities to aggravate pre-existing inequities, and injustices that shape the life-worlds of minoritized graduate students. Additionally, those in leadership positions across higher education must resolve the pre-pandemic issues that have long challenged graduate students’ academic, personal, and professional development. Together, these critical measures will help institutional leaders to effectively manage crises and serve, support, and protect graduate students during times of normalcy and devastation. They will also help higher education stakeholders cultivate inclusive, equitable, empowering, and socially just educational environments for minoritized graduate students, who tend to face severe impacts during crises.

Conclusion

Higher education leaders’ lack of acknowledgment of the breadth of diversity among graduate students, as well as their refusal to apply the lessons learned from past crises, contributed to them being ill-equipped to support the various sub-populations of graduate students during the pandemic. This under-preparation resulted in poor institutional cri-

sis response and management, and caused graduate students, particularly those from racially minoritized populations, to experience exacerbated effects of the pandemic and racism. Additionally, institutional leaders’ indifference towards graduate students’ pre-pandemic challenges and their ultimate failure to resolve them before the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic added to graduate students’ burdens throughout the ongoing crises. Given these realities, it is imperative that higher education stakeholders recognize the galaxy of interactions and circumstances that can befall various subsets of the graduate student population. Equally as important, we recommend that higher education leaders engage in institutional decision-making through an intersectional lens, empower graduate students through collaboration, and apply lessons learned from the current COVID-19 pandemic and past crises. Together, these measures can enable higher education leaders to develop crisis management plans that account for graduate students’ intersectional needs and cultivate equitable educational environments that prioritize graduate students’ mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing both during and outside of periods of crisis (Gardner & Barker, 2019; Harper, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019).

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