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"Building the Plane While it's in the Air": Examining Institutional Response to COVID-19 and Impacts on Graduate Students

Raquel Wright-Mair
Rowan University

Candice Peters
Rowan University

Gabrielle A. McAllaster
Rowan University

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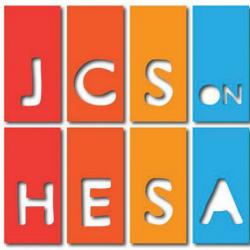
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Volume 6, Issue 2

Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs

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

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

RESEARCH-IN-BRIEF

Raquel Wright-Mair, *Rowan University*

Candice Peters, *Rowan University*

Gabrielle McAllaster, *Rowan University*

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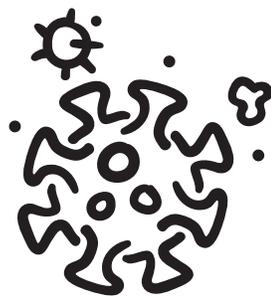
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Graduate students are complex beings who bring their whole selves to academic environments. They cannot check their varying identities and social realities at the door upon entering a graduate program. Rather, they contend with the (dis)advantages 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.

Graduate Students & COVID-19

Higher education leaders did not account for the varied needs of graduate students in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 for solutions. Graduate students, especially those who are minoritized, were forced to navigate the impacts of simultaneous crises with limited support, resources,

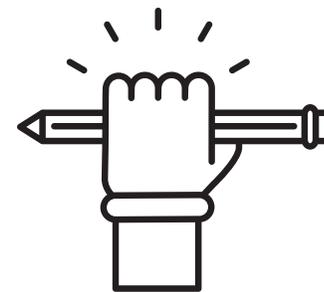


and protection. We underscore the complex identities of graduate students and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Graduate Students & Interlocking Systems of Oppression

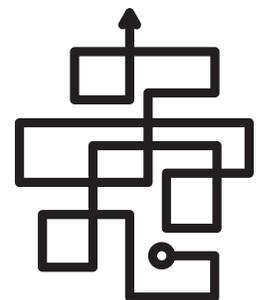
We highlight scholarship grounded in intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) that sheds light on graduate students and the various ways in which they have been impacted by the converging COVID-19 pandemic and racial injustices across the United States. The literature review covers graduate students and interlocking systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1982), including: racism, sexism, classism, ableism, queerphobia, transphobia, and xenophobia.



Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality

We use the lens of structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) to discuss the layered effects of institutional praxes and crisis response on graduate students. Intersectionality (Crenshaw,1989/1991) as a framework can increase awareness of graduate students’ interlocking identities and distinct social realities, enabling us to recognize, examine, and sufficiently address the nuances that exist among them.

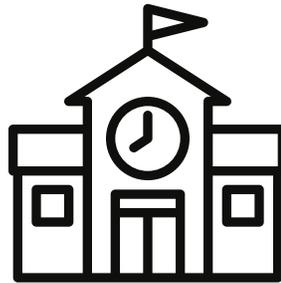


Discussion

Institutional Responses

We discuss four major points:

- The underpreparation of U.S. higher education for the COVID-19 pandemic which was further complicated by systemic racism.
- Institutional leaders’ disregard for graduate students’ pre-pandemic challenges, which only increased graduate students’ load during the pandemic.
- The consequences of education leaders’ failing to ameliorate their crisis management plans based on insights gained from past crises.
- Utilizing intersectionality as a tool to address the diverse needs of graduate students before, during, and after crisis.



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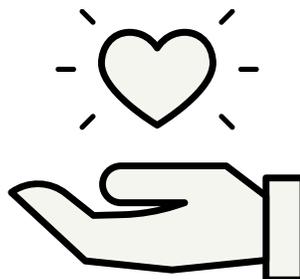
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Recommendations

Moving Forward

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.

1. Engage intersectionality in institutional decision-making.
2. Empower graduate students through collaboration.
3. Apply lessons learned from the pandemic and past crises.



Author Biographies



Raquel Wright-Mair, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Rowan University. Dr. Wright-Mair conducts research that is grounded in social justice. Her research agenda seeks to transform institutions

of higher education, and advocate for the creation of equitable, inclusive, and socially just campus environments for racially minoritized populations.



Candice Peters is a Ph.D. student in Education with a concentration in Urban and Diverse Learning Environments at Rowan University. She is the Graduate Coordinator of the Dr. Harley

E. Flack Student Mentoring Program in the Office of Social Justice, Inclusion, and Conflict Resolution (SJICR). Her research interests include Black women in Academia, Caribbean international students in the United States, and access, success, and equity in higher education. Candice holds a master’s degree in Higher Education from the University of Georgia (UGA), and a bachelor’s degree in Communications, with a double minor in Marketing and Human Resource Management, from Adelphi University.



Gabrielle A. McAllaster is a Ph.D. student at Rowan University in the College of Education, with a concentration in Higher Education. As a researcher, Gabrielle focuses on advancing intentional

and transformative institutions of higher education for faculty, staff, and students. Professionally, she is currently serving as a graduate coordinator in the Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Rowan University. As an educator, Gabrielle works closely with students to provide space and opportunity to explore their leadership potential, social identities, and calling to be socially justice-centered leaders.

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