

# Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and International Students: Experiences and Resolutions Beyond COVID-19

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

All of the authors are public health doctoral students in the Department of Health Behavior, School of Public Health, University of Alabama at Birmingham.

The Black Lives Matter Movement has awakened many to racism and anti-Blackness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID data tracker reveals that Black people nationwide are dying from COVID-19 at twice the rate of White people.<sup>1</sup> The data also disclose that Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color (BIPOC) are disproportionately affected by COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> Racial disparities are also seen in academia. In June 2020, Shardé Davis and Joy Melody started #BlackInTheIvory on Twitter to talk about their journeys as a Black female professor and doctoral student, respectively.

As BIPOC public health doctoral students at a US Deep South university, these kinds of discussions have motivated us to share our own stories and contemplate solutions to help spur change. As students of color from the same cohort at a predominantly White institution, we are facing

a few realities that impede both our identities and our lived experiences, and we seek resolve in this time of uncertainty. We have provided four personal accounts of our diverse public health doctoral student experiences and recommendations to address some of our challenges.

## SYSTEMATIC RACISM, COVID-19, AND ANXIETY

As a Black woman living during COVID-19 and protests against systemic racism across the United States, generalized anxiety disorder has been a personal perpetual battle. The COVID-19 pandemic has unearthed a multitude of racial injustices across the United States, particularly regarding social distancing guidelines, mask requirements, health care stigma, and socioeconomic status. Many Black Americans endure health care stigma from health care providers leading to refusal of care and disregard

of pain, which inhibits adequate treatment of chronic conditions; this puts them at an increased risk for adverse health outcomes from COVID-19. Students of color who are clinically or self-diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder are faced with unmet needs because of inadequate access to mental health services, food, safe housing, and employment opportunities.

The pandemic has created uncertainty in regard to future employment opportunities because of the likelihood of a pending recession and undue financial burden of medical insurance. The Affordable Care Act is under constant attack from the Trump administration, and its abolishment would force many Americans to go without medical insurance, thus limiting mental health care services. Preexisting inequalities owing to classism, sexism, racism, and so on have only added to the growing anxieties of what it means to coexist in the United States and in a Black body.

## STRESS AND COVID-19

As an underrepresented female graduate student, there is already an ongoing challenge to maintain resilience in a predominantly White doctoral program and institution. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person classes have been suspended and remote responsibilities, including virtual group meetings, assignments, and projects, have increased along with looming uncertainty. Frequent feelings and thoughts of existing inadequacy are coupled with intensifying stress levels. Unfortunately, this has led to the onset of a new stress-related disorder, which is a hindrance to navigating the problematic, academically isolated, and pressured pathway to a PhD.

The pressure to exceed academic and research expectations during this time

has resulted in a desperate need for social support. However, minority student group meetings and scheduled gatherings have been postponed indefinitely. Furthermore, seeking support from a mentor who does not identify as a person of color or from family and friends who have not experienced doctoral student realities has not been effective. Therefore, coping with stress in isolation with mounting responsibilities has left me perplexed with nowhere to turn.

## FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY AND GRADUATE PROGRAM

The shutdown triggered by COVID-19 resulted in sheltering in place while working and schooling from home. Before the closure, my own silo—being a working woman, wife, and mom—did not make me feel like a champion. The expectation to fulfill the roles of wife and mother persisted even if they conflicted with my career and educational pursuits. While comforting my children through their young relationships and navigating them through school rituals and routines, my own assignment deadlines always loomed. COVID-19 slowed things down to allow reflection on the difficulties of balancing school, work, and home. Seemingly, nontraditional graduate BIPOC students have no one with whom to share their experiences and discuss difficult decisions to successfully complete doctoral studies.

## IMMIGRATION AND CONTINUED GRADUATE STUDIES

The rapid growth of COVID-19 cases in the United States and its associated uncertainty have led to anxiety among international doctoral students. About

one third of new doctorate recipients every year in the United States are international students. Many US universities announced campus closure in response to COVID-19. Campus closure increased the stress and anxiety among international doctoral students. I, as an international doctoral student, no longer feel secure to study in the United States. According to a governmental modification announced on July 6, the US Department of State would not issue visas to international students who take fully online classes for the fall 2020 semester. If a doctoral program merely provided online classes under COVID-19, international students would have to leave the United States or transfer to another university.

In response to the Trump administration's new international student immigration rule, Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology filed lawsuits opposing the July 6 ruling. Consequently, there was a reversal of the guidance that allows international students already in the United States to stay. However, new students still abroad are out of luck. With less access and a lack of connection to the university community and resources, the support international students receive from campus and departments has declined. Furthermore, a recent Department of Homeland Security federal proposal to limit student visas to a fixed four-year term places international doctoral students' mental status and academic progress in jeopardy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As BIPOC doctoral students, we are facing a number of challenges, including institutional racial biases and structures, stress and anxiety, a lack of social support, and discriminatory immigration

policies. To address these issues during and after COVID-19, understanding differences among racial and immigrant groups is essential to develop multifaceted and equitable resolutions that will improve BIPOC and immigrant doctoral students' experiences. We provide some recommendations imperative to our career development and progress:

- 1 *Assign graduate students to academic mentors who share and are familiar with diverse cultures.* Universities should provide additional and continuous diversity and inclusion training and implicit bias training to non-BIPOC faculty to ensure the best engagement between student and faculty advisors and to aid student progress. Some preexisting beliefs can reinforce stereotypes and stigma attached to BIPOC students. Therefore, more consistent training can initiate a path to a more comfortable relationship between BIPOC students and faculty who may not look like them.
- 2 *Develop and implement a diverse course curriculum.* Courses that highlight microaggressions, cultural issues, and lived experiences would further incorporate key university commitments of diversity, equity, and inclusion. A few institutions, such as Purdue University and the University of Pennsylvania, have developed an implementation action plan and integrated antiracist education into their coursework.<sup>3</sup> In turn, the curriculum will help improve the livelihoods of students across their campuses.
- 3 *Develop a university child care and virtual education assistance strategy.* A university strategy will ensure the safety of nontraditional students' children and reduce some of

nontraditional graduate students' burdens in a fast-paced environment. Currently, a few universities provide support specifically for graduate students with spouses and children. The Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Science provides parental accommodation and financial support following the birth of a child, a student-parent organization, and child care and lactation support. Graduate BIPOC students juggling multiple roles would be well served with programs that consider specific support needs.

- 4 *Support efforts toward a collective university policy protecting international students.* To support international students during this unpredictable time, several universities, such as the University of California at Los Angeles and the University of Alabama at Birmingham, promote mental health services among international students and provide culturally relevant counseling services.<sup>4,5</sup> These efforts illustrate universities' solidarity in protecting international students.

The world is in an unprecedented time ripe for learning and change. At US universities, BIPOC doctoral students require their institutions to be committed to their diverse concerns during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. By enacting the aforementioned recommendations, universities can get closer to securing anti-racist and safe campuses for BIPOC doctoral students. *AJPH*

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The authors contributed equally to this editorial.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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