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## ARTICLE

### Teaching in 2020: Preliminary Assessments

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#### *Abstract*

*By the end of summer 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had upended higher education by requiring immediate adaptation by students, teachers, and institutions to new sets of limitations. What did this period of crisis mean for current and future teaching and learning? A rapid qualitative assessment presented here seeks to begin a sustained conversation around instructors' experiences. The anthropology professors interviewed in this study found that preexisting conditions in higher education resulted in pedagogical impacts that aggravated both student and faculty inequalities within their institutions. Far from being a new "crisis," the difficulties encountered in teaching and learning were familiar to professors, who worried ongoing problems in higher education were intrinsic.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Pedagogy; Inequality; Higher education

#### Introduction

In March of 2020, I received several urgent emails from my university's administration. The regular difficulties of teaching and learning were now compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. A "crisis" was declared at the national level, and the higher education sector's response affected students and instructors greatly. Administrators and instructors scrambled. Professors across the nation would not return to the classroom. This paper argues that while the "crisis" ostensibly concerned COVID-19, it was existing inequalities within academia that rose to the surface. Colleges and universities structure themselves around certain forms of privilege. Those without such privilege end up marginalized, often dropping out of the system. Certain groups of professors and students encountered greater difficulties than others. How does the pandemic reveal fundamental inequalities within the higher education system in the United States? What does it tell us about the normal functioning of the system in which teaching anthropologists function?

Some might argue the pandemic constitutes an extraordinary circumstance for institutions, making it unfair to evaluate colleges and universities based on what occurred in this period. This paper takes a different view. As Roitman (2013) suggests, systems reveal fundamental priorities when they respond quickly and aggressively. That is, university responses during a "crisis" simply reflect existing "socio-technical assemblages" (Roitman

2013, 77), relations between people and technology that sustain a system. In her analysis of the 2007-2009 economic crash, Roitman notes that “crisis” is often the result of normal functioning. The financial relations between people and technology during normal functioning worked “precisely as they were designed to work” (Roitman 2013, 62). Over the pandemic, the issues affecting first-generation students, poorer students, less tech-savvy professors, and students in need of support services were *not* caused by COVID-19, but by a system that was never designed for these groups.

Put differently, difficulties encountered by teachers and learners during the pandemic reflect an amplification of “business as usual,” including preexisting infrastructure limitations and institutional decision-making priorities. If Roitman is correct, the status quo demands that higher education portray the pandemic as a crisis that will be or has been resolved, in order to perpetuate a sense that preexisting mechanisms of inequality in the system are “normal.”

The research presented here represents a rapid preliminary foray into the effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning in anthropology. Given the short timeline to submission (Summer to Fall 2020), the study focused only on teachers of anthropology, most of whom were preparing for a COVID-based Fall term. A convenience sample of instructors from the author’s national network described and discussed the effects on teaching anthropology, student learning, and their institutions’ administrations. Thus, the professors’ responses generally refer to the end of the Spring 2020 semester, the following summer, and in some cases, the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester.

Interviews reveal that the COVID-19 crisis exposed preexisting problems within higher education in the United States that, while aggravating difficulties in anthropological pedagogy, coincide with problems long identified by scholars. Instructors found the crisis demanded pedagogical innovation, highlighted inequalities among students and teachers, and pointed to a perceived ongoing decline in higher education. Recognizing that higher education institutions will treat the pandemic “crisis” as an opportunity to foster certain existing practices and policies, this paper informs instructors as they prepare for discussions around instruction, and the institutional factors influencing instruction, with each other and decision makers.

## Literature Review

If the Spring 2020 semester represented a shock to higher education, the system itself had already generated complaints. Bousquet (2008), Gross (2013), Hyatt, Shear, and Wright (2015), Leitch (2014), and Newfield (2016) all describe recent massive shifts both internal to higher education and in the political discourse surrounding it. Neoliberal shifts in managerial emphasis, the growth of “alternative” knowledge, crises of academic authority, and political moves to delegitimize academia have left instructors bewildered as their institutions change. These authors describe threats to both the quality of students’ education and their victimization by an increasingly predatory system. The following

literature indicates that the higher education system fosters inequality, which creates extraordinary anxiety for students. Further, the higher education system itself seems to be part of a larger political struggle that perpetuates these inequalities.

Research suggests inequalities present themselves at every phase of the student experience. Both race and class influence what students need to get into, finish, and succeed after college (Walpole 2003; Merolla and Jackson 2014). Walpole greatly emphasizes the role of cultural and social capital. Cultural capital, or “the insider knowledge” (Walpole 2003, 49) of how college works, who to speak to, how to get help, and more, grants significant privilege which many students do not possess. Further, social capital, or “contacts and membership in networks” (Walpole 2003, 49), greatly affects who students can call on for help in moments of difficulty in their college careers.

Race also influences rates of employment for students, the quality of their K-12 education, and their likelihood of finishing a degree (Pell Institute 2021; Walpole 2003). Gender influences student class experiences so that even when women do more homework, study more, and get better grades than men, they may end up less interested in some subjects than when they began (Kost-Smith 2010). Even professors are discriminated against by gender and race in their evaluations. Administrative use of such evaluations institutionalizes discrimination (Centra and Gaubatz 2000; Flaherty 2019; Fries and McNinch 2003; Williams 2007). Above all, however, college costs create problems of both access and long-term debt within the academy (Newfield 2016).

Newfield (2016, 18) notes that state funding for public colleges declined 25% between 1989 and 2014, while tuition doubled. Yet: “Politicians and university leaders have mostly persuaded themselves that no harm had been done” (Newfield 2016, 18). In other words, they granted normalcy to increased costs, so that privilege and/or long-term debt must be assumed to access tertiary education.

This damage occurs alongside the rise of the “global knowledge economy,” so that the purpose of knowledge is international economic growth (Cantini 2017, 2). Specifically, higher education becomes more and more tied to global wealth production precisely as it grows out of reach for most populations.

Some students thus view education from cost-benefit perspectives. “They ‘know’ the individual pursuit of education is the only chance to secure an increasingly elusive place within the middle class. Yet, they also know that the quality of education is problematic and uneven and feel there is little they can do to change those conditions” (Lyon-Callo 2015, 84-85). As education, and therefore middle-class status become increasingly elusive, a structural trap leads students and would-be students to “frustration and anxiety” (Lyon-Callo 2015, 96). We can conclude that the more barriers to status exist, the greater the anxiety.

Jones et al. (2018, 252) report 84% of college students feel overwhelmed, 47% feel hopeless, and 51% report overwhelming anxiety. Research has demonstrated the adverse

effects of stress on learning since Rosenfeld (1978). More recent work has focused on “burnout” (Cushman and West 2006) and “student anxiety” (Jones et al. 2018), revealing larger structural problems. These studies name academic stressors as the major cause of anxiety followed by either financial distress (Jones et al. 2018) or “outside influences” (Cushman and West 2006) that include financial stress, family issues, and student jobs. Structural factors, not just professorial rigor, seem key to academic distress. Jones et al. (2018, 260) note two main reasons accounting for academic distress. First, students feel pressure to perform academically to secure careers and employment. Second, there are higher numbers of college graduates competing for these careers. Ultimately, they find that “[f]inancial distress was also correlated significantly with academic distress, which is unsurprising given that nearly two-thirds of college students report some concern about finishing their degree because of financial reasons” (Jones et al. 2018, 260). Anxiety often reflects students’ keen awareness they are paying beyond their means for an increasingly slimmer chance of obtaining or maintaining middle-class status. Most importantly, the role of financial stressors and “outside influences” in creating student anxiety again suggests more economically and socially vulnerable students will feel greater stress within the current system of higher education.

Why, then, has the state not intervened? Why no public outcry to reinvest in universities and colleges as a path to the “American Dream”? Many Americans now believe colleges and universities have a negative effect on the country (Parker 2019). By 2019, 59% of Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents viewed higher education this way. Only half of all Americans view higher education positively. Gross (2013) argues political enmity causes this. He notes a “campaign against liberal bias” (Gross 2013, 220-251), a political strategy engaged in by intellectuals, media sources, pundits, activists, and politicians against the perceived excesses of the academic left. This campaign focuses on professors’ liberal agendas, their intolerance of free speech, the excesses of political correctness and feminism, and paints the “common man” as their targeted victim.

Applying Roitman’s (2013) perspective, this “crisis” in academia, like other “crises,” provides an opportunity to inject certain narratives. “[W]hen crisis is posited as the very condition of contemporary situations, certain questions become possible while others are foreclosed” (Roitman 2013, 41-70). By declaring this crisis, the U.S. right-wing creates an opportunity to question certain structures within academia, problematize them, and thus influence academia’s development. Treating liberal movements, feminism, and political correctness as a deviation from what is normal and acceptable allows for the political possibility of their slow elimination. Movements towards equity, such as feminist demands for more equitable treatment of marginalized students, become “liberal propaganda” which threatens the “common man.”

This aggravates a coincident challenge to academic authority and the purpose of education (Leitch 2014). As the public critiqued the Ivory Tower, the internet quickly supplied them with new knowledge sources, such as Wikipedia and MOOCs, that bypass

classroom learning. The academy, struggling to keep up, adopted market-driven models it believed would lead to its renaissance. Loss of university funding, particularly as states withdraw from funding public institutions, greatly influenced administrative choices in this regard (Newfield 2016). Higher education pushed in directions prioritized by the debate on job training in the U.S., rather than education for its own sake:

[A]cademic administrators are sorely challenged to define students as acolytes, apprentices, consumers, or customers. Prospective employers ... push for colleges to provide more vocational training, inevitably rendering liberal education more and more irrelevant. Contemporary debates about liberal education – from those in journals and monographs to those that play out every day in individual classrooms and offices – are largely driven by inability to resolve the resulting conflicts (Leitch 2014, 27).

Bousquet (2008) insists universities following market principles inherently exploit both teachers and learners. Business logic, for example, dictates delaying graduate student graduation to extract their labor in research, teaching, and office work. It is similarly rational to not replace retired professors (who cost a great deal) but to hire adjuncts for far less (Bousquet 2008, 18-27). Bousquet even suggests the normalization of the student-worker has become part of this labor-extraction process, suggesting we can no longer understand higher education as centrally concerned with learning: “In the context of massive student employment, we cannot restrict analysis to the ideological questions of curriculum and the content of knowledge production” (Bousquet 2008, 87). Bousquet depicts a system whose market focus normalizes predatory habits at the expense of learning.

This review indicates that long before March 2020, learners already suffered increased costs and anxiety. Institutions suffered declines in public support and funding. Instructors suffered challenges to their authority and legitimacy. Higher education, already under pressures to perform, applied market-based shifts in policy, procedure, class formats, and more. Then the pandemic took center stage.

Universities scrambled. Many institutions extended Spring Break to give themselves time to respond. Dorms needed to be vacated. Classes needed to move online. Professors needed to alter course delivery, goals, and expectations. Budget crises arose as students demanded refunds for housing or courses. It became clear that the coming summer and academic year would follow similar procedures. Administrators made urgent decisions influencing student and faculty lives.

This paper assumes such decisions were made within the context described above. This context includes intrinsic issues of inequality among students and professors, anxiety among students, an anti-university trend in U.S. politics, a normalized institutional assumption of privilege among students, and normalized predatory habits targeting both students and professors. Examining how these problems express themselves in a new context, one with COVID-19, furthers our knowledge of both institutional bias and the

vulnerabilities themselves. The examination of professors' experiences below will illuminate this.

Doubtless, college and university administrations have already begun to envision and implement their solutions. Should professors support them? The urgency of the moment demands discussion and reflection. This research participates by bringing the words and thoughts of anthropology professors' pandemic experiences to the forefront. Understanding mutual concerns, innovations, and perceptions constitutes a first step in dialogue amongst instructors, administrators, policy makers, and all stakeholders.

## Methods

A convenience sample of anthropology instructors centered around the author's network formed the basis of research. Two basic justifications exist: expediency and the focus on anthropological pedagogy in the crisis. With the demands of a short turnaround (from Spring 2020 to Fall 2020), and the capacity to reach out to a network that spanned members of the American Anthropological Association and Society for Applied Anthropology across the country, it seemed reasonable to approach colleagues.

Approval for the research came from the Metropolitan State University Human Subjects Review Board. Listservs, email contacts, professional rosters, websites, and even social media were combed for anthropologists. About 40 names were compiled, and emails were sent inviting them to participate. Of these, 15 were interviewed by video chat or phone, save one who wrote replies by email. Informed consent was received after sending a copy of the interview questions and the informed consent form to respondents. The form was later revised after the study protocol changed to use a combination of automated transcription and a transcription assistant. Previous interviewees were sent an update with the opportunity to opt-out of any changes. None asked to do so.

Respondents span from their late 20s into retirement age. They teach at both private and public universities. All identified as either male or female. The majority are tenured or on the tenure track, and the rest are contingent faculty. Two are currently in administrative positions, which they undertook within the last few years.

Several interviewees expressed concerns about possible identification. They feared reprisal or stigma, particularly non-tenured instructors. Thus, only the most general aggregate information about the sample is provided above. In their responses, none are identified by individual characteristics (age, gender, location, etc.) that could identify them. Pseudonyms come from a list of unisex names from *Cosmopolitan* magazine (Newbould and Uy 2020). It must be emphasized that the absence of otherwise useful demographic characteristics concerning the informants (age, gender, race, institution, years of experience) results directly from the request of several participants to have such information absent from the study.

The first three interview questions concerned interviewees and their institutions. The next three asked how the COVID-19 crisis influenced teaching, learning, and administration at their institutions and across the nation. The last four questions asked if they felt the crisis influenced political debates, exposed any preexisting problems, or revealed positive things about higher education.

The analysis found themes expressed in all, or all but one of the interviews. Four themes were identified. Pedagogical Impacts includes responses describing issues making teaching difficult or obligating didactic innovation. Student Vulnerabilities consists of responses indicating the pandemic aggravated existing inequalities among students. Instructor Vulnerabilities involves responses pointing to vulnerabilities of instructors within institutions of higher learning. All respondents mentioned these three themes. Finally, all but one respondent referred to a sense of systemic danger. They felt the pandemic did not introduce a new "crisis," but that systemic inequalities went from Bad to Worse at many universities.

## Findings

### *Pedagogical Impacts*

All instructors experienced serious effects on teaching and learning resulting from the pandemic. Responses suggest teachers focused on understanding common problems for students, then innovated responses. They felt anxiety greatly impacted students' capacity to learn. Further, the switch to distance learning added to students' difficulties. Overall, flexibility became professors' most common resolution to these dilemmas. They quickly understood the pandemic did not leave all students on equal footing. Rather, intersecting vulnerabilities meant some students might require more time, modified forms of assessment, and even moments to voice and listen to each others' personal concerns.

Many noted the way anxiety can disrupt learning. Students, already living a stressful existence, found the pandemic created enough extra anxiety to lead to shut down. Some teachers described the problem cognitively, striking at the brain's ability to learn:

A lot of them were just in crisis mode. It wasn't really about learning and being excited about learning. It was just doing what you have to do to get through.

– **Shiloh**

The COVID crisis makes it harder for people to learn and think. ... When stress is high your biology does not work as well as it should, and you can't learn very well. ... The brain is not plastic at that point. It's very static. It doesn't learn anything.

– **Reese**

Most respondents noted how stress quickly resulted from unequal access to technology. Some students did not have their own computers. Some had no internet access at home. Others were often sharing computers and internet with other family members, creating scheduling conflicts. Many had either older computers or insufficient



bandwidth, and they struggled just attending and participating in synchronous classes. One professor explained how students without internet access at home parked their cars near buildings with free Wi-Fi:

Many students face the problem that I faced. Which was lack of internet. That by itself, of course, deeply impacts the ability to learn. An online format creates stress, anxiety. I mean, learning in your car, and like, I was trying to teach in my car, right? And that's ridiculous. – **Blake**

The combined logistical problems accompanying new course delivery, along with increased stress, resulted in students who “disappeared” after quarantine began. Professors noted that many pupils made it to class less frequently, were late, or left Zoom early. Some students formally withdrew, while others were simply not heard from again. A number of instructors felt this exposed a lack of institutional support for students:

We have students withdrawing from courses, from programs, because they can't do it. They can't manage. ... We have to think about what resources are provided, we have to think about training and professional development. We have to think about the actual goals of education. – **Dakota**

In the face of these barriers to learning, professors pivoted, attempting new approaches. By far, the most frequently mentioned adaptation was flexibility. Many instructors felt it appropriate to modify due dates, allow students to drop their lowest assignment grades, change testing formats, and substitute preferred forms of evaluation. The more professors came to recognize the various challenges students faced, the more they recognized traditional forms of assessment would victimize vulnerable students:

Let's just get everyone through. I had a lot of students that were really in crisis. They let me know they were in crisis. They were like, “I'm gonna drop the class.” And I'm, “Just do the bare minimum and you'll pass the class. Just take the pass/fail option. Do what you can. You're on board to pass.” – **Shiloh**

We've changed the way we grade things, and ... allow for some forgiveness, as well. ... I've [seen] professors ... who are really a hard ass about it. They don't have any idea what these students are dealing with. And to just stick to some arbitrary rule just to prove a point? Some [students] ... are probably seeing their family die, or maybe seeing their lives torn apart. Or they can't pay their internet bill. – **Jamie**

[I made exams] open note and open book. ... If you forgot to take it ... I'm going to basically take that time restriction off afterwards. ... I switched up my office hours. I added an hour and I changed the times. – **Shawn**

A popular approach was to address the crisis in class. Professors did not see the challenges to teaching and learning as unique to any individual. Rather, they felt directly speaking to the structural nature of what students and professors were experiencing, and

to common suffering, could help. Instructors felt that publicly acknowledging the barriers to learning could help address some of those barriers:

Students are emotionally affected and socially affected. They greatly appreciate that I would stop or start the session, and say, look, "How are you doing? How's your family, how are your friends, do you have a safe place to stay?" All these basic human questions and telling them that I get stressed too, this is really awkward for me too. ... I had numerous students talk to me and say, "thank you so much for doing this." ... It's kind of helping them see that the process of learning and education in the broad sense can't be separated from a whole being. – **Kai**

Professors acknowledged their own stress as problematic. Many felt constrained, under extreme pressure to help students. They readily confessed they felt they were not at their best. Much work was done for the Spring transition, followed by preparing for Summer or Fall. Further, the loss of in-person instruction meant certain teaching tools were lost:

Prior to this, everything was about experiential, hands-on learning. And now, all of that is kind of out the window. There's no way I can sit in the lab. ... Archeology is a very tactile kind of science. ... Not to mention things like field schools, which are gonna be out of the window for a while. People are doing virtual ones, but that's not gonna be the same. You can't feel the dirt going under your trowel. – **Jamie**

I can't use a whiteboard. I can't walk around the room. I can't group students into two or three groups, and then sit with them and monitor how they're doing. I don't get to see their faces. ... It just makes relationship building a little more difficult. I have to rely a lot more on emails and feedback on papers. ... Students vary in the degree to which they're verbal, to which they're forthcoming, and also to which they can even articulate what they need. – **Leslie**

One of the things that virtual has [as] a problem ... is that keeping that sense of community is a bit more of a challenge. That's one of my goals for this semester ... establishing a community ... where students can trust me and each other but also feel that they're not going to be embarrassed or intimidated by this new way of doing class. – **North**

I put a lot of time and effort into creating self-driven learning for the students. ... Put all my lectures [online] and readings ... and found some new videos that supplemented those materials. Not all that easy because I didn't have permission to do so from many different places. I felt, I personally felt, like I was failing my students. ... I mean it's timing, right? I don't have 7 hours to spend, right? So yeah, it's time, energy and a little bit of angst. – **Finley**

Professors thus felt the major difficulties teaching involved student stress and the abrupt switch to online teaching. This revealed vulnerabilities among students. Responding with flexibility, acknowledgement, and awareness of their own stressors, most felt these were positive challenges for instruction:

In some ways this is a good thing. ... Sometimes professors get really comfortable in their mode of teaching, and they're no longer advancing and not really interested in pedagogy. This is forcing us to return to that. – **Marlowe**

### *Student Vulnerabilities*

Professors consistently spoke to students' pandemic problems by noting differential impacts by race, class, LGBTQ identity, ability, first-generation college student status, cultural capital concerning college life and online presence, and social capital in terms of family or household support. They largely felt the pandemic exposed and amplified preexisting inequalities, making situations for already vulnerable groups worse. Differences in privilege among students and among different universities and colleges meant different populations had contrasting experiences.

Professors were quick to point to elements of cultural and social capital that students lack or were unable to activate during the pandemic. Cultural capital around accessing technology, the internet, and online skills mattered. Social capital, such as household composition, family situation, and family/friends with Wi-Fi access became even more critical. Students lacking such capital suffered the most.

She [a student] confided in me the reason she missed online appointments for her exam was she was looking for a place to live. She tried [moving] back in with her dad. She didn't go in details, but she emailed me from her phone saying, "Look, I'd like to do it, can I do it tomorrow? I'm sorry I missed it, but I had to move out of my dad's place. I'm in a car going to my friend's place to crash on her couch for the next couple weeks." I think that's not an isolated case." – **Shawn**

We have students who are low SES, who live at home with family members, who are front line folks, or who have health conditions, ... who share devices with younger siblings. ... We have students who already struggle to learn. – **Dakota**

Having Wi-Fi [is a problem]. They can't just go in a coffee shop anymore. Having a camera on the laptop or having a laptop, those things were major. [Our institution] has turned itself inside out to get CARES grants so that every student here has the possibility of borrowing." – **North**

For students ... already adept ... with these systems, ... this is business as usual. ... For other students, especially struggling learners, ... I think there's a sense that they get of like, "I have to do this on my own?" Because they don't have that face-to-face interaction, they can't go to someone's office hours and knock on the door. I think, especially for struggling learners, those are the students that don't always want to reach out for assistance. – **Dakota**

It spotlights disparities in K-12. If they're funded, those schools provide an education that would allow [students] to seamlessly go into higher education. I see the biggest disparities are in people entering college from some of those places

that don't have the same opportunities. ... Right now, those are the students with the most difficulties, trying to enter a system with all these other kinds of extenuating things on top of it. – **Jamie**

It depends how the student receives information. If the student has a purely asynchronous class – that is for people who are super-independent and don't need me to tell them what to do. ... And there's ones that are like, "I've never done this before." Those are the students who really should be in scheduled classes with Zoom videos. – **Reese**

Student difficulties intersect with first-generation college status, ability, race, parenthood, and more. Note how each instructor below refers to specific needs that different student populations may have. Most often, instructors feared their institutions would fail to prioritize student needs. Importantly, they point out how things that may have made college difficult before were now amplified.

We have a bunch of programming for first-generation students to talk to them about the "hidden curriculum." The problem is those aren't online now. ... Students that know how to work the system because they grew up in that kind of environment are going to thrive. Students who don't, I don't know. It's going to exacerbate some of those inequities. – **Marlowe**

The issue of students with disabilities has [come up]. ... There's a student who's blind taking some classes in our department. There are also undergrads who have different sorts of learning needs, which has been at the fore. If things aren't addressed properly then it's going to exacerbate these sorts of problems. – **Kai**

I'm the committee chair for ... a regional LGBTQA conference. We get all these kids, and they get to be around each other, and everybody is queer, and they love it. And it's awesome, it's cool. But we're not doing that. We can't do that [because of the pandemic]. – **Shawn**

We're seeing how COVID is taking a greater toll on African American lives and American Indian lives, Hispanic lives, Asian-American lives. ... That's about access to health care. That's about trauma, ... communities who have been deprived of the most basic resources for generation after generation. We have to talk about that. That is in our classrooms today. ... We need to talk about it right now. – **Leslie**

A lot of [students] have kids, take care of parents. And they don't have childcare. ... So, there's that. You've got people with a lot of competing needs. – **Reese**

Taken together, these instructors point to student vulnerabilities resulting from an inability to access resources: services that increase cultural capital (Marlowe), disability accommodations (Kai), community events (Shawn), healthcare (Leslie), and childcare assistance (Reese). Note, such resources are all things that would "level the playing field" a bit for vulnerable groups. These seem like "add-ons" to the college experience from the

perspective of privileged “normalcy.” However, their absence greatly affects the lives of vulnerable students.

In sum, instructors felt the pandemic amplified systemic inequalities among students. Importantly, they did not identify new and unexpected difficulties for students or identify a previously unknown vulnerability or lack of privilege within any student groups. Rather, they felt students who were previously vulnerable within their institutions became more so during the pandemic. Differences in cultural and social capital impeded online learning. Some students found services tied to racial, generational, and sexual identities became less accessible. Finally, academically struggling students suffered disproportionately.

### *Instructor Vulnerabilities*

Just as the pandemic aggravated preexisting vulnerabilities among students, professors found some faculty suffered disproportionately during the pandemic. Instructors named faculty inequalities around age, familiarity with technology, full-time versus contingent instructor status, gender, family status, and more. Access to equipment, training, and experience with online technologies create disparities that may intersect with ageism on campuses.

We have a lot of older tenured faculty who never taught online before. ... So, some of those folks have needed a lot of institutional support and discussions about how to teach effectively online. – **Cameron**

We’ve had a whole bunch retiring at the full [professor] level. They’re like, “I’m just done. I’m not going to relearn this whole thing. I don’t want to do it.” – **Marlowe**

We live in a rural spot [without internet]. We ended up relying on a hotspot ... capped at [a certain limit]. [Our] children had switched to online learning. So [the hotspot cap] lasts approximately five days. ... I could buy another line, right? For about \$150 for another five days. Or I could drive to the public library, which was closed, and sit in my car in the parking lot. Because I wasn’t allowed on campus. So, we ended up ... sitting in the car in the parking lot with children in the back.

– **Blake**

[It’s] having a weeding out effect on students and faculty. It’s highlighting the strengths of students and faculty who are adept at online teaching and learning. ... For faculty who have health conditions, have family members with health conditions, those sorts of things, ... they’re not working well at home. – **Dakota**

Differences between full-time and adjunct faculty came up. Adjunct instructors’ classes were canceled, with no promise of future employment. This tenuous environment affected instructors.

Universities laid off a lot of adjuncts. Not here. ... There’s another school I work for – they don’t have enrollment, so I don’t have work there. But some schools are

layering on the work, and some are cutting it for adjuncts. Or like, “Adjuncts are extra, so we’re gonna get rid of them.” And some schools are like, “Some of the adjuncts are really good, so we’re gonna give them more.” – **Reese**

I just did have one of my Fall classes canceled out from under me. So, the class that I was set to teach, and it’s a month out yet, from when the classes are going to start. Allegedly it was concerned with low enrollment, but I feel like the administration is eager to cut costs, to trim costs, so that’s been – I’m kind of feeling just some of the trimming effects [among adjuncts]. – **Leslie**

The adjunctification of the university system. That’s a big debate. ... A lot of adjunct faculty have been straight up just laid off, and staff as well. But it’s not really part of a larger debate because I think other things are taking precedence. – **Shawn**

Instructors with families, young children, or who were pregnant also found themselves vulnerable. One professor used humor to describe the situation:

The timing [was terrible]. I was seven months pregnant. My due date was [when] Spring grades were due. ... I was also submitting my stuff for tenure. ... I kind of just half-assed it. I thought, “You know what, my students are struggling. Their schedules are changing. The ones who have kids are overwhelmed with their kids at home. I don’t need to do anything to make things worse for them. So, if they’re gonna half-ass it, I’m gonna half-ass it. We’ll get through.” – **Shiloh**

We’re seeing research already suggesting that this is exacerbating gender inequities. As far as people getting publications submitted during COVID, men are able to submit more than women are. Because some of these household burdens, childcare in particular, are falling more towards women. – **Marlowe**

Normally, I probably would have my kids home. In something like this, I do not think it’s a good idea for my kids to be in a camp right now. But they’re in camp. Because guess what? I have to work my tail off. – **Reese**

Respondents noted disparities intrinsic to the structure of higher education became greatly aggravated. They felt that a “weeding out” process occurred because of additional stress on an already inequitable system. Age, cultural capital around technology, contingent employment status, and family needs create difficulties in a structure not designed for them.

### *Bad to Worse*

All but one respondent expressed that higher education had either already begun to decline or was in threat of decline, and the pandemic simply accelerated this process. Professors noted reduced funding, the dominant neoliberal administrative approach, and politicization of higher education. While “neoliberal” may be a contested concept, respondents used it frequently. Most often, it was associated with practices like a customer

service approach to students; cutting of academic programs and departments to improve profits; centralized decision making; and curriculum decisions and content moving from a professorial to an administrative prerogative. Funding represents the bottom line in these:

We were already in budget trouble. ... Fewer students were coming. Prior to [COVID-19], our board ... was planning on growing. Everyone said, "Why are you planning on growing in the middle of [losing students]?" They made these moves and spent a lot of money. All of a sudden, we have this double whammy. ... Our budgets are in very serious trouble. – **Blake**

It's gonna cause real financial burdens at some universities. Some have closed, or are furloughing, or closing departments. It's gonna have some long-term effects, because that money's not coming in. ... It's gonna undercut our ability to provide the same kind of educational experience. – **Jamie**

A lot of universities, I don't think they're going to come out of this. I think they're gonna shutter. Because the universities have all had to give [money] back ... like on housing. ... There's gonna be attrition. – **Finley**

Most respondents felt the neoliberal model of fiscal priorities now dominates teaching and threatens its integrity. Two respondents suggested the model could or should be accommodated. Despite these differences, all but one informant predicted disaster. Note how Reese below assumes the "crisis" will reach a breaking point, but the normalcy of market-based competition will decide which universities survive. Conversely, Marlowe and others view that same system as the fundamental problem, not COVID.

The administration knows what they do during the pandemic will make their name and their brand ... either stronger or weaker. You will either win or lose. ... They wanna make sure the product that we have will allow us to survive to the next step. Which is literally after the pandemic. Higher education is in a bubble. It will explode. I will imagine the pandemic might make it explode. ... Administrators are now not afraid to say, "Guess what? We have customers and we have products." They're not afraid of that anymore. And I'm not afraid of it either. Because I do think we are providing a service. – **Reese**

The [pandemic] makes the neoliberal model no longer sustainable. ... People are getting furloughed, students aren't coming to campus, the income isn't there. They continue to privatize. Even state education. You sell [students] this package of campus life that's horribly expensive. That model is falling away, so that you're losing the finances and things are crumbling. – **Marlowe**

I hate applying business models. I understand needing to balance the books. But I think we've now seen what business models do when they are applied to government, ... to the management of people and culture. I think that's unfortunately the direction a lot of universities have been going for some time.  
– **Jamie**

I attribute a lot of it to neoliberalism. ... I also think that, like Paul Farmer has pointed out, what he calls structural violence, basically different forms of inequality. ... People won't understand at first. They'll think, "I thought this was about the vaccine." No, it was never about that. This was never about COVID. This was about the system. COVID's just what helped the system buckle." – **North**

Professors fear continuing decline in quality of pedagogy and programs. They worry administrative decision-making shifts the emphasis and value of instruction. That is, they fear the existing model's status quo responses to the pandemic will further marginalize the vulnerable. For example, Jamie notes how students with access to fewer opportunities will suffer more greatly. Shawn fears this will increase centralization and competition within state school systems, setting professors in competition with each other. Equally, Emerson worries the pandemic will accelerate processes that disempower faculty and exploit them, which Bousquet argues has already been the case for years (2008).

It's already going to cause a lag for many students. ... If they don't have flexibility in which classes they need [for their major], they might miss out on experiential learning opportunities. And one of the things we do is set up internships and fellowships, things like that. ... If we can't send people into opportunities that normally would allow them to flourish and find paths within their careers.... Now those opportunities are not even there to say yes to. ... And they may not open up again. Or what opens back up is gonna be lesser than, because of the economic situation. All kinds of internships and fellowships that we value in our academic community, some of them are gonna go away, probably forever. – **Jamie**

We have [an initiative] to integrate across the system [of several universities] ... where anthropology students from another campus would essentially Zoom while I'm [teaching]. ... So, you get equivalency across the schools, ... but then I might have students who, instead of signing up for me, sign up for other classes [at the other universities]. ... That's a way of setting us up in competition with each other for FTEs [full-time equivalents]. ... They've already kind of used this [crisis] as a, "Well ... [this] will make implementing this long-term plan a little bit easier." That also allows for the shrinking of departments on individual campuses. Even eliminating departments on smaller campuses. – **Shawn**

The effect is one probably most administrators hoped for, the loss of faculty governance. ... We are all teaching an extra course for free. We're not getting paid for it. They suspended, as an emergency declaration, a portion of the faculty handbook, which clarifies our course load. ... Of course, it is an emergency, but we have had no clarification. Is this temporary...? Most people like myself don't even know what course it will be or when I will teach it. When you can suspend any portion of the handbook for an emergency, what becomes an emergency?

– **Emerson**



Many respondents pointed to political debates around higher education. They believe shifts in higher education are backed by political rhetoric to justify what they view as a decline. As noted above, the right-wing declaration of a liberal agenda “crisis” in academia helps create a sense that colleges and universities are bad for the country among Republicans (Gross 2013; Parker 2019). Most professors felt the pandemic must be viewed in that context, as another opportunity to move higher education systemically to the right.

Universities are losing legitimacy. ... This anti-intellectual trend has been here for a while. ... Students don't believe that good education is going to lead them somewhere. ... And seeing the scrambling for money during this period on the part of universities, I think there goes some of the legitimacy that they have. – **Arden**

We were already in an anti-educational environment. ... Look at the secretary of education, the trillion dollars in student debt, the unemployment rate for recent graduates, that a lot of them are in the gig economy, the defunding of public education. ... Seeing universities as ... not being worth the price tag. That was ... before COVID. Then, all the students went home and had to learn from their family rooms. [This raised] the question of “Why would I pay for this?” – **Emerson**

The current politics, the idea universities are leftist institutions that are promulgating radical thinking – I think that's all political. I certainly have been in a number of institutions and have never seen that. ... I think we're in a perilous moment. And I think that part of the reason that universities come under attack is because dictators find free thinking threatening. – **Leslie**

Ultimately, all but one of the instructors interviewed pointed to an ongoing process of decline accelerated, not caused, by the pandemic. They pointed to difficulties in funding, the neoliberal business model, declines in program quality, and the politicization of higher education as preexisting factors aggravated by the crisis.

## Discussion

Professors describe dealing with situations described in the literature, suggesting preexisting structural discrimination made life more difficult for vulnerable groups and less so for privileged groups during the pandemic. Like Jones et al. (2018), Cushman and West (2006), and Lyon-Callo (2015), respondents demonstrated the tremendous influence of student anxiety on learning and the need to teach to it. Just as other scholars note (Walpole 2003; Pell Institute 2021), the respondents focused greatly on existing racial and class inequalities amplified by the pandemic, as well as issues of cultural and social capital. The teachers interviewed here also perceived the political quagmires surrounding their instruction, as do Parker (2019), Gross (2013), and Leitch (2014). Significantly, entire volumes have described the encroachment of the neoliberal/privatization model on higher education that these professors felt encroaching on their pedagogy (Bousquet 2008; Cantini 2017; Hyatt, Shear, and Wright 2015; Newfield 2016). All this provides good

evidence that these respondents are correct to conclude that many of the problems encountered during the pandemic are simply amplifications of preceding conditions.

The crisis these informants point to is not actually the pandemic, but the inequalities inherent to the structure of higher education, which discriminates based on identity and cultural and social capital. Professors felt a punctuated, but not new distress for their students and peers. Business as usual in higher education had already created inequalities. Professors spoke of students with problems accessing technology and the internet, who were parents, who were in racial groups more likely to be affected by the pandemic, who did not have the social capital to provide safe housing and support, and who did not possess the cultural capital that would give them necessary advantages. This implies privilege went to students with the appropriate technology at home, who were not caretakers or parents, who were less likely to contract the virus, who had experience dealing with professors and universities, and who lived in middle-class or higher white nuclear households. For instructors, the critical distinctions between vulnerability and privilege were reported in terms of age, cultural capital around technology, contingent versus full-time status, and family needs.

How does the pandemic reveal fundamental inequalities within the higher education system in the United States? Ultimately, we can conclude that the fundamental structure of education is built around the assumption that privileges are “normal.” Universities may provide ancillary services for students who do not possess their own laptops, housing, social support, and more, but in a moment of “pandemic crisis,” those are all under threat, since they are not regarded as essential to the functions of the institution. We can conclude that higher education functions under a system where expensive technology is necessary for participation, where students must have social capital (such as household support or family support) to participate, in addition to cultural capital to participate effectively. Professors should possess and have knowledge to use the latest technologies, accept uncertain employment as adjuncts, and avoid having children or family issues. Unless such criteria are met, colleges and universities will tend to marginalize and push out students and professors, pandemic or no pandemic. Recall, the research emphasized that some students simply disappeared from class, and maybe professors felt pushed to retire.

The great danger, then, is believing administrators and politicians that assure us things are getting back to “normal.” Why? Because normal was not good. To move on with normalcy would leave grave problems unaddressed and would provide a continuing nest for inequality inside higher education. Ironically, it may be of more advantage to frame the crisis as ongoing, with the pandemic simply accelerating older institutional biases. Roitman notes (2013, 3): “[C]risis is mobilized in narrative constructions to mark out or to designate ‘moments of truth’ ... turning points in history ... to found the possibility for other historical trajectories or even for a (new) future.” To designate a “crisis” is to frame its future as

something that can be influenced. We should discuss if this is a good way to treat the inequalities described here.

There are limitations intrinsic to the data presented here. Some readers might accurately object that this paper only renders perceptions. They may argue that what these instructors believe may not reflect reality. Perhaps inequalities are not so grave, and no impending decline in higher education exists. Further, a limited convenience sample must never be taken as representative of an entire population. Too few professors' responses were presented here.

However, the importance of these themes remains. Even if difficulties are only perceived, they still hold influence. If instructors' appraisals are incorrect, they nonetheless form part of the teaching context. Anxieties and expectations influence performance. If professors feel inequalities exist between students, their colleagues, and institutions, it certainly influences their approaches. Many respondents incorporated such assessments of student inequalities into class content, lamented their ability to rectify them, and focused effort on resolving them. If our perceptions influence our teaching, they must be explored. Otherwise, professors like these will continue to invent this "crisis" of inequality within academia until their concerns are addressed.

Further, while not a statistically representative sample, the fact that agreement and similarities in perspective exist suggests further study should establish whether these views are normative or not. Respondents came from and have worked in different regions of the country (Midwest, South, Northeast, Southwest, and West Coast), yet all spoke of the same themes. For an initial foray of limited scope, this study points in some concrete directions.

Can any of this improve instruction? Recommendations can be made based on responses. First, teachers should acknowledge student anxieties and inequalities. Respondents created class space for sharing and expressing student concerns, believing that naming stress helps diffuse it. Others saw the difficulties as content, something that could be analyzed anthropologically. Doing so makes the difficulties students encounter part of pedagogy, creating relevance and connection while applying concepts and analyses.

Second, awareness of student difficulties can translate into pedagogical style. Flexibility does not imply a lack of rigor or learning. Instructors here found flexibility in due dates, course structures, content, and delivery useful. Flexibility constitutes a teaching tool for sustaining engagement among students in difficulty, rectifying structural inequalities, and developing trust between student and professor. One professor commented:

They feel bad because of the pandemic when they don't turn in their essay on time, which is fine. I listen to that. And it's also a reflection of my own teaching – should I have been listening to that the whole time? Because they've been saying that the whole time. Why did it take something like this to get me to think about it? – **Reese**

This research also makes abundantly clear that the context of teaching extends outside the classroom. Structural inequalities influencing instruction – whether they concern student or professor access to technology and training or point to the need for support resources for vulnerable groups – cannot be rectified through lesson plans. If these professors are correct, improving teaching requires advocacy, potentially unionizing, coupled with clear awareness of systemic disparities. Interested professors must emphasize the structural nature of their concerns. This may seem drastic to some, but recall again the references to student and professor withdrawal from university life. Students and teachers require equipment, cultural and social capital, knowledge, support, and relief from structural vulnerability for courses to reach their full potential.

The need for dialogue within and between universities and colleges becomes paramount. No doubt, administrations will present new initiatives and strategies in the wake of the “pandemic crisis.” Professors must prepare for this. Roitman (2013) recognizes that “crises” are powerful, because they allow parties to establish what should be considered normal functioning, and what constitutes a crisis, and what the origins of a crisis are. Professors should reject the notion that the crisis is over when the pandemic is no longer an issue. That is, they should continue to point to systemic vulnerabilities exposed by COVID-19 and reject that the pandemic is what created those systemic vulnerabilities. Attention to vulnerability within the classroom is important. However, pressure placed on administrations and policy makers disrupts their sense of normalcy. Ironically, professors must create an ongoing “crisis of inequality” so that necessary corrections are made to higher education.

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