The Differential Impacts of COVID-19: Preliminary Findings from a Qualitative Study of PhD Students at Texas A&M

11th Annual Vaughn M. Bryant Memorial Anthropology Department Conference

Cynthia Werner
Professor of Anthropology &
Director of ADVANCE
Texas A&M University
BACKGROUND:
ISSUES IN ACADEMIA PRE-COVID

(1) Insufficient Funding and Funding Disparities (Horta, Cattaneo & Meoli 2016; 2019)

(2) Overproduction of PhD Graduates (Cassuto 2015)
BACKGROUND:
ISSUES IN ACADEMIA PRE-COVID

(3) Growth of “Adjunct”/”Contingent”/Non-Tenure-Track Positions

Not all NTT positions are the same!

Source: The Chronicle of Higher Education
(4) Efforts to increase diversity have been slow due to toxic climates for members of underrepresented groups.

- “Leaky pipeline” for Female Graduate Students in STEM (Gouldin et al. 2009; Stewart and Valian 2018)
- Underrepresentation of Faculty and PhD Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) (Gasman and Nguyen 2011; Zambrana 2018)
BACKGROUND: ISSUES IN ACADEMIA PRE-COVID

(5) Mental Health Issues Specific to Graduate Students

Source: American Society of Human Geneticists
(6) International PhD Students face a unique set of challenges:

- Visa Issues
- Financial Issues
- Discrimination
ENTER COVID-19: “The Perfect Storm”

- Disruptions to Research
- Switch to Remote Work
- New Modes of Delivery for Courses
- Changes to Care-Giving Responsibilities
- Budget Cuts
- Hiring Freezes
- Increased Anxiety & Uncertainty
"The graduate school culture feels so toxic."

"I may have to delay my degree to care/provide educational support for my children."

"I have never felt so depressed, anxious, and inadequate."

"I’ve already lost over 3 months’ time worth of research."

"The feelings of being useless and left out...are even worse in times like these."

Megan Zahneis and Audrey Williams June, “How Has the Pandemic Affected Graduate Students? This Study Has Answers” The Chronicle of Higher Education (September 3, 2020)
OBJECTIVES

▪ How has the relationship between work-life balance and work productivity changed for scholars due to recent transformations to the organizational context of work?

▪ How do the impacts vary by category of scholar?

▪ How do impacts vary along other categories of difference: gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship status, care-giving status, and type of research?
METHODS

RECRUITMENT SURVEY
Selected 26 of ~150 PhD Students

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS
Interviewed 26 PhD Students in Fall 2020

DATA ANALYSIS
Identified Themes and Patterns
Total Number = 5,070

SAMPLE: PHD STUDENTS (N=26)

Race/Ethnicity

- White
- LatinX
- Black
- Asian
- Other

Gender

- Female
- Male
- Non-Binary

College

- Ag/LS
- CLA
- Ed/HRD
- Eng
- Sci
- Med
- Arch
- Geo

STEM = 21/26

3= care-giver
3= care-giver
INTERVIEWS

CATEGORIES OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

▪ Degree of Interruption to Research and Teaching
▪ Economic and Educational Impacts
▪ Material and Emotional Ability to Work From Home
▪ Changes to Work-Life Balance
▪ Changes to Workplace Climate
▪ Attitudes Towards University Response
▪ Personal Health and Risk Tolerance

TARGETED FOCI FOR THIS PAPER

▪ Covid-19’s Greatest Impact
▪ Impact on Research and Time to Degree
▪ Impact on Funding
▪ Perceptions of How the Pandemic will Affect Ability to Get Dream Job
GREATEST IMPACT OF COVID-19

- Mental Health/Anxiety/Emotionally Draining
- Less Social Interaction
- Turned my teaching position into a ton of work
- Disruptions to Research
- Decline in Productivity
- Constant Uncertainty with Changing Policies and Restrictions
- Had to Change Dissertation Projects
- More Opportunities to Spend More Time with My Child
- Less Structure to My Day
- Could not visit home as planned [in another country]
IMPACT ON RESEARCH

- Disruptions to Lab Research
- Inability to Focus
- Change to Research Topics
- Delays to Exams
- Care-Giving Demands

“[F]or a few months, we weren’t doing experiments in the lab. I tried to pick up the slack in terms of like writing and working up the data that I already have…which was fine, but definitely not the same as like being able to still go into the lab and run those experiments at the same time.”

Asian Female PhD Student in Science

“I was distracted because I couldn’t work. It was probably not what I wanted, but it personally, I think for everyone, we were stressing, especially as an international student I haven’t visited my family for five years. I was very worried about them. But we could talk to each other. I still am worried about them because the condition hasn’t gotten any better.”

International Male PhD Student in Engineering

“I had to completely scrap my original dissertation idea and move to something else.”

White Male PhD Student in Education

“There has not been much damage to my dissertation research…. [but] there was a problem… I was supposed to take the qualification exam, and they announced there would be no exam this semester. This might impact the schedule of my graduation.”

Asian Female PhD Student in Architecture
Responses are Bipolar

- Participants in departments where PIs typically fund their students off of grants are not very concerned.
- Participants in departments where the funding comes from the department are much more concerned.

Several participants lost income from summer opportunities that fell through.

“My department is not affected that much. I have funding for my research.”

“I came in with a master’s, so I can only get four years of funding...sometimes they are able to scrounge up things, or whatnot...but I don’t know if that’s possible.”

“I got a bonus [for extra work converting lab class to an online course]”...[but] I was supposed to have an internship, and they were going to pay me a lot ... and it was cancelled.”
"I believe I am still on track to graduate. My dissertation research plans stayed the same."
Asian Male PhD Student in Engineering

"Either I won't graduate on time… that could potentially happen, or I won't graduate as strongly as I would like. Like, you know, I'll have say fewer pubs than I'd hoped that- that sort of thing."
White Non-Binary Student in Social Sciences

"And I've had some discussion with my advisor and some other students and even my parents about, like, do I try to stay another year, try get some extra publications out, you know, and do I try to ride out the worst of this collapse? Because I know some people who were supposed to go on the market this summer, right….. and it's like, well, there's no market anymore."
White Male PhD Student in Social Sciences

"I'm hoping it won’t majorly affect it… Instead of working on some of the writing projects that I was going to do after I had all my data, I've shifted some of those to before I have my data."
White Female PhD Student in Social Sciences

Source: Zahneis & June (September 2020)
“What I’m seeing right now is even among my peer group and my friends on them finding jobs in the fields that they want is a lot more difficult. And obviously that that makes sense with companies downsizing furloughing their employees, let alone hiring new people.”
Female Asian PhD Student in a Sciences

“I always wanted to do research and teaching. So, a tenure track job was the thing that I always wanted to do……yeah it was my dream job, but the…. Well, the pandemic has affected this…”
International Male PhD Student in Engineering

“[t]he prospects at the moment are a little worrisome…..hopefully some of those positions will open up, …the one thing that kind of helps me not lose my mind about that.Is that I can kind of, I do have some administrative experience in higher education where if those positions are open. I can always fall back on that until things rebound.“
White Male PhD Student in Education

Source: Zahneis & June (September 2020)
CONCLUSIONS

▪ As expected, “we are all in the same storm, but we are not in the same boat.”
  ▪ PhD student experiences vary by the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, discipline/type of research/source of funding, and care-giving status.

▪ Disruptions to research are more “costly” for PhD students (relative to other categories of scholars) due to concerns about funding and the job market, plus likely delays in securing a job.
  ▪ For a large proportion of participants, these costs are manifested in concerns about social isolation, inability to focus, anxiety, and depression.

▪ Not all experiences have been negative.
  ▪ More time with family. Improved work-life balance. Advisor had time to help with a publication. Ability to attend online seminars and conferences.

▪ The results of this study will be shared with the Texas A&M community, including administrative leaders, and will also be submitted for publication.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FUNDING SOURCES

- School of Innovation
- Office for Diversity
- College of Liberal Arts

ANTHROPOLOGY STUDENT COLLABORATORS

Kevin Johnson, Aigul Seralinova, Michelle Yeoman, Casey Black, Kate Blehl, Madison Gulley, Paige Musgrave

COLLABORATORS IN OTHER DEPARTMENTS

Elizabeth Jenkins (Co-Director), Vansa Shewakramani Hanson (Co-Director), Linzi Berkowitz, Katie Constantin, Gemini Creason-Parker, Clarissa Fischer, Angelique Nevarez Maes, Rose Siuta, Benyt Hagler, Shreya Rao, & Lawren Walker

Mindy Bergman, Tracy Hammond, Claire Katz, Blanca Lupiani, Stephanie Payne, Christine Stanley, Heather Wilkinson, Sherry Yennello